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Conquering the last frontier

Briar Jensen visits parts of Papua New Guinea few tourists manage to reach



ISLAND TIME: Children enjoy a simple existence fishing, while adults make their living at the food market in Kavieng. PICTURES / BRIAR JENSEN

AS I strolled along the beach in the cool morning air, a woman scoured her cooking pot with sand at the water's edge while her children scampered naked between the nearby trees.

The lingering smell of burning coconut husks, used to repel mosquitoes in the evenings, mixed with the delicate, frangipani-like fragrance of utun flowers freshly fallen at my feet.

A cluster of women and children sat in front of their huts eating a communal breakfast of kaukau (sweet potato) and pandanus fruit.

Further along the beach, a woman washed clothes in the swiftly flowing river that is the lifeblood of this tiny settlement, one of many scattered along the narrow coastal strip of the East Coast of New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea.

Determined to absorb as much of the village atmosphere as possible before my departure later that morning, I was out the beach early, watching the village widen beside me.

The contented grunts of a foraging pig mingled with the squeal of toddlers as they played in the sand. Two teenage boys constructed a spear-fishing gun while **an elderly woman swished the entrance of her hut with a palm-frond broom.**

"PNG is not for the faint-hearted," I had been warned before my trip. And when I first saw expressionless locals carrying menacing-looking bush knives and stepped over what appeared to be blood on the ground, I understood why.

But my initial apprehension soon dissipated when I was offered a fresh coconut deftly slashed open by a bush knife, and realized the red pigment on the pavement was

nothing more than the spat-out remains of chewed betel nut.

I felt totally at ease in this tiny village and privileged to be a part of the community, albeit briefly.

I had spent most of my time in Kavieng, the main township and point of entry to New Ireland Province, a group of islands in the northeast quarter of PNG.

With a population of around 7000, the town is a service centre for New Irelanders and a meeting place for villagers from the nearby mountains and outlying islands, who bring fresh produce to sell at the market.

Outrigger canoes and banana boats (large dinghies) line the foreshore on the harbour side of the market, while trucks and utility vehicles park rudely on the other.

Bright blue herpetariums spread out between paddies form a striking background for the vibrant greens of highland vegetation.

Fish, fruit and more vegetables

are displayed on banana leaves on the benches under the pavilion roof, while those selling betel nuts and their accoutrements squeeze in wherever they can.

The majestic palms of Nusa Island provide a tropical backdrop to Kavieng harbour. Local villagers fish peacefully over the sides of their canoes, while the occasional rusting fishing trawler lingers past.

But despite the beauty of its harbour and hinterland, few tourists are in Kavieng — just a trickle of divers, surfers, birdwatchers and adventurers eager to explore what is often regarded as the last frontier.

Tourism is still in its infancy in New Ireland, as it is in PNG as a whole. While the Government talks about promoting the industry, little infrastructure is in place, and what does exist appears seriously underfunded.

The local New Ireland Tourist



Bureau struggles to stay in existence on an ever-diminishing budget. Its staff apologetically confessed they had no maps and few brochures to give away because of lack of funds.

Consequently, New Ireland remains relatively unaffected by tourism and offers enormous variety for the intrepid traveller.

The waters surrounding Kavieng have been described as the pelagic capital of the world, with huge schools of barracuda, trevally, grouper and silvertip sharks.

Relic diving is also excellent as there are numerous remnants of the Japanese presence here during World War II, many of them still unexplored.

In fact, Cara and Dorian, proprietors of local dive company Scuba Ventures, say they are still discovering wrecks right in the

■ Continued on D6

Living a predominantly subsistence lifestyle, there is no reason for people to rush. They have all day, and the next, and the next.



MAKE A SPLASH: Few tourists visit Kavieng, despite the beauty of its harbour, a magnet for locals who fish for the huge schools of barracuda, trevally, grouper and silvertip sharks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GREGORY DENBY

Conquering the last frontier

CHECKLIST



harbour. They are also opening up freshwater cave-diving sites in the interior.

Kavieng has long been recognised for its many surf breaks, two of which can be found at the entrance to the harbour.

Nusa Island Retreat caters for this market. Located on Nusa Lik Island, just a couple of minutes across the harbour by banana boat, the resort ferries surfers to and from the various breaks two or three times a day.

The harbour and surrounding islands can be explored aboard the adventure charter yacht *Imajica*, run by Australian Jesse Martin, who in 1999, at just 18, became the youngest person to sail around the world solo, non-stop and unassisted.

Martin will help you to design an eight-day itinerary based around diving, surfing, snorkelling, fishing, sailing and cultural activities.

Just 15 minutes out of town is the TreeHouse Village Resort, right on the beach. The main three-level building is perched in the majestic branches of a 200-year-old calophyllum tree, while individual bungalows are elevated by mangrove posts into the shady branches of trees.

Owner, ex-pat New Zealander Alan Beck, has developed a range of activities for guests, from rainforest treks to dugout canoe trips, surfing safaris and cultural dances.

For those who want to immerse themselves in traditional village life, several guesthouses and village

homestays are located across New Ireland. I spent the previous evening at one, Dalom Guesthouse, after travelling the 176km from Kavieng by PMV (Public Motor Vehicle), in this case an open truck.

Although bum-bruising, I was able to chat with a variety of villagers, from weatherworn elders to Bob Marley look-alikes (I was also able to solve the riddle of why most Melanesians have tight curly hair — it's so it doesn't get whipped into a knotted mess while travelling on public transport).

It was a last-minute decision to come to Dalom and our party of three arrived unannounced just on dusk, followed by two mature-aged surfers, also unexpected.

Our hostess, Milika, quickly dispatched two of her daughters to sweep our rooms and fetch fresh linen.

After an invigorating bathe in the adjacent river, we gathered in the lounge overlooking the beach to discuss our adventures in PNG.

The sound of waves crashing on the reef just a few metres away provided a soothing backdrop to our animated discussions.

Our conversation continued over dinner in the kitchen. Milika, dressed in a colourful meri blouse and laplap (sarong), apologised for her offering of kaukau and rice, supplemented by noodles.

Had she known we were coming, she said, she would have sent the village fishermen out during the day.

But this was traditional village fare and we devoured it



DIVERSE: The narrow coastal strip of Papua New Guinea's New Ireland province offers a range of attractions, from the bustling market in the main town of Kavieng (above) to World War II gun relics on Nusa Island (top) and the remoteness of palm-fringed, white-sand beaches (right).

surfer from Byron Bay.

The guesthouse is designed along the lines of a traditional village hut. Located just a few steps from the beach, the elevated section of the house features four bedrooms and a lounge.

All rooms have windows that open on to the veranda, and with just a curtain for modesty, the cool ocean breeze wafts freely through the rooms.

The large eat-in kitchen is down a couple of steps at ground level, and a conventional toilet is housed separately out the back.

Milika's husband will deliver guests to and from Kavieng in his truck, which was unfortunately undergoing repairs when we were there.

As I strolled back to the guesthouse for breakfast, watching the villagers slowly going about their morning chores, I finally realised the origin of "island time".

In Kavieng my initial impatience at the slow pace of life and absence of any sense of urgency in business had gradually faded to annoyance, then acceptance.

Now, here in the village, it changed to understanding. Living a predominantly subsistence lifestyle, there is no reason for people to rush. They have all day, and the next, and the next.

Unfortunately, I did not. With a plane to catch the following day I had to return to Kavieng after breakfast. But I'll be back, ready to unwind to island time and immerse myself in the culture of these friendly New Irelanders.

KAVIENG, NEW IRELAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

✓ GETTING THERE

Air Niugini flies daily from Port Moresby to Kavieng. On some days there are direct flights from Cairns.

✓ GETTING AROUND

Everything from minivans to large trucks. There are some vehicles for hire, as well as bicycles.

✓ WHERE TO STAY

Dalom Guest House — Dalom PO Box 255, Kavieng, NIP, PNG, or contact New Ireland Tourist Bureau Nusa Island Retreat — Kavieng, phone: (00675) 984 2247
Email: nir@global.net.pg
Web: www.nusaislandretreat.com.pg
TreeHouse Village Resort — Kavieng office phone: (00675) 984 2636 or direct (00675) 984 1265
Email: info@treehouse.com.pg
Web: www.treehouse.com.pg

✓ FURTHER INFORMATION

New Ireland Tourist Bureau — PO Box 419, Kavieng, NIP, PNG, phone: (00675) 984 2441, fax: c/o Kavieng Hotel (00675) 984 2283

✓ ACTIVITIES

Imajica Charters — Kavieng Australian Office, phone: (0061) 400 182 122
Kavieng Office, phone: (00675) 984 1599
Email: office@imajica.media.com
Web: www.jessemartin.net/sailing
Scuba Ventures — phone/fax: (00675) 984 1244
Email: scuba@global.net.pg
Web: www.scubakavieng.com

✓ TRAVEL TIPS

Take an easygoing attitude and the minimum amount of luggage. Useful items include quick-dry clothing (or a rain poncho), sandals for sun, rain and reefs, and a torch.