



ISLE OPENING

An expedition cruise in the remote islands of Papua New Guinea delivers an adventure like no other, writes Andrew Conway.



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The scene is surreal, primeval, otherworldly. I’m sitting with 18 fellow travellers in a jungle clearing, enveloped by a tangle of mangroves and sago palms, as two spear-wielding warriors lunge and shriek at us, demanding to know if we are friends or foes.

Moments later, the humid tropical air fills with the sound of rhythmic chanting and beating drums as a troupe of Indigenous male and female dancers begin a welcome ceremony – known locally as a *sing-sing* – bouncing and swaying in hypnotic unison.

The women are bare-breasted, chests heaving with shell necklaces, arms and legs swathed in foliage and waists wrapped with geometric tapa cloth

skirts. The men are even more exotic, wearing headdresses adorned with multi-coloured and highly prized feathers of birds of paradise, white cockatoos, rainbow lorikeets and eclectic parrots.

We are not alone. What appears to be the entire population of Tufi, a small and seldom-visited community in Maclaren Harbour on the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea, is watching the spellbinding celebration from the surrounding forest.

In a memorable afternoon, our Indigenous hosts transport us to and from this remote utopia by traditional outrigger canoes, show us the intricacies of sago production and tapa cloth creation, and share a glimpse of a tribal world that has remained largely untouched for millennia.

Diverse Indigenous cultures

We travel to this remarkable corner of the planet in the comfort of *Paspaley Pearl*, a purpose-built expedition motor yacht designed for only 30 guests.

Owned and operated by Pearl Expeditions – a partnership led by industry icons Sarina Bratton and Mick Fogg, who pioneered luxury expedition travel in Australasia – the ship draws on their deep knowledge of Australian waters and beyond.

Following a successful inaugural season in the Kimberley region, this voyage is a 10-day ‘Hidden Secrets’ sailing from Cairns to Madang, guided by an experienced and knowledgeable four-person expedition team along with 17 seasoned crew members.

01 An extraordinary tribal welcome 02 Tribal dancing and drumming is mesmerising 03 Some villagers have had little or no contact with Western visitors 04 Expedition ship *Paspaley Pearl* carries a maximum of 30 passengers 05 The Sun Deck on *Paspaley Pearl*. All images © Nick Rains

Our route is an island-hopping adventure in the warm, cerulean and crystalline waters of the Coral, Solomon and Bismarck seas, taking us from Samarai Islands to the dazzling Deboyne Lagoon, Trobriand Islands, Tufi, Morobe Harbour, Tami Islands and Tuam Island.

Each destination delivers richly diverse Indigenous cultures; entirely different yet equally mesmerising welcome ceremonies; shy but friendly people; handcrafted artefacts; coral atolls and pristine reefs; underwater wrecks from pivotal World War II battlegrounds, and fresh-faced children shrieking with laughter at every turn.

In true expedition style, we tour in Zodiacs, connect with isolated communities, sail in as-yet unsurveyed waters, explore the crumbling ruins of PNG’s colonial past, and spot rare colourful birdlife.

Home away from home

Built in 2021 to high sustainability specifications and refurbished in 2025, *Paspaley Pearl* is a welcoming, relaxed and informal space to return home to after a busy day of shore excursions.

Its 15 staterooms and suites – seven of which have private balconies – are comfortable yet practical, designed with contemporary furnishings, ample storage and well-equipped bathrooms. Keeping us connected with home, in this home away from home, Starlink Wi-Fi is available throughout the vessel.

This compact 50m motor yacht punches well above its weight in terms of living spaces, featuring a 32-seat indoor restaurant, lounge and bar on the Ocean Deck and an outdoor equivalent on the Horizon Deck.

Buffet breakfasts and lunches are followed by sunset cocktails, canapes and three-course à la carte dining, crafted by talented onboard chef Alex Bentley. The culinary offerings are complemented by Lallier Champagne, Australian wines, spirits and beers, and

an exceptional service team. Guests can chill at the Sun Deck lounge and bar with sunbeds, a large Jacuzzi and a sunset lounge forward of the bridge, or swim, kayak, paddleboard and access Zodiacs directly from the marina deck at the ship’s stern.

Comforts aside, this is an expedition first and foremost and most eyes are focused on what happens off the ship rather than on it.

Ethical, respectful travel

Celebrating 50 years of independence in 2025, PNG is one of the most diverse places on earth. This fledgling yet ancient nation’s cultural heritage is astounding: 840 living languages spoken by 600 distinct tribes spanning 22 mainland and island provinces, many of which are best explored by water.

Thanks to meticulous planning by expedition leader Joel Moore, we are treated to extraordinary welcome ceremonies by schoolchildren on Kitava Island; mud-covered men in Mou Village; a tribal ensemble with oversize white, black and red masks on Tami Island, and dramatic male-centric performances on Tuam Island.

In between Zodiac trips, the expedition team unravels the cultural complexities and sensitivities of places we are visiting with lectures, documentaries, workshops, talks on respectful etiquette, and nightly recaps of sights seen and ones to follow.

Moore ensures village and island permissions are secured in advance, occasionally in places that have had little or no contact with Western visitors, and present thank-you gifts of school supplies and soccer balls to community leaders when we depart.

From PNG, *Paspaley Pearl* heads to Indonesia and Borneo before returning to Australian waters for its second season in the Kimberley in April 2026. New adventures await but for now, I’m pressing the warriors of Tufi firmly into my memory book. ♦

