



Ecotourism Melanesia

Discover Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

EM202 2014 SEPIK CROCODILE FESTIVAL TOUR SUN03AUG-SUN10AUG

7 nights Wewak, Ambunti (Sepik Crocodile Festival), Middle Sepik

Fully escorted sign-up soft adventure tour, group size minimum 6 maximum 8.

INTRODUCTION

The Sepik Crocodile Festival is a small rural festival with amazing traditional dancing that you won't see at the Mt Hagen Show or other major festivals, and hardly any tourists. The festival is an initiative of WWF and aims to promote controlled harvesting of the wild crocodile population. The festival takes place at Ambunti on the border of the Middle and Upper Sepik where WWF's conservation activities are focused, and is scheduled in August, the middle of the local dry season, when the festival is least likely to be disrupted by rain.

The Crocodile Festival celebrates the centrality of the crocodile in lives of the Sepik people and also provides a venue for WWF to conduct conservation awareness with locals who flood in to Ambunti from all over the Sepik basin for the festival. A wide range of crocodile-themed handicrafts will be available and village groups will perform crocodile-themed traditional dances and dramas. In previous years the cultural performances at the festival have been superb. Dance groups come from as far afield as the Blackwater Lakes and the far Upper Sepik. The quality of the traditional costumes is exquisite and some groups dance with live crocodiles. Amazingly, each village's traditional dress and dance routine is very different from the others - it's amazing that so many diverse cultures have all evolved along the same river! Some of our tour group members have commented that the Sepik Crocodile Festival far outshines the Mt Hagen Show for authenticity and photography.

NOTE:

This is a "wet foot" tour that involves climbing in and out of motor canoes, some squelching in mud, some scrambling up riverbanks, and sleeping in basic huts without electricity several nights in a row, so some physical agility and mental resilience is required. Also note this is a unique small group tour program originally designed by Ecotourism Melanesia and not offered by any other tour company. The tour price includes a tour development levy to recover our outlays on designing, reconnoitring, organising and monitoring the remote area logistics, and a share of the group leader's travel costs.

TOUR COST: PGK 8550 per person (7 nights Wewak, Sepik River, Mt Hagen)

based on twin-share or willing to share, includes internal air and most meals.

Single supplement is available only for the two hotel nights in Wewak at an extra cost of PGK 800

To convert the tour cost to other currencies please contact us for a quote.

The tour price is subject to change. However clients paid-in-full are protected against any price rises.

TOUR INCLUSIONS (7 nights):

- Port Moresby - airport meet and greet, check-in/luggage assistance for connecting flight to Wewak, short city tour if time allows
- Port Moresby - domestic airfares Port Moresby-Wewak and Wewak-Port Moresby or Wewak - Mt Hagen
- Wewak - 3 nights accommodation at In-Wewak Boutique Hotel, Wewak (3.75 star twin-share room, room only)
- Wewak - day trip to Muschu Island including lunch and activities
- Wewak - air transfer to Ambunti (or alternative overland transfer if air travel precluded)
- Ambunti - 2 nights local guest house accommodation (1.0 star twin-share with clean bedding, outdoor bathroom, including local-style meals, bottled or boiled water, electricity at night only)
- Ambunti - 2 half days guided excursions to the Sepik Crocodile Festival (includes bottled water but buy your own lunch)
- Ambunti - afternoon excursion to Upper Sepik village
- Ambunti - afternoon excursion to Wagu Lakes
- Ambunti - motor canoe travel to the Middle Sepik and Timbunke
- Middle Sepik - 2 nights village guest house accommodation (1.0 star twin-share with clean bedding, outdoor bathroom), including local-style meals, bottled or boiled water, no electricity)
- Middle Sepik - guided village tours including entry to spirit houses and one dance performance, fruit lunches
- Middle Sepik - air transfer from Timbunke to Wewak (or alternative overland transfer if air travel precluded)
- Throughout the tour we provide:
 - services of a full time tour leader
 - all fees and gratuities for local villages, guides, demonstrators and helpers
 - all airport/hotel transfers
 - all road travel by late model mini bus or four wheel drive vehicle with bottled water on board (unless otherwise specified)
 - all water travel by open speed boat, skiff or motor canoe with life vests supplied and bottled water on board (unless otherwise specified)
 - various additional gear that may be required for your safety and comfort in remote areas such as mobile satellite phone, tropical first aid kit, mosquito net, life vest, sleeping bag, supplementary food supplies (we may ask you to carry such items with your personal baggage from Port Moresby to your destination and if this incurs any excess baggage penalty we will pay the charges)
 - daily reconfirmation of flights and arrangements coordinated by our Port Moresby office
 - 24 hour assistance from our Port Moresby office (phone 7700 5066, 7204 6950 or 7686 8917)

EXCLUSIONS:

- international airfares
- bottled water (except where stated as provided)
- hotel meals unless stated as included
- tips (not expected, and only appropriate for exceptional service)
- souvenirs and items of a personal nature
- bar drinks
- visa fees and visa assistance
- excess baggage charges - your free allowance on Air Niugini flights is 16kg + 5 kg and you can check in additional kilos at your own cost but for the light aircraft flights excess baggage is not permitted and a strict maximum of 16kg + 5kg is enforced.
- personal items - bring your own favourite munchies, favourite bath soap, favourite toilet paper, quick-dry bath towel, personal medications and first aid kit, personal hygiene requirements, brimmed hat or cap, "amphibious footwear" (sandals or quick-dry canvas shoes), insect repellent, sunscreen, personal flashlight, battery-operated personal fan. NB Aerosol cans are not permitted on domestic flights in PNG so bring roll-ons or pump-action sprays.

ITINERARY

DAY 1: SUN 03 AUG 2014

PORT MORESBY / WEWAK

On arrival in Port Moresby Ecotourism Melanesia staff will greet you and you will be transferred to check in for your connecting flight to Wewak. If time allows between flights, our staff will take you on a short tour of Port Moresby. *NB Your domestic air tickets are provided by Ecotourism Melanesia as part of the tour package and will be delivered to you on arrival or e-mailed in advance.*

16:30 Air Niugini flight PX120 departs for Wewak (aircraft: Fokker F100 jet with 98 seats)

18:00 On arrival in Wewak the group will be met by the tour leader and transfer 15 minutes to your hotel.

Overnight In-Wewak Boutique Hotel, Wewak (3.75 star twin room, room only, pay-as-you-go for meals by cash or card)

TOUR NOTE: About Wewak

Wewak town (population around 50,000) is the jumping-off point for the Sepik River and the Wewak Islands. A smaller town than Madang, Wewak is less tourist-oriented and the local economy is mainly based on commercial fishing. There are three good hotels and a number of smaller motels and guest houses. From Wewak there are two roads leading to the Sepik River (one to Pagwi on the Middle Sepik and one to Angoram on the Lower Sepik) and charter aircraft operate from Wewak airport to airstrips along the river at Ambunti (Upper Sepik), Timbunke (Middle Sepik) and Karawari (a tributary of the Sepik). From the Wewak waterfront open speed boats travel less than an hour to the Wewak Islands: Muschu, Kairiru and a number smaller islets.

TOUR NOTE: About In-Wewak Boutique Hotel

Situated on a cliff top overlooking the Bismarck Sea the In-Wewak Boutique Hotel is a plantation-style property, less than 10 years old, featuring white-painted rooms with sterile clean bathrooms, white stucco facade, and wide verandahs with stiff sea breezes in the afternoons. By far the best hotel in Wewak, this hotel offers international-standard comfort and service in a small boutique package. The restaurant serves superb local seafood and the a la carte menu is a match for any of the larger hotels in Port Moresby. Breakfast and lunch are served in the poolside café and represent good value. Dinner is served in the larger fine dining restaurant. ADSL internet is available from user terminals near reception. There is a small freshwater pool but no beach access.

All rooms are air-conditioned and fitted with a queen size or king size bed. A roll-away single bed can be set up in the room if twin share is required.

In-Wewak Boutique Hotel is quite a distance from shops so self-catering in the rooms is not a viable option unless you bring food with you from Port Moresby.

www.inwewak.com

DAY 2: MON 04 AUG 2014

WEWAK (Muschu Island day trip)

08:00 A pleasant 15 minute walk down hill from the hotel brings us to the waterfront where we board a local banana boat (open speed boat) for the 30 minute crossing to Muschu Island.

TOUR NOTE: About Muschu Island

Muschu is a lush tropical island, flat and low and covered in coconut plantations and verdant jungle. The island is fringed with beautiful white sandy beaches and colourful coral reefs. There are only a few villages. The island was occupied during WW2 by Japanese navy units who were responsible for planting large vegetables gardens all over the island to grow food for feeding the thousands of Japanese servicemen in the garrison based at Wewak. There was also a gunnery unit manning a pair of huge artillery guns on a hill inland from Sup Point. The big guns are still there in the jungle today (they are too heavy to be pilfered). In September 1945 when the Japanese surrendered, Australian forces kept up to 10,000 Japanese prisoners on the island until they were repatriated to Japan in 1946. For more information about Muschu Island's role in WW2 see

www.gunsofmuschu.com

There are no ferries servicing the island and the only way to get there is by squatting on the floor of a privately hired open speed boat ("banana boat") which is a little intimidating for conventional tourists, therefore Muschu is not a mainstream tourist destination despite its appeal.

Sup Beach (pronounced "soup") on the eastern side of the island will be our playground for today. A short distance inland from the beach is Sup village which has a small local guest house that will cater for our lunch, snacks and bottomless fresh coconut juice. Beach activities available today include swimming, beach walking, snorkelling (mask and snorkel is provided) and paddling a native canoe.

The locals at Sup village will welcome us to wander around, meet the people and see what daily village life is like in this tropical paradise.

After lunch there will be an optional hike along the coast and through the inland rainforest forest which will take us under flocks of parrots and past some of the old Japanese defence positions.

There is no need for the group to stay together today and you will be free to follow your own pace - a day of leisure sitting on a woven mat in the shade of a big tree on the beach with a coconut drink in one hand and a banana in the other, or a more active day exploring the island and the village.

NB Modest beachwear is essential today in order not to offend locals - no bikinis, briefs or revealing one-piece costumes. Ladies please bathe in shorts and a top, or a sarong. Men please wear board shorts or other thigh-length swimwear - shirt optional.

17:00 Depart Sup Beach for Wewak arriving back at the hotel in time to shower and change before dinner.

Overnight In-Wewak Boutique Hotel, Wewak (3.75 star twin room, room only, pay-as-you-go for meals by cash or card)

DAY 3: TUE 05 AUG 2014

WEWAK / AMBUNTI (crocodile festival and local village)

08:00 From Wewak airport we fly by light aircraft approximately 40 minutes to the small town of Ambunti which is the gateway to the Upper Sepik. Ambunti is only accessible by water or air; there are no roads into this area. There are also very few accommodation options at Ambunti and these are two reasons why not many tourists make it to the Crocodile Festival each year.

(In the event that weather conditions or operational problems preclude uplift by air, alternative overland transport will be arranged).

TOUR NOTE: Ambunti

Ambunti is a pindrop-quiet little township with a number of small government offices, a few tiny shops and churches, an airfield and one or two minor cottage industries. The population is around 2,000. There are no streets; just grassy lanes between houses and other buildings that are used by a few tractors with open trailers for hauling loads around the "station" - the rest of the time people just walk because nowhere is far from anywhere at Ambunti. The township normally seems asleep during the hot days, but comes alive in the late afternoon when various football games sprout on the airstrip runway and other open spaces and draw small social crowds. There is a little "hotel" called Ambunti Lodge which caters for tourists, government and business travellers, plus a few other small guest houses run by families and the church missions. Ambunti is the jumping-off point for the Upper Sepik and the Wagu Lakes waterbird zone.

The festival program will get under way this morning and continue until mid-afternoon. Apart from groups performing traditional dancing there will also be skits and plays presented by health, environment and church groups all hoping to get their messages across to the thousands of rural people from surrounding villages who flood in to Ambunti for the festival.

The festival venue will be ringed by stalls selling very good Sepik artifacts and

handicrafts such as crocodile carvings and crocodile tooth necklaces at bargain prices so buy up big. The pride and joy of your souvenir collection - if you can buy one - will be a crocodile-snout canoe prow. Sepik canoes normally have an animal totem carved into the prow and when the canoe becomes old or develops un-patchable leaks the prow is sometimes cut off with a chainsaw or axe and sold as a souvenir (about 40 centimetres long by 20 centimetres wide, and weighing about 3kg). Of course, it's not really a tourist souvenir but a genuine cultural artifact. Fumigation and special packing will be required if you want to take a canoe prow home with you.

Tourists and officials will be given priority seating with the performance area right in front so we will have ringside seats. You will also be able to take your camera into the performance area to get those close-up shots. There will be big crowds of friendly Sepik people - mingling with the masses will be half the fun for you today. You won't have to worry about drunks or pests as the local police will be around and they don't tolerate trouble-makers at these community events. There will also be a food market at the venue where you can buy all manner of fresh fruit, cooked foods and coconut drinks so there will be no official lunch provided today - just fill yourself up with food from the market. Ladies groups from the churches and schools will be out in force serving up their best traditional foods so this is your chance to sample some of the best local fare. If you are busy with photography, send one of our guides to gopher. The festival venue will be hot and sunny so wear a hat and plenty of sun-screen, and drink plenty of water. A carton of bottled water from our supplies will be carried up to the venue and available for you to help yourself from.

TOUR NOTE: Crocodiles on the Sepik

Crocodiles play a major part in the lives of the Sepik people. Apart from their centrality to spiritual beliefs, crocodiles are important for the local diet and the village microeconomy. Everywhere in the Sepik River basin, the crocodile is an occasional source of protein for the village diet, and crocodile skins are sold for cash to outside buyers. The collecting of crocodile eggs in the wild and hatching them in crocodile "farms" is an ongoing threat to the wild population. WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is educating locals about sustainable harvesting of wildlife resources and encouraging them to turn to alternative sources of income such as ecotourism. The two species of crocodile prevalent in the Sepik basin are the common saltwater crocodile (Crocodylus porosus) and the New Guinea freshwater crocodile (Crocodylus novaeguineas). These days the wild populations of both species are retreating to the more remote tributaries of the Sepik that are furthest from their major predator: humans. It is unusual to see crocodiles along the main human-occupied areas of the Sepik River proper these days, as the constant passage of motorised dinghies and other small boats has driven the crocodile population up into backwaters. Very large crocodiles are rare these days and no "monster man-eaters" have been caught in the past 10 years.

Mid-afternoon after the festival program has concluded, we will travel further upstream by motor canoe to a typical riverside village. We will spend an hour wandering around the village meeting the locals, examining their houses built from bush materials and admiring their subsistence lifestyle on the river bank. Late afternoon, we return to Ambunti for a cold beer at Ambunti Lodge (seriously!) and onwards to our accommodation.

Overnight local guest house, Ambunti (includes catered meals and bottled water).

TOUR NOTE: Ambunti accommodation

Bedding provided at the local guest house includes a clean tropical sleeping bag on a thin rubber mattress, clean pillow and mosquito net. The outdoor bathroom has a pit latrine and separate shower cubicle which may have running water or may have a drum full of water that you have to scoop over yourself Asian style, depending on the water arrangement. Whatever the case, you'll cope ©. Soap and toilet rolls will be supplied but bring your own lightweight bath towel.

We also **HIGHLY** recommend you bring a battery operated personal FAN to cool yourself while visiting the Sepik area because the air under your mosquito net at night can get very hot and humid which may prevent sleep. We can't supply such fans here in PNG - they aren't available - so pick one up from your local camping store and **BYO** - we guarantee you will be glad you did !

DAY 4: WED 06 AUG 2014

AMBUNTI (crocodile festival and Wagu Lakes)

This morning we enjoy a second day at the crocodile festival - the program will be different from yesterday.

In the early afternoon once the festival program begins to peter out we will board our motor canoe again for a one hour journey to the Wagu Lakes. Here we will do some water bird spotting, take a hike through the rainforest to see some of the exotic insects and flora of the Sepik Basin and, later in the afternoon, position ourselves near a known nesting spot of bird of paradise to see their end-of-day display.

As dusk approaches we commence our journey back to Ambunti arriving after dark - our canoe crew know these waters well so we are in safe hands even motoring by starlight..

Overnight local guest house, Ambunti (includes catered meals and bottled water).

DAY 4: THU 06 AUG 2014

AMBUNTI / MIDDLE SEPIK (Korogo village)

Departing Ambunti after breakfast we will head down-river approximately two hours to Pagwi mission (the road to Wewak commences here) and thence another 30 minutes to Korogo village arriving in time for lunch.

TOUR NOTE: Sepik motor canoes

The Sepik River and the neighbouring Ramu River are the only places in PNG where you will find motorised longboats or "motor canoes". Elsewhere in the country, locally made fibreglass dinghies (called "banana boats" because of their curved design) are more common.

Up to 10 metres in length, Sepik motor canoes are carved from whole tree trunks and take about 3 months to fashion. On the Sepik River you will see such canoes carrying up to 30 people or large quantities of fuel drums or other cargo weighed right down to the waterline but for comfort and convenience we load only 4 tourists plus baggage and supplies into a medium sized canoe (6-7 metres long with a 30hp outboard motor) or 6 tourists plus cargo into a large canoe (8-10 metres long with a 40hp engine). We do not own our own canoes: we hire them from local village operators in support of our responsible tourism policy.

Sepik motor canoes are very safe and in all our years of operating Sepik River trips we have never known a canoe carrying tourists to capsize or sink. This is because when the makers carve the canoe they leave the wood at the bottom of the canoe very thick and carve the sides and prow thin. This way the centre of gravity remains low and the canoe tends to remain upright and not tip over. For stability reasons we prefer not to place cane armchairs in canoes for tourists to sit on (as do some other tour operators) because when passengers sit high in the canoe this raises the centre of gravity of the canoe and makes it roll from side to side and increases the risk of a passenger toppling out of the canoe when standing up in the canoe to stretch or take a photograph. The local people normally sit cross legged right down in the bottom of the canoe and for safety reasons we prefer our clients to do the same, although we normally provide a cushion or sleeping bag to sit on for comfort. We do provide life jackets and encourage you to wear one even if you are a strong swimmer because the Sepik River has very strong currents that are hard to swim against. Although none of our tourists have yet fallen out of a canoe, if it does happen to you the best strategy is just to float in the current until you are washed onto a sand bank at the next river bend or until the canoe comes around to pick you up. Don't try to swim against or across the current.

The biggest danger with Sepik canoe travel is sunburn. Apart from applying sunscreen we recommend you wear long sleeves and hold a sturdy umbrella (which we normally provide) or wear a large wide-brimmed hat while travelling in these open canoes. Despite the brown colour of the river it does reflect a lot of solar radiation upwards under your umbrella or the brim of your hat so it is important to apply sunscreen to the undersides of your face and arms as well.

We will spend the rest of the day at Korogo with time for a village walking

tour, a visit to the wood carvers, the men's spirit house and a paddle on the adjacent Korogo Fishing Lake, a body of still water teeming with fish and of course the occasional small crocodile.

The Korogo village carvers are famous for their fine art. Wood artists from Korogo have travelled overseas on carver exchange programs - see:

http://www.alcheringa-gallery.com/past/af3_korogo.html

<http://www.alcheringa-gallery.com/artists.html/v1/view/v3/209>

There is no electricity here so we will have dinner by lamplight then retire early.

Overnight village guest house, Korogo (includes local style food and bottled water).

DAY 5: FRI 07 AUG 2014

MIDDLE SEPIK (Palembi and Kanganaman villages)

From Korogo we will travel one hour downstream to the heart of the crocodile cult, the twin villages of Palembang and Kanganaman which are located on opposite sides of the river.

TOUR NOTE: The Middle Sepik crocodile cult

Crocodiles (known locally as "pook-pooks") play a major part in the cultural heritage of the Middle Sepik people. Crocodiles are animal totems symbolising strength and power. In the Middle Sepik crocodile cult villages from Korogo down to Kaminabit the attributes of the crocodile are so envied that the men even try to make themselves look like crocodiles. The initiation of boys into adulthood involves a painful and bloody scarification ritual during which dozens of small cuts are made all over the back from shoulders to hips, and pockets of skin are lifted away from the flesh. Upon healing, this leaves raised scars that resemble the bumpy hide of the crocodile. Such initiations are carried out in secret only once or twice a year and outsiders are not normally allowed to witness the cutting ritual although increasingly villagers are accepting large cash inducements from film crews and wealthy tourists for permission to observe and photograph their young men undergoing the skin cutting.

Once initiated, the men of the crocodile cult may sit in the Haus Tambaran (men's spirit house) and participate in pagan cult practises such as communing with the ancestors.

Middle Sepik men who are not initiated (for whatever reason eg due to Christian religious beliefs, due to living in the city and not having the opportunity, or due to being frightened of the pain), are not permitted to enter the Haus Tambaran. However in most villages the initiated men do allow outside visitors, including foreign women, to enter.

While Palembang boasts two of the most ornate spirit houses on the Sepik, Kanganaman certainly has the biggest as it is set on very high posts to defend it from flooding.

Both Palembang and Kanganaman are located about 20 minutes walk inland from the river bank so you will carry only your camera and day-pack with you while your larger luggage remains in the canoe with the canoe crew. A fruit lunch is provided at Palembang.

Apart from inspecting the spirit houses with their collections of artifacts, the locals will put on a traditional dance performance in the village setting which will provide a much better background for photography than at the crocodile festival. There will also be an opportunity to photograph the "crocodile skin" of initiated men.

Overnight village guest house, Kanganaman (includes local style food and bottled water).

DAY 6: SAT 08 AUG 2014

MIDDLE SEPIK (Tambanum) / WEWAK

After breakfast we will depart Kanganaman and continue by motor canoe further downstream a 90 minute journey to Tambanum.

TOUR NOTE: Tambanum village

Tambanum is the largest village on the Sepik River (population about 2000) which actually spills over onto both banks of the river. The locals get from one side of the village to the other by standing in flat-bottomed canoes and poling themselves across. The River is suitably shallow here at low tide.

There are several clans inhabiting Tambanum village and each clan has its own Haus Tambaran (men's spirit house). The Haus Tambarans at Tambanum are only small but each one contains a variety of old and interesting artifacts including an orator's stool which is a large wooden statue with a seat where the meeting leader sits while speaking about important issues. Some clans at Tambanum do not allow women to enter their Haus Tambaran, even tourists. Other clans allow female visitors to enter. Your guide will pay any fees involved.

Tambanum is well dubbed "the carving factory of the Sepik" because Tambanum people are prolific artisans. As you walk through the village you will see almost every house displaying handicrafts for sale including masks, figurines, fish traps, mats, jewellery, animal totems, canoe prows, bows and arrows, clubs, grass skirts, tapa cloth, cooking utensils, sago beaters and sago bowls... most of which are genuine cultural artifacts that they would normally make for their own use and purposes but nowadays they also make extra ones for sale to visitors. There are also some items made specifically as souvenirs - your guide will help you tell the difference. Many houses at Tambanum are decorated with large woven gable masks sitting just under their roofs - these are usually clan totems and not available for sale (too large to carry out anyway). As you walk through village (about 30 minutes walk from one side to the other) the village people will come out of their houses to say hello and answer any questions you may have about the decorations and wares displayed on and under their homes. Your guide will arrange a visit to one or two of the house tambarans.

12:00 Your guide will arrange some fruit for lunch then the group will depart Tambanum and motor back upstream half an hour to Timbunke mission which has the only airstrip on the Middle Sepik.

14:00 Our MAF charter aircraft touches down from Wewak and we board for the return sector. Depending on our group numbers and baggage weight the aircraft may have to make two trips. It's only 20 minutes flying time each way so it won't take long to come back for the second load of passengers if two flights are required. (In the event that weather conditions or operational problems preclude uplift by air, alternative overland transport will be arranged. There is a road from Timbunke to Wewak but the journey takes four hours and is quite a rough surface so a road transfer will be kept as a backup measure only).

Overnight In-Wewak Boutique Hotel, Wewak (3.75 star twin room, room only, pay-as-you-go for meals by cash or card)

DAY 7: SUN 09 AUG

WEWAK / FLY OUT

The tour package includes your choice of outbound flight to Port Moresby, Mt Hagen or Madang. If you are taking the follow-on tour EM201 Mt Hagen Show Tour you will fly out to Mt Hagen. Flights out:

06:10 Air Niugini flight PX121 departs Wewak for Port Moresby (aircraft: Fokker 100 with 98 seats)

11:00 Airlines PNG flight CG1623 departs Wewak for Mt Hagen and Port Moresby (aircraft: Dash 8-100 with 36 seats)