



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
 For more info visit
theceomagazine.com

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Population: 7.32 million

Size: 462,840 km²

Official languages: English,
 Tok Pisin, and Hiri Motu

Capital city: Port Moresby

Climate: Tropical with high humidity

Official currency: PNG Kina (PGK)

Touched by Tufi

Renowned for its stunning diving sites and as a peaceful place to get 'off the grid', Tufi is the antithesis of busy Port Moresby.

WORDS AND IMAGES KATE HENNESSY

Virgil and the Craybobs are Tufi's local family band. By 'family', I mean Virgil, Frank Jnr, Elvis, Priscilla, Jane, Marckzin, Freda, and Mukawa—who comprise the band—are the many children of Tufi policeman, Frank. By 'local', I mean, even if the Craybobs wanted to play elsewhere, there are no roads out of Tufi. The last road is at Popondetta, 120 kilometres away. "A few fjords over," says Frank, is as far as the band's sunny harmonies and ukulele will resound.

Most fjords are created when glaciers erode. But when Yamewara volcano erupted 10,000 years ago in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Oro Province, its lava flowed into the Solomon Sea, splitting and hardening into many-fingered fjords. The water wends back into dense forest where birds of paradise dance and people still live traditionally, fishing from dugout canoes and farming family gardens.

Excluding Port Moresby and a few larger towns, roads are scarce right across PNG, meaning its people are some of the world's most isolated. Four out of five Papuans live in remote coastal areas or rugged mountains—Tufi is both. For tourists who won't explore by foot or boat, travel is limited to places with an airstrip.

"The chewing of betel nut is prohibited on this flight," the airline host announces en route to Tufi, which boasts the last remaining rural airstrip on the north coast. The warning seems absurd until you see kids of primary-school age squirting out the fruit's red juice. Sold cheaply and activated with lime powder and mustard seed, betel nut (*buai*) is ubiquitous in PNG. It delivers a mellow buzz, but chew it long enough and your teeth darken to orange-red or rot away entirely. >>

**Fast fact**

All land is either communally owned or owned by a family or tribe. When walking, remember you're in someone's 'backyard'.

The plane stops in Popondetta to collect four Australian Army reservists who've just finished the Kokoda Trail. They are seeking some R&R at Tufi Resort and a taste of the region's diving. For war history enthusiasts like them, Tufi is a natural next stop due to its wreck diving. Two torpedo boats were sunk here during a 1943 air raid and, just off the jetty, they lie on the sea floor along with machine guns, ammunition, and a couple of live torpedoes. Further out is a Dutch navy ship and a US bomber.

Built on the edge of a fjord, Tufi Resort is the area's only tourist business—and, seemingly, its only business at all, bar a bunker-like general store among the sheds on the jetty. Its broad verandas, cane furniture, carvings, and weaved straw walls give it a breezy retro feel, and a gin and tonic is easier to order than a fresh coconut. It's a popular getaway for expats—

mostly miners and diplomats who double ably as drinkers and raconteurs as they blow off some big city steam. The region's pristine coral reefs, diverse marine life, and 50-metre visibility also lure divers from around the world. "I typed 'dive' and 'remote' into Google and this came up," one visitor tells me.

"You have to remember where you are," says resort owner, Linda. And in case the answer was not apparent as we gaze across the fjord—the smell of cooking fires in the humid air, and a Blyth's hornbill flapping goofily by—she tells us: "You're in the middle of nowhere." Alone on my balcony at night, geckos tut-tut from the jungle and I am overcome by the exhilarating speck-on-the-ocean feel that is distinct to the Pacific islands—even the biggest of them all, PNG.

To exist amicably among the Tufi clans, Linda and her husband Tony have a sharp sense of social responsibility. They maintain the airstrip, facilitate homestays in adjoining fjords, arrange cultural tours, and try to ensure gifts from tourists are evenly shared among locals. "We're not just the only wage payer here; we're the lifeline of the community," Linda says. The resort employs a small percentage of villagers but the money is spread among the employees' families (*wantoks*).

The men employed to take us diving have been on the water all their lives. It's a pleasure to watch them effortlessly steer boats through treacherous coral reefs because their faces are so textured and expressive that, if they also had fame, they'd be courted by painters eager to win the Archibald Prize.

In 1972, Tufi was wiped out by Cyclone Hannah. When the strongest trees in the forest—the coconut palms—started snapping like matchsticks, the locals ran. "There were no [folk] stories of winds that strong," says Swedish photographer and author, Jan Hasselberg. "They stood in the grass believing the world was ending." It would be another three years until PNG gained independence from Australia in 1975, which was fortunate because aid arrived swiftly.



The '72 cyclone formed an island of broken coral known as Cyclone Reef, undisturbed by trade winds. Unlike our first snorkel location, it is calm. Multicoloured coral formations bloom before me like a sped-up reel of alien planets from *Star Trek* and, behind, the reef drops away, deepening from aqua to navy blue. A school of fish splits and swarms around me and their oblivion to my presence feels something like freedom. My mask mists up with awed tears and I flipper around grinning, wondering if I'll see a white hammerhead shark, as many here do. Water trapped in my snorkel makes it purr softly.

Many Australians worry about safety in PNG. Decades of news reports about Port Moresby crime or unrest in the highlands has taken its toll. Yet there has never been a violent attack on a tourist in the Tufi villages. The people are gentle and dignified and although the women lay down 'stalls' on strips of grass, hoping to sell shell jewellery, woven bags (*bilums*), or bark cloth (*tapa*), they don't hawk or hassle. I apologise one day for looking, but not buying. "It's OK," says the craftsperson, all empathy. "We'll be here, friend."

For reasons out of their control, the villagers' crafts are not as cheap as in other developing countries—but neither is the cost of living. Many blame the money netted by large mining and development projects for driving up costs

for services such as air travel—most recently the ExxonMobil LNG project, which began producing natural gas last year. "The miners pay off the landowners and that's it," says a jaded expat. Another, from the Australian High Commission, says, "Things are gradually getting worse. Money is coming in but it's not reaching the places it's supposed to." With its health clinic in ruin and other basic services lacking, even for women giving birth, there is a genuine sense of abandonment here.

Multicoloured coral formations bloom before me like a sped-up reel of alien planets from *Star Trek* and, behind, the reef drops away, deepening from aqua to navy blue.

To attend high school, Tufi's young people must board in Popondetta and pay a tuition fee. That fee is an enormous impost on locals with little or no income; impossible, even. Walking through Tufi one day, I meet Elvis. My pace slows to suit his—men amble around here, barefoot, carrying spades across their shoulders, chewing betel nut, and gently greeting those they pass. I ask what he does. There is a pause as I realise there is little employment, but he answers gracefully. "I'm a family man. I have five children so I fish and look after the gardens." This system of traditional land ownership is the social >>



Opening page A local man from Oro Province in a traditional Papua New Guinean canoe.

Left, top to bottom The awe-inspiring fjords that visitors fly above en-route to Tufi; Outdoor dining at Tufi Resort.

Above, left to right A visitor scuba diving on one of Tufi's outer reefs; A young child at a cultural show in Oro Province, near Tufi.



The sago palms tower over us in this jungle where every trunk, leaf, root, and butterfly is super-sized.

Then, best of all, a song and dance (*sing sing*). Men approach beating drums made from rosewood, lizard skin, and lumps of honeybee wax for tuning. They sport flamboyantly feathered headpieces that fan out as they prance; their costumes so decorative, you barely know where to look. Then, the singing starts and ancient-sounding harmonies fill the air. The sago palms tower over us in this jungle where every trunk, leaf, root, and butterfly is super-sized; where even the bird noise has ratcheted up to a cacophony.

It is a performance, but it is in an utterly wild place, and it doesn't feel manufactured. We are not watching an artefact, in any case, because *sing sings* are still common clan events in PNG.

It is on our last night that Virgil and the Craybobs play—the boys in grass skirts; the girls in bark cloth, frangipanis in their frizzy hair. Frank says he loved listening to Kenny Rogers and Donny Williams on the radio but now it's up to his band to bring the songs. "Popondetta had a radio station but it's broken down now." As Tufi's policeman, Frank has plenty of time to jam. "I'm not busy every day. It's very peaceful here." ■

The writer travelled courtesy of Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority, Tufi Resort, Air Niugini, and Airlines PNG.



security net—not the government. And any extra money (*kina*) helps.

We boat out one day to a more remote fjord. Men in traditional dress paddle up in narrow canoes and we transfer onto platforms. Wordlessly, they row us down a fjord, then down a river, deep into a sago palm plantation where "spirits and sorcery run wild". Out of the boat, shoes off, we navigate roots and swamp towards a sacred clearing. Men with black-painted faces and spears jump out of the jungle, shouting aggressively; an intimidation ritual.

Women with headpieces shower petals on us, chanting "Oro! Oro!"—the name of the province but also the word for 'welcome'. We're shown how to harvest every part of a sago palm, and the method of traditional tattoos.

Fast fact

Temperatures in coastal areas range between 24 and 35 degrees with high humidity.

Top to bottom

A traditional *sing sing* is performed for guests on a cultural expedition to Oro Province near Tufi; Banannas are a major staple for Papua New Guineans, and they grow in wild abundance in the jungle.

FACT FILE

Where to stay: Tufi Resort offers year-round diving, culture, and relaxation. Packages start from AU\$750 for five nights including accommodation, meals, and airport transfers at Tufi. Local homestays are highly recommended and can be arranged in advance through the resort. tufiresort.com

How to get there: Air Niugini operates 27 direct flights to PNG weekly from Cairns, Brisbane, and Sydney. The airline operates a code share with Qantas. airniugini.com.pg

Airlines PNG operates Port Moresby to Tufi flights on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. apng.com

More information: papuanewguinea.travel/australia
linda.honey@apng.com