

Idyllic Madang

Marisa Howden journeys to PNG's north coast to visit a forgotten paradise, above and below the waterline.

Sleepy Madang. Steamy Madang. Scenic Madang. I'm hard pressed to find just one word to describe Papua New Guinea's forgotten paradise.

'Sleepy' comes to mind for Madang's laidback attitude. 'Steamy' is certainly pertinent – it's significantly hotter here than anywhere else I've been in the country. 'Scenic' is close to the mark too – the natural beauty that surrounds the township is jaw-dropping beautiful. There are hundreds of kilometres of coastline, with turquoise waters and swaying palm trees.

But if I had to use one word to describe this place – just a one-hour Air Niugini flight from Port Moresby – it would be 'idyllic'.

Madang has everything from fishing and diving to nature walks and culture tours.

Madang was once PNG's main tourism destination, attracting guests from all over the world. And I can see why. There are few other spots in the country where you can dive with schools of big fish in the morning, and then catch one later that afternoon for dinner.

In recent years, Madang has seen a drop in international tourists. One of the country's main advocates for tourism, and owner of the Madang Resort, Sir Peter Barter, says more government support is needed to arrest the tourism downturn.

Sir Peter has been a driving force for tourism

in Madang (and wider PNG) for over 40 years.

He first arrived in PNG in the 1960s as a pilot for TALAIR, before purchasing Madang Resort in 1976. He then set up Melanesian Tourist Services, which is one of the largest tourism operators in the country, before trying his hand at politics as the governor of Madang Province.

Among other things, today his time is spent maintaining the 182-room Madang Resort and Kalibobo Village, while working tirelessly to bring Madang back to its glory days.

On the edge of Madang Harbour, the resort is the main tourism hub in town and the base for many of Madang's attractions. It's here you can organise kayaking, catamaran or snorkelling expeditions, as well as game fishing and hard-core cruises.

But it's Niugini Dive Adventure that I'm here to see. The company has organised a half-day tour to two of Madang's dive sites. ▶

PICTURES: DAVID KIRKLAND, SARAH WILES, MADANG RESORT



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 ”

The great thing about Madang is you don't have to go far to find good diving, and within half an hour we're at the first site of the day, Planet Rock.

My dive companion, Brad, who has dived all around PNG, tells me that you come to Madang to see the 'wow' stuff, such as schools of giant trevally and barracuda, as well as hammerhead sharks and rays. Planet Rock – a 600-metre volcanic seamount – is the best place to see them.

As soon as we descend, schools of barracuda, dogtooth and giant trevally hover around. It's like they're carefully scrutinising us with their watchful eyes.

Once you get over their presence, you notice that below them lies a healthy reef with an abundance

Town landmark ... the Coastwatchers Memorial Lighthouse (this page); Madang from the air (opposite page, right); snorkelling in Madang's turquoise waters (opposite page, bottom).



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of smaller fish. My favourites are the tiny, electric-blue fish with the bright yellow tails. Hundreds of them swim in and out of the stony corals and smaller sponge corals, just before cruising past bright blue

starfish as they lazily bask in the warm water. It's an excellent dive, but the current is strong so it takes a bit of extra effort.

Next, we move towards Barracuda Point, which is further

up the harbour, on the outer edge of Pig Island. But first we stop for a swim and snorkel on the inside of the island, and I'm blown away.

If I thought the rest of Madang was idyllic, it's nothing compared to the crystal clear, turquoise waters that fringe this island. It's absolutely stunning and only topped off by the magnificent snorkelling that lies beneath – another healthy reef that I could happily spend hours just cruising about, checking out all its nooks and crannies and the little Nemos that swim about.

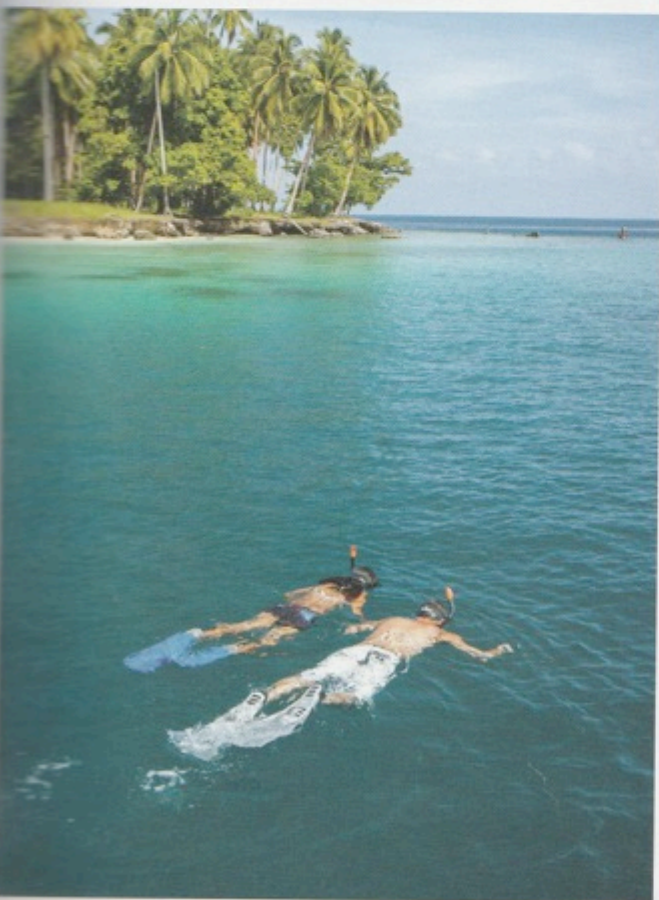
Even better are the smiley, happy children foraging on the island's white sand beaches, laughing freely without a care in the world.

Once I get over my envy, we make our way to Barracuda Point

for another excellent dive. The current isn't so strong this time, which makes for a very pleasant cruise around the point's seawall, where I encounter lots of big fish again, and more of my favourite tiny blue friends.

When we arrive back to the resort I'm told Pig Island and many other spots, such as Kranket and Wangat islands, can be accessed during half or full-day harbour cruises. Snorkelling equipment is available through the dive shop, as well as kayaks and catamarans if you prefer to make your own way there.

Madang is also one of the best places in PNG for game fishing. It was here, at the National Fishing Titles in 2013, that my mother-in-law caught a 182-kilogram ➤



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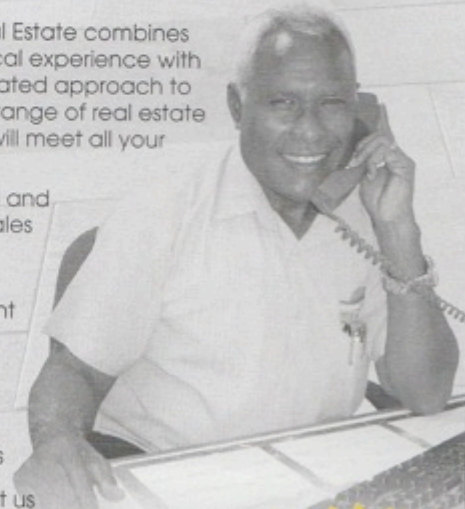
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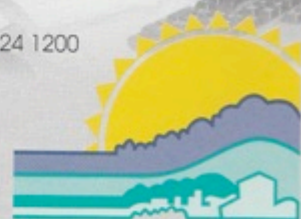
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marlin on 15-kilogram line, setting a national record.

The Madang Resort is one of the best places to stay in town, offering a range of accommodation options, from self-contained units at Kalibobo Village, to basic hotel rooms and waterfront bungalows. There is a nice restaurant with themed buffet nights and fresh fish, as well as four swimming pools, a tennis court, and bird aviaries with tree kangaroos, cassowaries and cockatoos.

The resort can also arrange land tours through Melanesian Tourist Services or Haus Tumbuna, the tourism bureau and artefact museum near the Madang Lodge. It's here you can view an exhibition about Madang's history.

The province was first settled by Russian explorer Nicholay Mikloucho-Maclay, before being occupied by the Germans and then Australia after World War 2.

But it's Madang's rich culture I'm most interested to hear about as I embark on a full-day tour of local villages. As we drive 45 minutes up the north coast, my guide, Alex, tells me that of PNG's 800-plus languages, 25 per cent come from Madang.

Incredible, really, that over a quarter of the country's culture stems from this one province. ➤

Cultural immersion ... visitors to Madang are sure to meet a diverse range of cultural groups. A quarter of PNG's culture is said to stem from Madang Province.

OUR COUNTRY



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Idyllic Madang

Many of these cultures are evident at the annual Madang Festival, usually held during the June long weekend. It's here you can meet people from many of the local cultures as they perform their enchanting *sing sings*, as well as view the lush floral collections from the region, which include over 10 species of orchids.

As we continue our drive up the coast, we stop in to Kusen village, next to a pale-blue coral lagoon, to see the natural rock formation called 'Hole in the Wall'. When the tide is at the right level, you can swim under the rocks that border the lagoon and come out on ➤

Flying the flag ... *sing sings* are part of the annual Madang Festival, usually held during the June long weekend.



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PICTURES: DAVID KIRKLAND, SARAH LOVIE, MARGARET MCNEIL



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the other side – a literal hole in the wall. I'm not game enough to try it myself but I'm more than happy to have a swim in the picturesque water hole.

Another 90 minutes up the coast is Tupira Surfing Lodge, which in April saw hundreds of surfers gather for the World Longboard Championships. The surfing season runs from November to April, but the lodge is open year round for visitors.

On our way back down the coast we stop into Alexishaven – a Catholic missionary site occupied by the Japanese during World War 2. Today it's another sleepy village, home to a commune, as well as a main port of call for many

of the islanders in the surrounding harbour. It's an idyllic spot for a picnic or walk.

As we head back towards Madang we call into Jais Aben, another resort, about 20 minutes from town. This is a must-do, whether it's to stay in one of the oceanfront bungalows or to visit for a swim and lunch on the white-sand beach.


South of Madang, is Balek Wildlife Sanctuary, which featured in the 1997 production of *Robinson Crusoe*. It's a small village with a sulfuric creek that runs down from the mountains through a limestone cave. ➤



Local craft ... Bil Bil villagers are renowned for their pottery.

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There's a pungent smell of sulphur in the air as we take a short walk through the surrounding jungle to view the crystal-clear stream where turtles, fish and eels congregate.

Further up the road from Balek is Bil Bil village, where you can view traditional clay pots being made. It's only the women who make the specialised pottery, moulding the pots into vases, water jugs, souvenirs and crockery. The small butterfly farm houses several species of butterflies, including the Cairns birdwing.

On the way back into town, is the Coastwatchers Memorial Lighthouse, built in 1952 to honour the Australian and PNG men

who assisted the Allies during World War 2. Further along this scenic coastal road, are Haus Tumbuna and the Madang Lodge, another one of the excellent accommodation options in town.

Set among beautiful manicured gardens with stunning views over Astrolobe Bay, the Madang Lodge has short and long-term accommodation options, including self-contained apartments, as well as a fully equipped gym and fitness centre, waterside restaurant, artifact haus, cafe and gift shop, and onsite masseuse.

The oceanfront apartments are great for families, with a big lawn and pool for kids to play in.

For somewhere to eat in town,

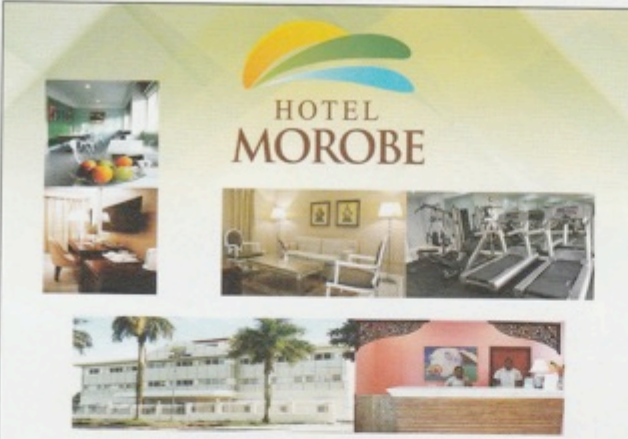
the lodge's barbecue on Friday nights is a treat, as is the Eden Restaurant at the Madang Country Club for Chinese cuisine.

There's not much you can't do in Madang. Tropical paradise, check. Incredible diving, check. Rich culture, check.

And since it's pretty easy to get here from Port Moresby, Lae or the Highlands, there's really no excuse not to visit. I promise: 'idyllic' Madang won't disappoint. ■

Taking the plunge ... diving and snorkelling excursions are available through Madang Resort.

 **Air Niugini flies from Port Moresby to Madang twice daily. See airniugini.com.pg.**

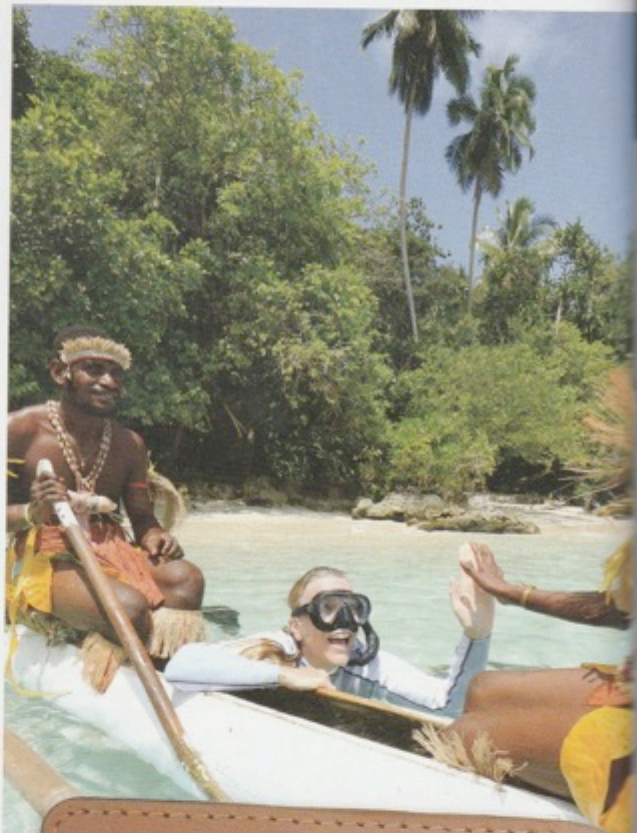


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STAYING THERE Madang Lodge from PGK130 per night, madanglodge.com; Madang Resort from PGK200, madangresort.com; Jais Aben Resort from PGK350, jaisabenresort.com.

THINGS TO DO Madang Resort arranges sightseeing, diving and snorkelling.

MORE INFORMATION madangvisitorsbureau.org

