



# Ecotourism Melanesia

Discover Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

## EM12 DISCOVER ALOTAU AND MILNE BAY 2, 3 OR 4 NIGHTS PREMIUM PRIVATE SOFT ADVENTURE TOUR FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVELLERS 2, 3 or 4 nights Alotau

*Alotau is a lovely South Seas town and capital of the Milne Bay Province, the largest of PNG's 20-odd provinces due to its immense 300,000 square kilometres of territory. However most of the province's area is empty ocean, with 250,000 square kilometres of open sea surrounding a scattering of 600 offshore islands. The province has only 50,000 square kilometres of land area including the islands and parts of the New Guinea mainland. Milne Bay itself is a deep water harbour at the south eastern tip of the New Guinea mainland, 35 km long and 15 km wide, shielded to the north and south by high ground thus providing perfect storm shelter for ships. The bay was first surveyed in 1850 by Royal Navy surveyor Capt Owen Stanley, who named the bay after British admiral Sir Alexander Milne. (The locals invariably pronounce it "Millen").*

*Alotau is a relatively safe and quiet backwater - the occasional serious crime always sends shock waves through the community. Due to the lack of road connections with the rest of New Guinea, Alotau has remained reasonably isolated and immune to the immigration of settlers from the Highlands tribes which has caused so many problems in other PNG coastal towns.*

*During World War II, before Alotau existed, Milne Bay played a strategic role in pushing back the advancing Japanese Imperial forces especially at the 1942 Battle of Milne Bay (see other trip notes) and there are still quite a few relics and reminders of this conflict in the area.*

*EM11 is a premium soft adventure package featuring a number of exciting excursions with authentic cultural experiences specially arranged for your participation including markets, coastal village tours, the skull caves at East Cape, jungle walking, waterfalls, snorkelling over reefs and wrecks, canoeing on a the navigable rivers, and boat trips to nearby islands such as Samarai, the old capital.*

*NOTE: Alotau is a high rainfall area throughout the year. For every three days you stay there, it is likely to rain at least one day, although it usually just rains for a few hours at a time then clears up. Whole-day rain is uncommon, even in the "wet" season (Dec to Mar). Rain is a part of life year-round in the wet tropics so when it rains people just put up their umbrellas or walk around in the wet and get dried off later - the hot temperatures mean you are unlikely to catch cold. Your tour itinerary will still proceed even if it's raining and there will be no refunds or rescheduling of outings just because of rain. However travel by boat will be cancelled if the sea is unsafe for small craft and in this case transfers for the Waga Waga trip will be by road both ways and if the China Strait trip has to be cancelled an alternative activity will be provided and the difference in value will be reimbursed.*

### PACKAGE COST: all prices per person, ground content only (excludes air)

	Group of 1	Group of 2*	Group of 3-4*	Group of 6+*
2 nights package 3.5 star	USD 1950	USD 1105		
3 nights package 3.5 star	USD 3360	USD 1830		
4 nights package 3.5 star	USD 4630	USD 2530		
Single supplement (per night)	N/A	USD 135		
Downgrade to 2.5 star (per night)	- USD75 per nt	- USD50 per nt		
Optional airfare supplement ** POM-GUR-POM (flat rate)	USD 400	USD 400		

\* Based on twin share 3.5 star accommodation plus one triple room for odd-numbered groups

\*\* Optional airfare supplement - we can supply your internal air or otherwise arrange your own.

Prices subject to change.

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## **EM11 DISCOVER ALOTAU AND MILNE BAY 2, 3 or 4 NIGHTS - INCLUSIONS**

### **ALOTAU EXTENSION 2 NIGHTS (DAYS A, B, E) - LIST OF INCLUSIONS**

- Alotau - return transfers to hotel with guide by or hotel shuttle or private car
- Alotau - 2 nights accommodation including breakfast
- Alotau - half day town tour by private car
- Alotau - full day East Cape excursion including Topa Skull Caves and waterfall hike, picnic lunch, Lelegwagwa village tour and sing-sing performance

### **ALOTAU EXTENSION 3 NIGHTS (DAYS A, B, C, E) - LIST OF INCLUSIONS**

#### **inclusions as per 2 nights extension above PLUS:**

- Alotau - 3<sup>rd</sup> night of accommodation including breakfast
- Alotau - full day Dawadawa River and Wagawaga excursion including boat and road transfers, Dawadawa River canoe paddle experience, Labelabe village river village food tasting, lunch at Ulumani Lodge, afternoon beach/snorkelling or jungle hiking/birding activity  
*(Day D China Strait excursion (below) may be substituted on Day C instead of Dawadawa River and Wagawaga excursion at same cost if preferred).*

### **ALOTAU EXTENSION 4 NIGHTS (DAYS A, B, C, D, E) - LIST OF INCLUSIONS**

#### **inclusions as per 3 nights extension above PLUS:**

#### **INCLUSIONS**

- Alotau - 4<sup>th</sup> night of accommodation including breakfast
- Alotau - full day China Strait excursion including boat transfers, Samarai Island walk-around tour, Gonubalabala Island exploratory tour, local style lunch, beach/snorkelling/manta ray swimming, island village cultural and food preparation demonstrations, traditional dancing

## **DAY A**



### **PORT MORESBY / ALOTAU (half day Alotau town sightseeing)**

10.30 On arrival at Alotau airport (situated at Gurney, about 20 minutes' drive out of town) you will be met by our local guide who will accompany you by hotel shuttle or private car to your accommodation. Settle into your room and have lunch (pay-as-you-go).

13:00 Although most of the town's sightseeing attractions are within walking distance of your accommodation, the hot weather will not favour a walking tour so your guide will take you out in an air-conditioned car for this afternoon's sightseeing. Stops around of Alotau township will include the bustling fresh food market, handicraft market, Chinese shops, the waterfront (with its fascinating array of inter-island trading vessels loading and unloading and small banana boats bustling about), the Battle of Milne Bay memorial and the expansive views across the Bay from the Goilanai ridge residential area above the town.

16:00 After the tour, some free time is left to enjoy the cool of the late afternoon and perhaps take a stroll around or soak up some sea breeze. Alotau town is safe to walk around without a guide during daytime.

Overnight hotel, Alotau

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## DAY B



### ALOTAU (full day East Cape and skull caves excursion)

07:00 Depart for full day tour to East Cape. The road east from Alotau is unmade and a little rough but the pleasant coastal scenery with villages and beaches takes your mind off it ☺

09:00 Arrive at Topa Village where a local villager will show you around the village then lead you on a bushwalk 20 minutes to the Topa skull caves (best visited in the morning when there is less chance of rain).

There are two karst (limestone) cave systems in different locations and each cavern has two or more connected chambers containing hundreds of human skulls - no other bones - that are well preserved and calcified, obviously hundreds of years old and not from recent deaths.

The bushwalk and descent down rickety steps into the largest underground cave is a bit tricky and not suitable for frail walkers.

Your guide will bring flashlights for lighting the otherwise-pitch-black cave, where villagers will explain their legends of how the skulls came to be stored in the caves.

Some villagers will admit they are head-hunting trophies while others, embarrassed about their cannibal roots, may claim they are the skulls of ancestors.

Although there are ancestor skull caves in some parts of Milne Bay (eg Doini Island), where the skulls of ancestors are preserved and reburied in caves for homage purposes, the haphazard and almost disrespectful manner in which the Topa cave skulls are piled in heaps - and the fact that almost every cranium has a sizeable hole or crack in it - indicates that these skulls are actually ghoulish collectibles from the head-hunting days which, supposedly, ended with the arrival of the missionaries 130 years ago.

It is hot, stuffy and creepy inside the caves so if you are claustrophobic or “ghostophobic” (you’ll see the remains of hundreds of murdered souls) you had best wait outside and let others show you their photos later ☺

11:00 From the skull caves you’ll retrace your steps to the village then another 20 minute walk in the other direction brings you to a lovely waterfall with swimming pool underneath that the locals use for bathing as well as washing pots and clothes but they always make themselves scarce if visitors are coming in for a swim.

The mind boggles when considering what the waterfall and pool may have been used for in cannibal days!)

12:00 Settle on the beach at Topa to have your picnic lunch (provided by your guide).

13:00 Depart Topa and drive further east to East Cape, the easternmost tip of the New Guinea mainland and see the fast currents rushing through Goschen Strait, the stretch of water between East Cape and Normanby Island where the Solomon Sea meets the Coral Sea, then head back towards Alotau.

15:00 Stop halfway at Lelegwagwa village for a village tour and sing-sing performance.

18:00 Arrive back in Alotau.

Overnight hotel, Alotau

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## DAY C

### ALOTAU (full day Dawadawa River and Wagawaga excursion)



07:00 With your guide, walk or transfer on your hotel shuttle to the nearest beach or jetty and board your private banana boat for a 30 minute water transfer directly across Milne Bay to the mouth of the Dawa Dawa River (see trip notes). Depending on the tide level your banana boat should be able to enter the river mouth and transport you a short distance up the wide lower reaches to tiny Labelabe village where locals will await you with an outrigger dugout canoe, ready to paddle you further upstream as far as the first impassable sand bar or rapids then turn around and make a faster run back downstream flowing with the current. Of course you may have your own turn with a paddle too - it's great fun and the outrigger canoes are very stable - but if you prefer, you may ask the motorised banana boat to take you upstream instead of the canoe.

10:00 Back at Labelabe, spend some time with the villagers who have prepared for you some of the classic Milne Bay village foods such as cassava pudding, sago cake and their signature staple, yams, cooked in different ways. You'll see how these foods are prepared and taste the creations on the spot and take some of them with you to eat for lunch or back at the hotel.

11:00 Farewell the villagers and head back out the river mouth aboard your banana boat following the southern coast of Milne Bay in a westerly direction about 30 minutes to the small township of Waga Waga. From the Waga Waga beach, hike about 20 minutes up the unmade driveway to Ulumani Rainforest Lodge (or if you are lucky a car may be available to drive you up). This quaint bird watching lodge is built in local style from bush materials and has expansive views over Milne Bay and also looks directly down and across into the upper canopies of rainforest trees rooted further down the slope.

12:00 Lunch is served on the lodge verandah as you enjoy the views. There is also a tiny licensed bar in this most unexpected place where you can buy a cold beer.

13:00 After lunch, a choice of sea or land activities is offered:

(i) enjoy some beach and snorkelling time at Waga Waga beach. Either sit in a shady spot on the black sand beach and soak up the quiet location or beachcomb along the water's edge waving at locals as you pass their beachfront homes and gardens. If you enjoy snorkelling, explore the artificial reef now growing on the wreck of the Muscoota (see trip notes), an old coal barge that was scuttled at Waga Waga beach after the war. The wreck is said to be haunted by the ghost of its first captain (see the full story in the trip notes), so be ready to jump at every shadow as you snorkel ☺

(ii) if you are not a "water-baby", you can take a guided rainforest bushwalk along one of the bird watching trails behind Ulumani Lodge, hiking through pristine jungle, crossing bubbling brooks, scrambling over rocks and cooling off under waterfalls as you keep an eye out for interesting birds and butterflies. Jungle walking in the Milne Bay heat and humidity is challenging so bring a sweat towel.

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15:00 Depart Waga Waga by private car, driving around the western end of Milne Bay to Alotau (1 hour drive). There is not much else to see at Waga Waga, apart from some American-made machinery relics abandoned in the bush near the road which have not been noted or identified on any military history websites and may be associated with one of the failed post-war agricultural ventures in the area.



Halfway to Alotau is the Gili Gili locality which encompasses Gurney Airport and the provincial prison, all surrounded by the ubiquitous oil palm trees now planted on every square inch of available flat land around Alotau. Signs of the other wartime airstrips (Number 2 and 3) are all but obliterated and any sizeable war relics in the area have now either been pilfered or covered in vegetation and are not accessible from the road although there is a restored anti-aircraft gun on display at the airport. 17:00 Arrive back at your accommodation

Overnight hotel, Alotau

*(NB overnight at Waga Waga is possible on request, subject to flights)*

## DAY D



### ALOTAU (full day China Strait excursion)

06:00 make an early start this morning, transferring to the jetty for your boat trip across Milne Bay's outer mouth while the sea is still calm.

07:30 Tie up at tiny Samarai Island in the China Strait (see trip notes) and take a walking tour of this forgotten South Pacific town. There are a couple of quaint little trade stores, a public market, a church or two, an historical cemetery and a rather politically incorrect memorial to a former colonial administrator who tried to make life better there "for white men".



09:00 Depart Samarai another 30 minutes boat ride to Gonubalabala Island (see trip notes), a little piece of paradise belonging to the Mailulu family, originally from Logea (Rogeia) Island, who live there in a small village on the beach. On arrival you'll be welcomed with traditional dancing in local costume with the whole clan taking part from the elders to the little kids. The kids in turn will insist on being the chief tour guides for your exploration of the island including a walk right around (about an hour) and a climb up the central hill through light rainforest and the family food gardens to the lookout point at the top, from where you can see all the neighbouring islands including Doini, where there is a tourist resort, and Samarai which you visited earlier.



12:00 Back at the village on the beach, the ladies have lunch ready for you and will show you how each local dish has been prepared, as well as demonstrating some of their island handicrafts and chores eg weaving coconut fronds to make food carrying baskets for the gardens, and scraping and squeezing coconut meat to extract the milk.



After lunch it's time to get into the water and enjoy some swimming and snorkelling over the fringing reef (mask and snorkel is provided) or possibly try some hand line fishing by dug-out canoe to pick up some reef fish or troll a line behind the motor boat to lure a mackerel which you may each catch-and-release or give to the local for their dinner.

If you are confident to swim out into deep water wearing a life vest you can stake out the **manta ray "cleaning station"** about 50 metres off the far end of the beach, a location frequented by huge manta rays at certain times - they float in the current while cleaner fish preen their gills, mouths and outer surfaces. The rays are not aggressive and, just like dolphins and

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whales, they seem to enjoy interacting with humans. Floating on the surface with a life vest and looking down into the deeper water with your mask you may be lucky to see manta rays swimming below you and sometimes they will approach you and swim around you and even playfully flap their wings at the surface to splash you. Our guides are not trained divemasters or lifesavers so please do not attempt swimming with the manta rays unless you are a competent swimmer.

*NB The manta rays are also an attraction for scuba divers so do not be surprised if you find a live-aboard dive vessel anchored off the island on the day of your visit.*

16:00 Once the afternoon sea chop has had some time to settle, commence your 90 minute boat trip back to Alotau, perhaps via an alternative route through the narrow gap between Sariba and Sideia Islands if the weather is fine. If the weather is rough going back your boat driver will hug the mainland shoreline of China Strait to keep the boat in calmer shallow waters over the fringing reefs, which may take twice as long to get back to Alotau but at least you won't get so wet 😊.

Overnight hotel, Alotau

*(NB overnight on the island is possible on request, subject to flight connections)*

## DAY E



### ALOTAU / PORT MORESBY

After breakfast, transfer to Gurney Airport by hotel shuttle or private car and check in for your flight.

**10:40 Air Niugini flight PX155 departs Alotau, arrives Port Moresby 11:30 or**

**13:45 PNG Air flight CG1645 departs Alotau, arrives Port Moresby 14:55**

Ecotourism Melanesia staff will meet you on arrival and assist you with your onward connection or other arrangements.

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