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Conflict? What Conflict?

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Most people who are familiar with the South Pacific have come to expect tropical island paradises unparalleled in beauty. They frequent these islands for a sun-drenched break, whether it be Hawaii, for its beaches, or Tahiti for its crystal clear waters.

Few might think of Papua New Guinea when it comes to their South Pacific holiday, and even fewer would know of the Conflict Islands. A lucky handful might!

Located in PNG's Milne Bay Province, approximately 90 minutes from Port Moresby, the Conflict Islands are a privately owned atoll of 21 islands that span across a picturesque lagoon drowning in pale blue waters and white sandy beaches.

Named after the survey ship that discovered them in 1886, these islands remain untouched amongst the Coral Sea's pristine environment. And when I say untouched, I mean the purest sand that will ever brush your feet, the clearest waters that you will ever gaze over and above all the most diverse and abundant marine life you will ever experience.

Encouraged by the constant movement of the surrounding Bismark, Coral and Solomon Seas, there is a stunning array of over 3800 sea-life species to be discovered in New Guinea, with the Conflict Islands home to over half of them. These waters are thought to have twice as many marine species as the Red Sea and up to ten times as many as the Caribbean, making it the most diverse marine location on the planet.

The marine life here is so rich that diving these waters is like an out-of-body experience. Every dive is a discovery of new species I had not seen before, from tiny pygmy seahorses to more than 15 types of Clown Fish.

And the colours...the magnificent colours. It's like an iridescent rainbow swallowed the ocean and spat it back out to create a Dali-esque landscape of reef. Giant Gorgonian's, otherwise known as sea fans, illuminate the waters in vivid shades of purple and pink. Bright Feather Star corals, with their fiery shades of yellow, orange, and red sit side by side never-ending fields of Cabbage Coral, which look more like life sized rosebuds ready to swallow you whole.



As these elaborate reefs sway with the currents of the ocean, thousands of fish engulf me, giving me an insight into what life in an aquarium would feel like. Schools of silver barracuda glide along gracefully, eyeing off dinner with their razor sharp teeth.

Herd of batfish sit above the masses, quietly looking down as if they're holding court and deliberating on how to keep order amongst their dynamic eco-system. Friendly Nemos (a.k.a. Clown Fish) dance amongst Stony Corals as cheeky Green Sea Turtles cruise along without a worry in the world.



As I remained spellbound by the colours and swarms of fish I feel moved to know such vibrant marine life still exists. It's touching to see a part of nature that is still so preserved, untouched by man and thriving with life, which I guess could be said about most of Papua New Guinea. Not only does life thrive below the water, but the country is filled with a plentiful mix of dynamic cultures and languages that have remained at the heart of the people for thousands of years.

With more than 1,100 cultures and 800 languages, Papua New Guinea remains one of the most culturally unique and untouched countries in the world. In the remote villages, visitors will find tribes that passionately maintain traditions through art, initiations and Sing Sings.

A Sing Sing, expressing customary dance, music and traditional costume, provides the opportunity for visitors to witness tribal traditions in an explosion of colour and sound. Luckily enough and by special request, you can experience these unique traditions while at the Conflict Islands, which for me, was one of the most rewarding experiences of the whole trip.

Since the islands remain uninhabited, local villages from the neighbouring Misima and Brooker Islands travel for more than 50 miles by traditional sailing canoes, (using only the stars at night to navigate) in order to share their unique customs with us.

Known as the Liak Saga Group, the intricate detail that is showcased through their dances and costumes is astounding. In this particular region, both men and women wear skirts made of dried palm fronds with strings of woven leaves draped across their upper bodies. White feathered hats in different shapes and sizes sit atop their heads with detailed face paintings used to distinguish the men from the women.

Kundu drums, a national emblem of Papua New Guinea, provide the music for the dance, sounding off a rhythmic beat that the tribe carefully keeps in step with. Deep chanting and shrill cries resonate loudly, piercing your soul with rich culture roots.

Cultural experiences like these are just one of the many things that can be arranged during your stay, with the 21 islands becoming your own piece of paradise for play.

Featuring an exclusive resort that caters for only 12 guests, your every need will be attended to while at the Conflicts, with the resort offering an array of activities, including snorkelling, fishing and island tours. The ecological environments differ across each island, giving way to natural rainforests, stunning tropical gardens and array of bird life just waiting to be discovered.

For those who aren't into donning a full scuba suit, there's incredible snorkelling just off the main beach on Panasesa Island. Being an atoll formed from a volcano, the Conflict Islands are surrounded by deep troughs, clear waters and good ocean currents, making them ideal for snorkelling. Millions of fish feed off the rich currents that pass through the lagoon, with beautiful corals accessible just metres from shore.

This fish population stretches far beyond tropical coral fish, making the Conflict's an ideal spot for sport fishing. If you're lucky like us, you might be eating fresh yellow fin, coral trout or Spanish mackerel for dinner cooked to your liking by your own private chef, but it all depends on whether the fish are biting (and if you're reeling them in).

With so much on offer including untouched marine and wild life, lush rainforests, rich traditions and the world's best diving; it's a wonder that more people aren't flocking to PNG's shores. The abundance of life here, both below and above the water, is breathtaking. Knowing I'm one of the few to experience the true beauty of Papua New Guinea and its pristine Conflict Islands is just the icing on my tropical island cake. 🍷

→ www.papuanewguinea.travel

