

[Country profile: Papua New Guinea]

Spotlight on Papua New Guinea

Country overview

Papua New Guinea is the largest island nation in the South Pacific region, both in land area and population, lying barely south of the equator (between 1 to 12 degrees South latitude and 141 to 157 degrees East longitude) and on the northern tip of Australia.

It comprises the eastern half of the world's second biggest island - New Guinea - bordering Indonesia's province of Irian Jaya (Papua) to the west, between the Coral Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The rest of the country is made up of some 600 small islands. Papua New Guinea's other neighbours include Australia to the south, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to the east, and Micronesia to the north.

The major city and capital of the country is Port Moresby (National Capital District), with a population of 300,000. The second city, Lae in Morobe Province, is the main industrial centre, while Mount Hagen in Western Highlands Province is the third main city. Other major towns include Madang, in Madang Province, Wewak in East Sepik Province, Goroka in Eastern Highlands Province, and Arawa in the Bougainville Autonomous Region.

Papua New Guinea embraces an outstanding collection of islands and coral reefs scattered around its coastlines. The climate is generally tropical: the north-west monsoon brings rain from December to March, with dry south-east monsoon from May to October, and slight seasonal temperature variation.

The country's most striking feature is the variety of mountainous landscapes to that of coastal lowlands and gently sloping foothills. The mainland is divided by the Owen Stanley Range - a rugged central spine with peaks over 4,000 metres high. Great rivers begin their route to the sea from these mountains - among them the mighty Sepik River and the Fly. The country is dominated by highlands, plateaus, valleys, rainforest, mangrove swamps, gardens, plantations and coral atolls.

Papua New Guinea became an independent nation on 16 September 1975. As well as the National Parliament, there are two other levels of government - provincial and local. The country is divided into 20 provinces including the National Capital District, each with its own provincial government.

Fast facts

- **Full name:** The Independent State of Papua New Guinea
- **Population:** 6.0 million
- **Capital:** Port Moresby
- **Area:** 462,840 sq km (178,704 sq miles)
- **Coastline:** 8,300 km

- **Major languages:** English, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu (there are over 800 indigenous languages)
- **Ethnicity/race:** mainly Melanesians, with small communities of Polynesians
- **Major religions:** Christianity, indigenous beliefs, others
- **Life expectancy:** 55 years (men), 56 years (women)
- **Monetary unit:** Kina
- **Main exports:** minerals (copper, gold, silver, crude oil, natural gas), agricultural products (coffee, cocoa, palm oil, copra oil, copra, tea, rubber), forest products (timber logs, timber, plywood, woodchips), marine products (prawns and fish), others (other agricultural products, manufactured goods)
- **GNI per capita:** US\$770 (*World Bank*)
- **Independence:** 16 September 1975

Culture in Papua New Guinea

The indigenous people of Papua New Guinea are of mixed, mostly Melanesian, race. There are also small communities of Polynesians on the outer lying islands. These are Ninigo groups among the Bismarck Archipelago, particularly found in Manus Province, and Nukumanu groups in the Bougainville Autonomous Region. Culturally, Papua New Guinea is very diverse. It is the world's most linguistically diverse country with more than 800 languages spoken among the population of 6 million.

Physical landscapes determine cultural landscapes in Papua New Guinea. Coastal lowland areas consisting of islands, seashores, swampland and lagoons enable cultural and livelihood patterns that are distinctively different from the highland communities. Local diets also differ.

Differing physical environments also influence different cultural forms in the country. This is evident when witnessing cultural festivals and ceremonies performed by communities both seaboard (coastal areas) and from landlocked groups in the highland areas of Papua New Guinea.

Young men and adolescent boys are initiated into their respective societies' cultures. Taboos are observed when undergoing rituals; for example, certain foods are forbidden while remaining in seclusion. Those young men and adolescent boys who are to be initiated into the men's spirit house do not eat greasy food or, at times, animal meat; they are forbidden to sleep with their wives, or women, and must remain in the confines of the men's spirit house.

Papua New Guinea has a vast corpus of oral traditions found within respective communities. For example, in the Eastern Highlands, there is the popular legend of the mudmen culture. According to the legend, there was a tribal war fought many years ago, and men of one tribe were driven into the Asaro River. Later they emerged with mud and were mistaken for evil spirits by their enemies, who fled.

The mask culture that appears on East New Britain, West New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville is very unique, dynamic and apart from the other cultural materials and ceremonies the people there maintain. In East New Britain Province, an annual festival called the National Mask Festival is hosted in which the mask cultures in this region as well as those in other areas of Papua New Guinea are showcased. Those who participate in these mask dances have to go through rituals for weeks before participating in the actual festival.

In the Southern Region of Papua New Guinea, a Canoe and Kundu (hand-drum) Festival is held every year in the Milne Bay Province, where different styles of canoes are gathered in a canoe-racing competition. The main purpose is to showcase various types and forms of canoes prevailing in the region.

As for the Momase Region of Papua New Guinea, from August to September every year there is a National Mambu (bamboo) and Garamut (slit gongs) Festival that is hosted. This festival showcases an array of bamboo and slit gong culture in the communities they occur.

In addition to these major festivals, there are mini-shows and festivals held in other parts of the country to encourage people's participation. These festivals foster promotion and help to maintain cultural traditions of Papua New Guinea.

In 1997, Papua New Guinea helped ratify the World Heritage Convention by becoming a signatory to it. Under this Convention, the Kuk Early Archaeological Site has been nominated for the World Heritage List. The Kuk site contains evidence of earliest plant domestication practised in the Western Highlands area dating back to 9,000 years ago.

In September 2006, the Kuk Nomination Document was listed. This made Kuk the first in the country to be listed. There are seven other heritage sites placed under the tentative listing: the Kokoda Track and Owen Stanley Ranges (embracing the natural heritage); the Huon Terraces (showing coral stairways to the past); the Kikori River Basin of the Great Papuan Plateau; Milne Bay Seascape (regarded as the Pacific Jewels of Marine Biodiversity); the Sublime Karsts of Papua New Guinea; the Trans-Fly Complex; and the Upper Sepik River Basin. These sites contain both the natural and cultural properties of Papua New Guinea's cultural heritage.

Tourism is a growing industry in Papua New Guinea, estimated to contribute 3.5 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Development of tourism has been gradual in regard to the rest of the world and the region, and is still at an embryonic stage. Tourism has potential in Papua New Guinea given the diversity and uniqueness of the natural and cultural resources it can offer.

English is the official language of education, administration, and commerce in Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin is basically derived historically from English and is widely spoken in the New Guinea Islands, Highlands and the Momase regions. Hiri Motu was the trade language used by the Motu people of the Central Province when travelling on trading expeditions to the Gulf Province. It was adopted as a *lingua franca* by the then Armed Native Constabulary of what used to be called British New Guinea (and much later as Papua). It was then used by the colonial administration in its administration of the then British Papua.

Papua New Guinea is at the crossroads of maintaining its cultural identity and heritage. It is endeavouring to preserve and promote its rich cultural heritage from eroding and possible extinction. The country now stands at the crossroads particularly as the cultures and traditions are impacted by globalisation activities. It has to keep hold of what it has and ensure that its cultural meanings and identity are sustained. It is of importance that Papua New Guinea incorporates its cultural ideas into activities to allow for their continuity.

The state agencies, the National Cultural Commission and the National Museum and Art Gallery are committed to ensuring that Papua New Guinea's rich cultures are developed and preserved at the national level. The state's school curriculum also covers cultural programmes. Through these means, the notion of maintaining and ensuring the continuity of certain cultural ideas and practices are instilled in the younger generations.

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