



Ecotourism Melanesia

Discover Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

EM3B MYSTICAL MIDDLE SEPIK 2 NIGHTS PACKAGE FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVELLERS 2 nights Middle Sepik River motor canoe trip (extendable)

This soft adventure package is a great introduction to the rituals and secrets of the crocodile cult of the Yatmul tribe of the Middle Sepik. The trip features two overnights in basic village guest houses along the river and usually also requires two transit nights in Wewak due to flight schedules - a minimum time commitment of 4 nights.

The trip to the river begins with a four hour road transfer from Wewak to Pagwi, the jumping off point for water transport along the Middle Sepik. The road trip is followed by a one hour motor canoe transfer downstream to Korogo, the first of the "crocodile cult" villages where you will spend the rest of this day, and overnight. On your second day on the river you will visit the crocodile cult villages of Palembang, Kanganaman and Kaminabit where you will have your second night on the river. The third day is a travel day for returning to Wewak, either (i) retracing your steps via Pagwi, (ii) taking a fast run downstream to Angoram or (iii) flying out from Timbunke airstrip (Tuesday only). Three great exit options that keep the tour flexible.

NB This is a "wet foot" tour that involves climbing in and out of small boats, some walking, and overnights in local-style village guest huts without electricity, so some physical agility and mental flexibility is required. Note that this is an original itinerary designed and reconnoitred by Ecotourism Melanesia.

TOUR COST (per person twin-share)

	Group of 1	Group of 2	Group of 4	Group of 6+
Core tour 2 nights Middle Sepik	USD 2500	USD 1700	USD 1300	USD 900
Extra day/night touring Middle Sepik*	USD 300	USD 200	USD 150	USD 100
Extra day/night Muschu Island or Kairiru Island**	USD 300	USD 200	USD 150	USD 100
Day trip to Muschu Island	USD 300	USD 200	USD 150	USD 100
Hotel accom Wewak (per night room only)	USD 200	USD 100	USD 100	USD 100
Budget accom Wewak (per night room only)	USD 100	USD 50	USD 50	USD 50
Optional airfare supplement POM-WWK-POM****	USD 500	USD 500	USD 500	USD 500

* eg side trip to Yamok, Chambri Lake, Kambot including canoe hire, fuel, guide, village fees, village accom, catering

** minimum 2 nights stay, includes boat transfers, guide, village fees, village accom, catering, beach activities / jungle hiking, WW2 relics

*** flat rate, economy fares, includes our booking fee

Prices subject to change but otherwise valid till end 2018.

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INCLUSIONS FOR CORE TOUR (2 nights):

- Private road transfer from Wewak to Sepik River (Pagwi) with guide
- 2 nights Sepik River canoe trip including motor canoe transport, Sepik River guide and helpers, welcome sing-sing, village entry fees, village guest house accommodation, all meals (a mixture of village food and camp food), all bedding and other basic camping gear, bottled or boiled or treated water, toilet tissue and soap, insect killer, umbrellas
- Choice of exit via Pagwi, Angoram or Timbunke (flight) depending on availability
- 24-hour tour monitoring and emergency assistance from our Port Moresby office

EXCLUSIONS

- airfares (available at extra cost)
- accommodation in Wewak (available at extra cost)
- meals and drinks in Wewak (pay as you go)
- tips (not expected, and only appropriate for exceptional service)
- souvenirs and items of a personal nature
- Personal items. Bring your own favourite munchies, favourite bath soap, favourite toilet paper, small quick-dry towel, personal medications and first aid kit, personal hygiene requirements, brimmed hat or cap, "amphibious footwear" (sandals or quick-dry canvas shoes), insect repellent, sunscreen, personal flashlight, battery-operated personal fan. Please note that pressurised aerosol spray cans are not permitted on domestic flights in PNG - bring pump-action sprays or roll-ons.

ITINERARY

DAY 1:



WEWAK/SEPIK RIVER (Korogo)

07:00 Pick up at your accommodation. Our local guide who will drive you by private four wheel drive vehicle to Pagwi, your jumping-off point on the Sepik River.

The road from Wewak to Pagwi is bitumen sealed most of the way and quite a pleasant journey. First you climb steep winding curves from the steamy coastal strip to the cool forests of the undulating Prince Alexander Range. Two hours into the trip you can stop at a roadside market to buy tropical fruits, cooked vegetables and delicious green coconuts to drink.

Back on the road, you will soon descend onto the hot dry (or steamy wet) Sepik plains, with the river itself a fuzzy brown ribbon on the horizon. On the savannah grasslands of the Sepik plains, you pass by a number of roadside villages before arriving at tiny Pagwi township on the Middle Sepik around midday.

At Pagwi you will board a waiting motor canoe and head down-river almost one hour to Korogo, the first of the Middle Sepik crocodile cult villages. Very few tourists visit this village - most head straight to Palimbei or Ambunti - so you will certainly have the place to yourself. At Korogo your guide will settle you into the small guest hut then take you on a walking tour of the village to meeting local people outside their huts doing their usual late afternoon chores - chopping firewood to smoke fresh fish and cook sago for dinner before it gets dark (there is no electricity here and the people can't afford kerosene for lamps). You'll stop at the men's spirit house to watch a group of villagers perform a traditional Yatmul tribal dance.

Overnight village guest hut, Korogo (includes local style meals and bottled or boiled water).

After dinner you'll have some light conversation with your hosts then everybody will retire early as is the custom here because - apart from crocodile hunting - not much happens at night here. Your mosquito net or dome tent will give you refuge from insects but the air trapped inside your net or tent quickly becomes hot and stuffy which makes it hard to sleep. Bringing a battery operated personal fan or tent fan is highly recommended.

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DAY 2:



SEPIK RIVER (Korogo to Kaminabit)

This morning after breakfast you will depart Korogo for a two hour trip downstream to the twin villages of Palembang and Kanganaman which are located on opposite banks of the river. Palembang is actually about 30 minutes hike inland from the south bank and is located on low-lying savannah which floods easily during the wet season so if the water is up you'll have to reach the village by motor canoe or paddle canoe instead, depending on the water depth. Palembang has two spirit houses containing many old artifacts. Normally only initiated men (with crocodile scars on their skin) may enter the spirit houses but an exception is made for tourists (male and female) since they are outsiders and not under tribal law.

Retracing your route to the south bank you'll cross over in your motor canoe to the north bank and up a small channel to Kanganaman village which is located on higher ground less subject to flooding. There is only one spirit house at Kanganaman but it is actually the largest spirit house on the Sepik, a towering structure with an impossibly steep ladder that is quite a challenge to climb. Underneath the spirit house is a cool sitting area where the initiated men gather to socialise, beat their log drums and play their large bamboo flutes.

Your guide will provide something for lunch at Kanganaman then you'll continue another hour downstream to Kaminabit.

Much of today's canoe travel will be in blazing hot sun (and/or rain !) so wear long sleeves, plenty of sunscreen, a hat, sunglasses and even hold an umbrella to keep the sun off you. Beware also of the sun's reflection off the water which can burn you face and neck.

A few years ago the old spirit house at Kaminabit slipped into the river due to erosion of the riverbank but the beautifully carved support poles were rescued and used as the foundation for a new spirit house built a safer distance back from the shoreline which you'll be able to visit.

The other major attraction at Kaminabit is Bowie's Art Haus, a small artefact shop owned by a local villager that offers a wide range of Sepik carvings, woven crafts and crocodile tooth necklaces at very good prices (cash only of course). Being located near the junction of the Sepik with the Korosameri River leading up to the Blackwater Lakes and Karawari River, Kaminabit is something of a trade crossroads which enables Bowie's to purchase traditional art from a number of different Sepik tribal peoples passing by on their way to either Pagwi or Angoram.

Overnight village guest house, Kaminabit (includes local style meals and bottled or boiled water).



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DAY 3:



SEPIK RIVER/WEWAK

There are three possible routes back to Wewak today, from Kaminabit:

- (i) retracing your steps by canoe to Pagwi then by road to Wewak (7-8 hours travel time)
- (ii) continuing downstream by canoe direct to Angoram and thence by road to Wewak (7-8 hours)
- (iii) flying out from Timbunke airstrip (flights are currently Tuesday mornings only).

Options (i) and (iii) are included in the package price but option (ii) requires an extra USD 200 fuel surcharge

TOUR ENDS

See trip notes next page



TRIP NOTES

ABOUT WEWAK

Wewak town (population around 50,000) is the jumping-off point for the Sepik River and the Wewak Islands. A smaller town than Madang, Wewak is less tourist-oriented and the local economy is mainly based on commercial fishing and agriculture. There are three medium sized 3 star hotels and a number of smaller motels and guest houses. From Wewak there are two roads leading to the Sepik River - one to Pagwi on the Middle Sepik and one to Angoram on the Lower Sepik - and charter aircraft operate from Wewak airport to airstrips along the river at Ambunti (Upper Sepik), Timbunke (Middle Sepik) and Karawari (a tributary of the Sepik). From the Wewak waterfront open speed boats travel less than an hour to the offshore Wewak Islands, Muschu and Kairiru.

ABOUT IN-WEWAK BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Situated on a cliff top overlooking the Bismarck Sea the In-Wewak Boutique Hotel is a recently built plantation-style property featuring white-painted rooms with sterile clean bathrooms, white stucco facade, and wide verandahs with stiff sea breezes in the afternoons. By far the best hotel in Wewak, this hotel offers international-standard comfort and service in a small boutique package. The restaurant serves superb local seafood and the a la carte menu is a match for any of the larger hotels in Port Moresby. Breakfast and lunch are served in the café and represent good value. Dinner is served in the larger fine dining restaurant. Dial-up internet, though very slow, is available from user terminals near reception. There is a small but no beach access due to the clifftop location. All rooms are air-conditioned and fitted with a queen size or king size bed. A roll-away single bed can be set up in the room if twin share is required. www.inwewak.com

ABOUT PAGWI

Pagwi was originally established as a mission station but is now a small rural township with a population about 1,000. There are a couple of trade stores and fuel depots, a small guest house and a police post. The road from Wewak to Pagwi is the lifeline of the Middle Sepik.

ABOUT SEPIK CROCODILES

Known locally as “pook-pooks”, crocodiles play a major part in the lives of the Sepik people. Apart from their centrality to spiritual beliefs, crocodiles are important for the local diet and the village microeconomy. Everywhere in the Sepik River basin, the crocodile is an occasional source of protein for the village diet, and crocodile skins are sold for cash to outside buyers. The collecting of crocodile eggs in the wild and hatching them in crocodile “farms” is an ongoing threat to the wild population. WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is educating locals about sustainable harvesting of wildlife resources and encouraging them to turn to alternative sources of income such as ecotourism. The two species of crocodile prevalent in the Sepik basin are the common saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and the New Guinea freshwater crocodile (*Crocodylus novaeguineas*). These days the wild populations of both species are retreating to the more remote tributaries of the Sepik that are furthest from their major predator: humans. It is unusual to see crocodiles along the main human-occupied areas of the Sepik River proper these days, as the constant passage of motorised canoes and other small boats has driven the crocodile population up into the backwaters. Very large crocodiles are rare these days and no “monster man-eaters” have been caught in the past 10 years.

ABOUT THE MIDDLE SEPIK CROCODILE CULT

In the Middle Sepik and Blackwater Lakes, crocodiles are revered as spiritual totems symbolising strength and power. In the Middle Sepik Yatmul tribe villages from Korogo down to Kaminabit including Yentchen, Palembang and Kanganaman, the traits of the crocodile are so envied that the men even try to make themselves look like crocodiles. The initiation of young men into adulthood involves a painful scarification ritual during which dozens of small cuts are made all over the back and chest from shoulders to hips, and pockets of skin are lifted away from the flesh (without any anaesthetic). Upon healing, this leaves raised scars that resemble the bumpy dorsal hide of the crocodile. Such initiations take place once or twice per year in each village and are carried out in private for modesty reasons because the young men cannot wear clothes while their scars are healing uncovered. After the cutting they spend two weeks

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resting and recovering in a special hut, naked with only healing herbs rubbed on their bodies. Women and outsiders in particular are not normally allowed to witness the cutting ceremony or see the initiates naked although recently some villages have started allowing film crews and wealthy tourists to fishbowl the ritual on paying a sizeable fee. Apparently, and hopefully, the fee goes to the initiated boys and their families to help them pay for hosting several days of feasting at the end of the initiation process. Once initiated, the young men gain status in the tribe and may frequent the Haus Tambaran (men's spirit house) to socialise with other initiated men and participate in pagan cult practises such as communing with the ancestors. Yatmul men who are not initiated (eg due to Christian religious beliefs, due to living in the city and not having the opportunity, or due to being frightened of the pain) are not permitted to enter the Haus Tambaran. However in most villages the initiated men do allow outside visitors, including foreign women, to enter the tribal spirit house because outsiders are not under tribal law.

ABOUT KOROGO VILLAGE

Korogo (population 500) is the furthest upstream of the crocodile cult villages of the Yatmul tribe. Although it is the closest crocodile cult village to Pagwi, only an hour's ride by motor canoe, very few tourists visit Korogo as most other visitors head further downstream to the larger villages of Palimbei and Kaminabit, or upstream to Ambunti. Behind Korogo village is the "Korogo fishing lake", a large ox-bow lake formed when a bend in the Sepik was cut off by a change in the course of the river at some time in the past. Korogo village carvers are famous for their fine art. Wood artists from Korogo have travelled overseas on carver exchange programs (see <http://www.alcheringa-gallery.com/artists.html/v1/view/v3/209> and http://www.alcheringa-gallery.com/past/af3_korogo.html for example). The spirit house at Korogo has fallen into disrepair due to the death of the old chief and the wait for a new chief to take his place - the new chief will oversee the rebuilding of the new spirit house - and only the intricately carved support poles are still standing at the moment (watch this space). There is a new thatched village guest house at Korogo where visitors are accommodated and local style meals are served. A good cultural group is available here to perform traditional Sepik River "sing-sing" dances.

ABOUT KAMINABIT VILLAGE

Kaminabit is a large village with about 1000 people, spread out along 500 metres of the northern Middle Sepik river bank. Kaminabit is the furthest downstream of the crocodile cult villages of the Yatmul tribe. The other crocodile cult villages along the main river (Korogo, Suapmeri, Yentchen, Palimbei, Kanganaman and a few smaller ones in between) are all upstream from Kaminabit. Like the other Yatmul villages, Kaminabit men have been initiated into the crocodile cult and have ritual "crocodile skin" scars on their dorsal surfaces ie the backs of their arms and legs, their upper shoulders and backs. Some are also scarred on their chests. The village is well organised and there are several basic guest houses offering rustic accommodation for occasional visitors, a good cultural dance group and Bowie's Art Centre, a thatch-roof artifact shop run by a village man who stocks carvings and other handicrafts from around the Sepik Basin and has quite a wide selection at good prices. (Bowie's also has an outlet at "Kaminabit Camp", a settlement in Wewak). Of all the Yatmul villages along the middle Sepik, the Kaminabit people own the largest land area and arguably the best hunting grounds, sharing land borders with the people of Timbunke, Blackwater, Aibom, Palimbei/Kanganaman, and the Abelam. A large area of the Chambri Lake is Kaminabit territory. Bird life along this section of the river and in the adjacent Chambri Lake area is prolific, with herons and egrets, ibises, cormorants, gigantic osprey/sea eagles, the common hawk, palm cockatoos, sulfur-crested cockatoos, parrots, warblers and finches, a beautiful fly catcher/honey eater, and several species of wild ducks. A few years ago the old spirit house at Kaminabit slipped into the river due to erosion of the riverbank but the beautifully carved support poles were rescued and used as the foundation for a new spirit house built a safer distance back from the shoreline which you'll be able to visit.

ABOUT SEPIK MOTOR CANOES

The Sepik River and the neighbouring Ramu River are the only places in PNG where you will find motorised longboats or "motor canoes" still in common use. Although previously found in all large rivers around PNG, fibreglass dinghies are now more common along most other rivers. Up to 10 metres in length, Sepik motor canoes are carved from whole tree trunks and take about 3 months to make. On the

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Sepik River you will see such canoes carrying up to 30 people or large quantities of fuel drums or other cargo weighed right down to the waterline but for comfort and convenience we load only 4 tourists plus baggage and supplies into a medium sized canoe (6-7 metres with a 30hp outboard motor) or 6 tourists plus cargo into a large canoe (8-10 metres with a 40hp engine). We do not own our own canoes: we hire them from local village operators in support of our responsible tourism policy. Sepik motor canoes are very safe and in all our years of operating Sepik River trips we have never known a canoe carrying tourists to capsize or sink. This is because when the makers carve the canoe they leave the wood at the bottom of the canoe very thick and carve the sides and prow thin. This way the centre of gravity remains low and the canoe tends to remain upright and not tip over. For stability reasons we prefer not to place cane armchairs in canoes for tourists to sit on (as do some other tour operators) because when passengers sit high in the canoe this raises the centre of gravity of the canoe and makes it roll from side to side and increases the risk of a passenger toppling out of the canoe when standing up to stretch a cramp or take a photograph. The local people normally sit cross legged right down in the bottom of the canoe and for safety reasons we prefer our travellers to do the same. We'll try to provide a cushion or rolled blanket for you to sit on for comfort. We do provide life jackets and encourage you to wear one even if you are a strong swimmer because the Sepik River has very strong currents that are hard to swim against. Although none of our travellers have fallen out of a canoe before, if it does happen to you the best strategy is just to float in the current until you are washed onto a sand bank at the next river bend or until the canoe comes around to pick you up. The biggest danger with Sepik canoe travel is sunburn. Apart from applying sunscreen we recommend you wear long sleeves and hold an umbrella or wear a large wide-brimmed hat while travelling in these open canoes. Normally we provide umbrellas. Despite the brown colour of the river it does reflect a lot of solar radiation upwards under your umbrella or the brim of your hat so it is important to apply sunscreen to the undersides of your face and arms as well.

ABOUT MUSCHU ISLAND (OPTIONAL EXTENSION)

Muschu is a perfect tropical island, flat and low and covered in coconut plantations and green jungle. The island is fringed with beautiful white sandy beaches and colourful coral reefs. There are only a few villages. The island was occupied during WW2 by Japanese navy units who were responsible for planting large vegetable gardens all over the island to grow food for feeding the thousands of men in the garrison based at Wewak. There was also a gunnery unit manning a pair of huge naval guns on a hill inland from Sup Point. The big guns are still there in the bush (www.gunsofmuschu.com). In September 1945 when the Japanese surrendered, Australian forces kept up to 10,000 Japanese prisoners on the island until they were repatriated to Japan in 1946. There are no ferries servicing the island and the only way to get there is by squatting on the floor of a privately hired open speed boat ("banana boat") which is a little intimidating for conventional tourists, therefore Muschu is not a mainstream tourist destination despite its beachy appeal.

ABOUT SHAGUR VILLAGE, KAIRIRU ISLAND (OPTIONAL EXTENSION)

Kairuru is a larger, more mountainous island than Muschu, located further out in the Bismarck Sea. It's an active volcano with hot springs bubbling onto the beach at Victoria Bay on the western end. A four hour hike brings you to a cool crater lake at the top of the island which boasts high biodiversity. The island was occupied by the Japanese Imperial forces in World War 2 and a number of caves containing ammunition supplies, fuel drums and other military supplies have been found. On the north side of the island, not visible from Wewak, is Shagur village a tropical paradise situated in lush green rainforest. The houses here are all traditional style, made of bush materials only. The people here have built an excellent village guest house and prepared a repertoire of bona fide cultural dances, songs and drama to perform for visitors - one of the best village cultural experiences anywhere in PNG. Other activities include hikes to waterfalls, streams and blow-holes.

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