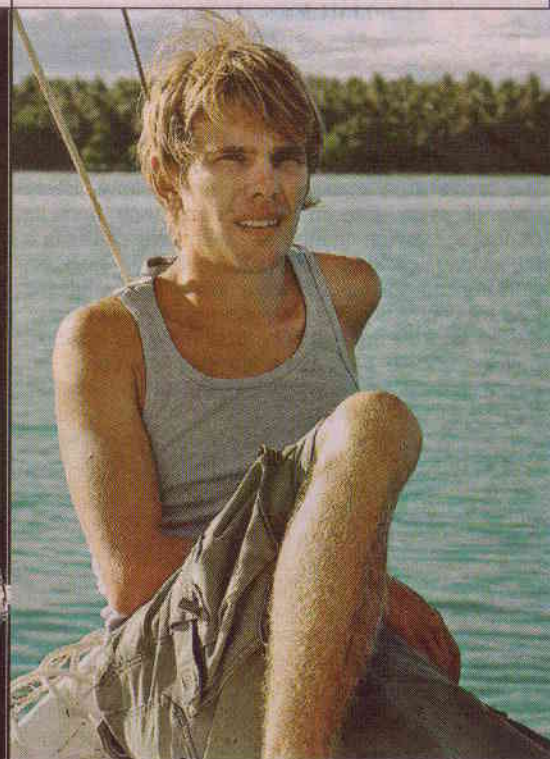




Island time



Briar Jensen joins Jesse Martin on his new sailing venture in Papua New Guinea



Last frontier: Clockwise from above, the catamaran Imajica, and its skipper Jesse Martin, offer wannabe sailors a hands-on experience of life on the high seas and close encounters with local people and their heritage

MY adventure starts the moment I step off the plane from Port Moresby at Kavieng, the main township of New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea. Jesse Martin, my 23-year-old skipper, meets me with bare feet, torn shorts, an enviable tan and shy, but welcoming smile. Shouldering my bulging bag on his slim frame, he negotiates us a ride into town. Bouncing along in the back of a battered ute, I realise this eight-day holiday is going to be a stark contrast to my usual precisely planned trips.

Hurting across Kavieng harbour in an inflatable dinghy, I also realise it is going to be vastly different from sedate cruises with children aboard our family yacht. Before this trip, the words "skipped yacht-charter" brought to mind an image of a luxurious fibreglass monohull, leisurely cruising a well-known, sun-drenched location with an immaculately groomed skipper addressing all nautical needs.

Imajica Charters blows that picture right out of the water. Marketed as an adventure charter, Imajica offers a hands-on experience for wannabe sailors on what is essentially a no-frills, home-built catamaran. From planning the itinerary, through cooking and washing up, to hoisting sails and taking the helm, guests participate in every aspect of life on board. It's like sampling the authentic, live-aboard, cruising lifestyle, albeit with the safety net of an experienced skipper.

Imajica Charters was established by Martin, the

Australian who at age 18, in 1999, became the youngest person to sail solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world. The business was conceived in the aftermath of Martin's uncompleted Journey of Kijana, which was to be a two-year adventure of exploration and discovery by a group of young people sailing the world. The expedition attracted enormous attention when it advertised around the globe for extra crew. Martin was swamped with applicants, including many who ignored the 25-year age limit.

Capitalising on this interest, he incorporated the same principles into his charter business: sailing an old-fashioned wooden vessel to remote and exotic locations, exploring ashore, meeting local people and learning their cultural heritage, as well as having fun snorkelling, swimming, diving, fishing and surfing.

As I jealously watched the crew of Kijana set off in 2002, I sorely wished I was 20 years younger and going with them. So when the opportunity arose to join Imajica, I leapt at the chance of my own mini expedition.

Martin chose Papua New Guinea for his charter because of its remoteness. "It's pretty much one of the last frontiers in the world. And it's a beautiful place," he says. He first visited as a 16-year-old, when he and his younger brother kayaked more than 240km from Rabaul, East New Britain Province, to Kavieng. "I am fascinated by the culture and history here," he says. "I love the wildness of it; it still has an element of danger."

He wants guests to experience the thrill of their own adventure, whether it be sailing to remote islands, discovering dive sites, surfing unknown reef breaks or exploring local culture. "I've planned the trips to be how I would like to go ... I hope to attract intrepid travellers."

Martin's easy-going, laid-back personality and sense of fun mean there are no set schedules and Martin encourages guests to design their own itinerary. As the only passenger on his first charter, I sit on deck with fresh coconut milk dribbling down my chin, and plan a sailing adventure down the west coast of New Ireland to Tembin, in the hope of witnessing a shark-calling ceremony. This involves an overnight sail so I can practise celestial navigation. I also want to visit the tiny coral-fringed island of Tsoi to snorkel, reef walk and experience a traditional feast on shore with the islanders.

But Mother Nature and island time conspire against us and I soon learn flexibility and accepting the unexpected are key ingredients in this adventure holiday. Torrential rain and a delayed business appointment for Martin twice postpone our departure for Tembin. When we finally get under way, we are forced to turn back to Kavieng after several hours of battling strong winds and incessant rain.

But this delay gives us time to explore Kavieng, spending mornings wandering through the local waterfront market buying fresh fruit and vegetables for our