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Cities of Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea is a land of vibrant contrasts, where rugged highlands meet sparkling coral seas, and over 800 distinct languages are spoken among its diverse communities. While the majority of Papua New Guineans live in rural villages, a growing network of towns and cities acts as the social, economic, and administrative lifeblood of the nation. These urban centers are not merely geographical dots on a map, but dynamic crossroads where tradition and modernity, opportunity and adversity, intersect in uniquely Papua New Guinean ways.

The evolution of cities in Papua New Guinea has been tightly woven into the threads of colonial history, indigenous society, and the nation's quest for independence. From the earliest settlements of the Motu-Koitabu along the shores of what would become Port Moresby, to the mining booms that shaped Lae and the resilience displayed in Rabaul's recovery from volcanic eruptions, the cities of PNG each possess distinctive stories etched by people, place, and time. Today, these cities not only bear the legacy of their pasts but also face the pressing challenges of rapid urbanization, resource constraints, and social change.

For the traveler, PNG's cities offer an introduction to the country's remarkable plurality. They are practical gateways to breathtaking landscapes, cultural festivals, and opportunities for meaningful encounters—yet they are also fascinating in and of themselves. Whether standing in the parliamentary corridors of Waigani, exploring the lively markets of Mount Hagen, or strolling the waterfront in Madang, visitors will discover environments as complex and rewarding as anywhere in the Pacific. Cautious exploration is advised in certain urban areas, but for those who do venture in, the cities reveal an extraordinary blend of resilience, creativity, and ongoing transformation.

This book aims to guide visitors and readers through the rich tapestry of Papua New Guinea's urban life. Each chapter delves into the unique character, history, and attractions of a major city or town, while also addressing the broader issues facing PNG's urban centers—housing, employment, governance, safety, and environmental challenges among them. The intent is both to inform and to inspire: helping travelers plan meaningful journeys, and encouraging greater understanding of the local realities that shape urban life here.

The future of Papua New Guinea's cities remains an unfolding story. As the country continues to urbanize and as new policies and investments take root, these urban centers have the potential to become engines of national progress. By exploring their past and navigating their present, we gain insight into their path forward—a path that

holds the promise of more dynamic, inclusive, and resilient cities for generations to come.

In the chapters that follow, we invite you on a journey through the cities of Papua New Guinea: to meet their people, witness their challenges and triumphs, and discover the vital role they play in shaping the nation as it moves into the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Port Moresby: The Capital City

Port Moresby, affectionately known as "Pom City" or simply "Moresby," stands as Papua New Guinea's vibrant capital and largest urban center. Perched on the southwestern coast of the Papuan Peninsula, along the Gulf of Papua, it serves as the nation's administrative, commercial, and educational heart, and the primary gateway for international visitors. Its unique geography blends picturesque harbor views with lush hills and a scenic coastline, all under a tropical climate that brings warm temperatures and ample rainfall, nurturing a diverse ecosystem. The city's waterfront, a fascinating mix of modern developments and traditional stilt houses, vividly illustrates Port Moresby's ongoing evolution.

Long before European arrival, the area around Port Moresby's natural harbor was home to indigenous settlements. The Motu-Koitabu people, particularly the Motu, thrived along the southern coast for centuries, renowned for their intricate Hiri trading voyages. These daring expeditions involved navigating large *lagatoi* canoes westward, exchanging pottery for sago and other essential goods from communities in the Gulf Province. This historical trade network was not merely an economic activity; it was a deeply ingrained cultural practice that gave purpose and meaning to Motu life, fostering the development of two distinct "trading languages," Hiri Motu, which persist to this day.

The colonial chapter of Port Moresby's story began in 1873, when British Royal Navy Captain John Moresby explored the harbor and named it after his father, Admiral Sir Fairfax Moresby. A decade later, Britain formally annexed the area, and in 1906, it came under direct Australian rule as the capital of Papua. This period saw Port Moresby slowly grow from a small colonial outpost into a burgeoning administrative center, with gradual improvements to port facilities and other services.

During World War II, Port Moresby's strategic location transformed it into a crucial Allied base and a prime objective for Japanese forces. The city endured significant military activity, including air raids and battles, leaving a lasting impact on its development. After the war, under Australian administration, Port Moresby shed its drab port image and evolved into a more planned city with modern amenities. In 1974, the National Capital District, coterminous with the city, was established, and with Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, Port Moresby proudly took its place as the capital of the new nation.

Since independence, Port Moresby has experienced considerable growth, with its population expanding significantly from 120,000 in the 1980s. Unofficial estimates in recent years place the population around 383,000, with official 2021 figures for the

National Capital District at over half a million. This rapid expansion has been fueled by rural-to-urban migration, as people seek better economic opportunities and access to services, contributing to both the city's dynamism and its complex challenges.

Port Moresby's economy is predominantly driven by the service industry, government, and finance sectors. The city also serves as the headquarters for major oil and gas companies, further bolstering its economic significance. Its seaport and Jacksons International Airport are vital for trade, facilitating the export of goods such as coffee, timber, and fish. Recent years have seen considerable urban development, including waterside housing, business, and retail projects like Harbourside, Harbour City, and Paga Hill Estate, signaling the city's ambition to become a modern Pacific hub.

The suburb of Waigani serves as the governmental heart of the city, housing the National Parliament, various government agencies, embassies, the National Museum and Art Gallery, and the Supreme Court. These institutions underscore Port Moresby's role as the political and administrative center of Papua New Guinea. The city's urban plan envisions a dual-district structure, with a business and commerce hub extending from Koki to Konebada, alongside the Waigani Precinct, aiming to create a more efficient and connected urban environment.

Culturally, Port Moresby is a fascinating melting pot, reflecting Papua New Guinea's extraordinary linguistic diversity, with over 800 indigenous languages spoken across the nation. The traditional Motu trading voyages are celebrated annually through the vibrant Hiri Moale Festival, a lively event featuring traditional canoe races, cultural performances, and exhibitions that highlight the maritime heritage of the Motu-Koitabu people. The National Museum and Art Gallery in Waigani provides a rich repository of traditional artifacts and art, offering insights into the country's diverse cultural heritage, while the National Parliament building itself incorporates traditional "haus tambaran" (spirit house) architectural styles, blending modernity with ancient aesthetics.

Despite its ongoing development and cultural richness, Port Moresby faces a formidable array of urban challenges. The rapid influx of people from rural areas has led to a chronic housing shortage and the widespread growth of informal settlements, often lacking basic infrastructure like water, sanitation, and electricity. High unemployment, particularly among those residing in these settlements, contributes to urban poverty and social tensions, with many individuals relying on informal sector activities for their livelihoods.

Infrastructure, including roads, water, and sanitation systems, often struggles to keep pace with demand, suffering from poor maintenance and increased strain. The rugged terrain of the mainland has historically inhibited the development of an extensive road network, with no major road currently linking Port Moresby directly with the Highlands region, home to a significant portion of the population. Addressing these infrastructure

deficits is a critical focus of government initiatives like the Connect PNG program, which aims to improve connectivity and economic growth across the country.

Safety and security are also significant concerns in Port Moresby, contributing to its reputation as one of the least livable cities globally. High crime rates, encompassing petty theft, carjackings, and armed robberies, are rooted in complex socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and weak law enforcement. The city also grapples with a high cost of living, which exacerbates overcrowded conditions and pushes many residents into informal settlements.

Environmental concerns add another layer of complexity. Port Moresby is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, erosion, and flooding in low-lying areas. The city experiences both prolonged dry seasons, leading to water and energy supply issues, and extreme seasonal rainfall, which can cause flooding due to clogged drainage systems. Efforts are underway to address these challenges, with the government and various organizations working on climate change response strategies and sustainable urban development initiatives.

Despite these challenges, Port Moresby is a city of immense resilience and potential. Its strategic location as a gateway between the Pacific and Asia, coupled with ongoing investment and development projects, positions it as a key driver of Papua New Guinea's economic future. The Vision City Mega Mall, the nation's largest shopping center, exemplifies the demand for modern retail and recreational spaces, signaling a burgeoning urban consumer base. As Port Moresby continues its journey of transformation, it strives to balance its rich cultural heritage with the demands of modernity, aiming to create a more dynamic and inclusive urban environment for its diverse population.

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