

The Sepik



The mighty Sepik is one of the great rivers of the world, in serpentine fashion it flows for 1126km through a largely undisturbed environment of swamplands, tropical rainforests and mountains. However, the Sepik is more than just a river – it's also a densely populated repository of complex cultures, dying languages and the most potent art in the Pacific.

As you motor around one of the endless river bends, the scale of the river, the towering façades of the *haus tambarans* (spirit houses), the splash of a crocodile as it slithers into the water, the bird life, the eerie lagoons and the beautiful stilt villages make it all too easy to believe that you've travelled clean out of the 21st century and straight into an adventure.

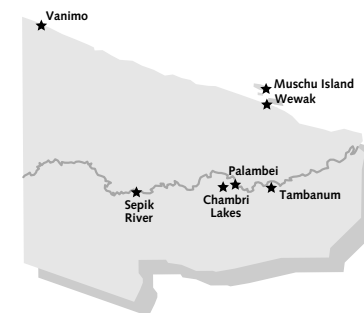
Despite the erosion of some cultural values and the trappings of Western influence, life continues in much the same way as it has for centuries. Local populations are clustered into different language groups and clans. There are still virtually no roads in the region and the river still carries all the traffic – from naked children poling dugout canoes to sunburnt tourists in their luxurious yachts.

The Sepik region also takes in the sleepy provincial capitals of Wewak and Vanimo, two beachside towns that boast vast stretches of white sand, excellent diving and seasonal surf. Untouched coastal islands such as that of Muschu off the coast of Wewak are only now seeing a trickle of tourists.

This chapter first looks at the two provinces through which the river flows and later, the river itself, its tributaries and the riverside towns and villages.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watching the legendary **Sepik River** (p191) unfurl from the bow of a giant canoe
- Immersing yourself in the lifestyle and culture of a **Chambri Lakes** (p198) village
- Buying a carving from a master carver in **Tambanum** (p196) or examining the architecture of *haus tambarans* (spirit houses) at **Palambei** (p195)
- Swimming and surfing off the white-sand beaches of **Vanimo** (p186) and **Wewak** (p181)
- Barbecuing your freshly caught fish on the deserted and idyllic **Muschu Island** (p184)



■ POPULATION: 530,000

■ AREA: 79,100 SQ KM

History

The Sepik's first contact with the outside world was probably with Malay bird-of-paradise hunters – the feathers from these beautiful birds were popular in Asia long before fashionable European millinery incorporated them into late-19th-century women's headwear.

The first European contact came in 1885, with the arrival of the German New Guinea Company. Dr Otto Finsch named the river the Kaiserin Augusta, after the wife of the German emperor. Dr Finsch, after whom the Germans' first station – Finschhafen – was named, rowed about 50km upstream from the mouth.

The Germans established a station at Aitape on the coast in 1906, and in 1912 and 1913 sent a huge scientific expedition to explore the river and its vast, low-lying basin. They collected insects, studied local tribes and produced maps of such accuracy that they're still referred to today. Angoram, the major station in the lower Sepik, was established at this time.

The early 1930s saw gold rushes in the hills behind Wewak and around Maprik, but development and exploration ceased when WWII started.

The Japanese held the Sepik region for most of the war. Australian forces pushed along the coast from Lae and Madang, and the Japanese withdrew to the west. In early 1944 the Americans seized Aitape and the Australians moved west from there. When a huge American force captured Hollandia (now Jayapura in West Papua) in April, the Japanese in Wewak were completely isolated. A year later, in May 1945, Wewak fell and the remaining Japanese withdrew into the hills. Finally, with the war in its last days, General Adachi surrendered near Yangoru. The formal surrender took place a few days later on 13 September 1945 at Wom Point near Wewak. Of 100,000 Japanese troops, only 13,000 survived.

The region has been volatile since the Indonesian takeover of Dutch New Guinea (now Papua). The border was jointly mapped and marked in 1968. On several occasions large numbers of Papuan refugees have fled into PNG. In 1984 more than 100 Indonesian soldiers deserted to the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or Free West Papua Movement), sparking a major Indonesian

operation which in turn drove 12,000 West Papuans into PNG. Some of these refugees were settled permanently in PNG in camps close to the border at Blackwater, near Vanimo, and Green River, near the Sepik River. Since then, following brutal Indonesian crackdowns on West Papuan separatist activity, even more West Papuans have fled over the border to PNG.

In March 2001 PNG police beat some asylum seekers at the Blackwater camp in an attempt to coerce them and others back across the border. The PNG government has been fickle about recognising the West Papuans as refugees and negotiated the repatriation of some with Indonesia in early 2002. In late 2004 about 400 border crossers, mostly women and children who had fled West Papua in 2000, were finally granted refugee status within PNG after sustained pressure on the government from the Catholic church and the UNHCR. The refugees were transferred to East Arwin camp in Western Province. The situation remains unstable.

Geography & Climate

The Sepik River is 1126km long and is navigable for almost its entire length. It starts up in the central mountains, close to the source of PNG's other major river, the Fly, which flows south. The Sepik flows in a loop, first west across the West Papua border, then north, before returning east across the border. It then runs through two PNG provinces – Sandaun (West Sepik) and East Sepik.

At its exit from West Papua, the Sepik is only 85m above sea level and from there it winds gradually down to the sea – a huge, brown, coiling serpent. It has often changed its course, leaving dead-ends, lagoons, oxbow lakes or huge swampy expanses that turn into lakes or dry up to become grasslands in the dry season.

As an indication of its age and changing course, there are no stones or rocks within 50km of the river's banks. Villages have 'sacred stones' that have been carried in from far away and placed in front of village *haus tambarans*.

The inexorable force of the river tears great chunks of mud and vegetation out of the riverbanks and these drift downstream as floating islands. There is no delta and the river stains the sea brown for 50km or more from the shore.

STRANGERS TO THE SEPIK

When the Brazilian water weed *Salvinia molesta* was introduced to the Sepik, it went wild. In the early 1980s it covered 60% of the Lower and Middle Sepik's lakes; with the ability to double in size every two days it formed a mat too thick for canoes to penetrate and ecological disaster threatened.

A weevil was introduced; the adult feeds on *Salvinia* buds and the larvae burrow through the plant which dies, becomes water-logged and sinks. Wide distribution of the weevil began in 1983. The results were dramatic and within months the spread of the weed had been reversed.

Another major environmental problem on the Sepik is the water hyacinth. Although attractive, this is one of the world's worst aquatic weeds and a new battle rages. Since 1993 three hyacinth-killing insects have been investigated and more than 450,000 water hyacinth weevils released at various locations in PNG. Here too, dramatic results have been achieved. Many of the lagoons that were dying under the strangling blanket of weed are now less than 30% covered; fish are returning and people are once again able to travel the waterways unimpeded.

The latest introduction is also an Amazonian import – the red-bellied pacu, a relative of the flesh-eating piranha. Introduced as a food source for the villagers it soon seemed that things had gone horribly wrong and stories of men being eaten by schools of vicious fish seeped from the Sepik. Panic grew and an investigation was launched. Had the vegetarian pacu suddenly become carnivorous? Apparently not and the waters are once again safe to swim in (but of course for the crocodiles).

For much of its length, the Sepik is bordered by huge expanses of swamp or *pitpit* (wild sugar cane). There are hills further inland and eventually the Sepik climbs into wild mountain country near its source. Between the river and the coastal plain, the Bewani and Torricelli mountains rise to over 1000m. There are no natural harbours on the Sepik region's 450km of coastline.

June to October is the driest time in most of the Sepik, but microclimates vary significantly. Average annual rainfalls lie between 2000mm around Wewak and Maprik, and a stunning 5200mm at Amboin. You can expect drenching rain at any time on the river, but the wet season is from December to April.

Most rain falls in January and February and the river level starts to drop after April. Temperatures and humidity can be high, but it's usually pleasant on the river, where you catch the breeze.

Early in the dry season is the best time to visit – the mosquitoes are less numerous and there's plenty of water in the river system. By August the level drops significantly emptying some tributaries and *barets* (artificial channels cut as shortcuts across loops in the river), and this makes travel times much longer.

In the dry season the Chambri Lakes can get very smelly – they shrink, fish die and weed rots.

Culture

The Sepik region is the best-known part of PNG outside the country, and Sepik artefacts (carvings and pottery) are displayed in many of the world's great museums. Traditional art was linked to spiritual beliefs. Sepik carvings were often an attempt to make a spirit visible, although decorations were also applied to everyday items (ie pots and paddles).

Carving is rarely traditional – it's now more a mixture of long-established motifs, imagination and commercial tastes. Some villages still retain their own signature styles – Kambot makes the famous storyboards. Even these are not traditional – storyboards were originally painted on large pieces of bark, and now they're carved in relief from timber. Sepik storyboards are one of the very few narrative art forms in the whole Pacific. These days a generic 'Sepik style' is emerging.

Carving is a vital part of the river's economy. In some villages, carving is the only significant source of cash. Coffee is grown in the Maprik region, but on the river there are no cash crops, no paid employment and rarely any agricultural surplus.

Sepik people invest great spiritual power in crocodiles. People around Korogo village in the Middle Sepik perform an initiation rite where young men are cut with hundreds of incisions on the back, chest and buttocks (p197).

Dangers & Annoyances

Sepik *Natnat* (Tok Pisin for mosquito) aren't particularly big but can be numerous and vicious. They're not a problem while on the river, but on the banks they can descend in hordes. For malaria information see p323.

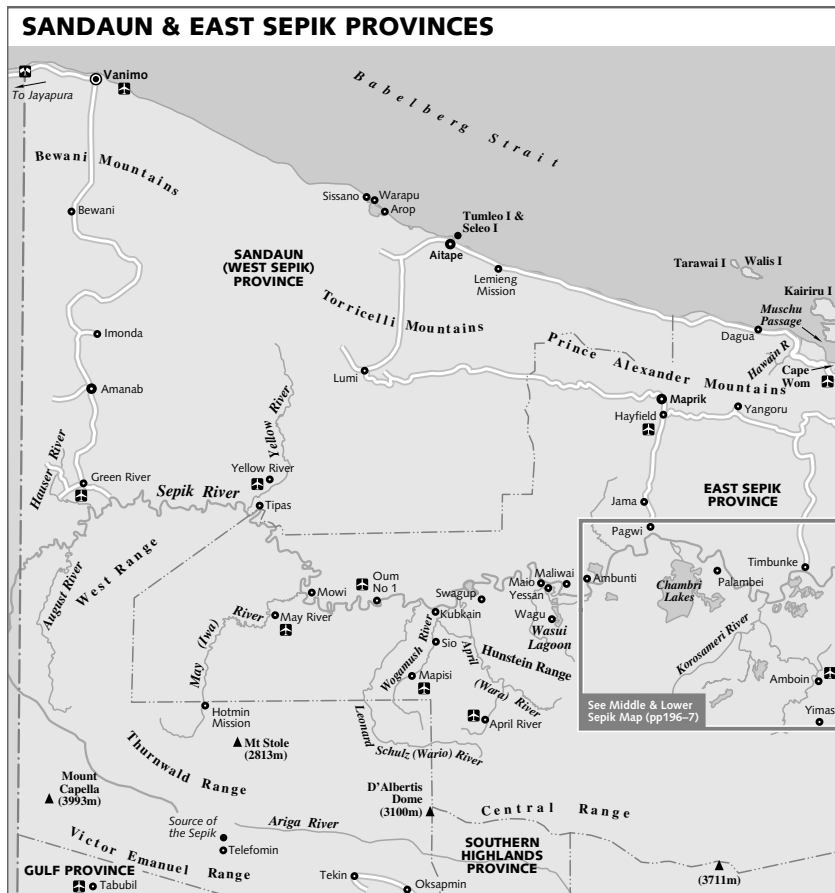
There are fewer mosquitoes in the June-to-October dry season, and they are less of a problem once you get up the tributaries, to higher altitudes and cooler weather.

EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

East Sepik Province is much more developed than Sandaun Province and includes the

most-visited and heavily populated sections of the Sepik, as well as several large tributaries. It was here, in 1945 that the Japanese finally surrendered to the allies and various vehicles of war can still be seen, rotting where they were left.

Vanilla, once a lucrative crop for Sepik villagers, has seen its price spiral downhill in the last few years. A scarcity of buyers and a glut on the international market have seen the 2003 record highs of US\$450 per kilogram nose dive to mere US\$26 per kilogram in 2007, and place additional hardships on impoverished communities. The provincial capital, Wewak, is linked by three roads to the Sepik River towns of Angoram, Timbukne, and Pagui.

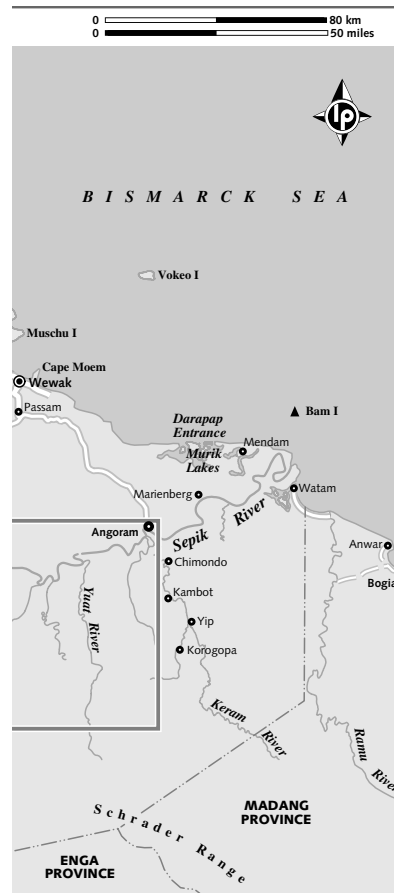


WEWAK

As Wewak was once the site of the largest Japanese airbase in mainland New Guinea, it was subject to a barrage of bombs during WWII.

A short distance inland the coastal mountains of the Prince Alexander Mountains separate the narrow band of flat land and headland peninsula on which Wewak is built from the Sepik Basin.

Wewak itself is an attractive town, and while most people pause only long enough to arrange their Sepik expedition and stock up on provisions, it does have its charms. A series of beaches with golden sand and backed by swaying palm trees start here and stretch all along the coast.



Orientation

The headland overlooking Wewak is a largely residential area with some nice houses. The main commercial area is at the bottom of the hill behind the beach. The rest of town stretches eastward towards the airport, about 8km away. When locals refer to 'the town', they are often specifically referring to Wewak's main drag which is also known as 'the centre'. Wewak is spread out, but fortunately there's an excellent bus system around town.

The intersection of Boram Rd with the road leading down to the main wharves and the provincial government offices is called 'Caltex', despite the fact that the service station is a BP outlet.

There's a wharf for local fishing boats and canoes next to Wewak town, and a longer one for ships, east of the Windjammer Hotel.

MAPS

The **Christian Bookshop** (☎ 856 2126) sells the 1:500,000 *East Sepik and Sandaun Provinces* (K14) detailing the Sepik in all its coiled, twisted glory.

Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 856 2166)

Police (☎ 856 2633)

INTERNET ACCESS

Help Resources (☎ 856 2661; tcentre@daltron.com.pg; per min 40t) On some days a piece of string and a couple of cans would work better. Sepik guides often come here.

In Wewak Boutique Hotel (☎ 856 2100; inwewak@global.net.pg; Seaview Rd) Has the only decent connections in town.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 856 2166) On the point at Cape Boram.

MONEY

ANZ (☎ 856 1100; The Town) Charges 1% commission to change travellers cheques. It also has ATMs.

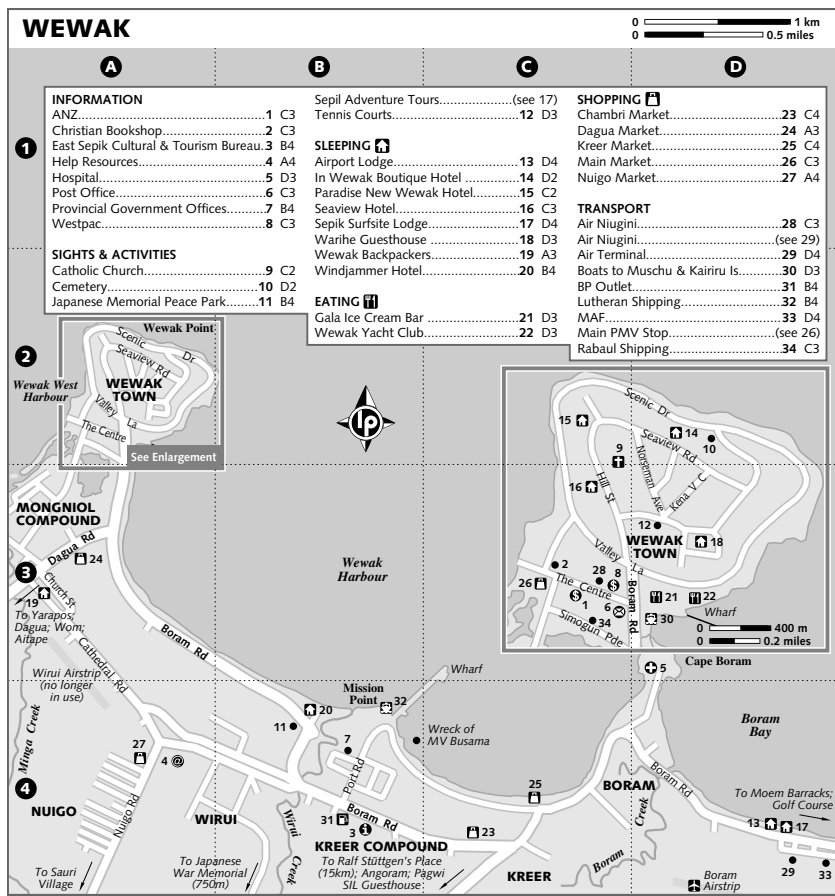
Westpac (☎ 856 2113; The Centre) Has no ATMs (yet). It also charges 1% commission to change travellers cheques.

POST

Post Office (☎ 856 2290; cnr The Centre & Boram Rd)

TOURIST INFORMATION

East Sepik Cultural & Tourism Bureau (☎ 856 2005; Boram Rd; ☎ 9.30am-4pm) It's worth visiting



just in case there's a local event happening they can tell you about, but otherwise this centre won't be of much use.

Ralf Stüttgen (☎ 856 2395) Ralf has been in the Sepik region since 1968. He doesn't run tours but he offers advice to those heading to the Sepik and expects to be paid. Alternatively, you're welcome to buy some artefacts (p183) and get some free advice. He also offers accommodation (opposite).

Sights

MISSION POINT TO CAPE BORAM

Near the main wharf lie the rusting remains of **MV Busama**. Further down at Kreer, on the road to the airport, there's the wooden hulk of a Taiwanese fishing junk. On the beach between Kreer Market and the hospital are

some rapidly disappearing rusting Japanese landing barges. The **Japanese War Memorial** marks the mass grave of many troops. The soldier's bodies were later exhumed and returned to Japan.

JAPANESE MEMORIAL PEACE PARK

This peace park contains a memorial and a fish pond. Tok Pisin doesn't have a word for peace; 'peace' sounds like *pis*, which means fish. Thus, most locals refer to the park as *pis park*, which is perhaps appropriate given the fish pond and the general ambivalence that many modern Papua New Guineans have towards WWII.

Ironically, the peace park is enclosed by a wire fence.

Activities

SWIMMING & SNORKELLING

Wewak's beaches are excellent – long stretches of white sand that fall away gently under the water. The water is clean and clear, warm and very inviting.

There's excellent snorkelling around the Wewak headland, over the outer reef and off the nearby islands. Like many coastal places in PNG, the diving conditions around Wewak are sensational – reefs, wrecks, tropical fish – but there's no organised diving industry in Wewak.

SURFING

Between mid-October and late April monsoon swells bring waves between 1m and 2.5m to PNG's northern coast, and there are several good breaks around Wewak. Some of the hotels have surfboards, but they're pretty battered – surfers usually bring their own.

GOLF

There's an 18-hole golf course beyond the airport. It has a pleasant clubhouse for its 52 members.

TENNIS

The tennis club on Wewak hill is seldom manned. Bring your own racquet and if anyone shows up, blame it on this guide (and sort out the fee).

Tours

Wewak is the main departure point for trips up the Sepik River. See p311 and p319 for a list of inbound tourist operators who run all-inclusive trips in the area. Some can also arrange tours around Wewak and out to the offshore islands of Mushu and Kairiru.

For cheaper local guides and do-it-yourself options see p192.

Sepik Adventure Tours (☎ 856 2525; www.ambuntillodge-sepiktour.com.pg; Sepik Surfsite Lodge) is the most visible of the local operators and a valuable source of information. Friendly Alois Mateos also owns Ambunti Lodge on the Upper Sepik and specialises in all-inclusive tours based there. A seven-night/eight-day tour costs K6064 for a solo traveller or K2115 per person in a group of four. Bear in mind however that four of those days are actually spent in Wewak or travelling to/from Paganwi.

Festivals & Events

Wewak's **Garamut & Flute Festival** is usually held on the first weekend of September, and features song and dance as well as yam-planting ceremonies.

Sleeping & Eating

There are good accommodation options among Wewak's hotels and guesthouses. You can stay in town at a couple of decent hotels, but there's no reason not to stay along the beach a few kilometres away from town towards the airport. Daytime buses from here to town are frequent and cheap, and the beach is brilliant.

Eating options, beyond daytime *kai bars* (cheap takeaway food bars), are confined to the hotels and yacht club.

Wewak Backpackers (Wewak Guesthouse; ☎ 856 1497; Cathedral Rd; dm/s/d K25/50/100) Mrs Barry (you won't be on a first-name basis) runs her guesthouse with a titanium fist. When she says 'jump', you ask 'how high?' It's the cheapest place in town and none too clean.

Ralf Stüttgen's Place (Tower Guesthouse; ☎ 856 2395, 682 0051; s K40) Ralf, a naturalised citizen, has been knocking around PNG for some time; first as a missionary and more recently as an artefacts dealer. He provides basic accommodation in two very simple rooms in a house overflowing with dogs, storage boxes, carvings, books, WWII memorabilia and ethnic art. Ralf doesn't get many hard-core backpackers anymore, a far cry from its heyday in the '80s when the guesthouse opened. Ralf's place is on a 400m ridge overlooking the coast at Tower (there's a radio mast), 15km inland from Wewak. Take PMV 2-3 (K2) to Tower from the main market.

Warie Guesthouse (☎/fax 856 1153, 693 7201; dm/d K50/120) The dorms here are airless boxes but the common toilets are clean and the showers are cold-water only. The doubles are self-contained with air-con and fridge. The bar here gets fairly rough.

SIL Guesthouse (☎ 856 2176/2416; s/d K80/90) The SIL Guesthouse is in Kreer Heights, and is clean, secure and comfortable. It's also often full. There are several furnished two-bedroom flats with kitchens, bathrooms and TV. This is a good place for a group, but book well ahead. To get there, take a town bus to Kreer Heights and then ask for directions.

Sepik Surfsite Lodge (☎ 856 1516; adventurepng@datec.net.pg; r K105-156; ☎) The prime, beachside

location and the *haus win* (open-air structure like a gazebo) restaurant (mains K35) and bar are the chief draws here. The fan-cooled cheaper rooms with shared, cold-water-only facilities seemed pricey considering their fairly basic amenities. The more expensive rooms are essentially the same but are at least self-contained with hot water and air-con. The manager, Alois Mateos, is a great Sepik expert and owner of Sepik Adventure Tours (p319) and Ambunti Lodge (p194). The Surfside is opposite the airport.

Seaview Hotel (☎ 856 1131; fax 856 1281; Hill St; s K121-191, tw/fk198/280; 🏠) The Seaview has had incarnations as a hotel and police barracks, but it's a hotel again now, and a comfortable place to stay. The budget rooms represent the best value for money whereas the VIP rooms (K315) are overpriced. The à la carte restaurant (meals K25 to K45) has outlooks to the town and a sweeping arc of the harbour but the service is very slow. Tariffs include airport transfers.

Paradise New Wewak Hotel (☎ 856 2155; fax 856 3411; Hill St; s/d/tr K132/154/176; 🏠) There's nothing 'new' about the New Wewak Hotel. Situated atop the headlands, overlooking the ocean, this old hotel seems destined to fall into disrepair. The rooms however are large and comfortable with fans, fridges, phone, air-con and private facilities. The open air, *haus win* restaurant (mains K20 to K35; open 8am to 2pm and 6pm to 10pm) and bar has great views to Robin Island and serves fare of the 'steak 'n' chip' variety.

Windjammer Hotel (☎ 856 2388; windjammer@datec.net.pg; Boram Rd; s K135-400, d K185-465; 🏠) The Windjammer is halfway between the town and the airport, right on the beach. There is a dizzying array of rooms – all priced differently. Some rooms were quite comfortable but others smelt musty and were in need of modernisation to justify their prices. At one time the Windjammer had a large collection of Sepik art adorning its walls, but these have been sold to an European art collector. Nonetheless it's still worth visiting just to see the magnificent carved crocodile bar. The beachside *haus win* makes the Windjammer a nice place for dinner. The restaurant (meals K30 to K50; open 6pm to 10pm) serves some of the best food in town, including seafood, burgers and salads. There a nightclub attached which can get noisy and very rough. No shirt required.

Airport Lodge (☎ 856 2373; marg@online.com.pg; s K154-187 d K165-198; 🏠) Opposite the airport, this a good midrange option. The rooms are clean with small en suites and have TVs. There's a large aviary in the tropical gardens and when the cockatoo gets to screeching you'll be tempted to turn it into a headress. The beach bar is under a large shade sail and it's a great place for lunch (K17 to K20) and a beer. The restaurant offers a choice of three mains (K40) in the evenings.

In Wewak Boutique Hotel (☎ 856 2100; inwewak@global.net.pg; Seaview Rd; s K200, d/tw K280-380, f K380; 🏠) This gleaming white, spotlessly clean, plantation-style hotel opened in 2006 and is easily the best accommodation available. The rooms are accessed off expansive decks furnished with comfortable outdoor lounges. The small single rooms have flat-screen TVs but no air-con and there is only one twin room. Discounts are sometimes available to those who ask. The Cocoa Café (mains K20; open 7am to 9am and 11am to 2pm) is reasonably priced as is the Vanilla Room (mains K40 to K50; open 6pm to 9pm). The latter serves local food prepared to international standards with dishes such as seared yellow-finned tuna or chicken in green coconut curry. Yum.

Gala Ice Cream Bar (☎ 682 4515; meals K10; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) The best *kai bar* in town with outside seating on the waterfront. It serves a decent chicken and chips, and three flavours of ice cream.

Wewak Yacht Club (☎ 856 2708; meals K20; ☎ 2-8pm) The yacht club overlooks a nice part of the harbour. There aren't too many yachts tied up, and the patrons are mostly Wewak locals and expats who come for drinks and simple pub-grub. Dances are held here every couple of months and while the club is for members, tourists are welcomed.

Shopping

Wewak is adequately supplied with supermarkets, chemists and clothing stores. There's a market and several Christian bookstores. There are also several bulk stores that supply regional trade stores up the river.

MARKETS

The main market, at the west end of the town's main shopping strip, is pretty colourful thanks to the multitude of umbrellas used to shade the merchants. There are a few *bilums* (string bags) and occasionally some small trinkets for

sale; otherwise it's largely all local produce on offer. The dried fish can get fairly 'ripe' in the hot sun but it's worth poking around here to see if anyone has brought in a live baby crocodile to sell – usually with its snout tied shut. This is also the main PMV stop.

There are several other markets around Wewak, of which Kreer market, on the airport road just before it turns inland, is the most interesting. Chambri market on Boram Rd sells *buai* (betel nut) and a few artefacts. There are also Dagua and Nuigo markets which sell *buai*, *pitpit* and sometimes woven pandanus satchels.

CARVINGS

Nobody comes to the Sepik without buying at least one carving and buying just one is often a good strategy. Sepik pieces are often heavy and large, and are a drag to lug around the country. Small flyers charge a premium on excess baggage no matter how empty the flight is. The Airport Lodge and Sepik Surfside Lodge both have small craft shops.

Ralf Stüttgen (☎ 856 2395, 682 0051) has a vast array of Sepik carvings collected over a lifetime with pieces from 50 different villages. His artefacts are for sale, or he can tell you where to buy particular pieces on the river.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Wewak is a major hub for air transport around the Sepik. **Air Niugini** (☎ 856 2233; fax 856 2203; The Centre) has frequent connections to Madang (K360, 40 minutes), Vanimo (K351, 35 minutes) and Port Moresby (K650, via Madang). Other destinations are via Port Moresby.

MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship; ☎ 856 2124; Airport) flies to Ambunti (K280, whole plane charter K2100) in the Sepik every Tuesday and Thursday and Vanimo (K590) on Wednesday and Friday via Aitape (K300). It also flies into many remote airstrips in the East Sepik Province and on to Mt Hagen on Monday.

BOAT

Lutheran Shipping (Luship; ☎ 852 2577; luship.madang@global.net.pg) connects Wewak to Vanimo (K107 to K192) fortnightly and Madang (K79 to K107) weekly. It's predominantly a cargo carrier, but some of its ships also carry passengers.

Rabaul Shipping (Star Ships; ☎ 856 1160; Simogun Pde) operates the MV *Kokopo Queen* between

Madang and Vanimo calling into Wewak on the way past. Schedules are erratic but generally there are two overnight services a month costing adult/student K80/70 to either Madang or Vanimo.

The Wuvulu-Aua community own the MV *Thompson*, which does a trading circuit between Wuvulu, Aua, Manus, Wewak and Madang, but there's no schedule so it's a matter of asking around at the port.

CAR & PMV

There are roads running west along the coast as far as Aitape, through the Torricelli Mountains and into the Sepik Basin, but they're very rough.

The 3-10 PMV bound for Maprik (K20, four hours) leave between noon and 1am Monday to Saturday from near the post office. Other routes include the 3-5 and 3-6 to Kubalia; the 3-7 to Yangoru and the 3-9 to Wosera (all K10).

For travel to the Sepik access towns of Pagwi, Timbunke and Angoram from Wewak see p190.

AROUND WEWAK Cape Moem

There are some fine beaches for **swimming** and **diving** at Cape Moem, past the airport. The cape is an army base however, so seek permission from the **commanding officer** (☎ 856 2060). Get a bus to Moem Barracks, then walk 1km along a dirt road to the right.

At Brandi High School, to the east of Cape Moem, there's a collection of Japanese war relics.

Cape Wom

Fourteen kilometres west of Wewak, **Cape Wom International Memorial Park** (admission K4; ☎ 7am-6.30pm) is the site of a wartime airstrip and where the Japanese surrender took place. There's a war memorial flanked by flagpoles on the spot where Japanese Lieutenant General Adachi signed the surrender documents and handed his sword to Australian Major General Robertson on 13 September 1945. On the west side of the cape there's a good reef for **snorkelling** and a nice stretch of sand for **swimming**. It's a pleasant place for picnics and has good views across to the islands.

Cape Wom has had *raskol* (bandit) problems so it's best to go when many people are

around. It's always popular on weekends. There's no transport that reaches there – you could catch a PMV bound for Dagua (a village further west) at the Wewak main market and get off at the turn-off to the cape at Suara. From the turn-off it is a 3km walk. There's a ranger at the gates.

Coastal Islands

Just off Wewak's coast are the beautiful and often overlooked islands of Muschu and Kairiru. Speed boats leave from the beach opposite the post office at around 3pm to both Muschu (K15) and Kairiru (K20).

MUSCHU ISLAND

Palm trees, turquoise waters, nearby reefs and a left-hand point-break (November to March) make this one of Papua New Guinea's best-kept secrets. Muschu may only be a half-hour boat ride from downtown Wewak but it's a whole other world away and the perfect place to unwind after the rigours of the Sepik.

Hidden in the jungle are a couple of Japanese anti-aircraft guns and a **plane wreck**. There isn't much left of the plane; some scattered debris, two hulking engines and a propeller. Further inland, two jeeps lie abandoned alongside the **Japanese Road**, now overgrown with regenerating jungle.

From the main village of **Sup** it's a five-hour walk to the area school and the deep and wonderfully clear **swimming hole**.

our pick **Auoug Guesthouse** (George's Guesthouse; Sup village; K30 per person) Ask for George around the small beach opposite Wewak's post office. He'll run you across to the island (K15) to his beachside guesthouse. Accommodation is in a simple, but spotlessly clean bungalow, a stone's throw from an unspoilt, coral-fringed beach. George's wife Josephine makes delicious meals (K15 to K17) and his sons guide guests (K10) to local sights. George also has a set of scuba equipment (K80), a surfboard and snorkel set (K25) for hire.

KAIRIRU ISLAND

Kairiru is heavily forested and rises to nearly 800m. Its western end is volcanic and the sea has broken into an active crater at Victoria Bay where there's good snorkelling, hot springs and waterfalls. At the northeastern end of the island, there are two big Japanese guns.

It is possible to stay here at some grass-roots guesthouses. On the far side of the

island at Shagur village, Wolfy Kalem runs **Polen Guesthouse** (r per person K20, meals K10-15). On the southern side of the island there is also a Catholic Mission that accepts guests.

MAPRIK AREA

There isn't much to Maprik. There is a market, post office, two churches and a couple of stores selling the bare essentials (and, oddly enough, ice-cream scoops although, disappointingly, no ice-cream) and that's about it. A tour of the town takes a couple of minutes; look out for the pair of carved **totem poles** of which one side is male and the other, female.

Maprik town aside, this area in the Prince Alexander Mountains overlooking the vast Sepik Basin is very interesting. It's noted for the Abelam people's distinctive **haus tambarans**, yam cults, carvings and decorations. There are numerous villages around Maprik, many with a striking, forward-leaning *haus tambaran*, an architectural style echoed in such modern buildings as Parliament House in Port Moresby. The front façade of the Maprik *haus tambarans* are brightly painted in browns, ochres, whites and blacks and in some cases reach 30m high.

Without your own vehicle getting to the various villages can be problematic. Speak to the owner of the Maprik Wakin Hotel to arrange an impromptu tour. Traditionally *haus tambarans* were exclusively an initiated-man's domain, but these days the rules are usually bent for Western travellers. Locals usually charge between K5 to K10 to enter and an additional K5 to K10 photography fee. There isn't much to see inside anymore, most of the art having been sold to collectors decades ago. The tunnel-like entrance at the front is reserved for ceremonies; you'll be asked to enter by a door at the back.

Yams are a staple food in this region. Harvesting entails considerable ritual and you may see **yam festivals** during the July or August harvest time. Woven fibre masks are used in ceremonies where yams are decorated to resemble people.

Interesting back roads connect villages between Maprik and Lumi, some with spectacular *haus tambarans* and good carvings. You can walk between these villages. Ask permission before entering a village and then see the *bigman* (local leader).

Maprik makes for a convenient overnight stop on the way to Pagwi.

Sleeping

At the time of research there was a half built orange building, on a small rise above the police station that, we were told, was also to be a guesthouse and may be worth asking about.

Niamikum Guest House (☎ 689 4477; per person K50) If arriving by PMV you'll need to arrange with the driver to run you the extra 2km out of town to this camp. The cabins here are scattered through spacious grounds. There is a communal kitchen but no bathrooms, just a river; go easy on the soap.

Maprik Wakin Hotel (☎ 858 1315; r K77-143) The only difference between the VIP and standard rooms is that the VIP ones come with their own bathroom. Otherwise expect the same c 1970s lino and mismatched curtains. The Wakin is near the town market.

Getting There & Away

To get to Maprik from Wewak catch a 3-10 PMV (Monday to Saturday) from opposite the post office. The road climbs up and over the Prince Alexander Mountains then, 132km later, turns off at the Hayfield's junction for the final 8km into town. The trip takes between three and four hours and costs K20.

PMVs run back to Wewak and to Pagwi (K10, two hours) from the town market place. The last stretch to Pagwi reaches the Sepik floodplain and has recently been upgraded courtesy of the Australian government.

SANDAUN PROVINCE

Sandaun (pronounced sundown) Province is so named because it's in the northwest of PNG – where the sun goes down. Formerly called West Sepik Province, it's largely undeveloped, but agricultural activity around Telefomin and timber development near Vanimo have brought rapid change. Gold is mined inland. There are opportunities to surf and enjoy the beaches here but it is a very remote part of PNG.

Sandaun Province is most notable to outsiders because of the devastating tsunami in the region near Aitape in 1998. As in East Sepik Province, cash-crop farmers are making good profits on vanilla beans which are

often traded over the border into Indonesian West Papua.

VANIMO

Vanimo is a tiny outpost on the western edge of a remote country; most travellers who get this far go onto Jayapura in Indonesia.

Vanimo's topography, with its peninsula and hill, is reminiscent of Wewak and, like-wise, there are beautiful beaches and a bustling port. Vanimo, however, is much smaller and quieter, with generous and hospitable people. The town's Indonesian influence is quite marked in the goods for sale in the stores as much as the fabrics hanging up in the market.

The Malaysian logging company **Vanimo Forest Products** (www.vanimoforestproducts.com.pg) is logging the province and there are business opportunities with cross-border trade. Hopes are high for development even though the Indonesian and Malaysian business people seem to have a disdain for the local service workers that is quite palpable and uncomfortable.

Orientation

Vanimo is built at the base of a hilly headland on a narrow isthmus. The airport's runway slashes across the neck of this isthmus from the western ports to the eastern beaches. 'The Town' can be found between the airport and the base of the headland and has all the essentials – supermarkets, post office, Westpac (which cashes travellers cheques for K30), Bank South Pacific (with an ATM), hotels and a rather unimpressive market.

Most hotels send vans to meet arriving guests, but the two main hotels are only a five-minute walk away, opposite the Indonesian consulate.

Sights & Activities

There's a pleasant two-hour walk around the headland, but carry water and sun protection. People in the villages here don't get a lot of tourists or even a lot of local passers-by so be respectful as you enter an area and seek approval before moving on. There's good snorkelling offshore and the beaches are sensational, but ask before stripping down and plunging in.

Another good walk is west along the beach from the airport. After 40 minutes you come

to a limestone headland draped with vines – wade around it to the beautiful beach on the other side. There's a rusting Japanese landing barge just offshore.

Narimo Island can be seen offshore from the Vanimo Beach Hotel. This is an excellent place for picnics and swimming. The hotel may be able to arrange a boat to take you there or else ask about boat hire at West Deco village near the main wharf on the other side of the peninsula.

SURFING

One claim to fame that Vanimo does have is the best surf in PNG, and it's one of the primary reasons why people come to Vanimo. The surf is strictly seasonal, from October through April, when monsoon swells bring waves between 1m and 2m. Vanimo and around has excellent point-breaks and beach-breaks with consistently good surf. There's a local bunch of surfers known as the Lido Surf Club – an informal collective who show visiting surfers around in a banana boat out to the nearby island breaks. They can even arrange accommodation in local villages. There's no surf-rage in PNG and the scene is just in its infancy. BYO boards.

In February 2007 the **Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea** (www.surfingpapuanewguinea.org.pg) held the national surf titles here and by all accounts some got 'axed by gnarly bombs in the green room' while others 'boosted some major, bitchin' air' – umm right. See p287 for more on surfing in PNG.

Sleeping & Eating

Travellers have reported that if you hang around the Vanimo Beach Hotel with your backpack, looking homeless, locals offer homestays.

Tanyuli Bungalows (Yako Village; d K80) These nine bungalows are in the seaside village of Yako (PMV fare K1.50), next to Baro school, on the way to the Indonesian border. Facilities are fairly basic – a mattress on the floor, but there are plans to improve the toilets and shower. If you ask nicely your hosts will prepare meals.

Vanimo Beach Hotel (☎ 857 1102; fax 857 1131; s/d from K94/165) This hotel has a range of rooms and self-contained suites. The well-trimmed gardens and traditionally inspired bungalows (K325) make a pretty impression when you arrive and are very comfortable. Unfortunately, the standard rooms are a big step down.

Weekends get noisy when Malay businessmen are in town to spend their money and feed the pokies. There's a comfortable bar area and a great restaurant (mains K25; open 7am to 9am, 11.30am to 2.30pm and 5pm to 9pm) which serves Western essentials (steak), Malaysian classics and local lobster.

Varmoneh Lodge (☎ 857 1281; fax 857 1273; s K99, d K99-132; 🍷) This is a steep walk from town at East Tower – head for the antennae array. Oddly, the more expensive self-contained deluxe rooms have no windows and are pretty grim. Meals are available (K15 to K25) and feature yams, sago, banana and fresh fish. Alcohol is not allowed and airport transfers are included in the tariff.

Visser's Guesthouse (☎ 857 1366; fax 857 1309; s/d/ apt K98/196/392; 🍷) The guesthouse is up the hill on the west side of the headland. The wood-pannelled rooms are large, comfortable and quaintly old-fashioned. There is no kitchen or restaurant but there is free, spasmodic transport to town, a 15-minute walk away.

Sandaun Motel (☎ 857 1148; reception@sandaunmotel.com.pg; s/d K168/196; 🍷) The motel is reminiscent of a string of railway carriages – a series of large airy bungalows, each with a wooden floor, overhead fan, TV and fridge. The bar and restaurant (meals K20 to K40; open 7am to 9am, noon to 2pm and 6pm to 9pm) serves steaks, Chinese and lobster dishes.

Shopping

There are several supermarkets and chemists in Vanimo all spread apart. There are markets located on a few green stretches around town selling fruit and vegetables, clothing and Indonesian cigarettes.

Getting There & Away

AIR

To avoid the queues head early to the **Air Niugini** (☎ 857 1014; sales.vanimo@airniugini.com.pg) office in town near the market. There are three flights a week to Wewak (K351), Madang (K607), Lae (K836) and Port Moresby (K824).

MAF (☎ 857 1091; fax 857 1481) has flights to Amanab (K250), Green River (K320), Telefomin (K580), Tabubil (K610) and Oksapmin (K750).

Dovair (☎ 857 1259) is principally a charter-only company that can drop you into the jungle so that you can walk out. Good luck with that!

BOAT

The **Lutheran Shipping agent** (☎ 857 1320; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-4pm) is located in the Vanair building not far from MAF. It opens its office three days prior to the arrival of the fortnightly MV *Rita* or MV *Momase*. Prices vary between the two boats and the two classes (the upper-deck tourist class and the bottom-deck passenger class). Boats travel to Aitape (K45 to K94), Wewak (K79 to K107) and Madang (K107 to K192).

Rabaul Shipping (Star Ships; ☎ 693 3176) runs the MV *Kokopo Queen* twice a month to Wewak (K80, overnight) and Madang (K160, two days). Its office is the white shipping container opposite PNG Ports at the wharf.

Banana boats depart Vanimo, weather permitting, for Aitape (K90 to K100, four to five hours) regularly. Larger vessels that supply the coastal trade stores sometimes pin notices around town advertising schedules and departure dates.

CAR & PMV

The road from Vanimo to Jayapura is finally finished and travel to Indonesia by land is simple. You need to have a visa, which you can get from the Indonesian consulate, but other than that, what used to be complicated is now very easy. See p310 for details.

Visser Enterprises Ltd (☎ 857 1366) rents cars for K280 per day. It also runs a local guesthouse (opposite) and will drive you to the border for K154.

Getting Around

Vanimo itself is easy to get around by foot, although there are a couple of taxis. PMVs run along the beach roads. Banana boats ferry people around the coast – it costs K25 to Lido.

AROUND VANIMO

The coast between Vanimo and the Indonesian border has many superb beaches, waterholes and lagoons, pretty creeks and picturesque villages. There are panoramic views up and down the coast and locals will direct you to several fine waterfalls.

Lido village has a worthwhile surf beach and a village guesthouse. Outside every house at **Waramo**, there are smaller and well-constructed houses stacked meticulously with cut firewood. This variety of

traditional wealth is presented to newly married couples.

AITAPE

Aitape is a tiny coastal town east of Vanimo towards Wewak.

The Germans established a station here in 1905 and the jail they built in 1906 still stands above the town. It was used by the Japanese during WWII.

In 1944 an Australian division pushed inland from Aitape, against considerable Japanese opposition, to establish a base in the Torricelli Mountains. From there, they pushed the Japanese eastward until Wewak fell on 22 May 1945. A B24 bomber sits outside Aitape High School between Tadjai airstrip and the town. There's a Japanese war memorial between the town and the Santa Anna Mission.

As fierce as that fighting was, the tsunami on 17 July 1998, really laid waste to the area. A 10m tsunami struck a 14km stretch of coastline and swallowed everything within 500m from the shoreline. More than 2200 people were killed, 1000 terribly injured and 10,000 became homeless in an instant. Help didn't arrive for 16 hours and it was three days before most of the injured were admitted into hospitals at Vanimo and Wewak.

Getting There & Away

There are two airstrips: Tadjai and Aitape. Tadjai airstrip, where most flights land, is 10km out of town. There's nothing at the grass strip except a windsock and guy with a two-way radio, and even he goes away between flights. The airstrip was the scene of much activity during WWII when the Australian Air Force flew Bristol Beaufort bombers from it – the original tarmac can still be seen in places through the vegetation.

The road between Wewak and Aitape is very rough and closed during the occasional bad wet season. In Wewak ask around the PMV stop opposite the town wharf for the next truck heading to Aitape (K60, twice weekly).

Banana boats travel from Aitape to Vanimo (K90 to K100), but this is a dangerous undertaking in rough weather when they often sink. Luship and Star Ships boats call in here on their runs between Wewak and Vanimo.

TELEFOMIN

The remote station of Telefomin was established in 1948 and remains one of the most isolated communities in PNG.

The local MAF pilots and pastors give excellent advice on local walks, including a three-hour trek to the **source of the Sepik**. Between 1912 and 1914, Richard Thurnwald walked some hard yards following the Sepik to this stream, found not far from Telefomin.

Children can guide you to **Oketemp Cave** (1½ hours return) and **Songjitin eternal flame** (two hours return). Bring your matches to light the natural gas that seeps from the ground as the rain will have put it out.

Missionaries are very active here and traditional ways are dying out. Men no longer wear 'Telefomin trousers' (penis gourds) for which the area is renowned other than at *singsings*, Christmas celebrations and Independence Day. The town's generator kicks in at 6pm and finishes at 10pm – provided it has fuel.

Sleeping

To contact the church guesthouses, send a message via **MAF** (☎ 857 1091; fax 857 1481) to the appropriate pastor.

Telefomin Baptist Association Guesthouse (contact Pastor Silas Kameng; per person K60) As with ABSM guesthouse, you get the whole house to rattle around in.

ABSM Guesthouse (contact Pastor Silas Neksep; s K70, group of up to 5 people K140) This is a basic self-contained home. Linen, cutlery and pots are all supplied.

Min Baptist Union Guesthouse (MBU; contact Pastor Yanga Finarok; s K85, group K170) This house has one double and three singles in a simply furnished home.

Getting There & Away

MAF has a surprisingly large base here, and several pilots and their families live locally – one even has satellite broadband!

There are flights to and from Telefomin between Vanimo (K580) and Tabubil (K150) twice a week. The Thurnwald and Victor Emanuel Ranges are often obscured by cloud and when incoming weather systems collide with the ridges they throw up some pretty turbulent air. During such times, flights are suspended.

It is possible to walk to Oksapmin in four to six days. You would need to carry a tent and bring your own food. Pastor Silas Neksep can help locate guides.

OKSAPMIN

Oksapmin Station was established in 1962 and is now the main town in the area. This is a beautiful region with the Om and Strickland Rivers and their spectacular valleys. The climb from the valley floor to the ridges is as high as 3000m in some places. The district is important for the vegetables it grows and supplies to the Ok Tedi mine (p205) and its name is derived from its two main clans, the Ok and the Min.

Oksapmin was historically a protein-deficient area; even spiders, grubs and beetles were eaten before *tinpis* (tinned fish) was introduced. In the evenings you can sometimes see torchlight around the valleys as women search for frogs, mice and snakes.

There are some dramatic **caves** in the Oksapmin Valley – you'll need a guide. An interesting circular walk can be made through the villages around Oksapmin to the west and back along the Ariga River. North of Oksapmin, there are very few people, but around the town and to the south in the five high valleys of Bimin, Bak, Tekin, Teranap and Gaua there are more than 10,000 people.

For the more ambitious it is possible to walk from Oksapmin to the Strickland Gorge and on to Lake Koperasi, from where you could catch a lift to Tari. This area is driest in November and December but can be very wet any time.

THE SEPIK & ITS TRIBUTARIES

The mighty Sepik is the most famous feature of PNG and has captured the collective imagination of adventure travellers. It represents to outsiders something quintessentially primitive, and an embodiment of ideas portrayed in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – a vast, densely populated river region home to isolated people (Conrad was a friend of the anthropologist Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski).

The scale of the river, the impressive architecture of *haus tambarans*, the beautiful

stilt villages, the long canoes with crocodile-head prows, the bird life, flower-clogged lakes, misty dawns and spectacular sunsets make a visit unforgettable.

The Middle Sepik is one of the most frequently visited parts of the river, but it is not crowded with tourists – you're unlikely to bump into other travellers. The river carries traders and missionaries, but that's about it. While photos of Sepik villages look idyllic, they don't show the heat and humidity, the mosquitoes or the basic village food. Nor do they indicate the meditative nature of travelling for hours every day in a motor-canoe, watching ibis take to the sky as you round a bend, or the rewards of experiencing these rich and fascinating cultures.

During the dry season water levels drop dramatically, cutting off villages and turning the lakes stagnant. The trapped water heats up resulting in a toxic algae bloom which kills the fish. Eagles then feast on the dead fish (which are found in droves on the river banks).

The river has few exploitable natural resources and has attracted little development in spite of the density of the population. Even in the face of Western influences, the people on the river are living much the same way as their ancestors – people here cook in Western pots and drive motor-powered

boats and canoes, they wear Western clothes, but they still practise many traditions.

Christianity, as elsewhere in PNG, is blended with many traditional beliefs. Although most Sepik people would claim to be Christian (they go to church every Sunday) it's a very localised interpretation. The religious world is also inhabited with the spirits of ancestors and crocodiles.

The Sepik is too big to cover, so pick a section and give yourself plenty of time to relax in the villages in between legs on the river – don't try and do too much. Two or three Middle Sepik villages are enough for most people, and some enjoy it more when they get off the main river.

The Upper Sepik extends from the river's source to just below Ambunti, the Middle Sepik covers from Ambunti to Tambanum and the Lower Sepik is the final section from Tambanum to the coast.

What to Bring

Only take to the Sepik what you need on the Sepik – leave your luggage with someone you trust in Wewak. A daypack is plenty.

The biggest issues on the Sepik are mosquitoes (*natnats*, p178) and sunburn. You'll need to cover up for both – long sleeves and loose-fitting trousers in lightweight fabrics are ideal although *natnats* can bite

DOS & DON'TS

There's probably too much hang-up about appropriate behaviour in the Sepik area. Good manners go a long way and locals usually forgive transgressions of local rules – you won't know you've done something wrong. Rules might be different for men and women. Try and remember the following:

- Don't wear your hat and shoes into a *haus tambaran* (spirit house).
- Dress and act conservatively.
- Ask where you may wash.
- Ask before taking photographs of anybody or anything – *haus tambarans* are taboo.
- 'Best price?' Don't bargain, but objects sometimes have two prices. It's OK to ask and leave it at that.
- Don't be aloof. Meet with people, relate with them and demonstrate that you respect their culture.
- Be discrete about displaying your cash.
- Alcohol can be a very sensitive thing in villages – it's probably better not to have any.
- The gender politics can be a bit confusing; it's better that men mingle with the men and women with women. There can be awkwardness if Western women are allowed into sacred *haus tambarans* when local women aren't. Couples should not overtly show affection.

right through looser weaves and fine cottons. Covered footwear is essential as is a broad-brimmed hat.

If you're travelling on a plush cruise boat you won't need much beyond some sensible clothes, but for everyone else, preparation is important. You will probably be sleeping rough (although some river guesthouses provide mattresses and linen) and an inflatable hiker's mattress is perfect when combined with a box-style mosquito net secured at four corners (the umbrella type are crap). You can buy good mosquito nets in Wewak. A sleeping sheet is ideal – silk is lighter and less bulky, cotton is a little cooler. A torch (flashlight) is essential and Sepik people have a voracious appetite for D-size batteries, so stow some to give away. There is nowhere to recharge spent digital camera batteries so bring an extra or go easy on the previews.

You bathe in the river, but never nude: bring some swimmers or a *laplap* (sarong) and a towel. Bring sunscreen, sunglasses, industrial-strength insect repellent, toilet paper, a spoon and a bowl. Rain water is collected and is fine to drink, but you might want to carry bottled water to be safe. Take a basic first-aid kit (see p320), and an umbrella might be worthwhile protection from the sun.

In Wewak or Vanimo you must stock up on food and cash. Of the former pack two-minute noodles, *kundu crackers* (beef crackers), rice and *tinpis*. Take some cooking oil as well as that's precious in the Sepik. Any spare food you have remaining you can give away and it's gratefully received. Take plenty of small bills as villagers seldom have change.

Sleeping & Eating

Finding a place to stay will rely on your ability to find people willing to accommodate you. Locals often consider their dwellings below the standard acceptable to 'white' folks and although you would gladly roll out your mattress on their floor the feeling may not be reciprocal. This is where the knowledge of a local guide is invaluable. Other villagers who have travelled beyond the Sepik are generally less reserved with foreigners. A lot depends on who you meet and how receptive they are to an unannounced guest.

Bear in mind that you can't just pitch a tent on some deserted stretch of the river. Not only is this unsafe but like all land in Papua

New Guinea, none is considered deserted by the local who owns it. Landowners have a tradition of fighting over land, and their forefathers didn't spend centuries holding off marauding neighbours just to have some tourist paddle up and camp on it. Instead, ask to speak to the village chief about village guesthouses or local families willing to let you stay or camp with them. If you stay in someone's home, compensation is expected although you will seldom be asked directly to make a contribution.

Getting There & Away

The river is only accessible by road at three points – Angoram on the Lower Sepik and Timbukne and Pagwi on the Middle Sepik. PMVs in these parts are mostly trucks, either with a tarpaulin covering bench seats down each side, or a plain open tray. Those with a sensitive tail bone might consider bringing a pillow – it can be *very hard* on your rear end.

From Wewak, catch a 3-8 PMV to Pagwi from the post office between 9.30pm and 11.30pm (K30, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday). These vehicles run through the night in order to meet the waiting canoes at around 6am the next morning. They return to Wewak as soon as they are full, usually between 6am and 8am.

Roads to Timbukne are impassable in the wet and this is the most unreliable of the three towns in terms of transport. The trip takes about seven hours and costs K40.

2-4 PMVs bound for Angoram leave from Wewak's market every day, except Sunday (K30, four hours). The road from Wewak to Angoram is the shortest access route to the Sepik. It branches off the Maprik road 19km out of Wewak. The 113km, all-weather road is good by Sepik standards but it's still extremely uncomfortable. If you're returning to Wewak you start very early (around 3am) in order to get the locals to the morning market if not bright, at least early.

PMVs are scarce on Saturday and don't run on Sunday. Market days are the best days to travel when the trucks (and canoes) are more frequent.

MAF Wewak flies twice weekly to airstrips at Amboin on the Karawari River and Ambunti (K260). Scheduled flights no longer call at Angoram. The airstrip is overgrown and not in use.

TRIBAL ART

The Sepik is synonymous with tribal art (p45). It is often described as Papua New Guinea's 'treasure trove'; overflowing with masks, shields, figures, canoe prows and story boards and today carving plays an important part of the river economy.

And like all art forms that are alive and vigorous, Sepik art is constantly undergoing subtle transformations, evolving from traditional forms to reflect current tastes and artistic fashions. Today, just as in the past, a master carver is regarded with considerable prestige and is quite capable of producing quality work every bit as unique as his forefathers.

The most artistic villages are concentrated on the Middle Sepik. The villages of Palambe, Kaminabit, Mindimbit, Timbukne and Tambanum are all good places to buy tribal art. Remember that a 10kg carving might cost less than K100 but excess-baggage or postage charges might be twice the cost of the item.

There is also a dark side to art collecting, and over the years unscrupulous art collectors have plundered the Sepik of some of its most significant and culturally important pieces. Taking advantage of local poverty, the lucrative ethnic art market and toothless laws, traders have been able to strip the area of its cultural treasures leaving the treasure chest, or more aptly, the skull rack, empty.

Rory Callinan's interesting article on the trafficking of human heads is worth reading at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1086707,00.html.

TRAVEL ON THE SEPIK

Broadly speaking you have three options. You can go-it-alone, hire a local guide or book on a prearranged tour. Which one you choose determines the degree of comfort you can expect and ultimately how much you'll end up spending. All have their pros and cons, and all are more expensive than you might imagine.

To experience the Sepik more economically (and some would say more enjoyably) base yourself in one village, live with a family, and learn the art of sago washing, canoe making, gardening and fishing.

Goin' Alone

While it's possible to travel on the Sepik independently without a guide, very few people do so. Even if you plan to use local river traffic you'll get far more from the experience if you have the help of a local to explain the everyday happenings, cultures and languages. There are some *raskols* up-river and a guide is honour-bound to get you onto the river and back again safely – once on the water you are days away from the nearest medical help.

If you really want to go alone talk to Ralf Stüttgen (p181) or Alois Mateos in the Sepik Surfside Lodge (p181) before leaving.

If you decide to either paddle yourself or catch passing canoes you will need to have plenty of time and be well prepared and provisioned. Both have the distinct chance of

leaving you up the proverbial creek without a paddle!

The biggest advantage of going alone is that it is considerably cheaper than the other two options and, like it or not, you'll be forced to live as the locals do and gain an exceptional insight into their way of life.

PADDLING YOURSELF

You can purchase a small dugout for about K300 and paddle yourself. However, this is probably insane – the distances are vast and you can only paddle downstream. You might be able to buy a canoe in Ambunti or Pagwi; it may take a while to find one. Make sure it's suitably river-worthy. It takes a solid week of paddling to get from Ambunti to Angoram. This option should not be taken lightly and we don't recommend it; die-hards should be well prepared and very well-informed.

VILLAGE CANOES & TRADERS

The river traffic is reasonably constant although totally unpredictable, and if you've got a pretty open-ended schedule and a lot of time you can catch rides in locals' boats. This is the cheapest way to go – about K20 per hour – but you might be stuck somewhere for a few days before you can get a lift. There is very little traffic on the weekend.

Catching canoes to and from the major transport hubs of Pagwi, Timbukne and Angoram is relatively easy. There are often

boats travelling to meet the buses arriving from Wewak and a canoe ride from Pagwi to Ambunti takes about two hours, depending on the outboard's horsepower and how loaded down the boat is with passengers and freight.

Guide & Boat Hire

There's nothing quite like cruising along the river sitting below the waterline in the bottom of a 20m dugout watching the world slip by and this is perhaps the best option for independent travellers. You have the peace of mind knowing that your guide will find you a place to stay, arrange some food and show you the things that you have come to see along with the added security of reliable transport.

Ultimately the success of the trip will depend on the quality of the guide and the reliability of the boat. Because the expense of the guide and boat can be split it's cheaper to travel in a small group.

GUIDES

Since finding a reliable guide is paramount to an enjoyable trip, every effort should be made to establish contact before your arrival on the Sepik. This is sometimes easier said than done. Local guides seldom promote themselves, have no telephones or email addresses and invariably live in remote villages without a postal address.

It is worth asking for recommendations from other travellers and checking travel reports online at Lonely Planet's 'Thorn Tree' forum (www.lonelyplanet.com). Wewak hotel operators (p181) such as Ralf Stüttgen, Alois Mateos in the Sepik Surfsite Lodge and the staff at the Airport Lodge and Windjammer hotels may be able to offer sound advice. Help Resources (p179) is worth emailing directly as it is often in contact with local guides and can pass on a message. If you can't make prior contact, then plan on spending a couple of days in Wewak, Angoram, Ambunti or Pagwi talking to locals.

A good guide should have an extensive network of local accommodation options, know the river and be able to accurately estimate travelling times and fuel costs. The going rate is anything from K50 to K80 per day and you'll need to pay your guide's PMV fares and accommodation costs in the villages.

Guides currently operating include the following:

Ambunti-based guides Travellers have recommended Ronny Kospi, Alpones Mava, Henry Apina, Cosby Marek, Toby Wadi, Yunias Tobyas, Albert Yombgos (Masanombok Camp) and Johowes Teven (☎ 858 5124). Aldonus Mana (upstream from Ambunti at Japandai) and Kowspi Marek, can be reached through the Ambunti Akedemi in Ambunti.

Angoram-based guides Elijah Saun and Cletus Maiban both offer accommodation and motor-canoe trips. They can be contacted at the Service Camp, a little upstream from Angoram.

Chris Karis (☎ 856 1584, 698 4651) Based in Wewak and operating out of the Airport Lodge (p182), Chris is another top guide.

Joseph Konai (☎ 856 2395; fax 858 5108; joeseph.ykone@yahoo.com.au) He is a wry little fellow and one of the best guides in the area. Based in Ambunti and a friend of Ralf Stüttgen's (p181), Joseph can arrange anything from a day trip to a two-week expedition. For adventurers he organises raft trips down the April River and canoes for self-paddlers. Depending on variables and group size you can expect to pay around K200 per person per day which includes his guiding service, the canoe hire, the captain's fee, fuel, kerosene stoves, pots and cooking utensils.

Recommended.

Steven Buku (☎ 856 1956) From Yenchenmangua but often to be found in Nuiko settlement outside of Wewak is another of the Sepik's most professional guides. He's also sometimes contactable via the Windjammer Hotel in Wewak (p182). His uncle, Lawrence Buku of Indabu village also comes recommended.

Tambanum-based guides Henry Ganwa is recommended.

Wewak-based guides Robert Ulgu (☎ 856 1127, 696 8943) Cyril Tara (sepikarts@yahoo.com.au) lives in Kaminabit but is in Wewak and Kaula Gita regularly.

BOATS

Your guide will be able to help you hire a canoe (with an outboard) at a reasonable price and know how much fuel to buy. You can hire motor-canoes in Ambunti, Pagwi and Angoram.

Once you've accepted that the dugout motor-canoes (pronounced *car-noo*), won't tip over rounding a corner you'll find the ride very relaxing. It takes hours getting anywhere and the experience is quite calming and meditative. Even the buzz of the outboard motor seems to fade after a while.

Figure on K150 to K200 per day to hire a motor-canoe and pilot, about K150 per day (or more) in fuel. The fuel is the largest single contributor to the cost of the trip. Buy your fuel in Angoram or Pagwi because it costs a lot more on the river. Just like back home, the cost

of fuel affects the price of most things on the river and varies with the rise and fall of world oil prices. A 44-gallon drum of petrol was K800 at the time of research. Ouch! Travelling during the dry season is more expensive as various shortcuts are closed when the water level falls. A small, light canoe (15m or so) with a 15HP to 30HP motor is more economical than a larger heavier boat. You could expect to use one 44-gallon drum of fuel in a three-day tour, two drums in a five-day tour, depending of course on how far you travel.

If you charter a canoe you also have to pay for the driver to return to his base, whether you go or not. It's cheaper to travel downstream as the consumption is reduced. At a leisurely pace you could travel from Ambunti to Angoram in five days.

Bearing in mind that various factors can have an influence on the time taken, travelling downstream in a large canoe takes about 1½ hours from Ambunti to Pagwi, about six hours from Pagwi to Timbukne, and five hours from Timbukne to Angoram. Add at least 30% going upstream.

Taking a Tour

This is the easiest, most luxurious and expensive way to see the Sepik. Most people prearrange their Sepik itinerary with either a major inbound tour operator (p311), or one of the smaller Wewak-based tour companies (p319). This latter option is perhaps the best way to go, but give operators a few weeks to make arrangements.

Prices vary wildly, from local operators such as Sepik Adventure Tours (p181) based in Wewak to cruises on the *Sepik Spirit* run by Trans Niugini Tours (p165).

The **Sepik Spirit** (☎ 542 1438; Mt Hagen; www.pngtours.com; 3-day package per person all-inclusive s/tw US\$2585/1739) is a rather odd-looking vessel with its large, square, glass-covered front. It contains nine rooms, each with their own toilet and shower as well as a communal lounge and bar area. The boat doesn't travel quickly so guests board faster, smaller craft to explore the villages, returning each afternoon to overnight on the mother boat.

UPPER SEPIK

Above Ambunti, the villages are smaller and more spread out. The people are friendly and hospitable and have had less contact with Western tourists. Many villagers have no real

understanding of the value of money, so prices can be erratic.

There's not the same concentration of artistic skills that you find on the Middle Sepik, but nature lovers will find this the most exciting part of the river. From Ambunti the river narrows and the land it flows through becomes hilly with denser vegetation. In many areas, trees grow right down to the water's edge.

There are few villages after Yessan and there is a long uninhabited stretch between Tipas and Mowi. The Upper Sepik is more isolated than the Middle Sepik, because there are no roads, so a visit requires detailed planning. Villages around here tend to move and there are lots of deserted settlements.

Green River

This is a subdistrict station, close to the Sepik River in Sandaun (West Sepik) Province, due south of Vanimo and very close to the West Papuan border. It's about a three-hour walk to the river but there is a road and you may get a lift. There are also links to Telefomin and Oksapmin.

Swagup

Well off the main stream, east of the April River, Swagup is the home of the 'insect cult' people. Their unique art usually incorporates the figure of a dragonfly, sago beetle, praying mantis or other insects. The ferocious reputation these people earned in former times continues.

Maio & Yessan

The people here have a yam cult but they have been heavily influenced by missionaries. This area is quite swampy and marshy.

Maliwai

This village is on a small lake off the river. The Waskuk people invest spiritual power in cassowaries and these flightless birds are carved into most things, regardless of function. It used to be customary in this village to cut off a finger joint when there was a death in the family. The spirit house here has collapsed and most artefacts are housed within people's homes. Ask for Joseph Apaet who might put you up.

Yambon

Not far from Ambunti, Yambon is home to approximately a thousand Manabu-speaking

people and strung along the shore for some distance. There is a Catholic Mission here but no place to stay.

Ambunti

Ambunti is an administrative centre of no great interest but there is an airstrip, police outpost, very basic clinic and a couple of reliable people who hire motor-canoes, so this is one of the best places to start a trip.

The inaugural two-day **Crocodile Festival** (contact Lydia Kaia; ☎ 320 0149; lkaia@wwfpacific.org.pg), sponsored by WWF Papua New Guinea, kicked off here in March 2007 and was a great success. Ten cultural groups from various Sepik Basin villages performed with the aim of promoting community tourism and crocodile conservation.

SLEEPING

Because Ambunti gets a trickle of visitors there are various people prepared to accommodate you in their houses – you'll be expected to pay.

Ambunti Catholic Mission (per person K25) Ask the boat driver to drop you here at the bend of the river just before Ambunti Lodge. It can sometimes provide meals but bring emergency rations just in case.

Ambunti Lodge (☎ 856 1516; www.ambuntilodge-sepiktour.com.pg; r K156; 🍴) Has seven double rooms and two common bathrooms and its own generators to run the air-con. Grilled pork chop or chicken meals (K27) are served with rice and cabbage. This lodge mainly caters to the clients of Sepik Adventure Tours (p181) but it is possible to stay here if it has rooms available. By Sepik standards it's quite comfortable. Staff can arrange half- and full-day tours although you should be able to arrange things more cheaply if you contact the boat owners directly.

MIDDLE SEPIK

This region starts just below Ambunti and finishes at Tambanum. This area is regarded as the 'cultural treasure house' of PNG. Almost every village had a distinct artistic style, but these styles are now merging. The whole Middle Sepik region is interesting but the largest concentration of villages is just below Pagwi and it's possible to visit several on a day trip.

Pagwi

Down the road from Hayfield, Pagwi is the most important access point to the Middle Sepik. There is little of interest in Pagwi, and despite its vital role it's rather an ugly little place – some rundown government buildings and trade stores where you can buy basic supplies.

You can hire motor-canoes here but be mindful that there are some rogues. Day trips to Korogo, Aibom, Palambe, Yentchen and Kanganaman are all interesting and within reach. It's six hours to Timbunke and another five to Angoram. At a leisurely pace, stopping and taking side trips, you could take five or six days to get down to Angoram where you can get a PMV back to Wewak.

Pagwi has a rough reputation so avoid staying here if you can. A two-minute walk upriver brings you to the Catholic Mission with basic beds with nets (K25). The deacon is happy to boil water for your noodles.

Korogo

Korogo has an impressive *haus tambaran* with a pair of carved eagles at either end of the roof. Local myth tells of two young women who, while fishing, attracted the lascivious attentions of the Crocodile Spirit. The spirit caused a flood, forcing the girls from their homes and into his waiting jaws. One sister was eaten; the other captured and duly married. The union produced two eggs from which eagles, not crocodiles, hatched.

There's a pleasant two-hour walk inland to the village of **Yamok**, home to the Sowa tribe who travellers report have recently built two *haus tambarans*. You can also take a canoe to Palenquai and walk from there (40 minutes).

The Korogo guesthouse has collapsed so if you can't get someone to stay with you'll have to move on. Korogo is 30 minutes by motor-boat from Pagwi, half a day paddling.

Suapmeri

Variously spelt as Swatmeri and Sotmeri, Suapmeri is famous for its mosquitoes. There are few carvings for sale, although the village was famed for its orator's stools. Despite this, it's an attractive village and the entrance to the Chambri Lakes. You may be able to stay with the family of James Yesinduma. James knows everyone who lives on the river and speaks English.

HAUS TAMBARAN

Tambaran is a spirit, so the *haus tambaran* is the house where spirits live, inhabiting sacred carvings and *tambu* (forbidden or sacred) objects. *Haus tambarans* are often referred to as 'spirit houses' or 'men's houses' because only initiated men (and tourists) are allowed to enter. Although Western women are usually allowed inside, times have not changed for village women.

Every clan has a spirit house and they are still very much the centre of local life. Men lounge around in the shade underneath the building, carving, talking or sleeping. Across the Sepik area young male initiates remain up to nine months in the upstairs section of the *haus tambaran* while they prepare for (and often recuperate from) initiation rites, and in this period they often cannot look at a woman until they are reborn as men. The *haus tambaran* is universally a female symbol: its entrance is sometimes vaginal in shape, yet everything about *haus tambarans* and what goes on in them is secret men's business and *tambu* to women.

Haus tambarans vary in style but can be up to 50m long, 30m high and extremely intricate.

James can arrange a guide through the Chambri Lakes and along the weed-filled *barets* (artificial channels) – you can take a shortcut to Kaminabit if the water isn't too low. Suapmeri is half an hour from Korogo by motor-canoe. To Aibom in the Chambri Lakes it's 1½ hours by motor-canoe.

Indabu

This is a good place to buy carvings and *bilums* and you can stay with local people.

Yentchen

The two-storey *haus tambaran* here was copied from photographs taken at the turn of the century by German explorers of the building standing at that time. The top floor is only for initiates, who climb upstairs between the legs of a female fertility symbol and are blessed in the process. Sadly the building has fallen into disrepair and there are plans to move the artefacts into the half-built structure behind the *haus tambaran* and out of the sight of the women.

Yentchen is noted for its wickerwork dancing costumes – figures of crocodiles, pigs, cassowaries and two-headed men. Male initiates have their skin cut into 'crocodile skin' (see p197) around Christmas. The ceremony is open to foreigners (K150 per person) but be very respectful.

Yentchen is 2½ hours by motor-canoe from Pagwi and it is possible to stay with local Jacob Kambak (K25).

Palambe

You can't see Palambe village proper from the river and it's easy to miss – there are a few huts and there may be some canoes

on the bank. It's a hot 20-minute walk along a *baret* (which is empty in the dry season), but it is worth the effort because the village is beautiful. Built around several small lagoons full of flowering water lilies, the village has two impressive *haus tambarans* (K5 entrance fee) at either end of a ceremonial green. The remains of a third *haus tambaran* can also be seen. It was bombed by the Japanese in WWII and all that remains are the large upright posts, two of which have sprouted.

Inside the spirit house ask to see the chair that houses the village spirit but don't photograph it. Downstairs are eight fires bordered by eight benches, one for each of the eight clans in the village.

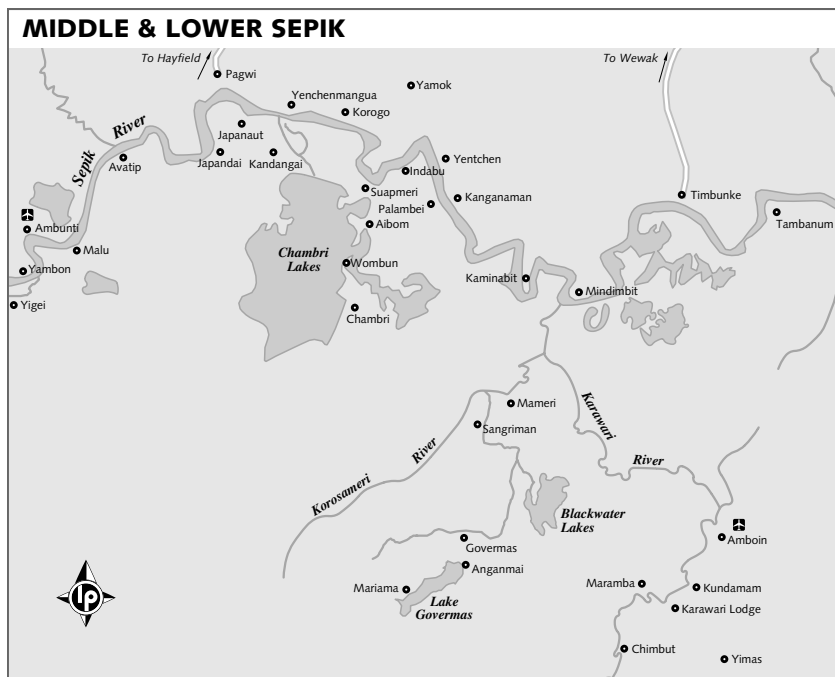
Stones, which must have been carried many kilometres, have been set up in the glade. Locals are great *garamut* (drum made from a hollowed log) players and you might see some beating out their powerful and complex rhythms (K10). The village women make the best *bilums* on the river and there are also many carvings for sale here.

Palambe is 1½ hours from Suapmeri by motor-canoe.

Kanganaman

A brief walk from the river, this village is famous for the oldest *haus tambaran* on the river. Declared a building of national cultural importance, it has been renovated with help from the National Museum and is interesting to visit (K5). It is a huge building with enormous carved posts.

The village guesthouse costs K25 and you will need to bring your own food and mosquito nets.



Kaminabit

The *haus tambaran* here is in fairly good condition and it is possible to climb to the second floor (K10) to view the painted beams and rafters. Skin-cutting ceremonies (opposite) are held here about once every two years during which ancestral skulls are placed in the two large drums. The men will play these *garambut* for K10. Carvings are also sold.

Kaminabit is divided into three villages and it is a few minutes' walk between each. There is a large, well-maintained Catholic church in the middle village, with three wings (one for each village) radiating from the central pulpit.

Local families offer accommodation – ask for Emanuel Yakawi or William Pekul. James Minja, Anton Bob, Dominic and Francesca and their families have also been recommended.

From Aibom it takes one hour to get here by motor-canoe, and from Palambe it's 1½ hours by motor-canoe.

Mindimbit

The village is near the junction of the Karawari and Korosameri Rivers. The

Korosameri leads to the beautiful Blackwater Lakes region. Mindimbit is entirely dependent on carving and there is some nice work, though there is no proper *haus tambaran*. You can stay with a friendly family – ask for Peter Bai.

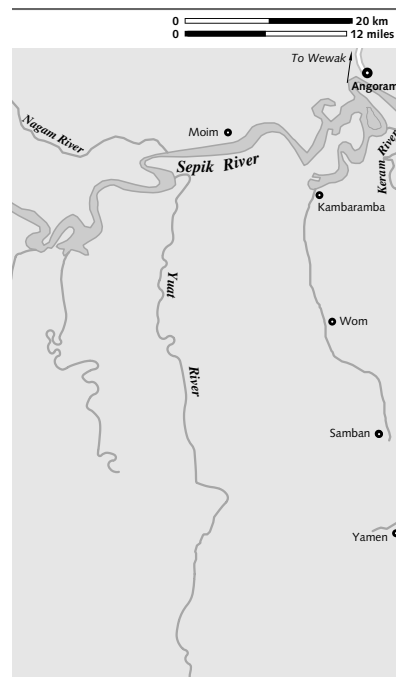
Timbunke

This is a large village with a big Catholic mission, a hospital and a number of other Western-style buildings. There are also some impressive houses.

Trans Niugini's *Sepik Spirit* calls in here which is why there's a good range of artefacts and carvings for sale. People have had problems trying to find somewhere to stay in Timbunke though, and the mission is not helpful. Ask a local about accommodation options.

Tambanum

This is the largest village on the Middle Sepik and fine, large houses are strung along the bank for quite a distance. The people here are renowned carvers. American anthropologist Margaret Mead



can be provided and tours can be organised. Contact Aloise Mateos in Wewak.

LOWER SEPIK

The Lower Sepik starts at Tambanum and runs down to the coast. Angoram is the most important town on the Sepik. The Marienberg Mission station, which has been operated by the Catholics for many years, is about two hours downstream from Angoram.

Near the mouth of the river, the Murik Lakes are vast semi-flooded swamplands, narrowly separated from the coast. Villages along this part of the Sepik are smaller, poorer and generally have had less Western contact than many in the Middle Sepik.

The vast volume of water and silt coming down means that the landscape around the mouth of the Sepik changes rapidly. Many villages here are only a few generations old, built on new land.

Angoram

This is the oldest and largest Sepik station. It was established by the Germans before WWII and is now a sleepy administrative centre for the Lower and Middle Sepik regions. Now, Angoram's population is falling and it's a town in decline – there has been no mains power in Angoram for 18 years despite the presence of power poles and cables. There used to be banks and businesses, a hospital and airstrip. Apparently this used to be a pretty swinging place in the colonial days with dances and parties – it's hard to imagine now.

If you haven't got a lot of time to spend but you want to see some of the Sepik, Angoram

lived here for an extended time. From Timbunke, Tambanum is about 30 minutes by motor-canoe.

The **New Tambanum Lodge** (☎ 856 2525) is now in poor condition. The guesthouse is situated 600m from the bank. There are six double rooms with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities and a separate septic toilet. Meals

SCAR TISSUE Nancy Sullivan

The first time I saw an initiated latmul man on the Sepik was in 1988. He was a guide on my first canoe trip through the region and I couldn't take my eyes off the bands of gnarly hard welts running down his shoulders and shirtless back. Years later, in the Nambaraman spirit house, I witnessed how he must have received such grizzly scars.

On that day I saw a group of young men, under the guidance of their mother's brothers, pass from youth to men, androgyny to manhood. All the initiates had their backs cut by their uncles that day, symbolically bleeding out their mother's postpartum blood and spilling it onto their mother's line; 'making' them into men for their fathers' clan. The uncles cradled their nephews on their laps as the gruesome scars were quickly and professionally cut. *Tigaso* tree oil and cooling white clay were applied and the boys were then made to lie down by smoky fires to slowly infect their wounds and produce the knobbly, keloid scars that make their skin resemble that of a crocodile's. It was during this ordeal, as the flutes and *kundu* drums played to confuse the women waiting outside, I finally 'got' what it meant to cut skin.

Nancy Sullivan (www.nancysullivan.org), Papua New Guinea anthropologist

is the place to come to. It's accessible by road from Wewak (p190) and there are beautiful and interesting places just a few hours away by motor-canoe.

There are a couple of reputable guides near Angoram. Elijah Saun and Cletus Maiban both offer accommodation and motor-canoe trips. They can be contacted at the Service Camp, a little upstream from Angoram.

Elijah's house adjoins his carving workshop on the riverbank. Mattresses, pillows, linen and mosquito nets can be provided. Cletus's house is a bit further upstream. There are various other people in nearby Angoram who will provide travellers with informal accommodation.

The **Angoram Hotel** (☎ 858 3011; s K100; 🏠), owned by Joe Kenni, a local *bigman* and politician, is in a pretty bad way – run down and closed a lot of the time; very few people stay here. The rooms have air-con but only when the generator is running. Joe also runs tours and can recommend guides.

Around Angoram

A good day trip is to go south on the Keram River to **Kambot**, stopping at either **Magendo** or **Chimondo** on the way. These villages produce fantastic art – Kambot is the home to the Sepik storyboards. The river is narrow and winding, and the banks are crowded with luxuriant growth and ibis. There's informal accommodation at the culture house in Kambot. Further south on the Keram is **Yip**, and a beautiful rainforest with plenty of birds.

Another day trip from Angoram goes to **Moim** and **Kambaramba** and some beautiful lagoons. Further south on a tributary is **Wom**. The **Murik Lakes** are about four hours away and there's accommodation in **Mendam**.

TRIBUTARIES & LAKES

The Sepik River becomes monotonous as it winds through its vast, flat plain, with *pitpit* up to the water's edge. The most spectacular scenery is on the tributaries and the villages are generally smaller, friendlier and less visited. There are three main accessible tributaries in the Lower Sepik – the **Keram**, the **Yuat** and the smaller **Nagam**.

May (Iwa) River

This is a small town more than halfway from Ambunti to the West Papuan border. There's an airstrip and a mission settlement. It's pos-

sible to begin a river trip at this point. Villages in this area are very rarely visited and there are unresolved hostilities between clans. Seek advice before heading off from May River.

April (Wara) River & Wogamush River Area

Life on these tributaries continues in a more traditional manner, with initiation rites and various social taboos and systems still intact. Both areas are good for bird-watching. There are villages at regular intervals.

Wasui Lagoon

Also known as Wagu Lagoon, this is a beautiful place, with many birds. The Hunstein Range is behind **Wagu** village and the area is covered in lush rainforest. Wagu is cut off during the dry season when lake levels drop. Kaku Yamzu (Mathew) operates the **Toheyo Guesthouse** (per person K25), a simple stilt house where you can sling your mosquito net and unfurl your sleeping mat. Bring your own food. Mathew's tours include trips to see the bird-of-paradise display tree (K15), fishing (K5) and crocodile spotting at night (K10).

Chambri Lakes

The Chambri Lakes are a vast and beautiful expanse of shallow water. Being only 4m deep, they partially empty in the dry season when things get smelly and the water is unfit for drinking unless treated. The area was once a fortress of floating weed-islands but these have been eaten by the voracious pacu (p177), an introduced South American fish.

Indabu is one of the four villages that make up Chambri region. There is a *haus tambaran* here with a huge collection of carvings in the polished Chambri style, as well as ornamental spears. **Aibom**, another village on the lakes, produces pottery and has a large stone said to be that of a woman who turned to stone resisting a snake who was trying to drag her into the water.

With the help of French anthropologist Nicolas Garnier and international funding, there is a new *haus tambaran* in **Wombun**. The four main totems here are eagles, flying foxes, rats and crocodiles. Although there is no guesthouse many guides bring tourists here to stay with their *wantoks*.

When the water is deep enough there are various routes and shortcuts to Chambri although you'll need a guide to find them. The

deepest route connects the lake with the Sepik just above Kaminabit. There's another passage via Suapmeri and another via Kandangai.

From Suapmeri to Aibom takes 1½ hours by motor-canoe. From Aibom to Kaminabit takes another hour by motor-canoe. There are village boats to Kandangai from Pagwi most days.

Karawari River

The Karawari runs into the Korosameri (which drains the Blackwater Lakes) and then into the Sepik just near Mindimbit. Initially the banks are crowded with *pitpit*. But jungle soon takes over and the river becomes more interesting, with abundant bird life and attractive villages.

Amboin

Amboin is usually reached by air and from the village it's a short distance up the river to the luxurious Karawari Lodge. The lodge river trucks will take you to nearby villages such as Maramba, Marvwak and Chimbut where traditional Sepik-style tree houses are still used. There are also tours that travel as far as Kaminabit and some that stay in the villages. *Singsings* and re-enactments of the Mangamai skin-cutting ceremonies are all part of the deal. Special tours for bird-watchers to the Yimas Lakes can be organised.

The **Karawari Lodge** (☎ 542 1438 Mt Hagen; www.pngtours.com; per person all-inclusive s/tw US\$499/402) is a luxury base, operated by Trans Niugini Tours, for exploring the Sepik near Amboin. The main building, built in the style of a *haus tambaran* with impressive carved totem poles and stools, is surrounded by 20 mosquito-

proofed bungalows. The lodge has dramatic views across the Karawari River and a vast sea of jungle. Tourists are flown in as part of a larger itinerary and it's possible to opt to stay at nearby villages (far less luxurious). Like all of Trans Niugini operations, it's cheaper to come to here on a package.

Mameri

About 40 minutes by motor-canoe from Mindimbit and just before the turn-off to the Blackwater Lakes, Mameri is known for its accomplished and dramatic carving.

Blackwater Lakes

To enter the Blackwater Lakes is to enter a vast water world where villages are often built on stilts and the people pole their canoes through shallow, reed-clogged lakes. The bird life is incredible.

As you get higher, away from the Sepik, the climate is cooler and the scenery becomes more spectacular.

Govermas

A place of 'dreamlike beauty', Govermas also has one of the most impressive *haus tambarans* in the region and some excellent carving. It's about one hour by motor-canoe from Mameri. If you get as far as this, it's worth going on to see **Lake Govermas** and the village of **Anganmai**, on top of a hill. Lake Govermas is surrounded by low hills, mountains, dense forest and three beautiful villages. On a tributary at the very south of Lake Govermas is **Mariama** which has a good *haus tambaran*.

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