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Away from it all

It's our nearest neighbour but Papua New Guinea has all the appeal of a different world, writes Marisa Howden.

Diving in Papua New Guinea is a psychedelic experience – or at least my notion of what that might be. Unusual coral formations akin to giant rose buds illuminate the clear waters. Soft fans of coral gently sway with the rhythm of the ocean as hundreds of fish lead each other in a whimsical dance of colour and movement.

I am fortunate to be visiting the Milne Bay region of PNG, a 250,000-square-kilometre province east of the northern tip of Australia. More than half of PNG's 3800 recorded fish and coral species are found in this area. I've arrived here by rather luxurious means, aboard the *Oceanic Discoverer*, a 72-berth expedition cruise ship that sets sail from Cairns or PNG.

Milne Bay is known to have the greatest marine biodiversity on the planet, with twice as many species as the Great Barrier Reef and up to 10 times as many as the Caribbean. Its last recorded survey found nearly 430 species of coral, 950 of molluscs and more than 1100 species of fish, many found nowhere else. That means that as a visitor, you can see an incredible array of creatures, from the tiniest ghost pipefish to huge manta rays and visiting killer whales. And that's just the sea. For landlubbers there are giant birds of paradise, massive butterflies, cuscus and tree kangaroos. The people who live on these islands are friendly and happy to share their cultures.

At Milne Bay's capital Alotau, we are welcomed by the painted dancers of the Wepalala Culture Group from neighbouring Fergusson Island. They perform a mesmerising dance that is traditionally performed when warriors are sent off to battle.

After an afternoon cruising southeast from Alotau, we arrive at a chain of 21 islands known as the Conflict Islands. Named after the ship that discovered them in 1886, rather than any dark episode in their history, these pristine islands form the shape of an atoll, which faces a central lagoon. The only inhabited piece of

land, Panasesa, houses the exclusive Panasesa Resort, a formerly privately owned property that since 2012 has opened to those who make it this far. The resort caters for just 12 guests and offers an array of activities including snorkelling, diving, fishing, and kayaking. And while that's impressive, it's having the 20 other islands to myself that makes this trip one to remember.

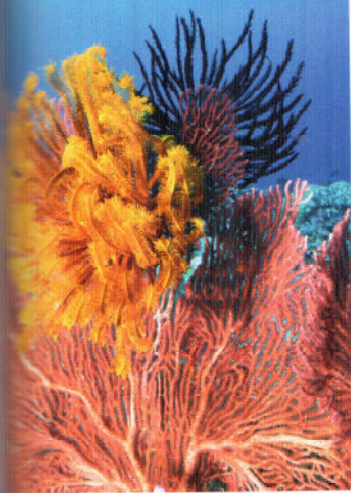
The Conflict Islands are under consideration as a World Heritage Marine Site so I feel fortunate to be here before its reputation travels any further than those already in the know. I have so many Robinson Crusoe moments as I get lost among the islands. Between dives, I spend days just laying my towel down on deserted beaches, reading, marvelling at nature and swimming in the tropical water.

Despite its proximity, PNG remains a mystery to many Australians even though we have a connection

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that dates back to WWII. More than 56,000 Australians served here during the war with several thousand fighting in the Battle of Milne Bay in 1942. After the war and prior to independence in 1975, PNG was a thriving hub with 40,000 Australians expats. Unrest on the mainland has seen numbers decline but in 2013 more than 19,000 Australian holidaymakers – trekkers on the Kokoda Trail, divers, or those who like to explore untrammelled islands – travelled here.

To find a moment to disconnect in today's world is fortunate but to find a place to connect with one of the world's last real frontiers is rare. And this paradise is right on our doorstep. >



WHEN IN PNG

The Conflict Islands offer tailor-made holidays at Panasesa Resort. A seven-night all-inclusive stay starts at \$5000pp and includes either a private air charter from Port Moresby, PNG, or a commercial flight from Port Moresby with boat transfers from Alotau. For more information visit www.conflictislands.com.

THE OCEANIC DISCOVERER

❖ The *Oceanic Discoverer* will cruise the PNG coast in November with a 12-night trip between Cairns and Rabaul. From \$9390pp. For more information, visit www.coralprincess.com.au.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Feather stars just off Irai Island. A warrior from Misima Island performs a sunset dance. A type of soft coral known as sea fan near Milne Bay. At Alotau, the Wepalala culture group from neighbouring Fergusson Island welcomed the boat.

