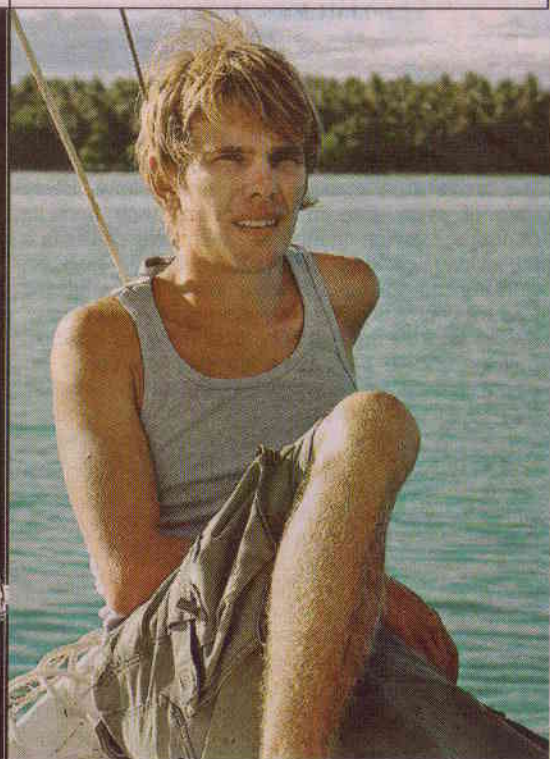




Island time



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

evening meals. We swim and snorkel the quiet harbour waters, where we come across remnants of a small plane, one of numerous wrecks dating back to World War II. I soon wish I'd been able to fit in a dive course before the trip.

We take the dinghy across to Nusa Lik Island where we lunch in the open-sided, sand-floor restaurant of the resort, while chatting with a bunch of ageing Aussie surfers. We even have time to explore adjacent Nusa Island, where with the help of local village children we find two rusting guns hidden in the undergrowth, a lasting reminder of the Japanese occupation of Kavieng.

Carpenter Melsius Anthony, who is adding a Melanesian thatch roof to Imajica's wheel house and replacing the deck with indigenous timbers, treats me to enlightening discussions on local culture, lifestyle and politics as well as demonstrating the myriad uses of his large bush knife. I visit his home, where I sample taro cooked in an underground oven.

Alun Beck, an expatriate New Zealander, shows us around his TreeHouse Resort, located just outside Kavieng. The main three-level structure is perched in the majestic branches of a 200-year-old

Calophyllum tree. Built from local timbers, it started out as Beck's residence, but is now the centrepiece of his resort, which includes six eco-bungalows elevated by mangrove posts into the shady branches of nearby trees.

The rain usually eases by sunset, so we spend the evenings on deck preparing dinner while chatting over a few South Pacific beers or Australian wine. Some nights, Anthony stays on board and watches intrigued as Martin and I prepare dishes, such as Thai-style seafood soup and lobster tails in garlic butter, with little fuss and heaps of fun. One night we attempt (unsuccessfully) to make bread. But even unrisen baked dough, dripping

with butter and jam, tastes delicious when rocking gently at anchor under the stars.

Some nights, Martin strums his guitar while I read by the tilly lamp, having raided his diverse library, which contains a mix of practical texts with titles such as *Coconut Palm Frond Weaving*, nautical classics by Thor Heyerdahl and Joshua Slocum and travel books on the Yukon that hint at Martin's next odyssey. Facilities aboard Imajica, a 38ft Polynesian-inspired catamaran, are basic. Two double and one single cabin for sleeping and a toilet/storage area make up the below-deck layout.

There is no sink or running water, so all food preparation and washing up is done on the deck and a solar shower is hoisted in the rigging when required. A fridge/freezer and Esky keep essential beverages cold. With all snorkelling, diving, fishing and surfing equipment on board, and the dinghy for exploring, there's always something to do, even in rain.

Having spent four days in Kavieng Harbour and with insufficient time for a return sail to Tembin, I am eager to visit Tsoi Island. As we venture out of the harbour again, my spirits soar, despite the onset of over-cast skies. Trawling a line astern, we catch the largest barracuda I've ever seen and we look forward to fish in fresh coconut milk for dinner. But after a few hours pleasant sailing, the wind dies and we drift around with timbers creaking and sails flapping uselessly. When the wind returns, it is from the wrong direction, soon followed by a rainstorm. Then darkness. It is too risky to approach the island in such conditions, so we decide to sail back to Kavieng rather than remain hove-to all night at sea.

While I don't make it to Tsoi or Tembin, it hardly matters. I've still had the nautical-based adventure I craved.

Briar Jensen was a guest of Imajica Charters.

NEW GUINEA



Checklist

An eight-day trip costs \$2400 per person, including airport transfers, food and use of onboard equipment. Imajica takes up to four people and individual charters are available at additional cost. Twelve-day trips are also available; passengers who want to include an inland trek to see the fire dancers of East New Britain Province, can be met by Imajica crew in Rabaul for a three- or five-day trek, before sailing to Kavieng or vice versa. More: 0400 182 122; www.theimajicaexperience.com

Author's note: I was aboard Jesse Martin's first (slightly premature) commercial trip when he was still fine-tuning the business and the boat, while dealing with bureaucratic delays. Now fully established, Imajica Charters operates predominantly in the dry season, and provides transport to and from the airport. Martin has also taken on a partner who will skipper some charters.

Buried treasure: Village children on Nusa Lik Island proudly display a World War II relic from the Japanese occupation

Picture: Briar Jensen