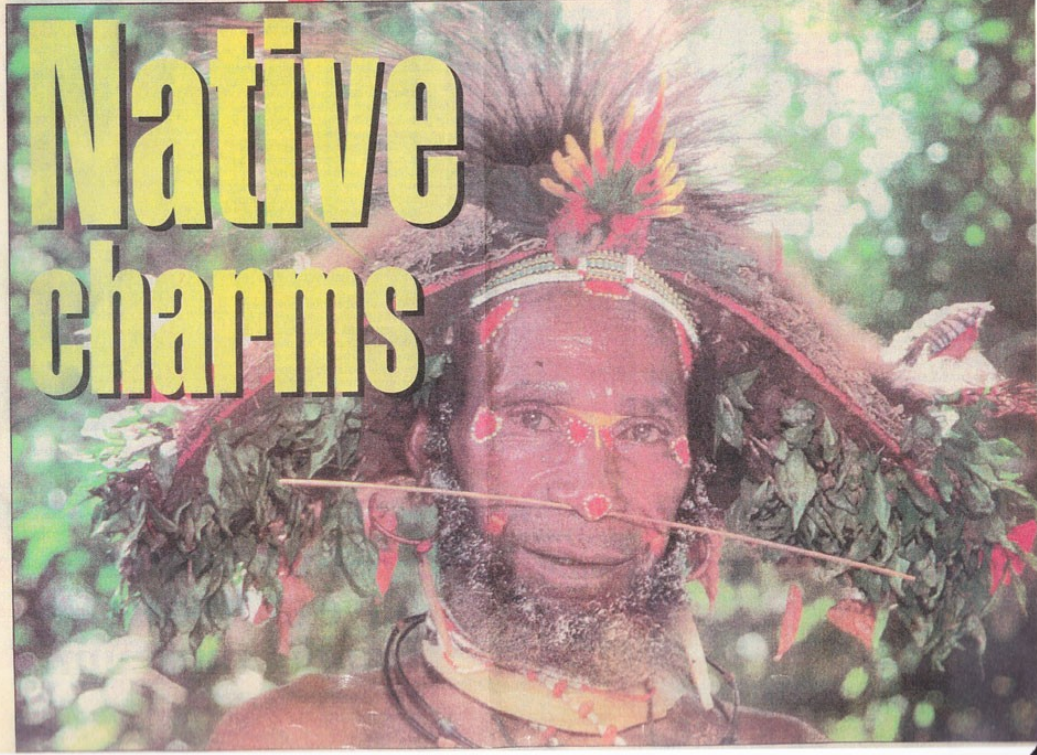


**TARA'S SPECIAL**  
 Vancouver - Germany  
 May 28 \$579.00  
 Air Only

**INTRA TRAVEL**  
 860-3593



# Native charms

## Exploring Papua New Guinea's Sepik River basin is no jolly little outing, but you can't do better for sheer adventure

By A.R. LEWIS  
 Special to The Okanagan Saturday

Call it a sense of adventurous curiosity or even a return to my earliest roots. This is the second time I have been drawn back to Papua New Guinea, a country where tribal warfare remains a way of life and primitive art is sought by collectors the world over. Without the aid of operative radar, our tiny Cessna winds its way

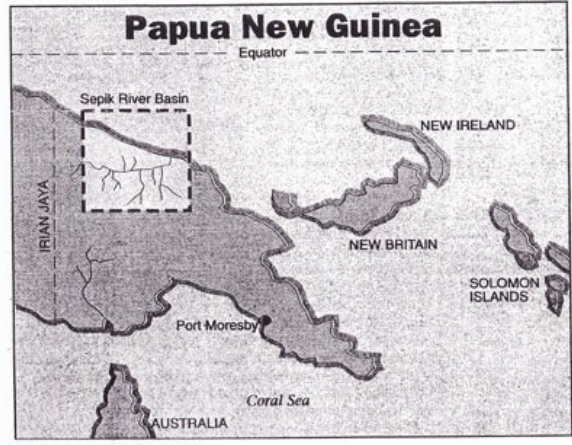
through mountainous valleys, struggling to gain sufficient altitude to climb above the cloud-covered ridges. The storm pelts the paper-thin fuselage with driving rain and hail. The turbulence is unyielding. I'm now beginning to understand why pilots in Papua New Guinea are considered among the world's finest. As the clouds break, occasional beams of sun illuminate lush-terraced gardens. Remote villages with huts of thatch and mud indicate civilization has not been altered drastically in centuries. Within the next 90 minutes, I will be deposited in a time warp; an anthropological treasure house—the jungles of the Sepik River basin. The East Sepik province is a thick, green carpet of swamp, grassland and jungle, teeming with abundant reptile and insect life. The

Sepik river, an 11,000 km muddy, snakelike system, originates in the interior mountains of neighboring Irian Jaya (Indonesia), eventually emptying into the Bismark Sea on the East Coast. Dotted its network are many remote, virtually untouched villages with an international reputation as the breeding ground for some of the world's finest examples of primitive art carvings. With tales of head hunters and natives with an appetite for human flesh little more than a generation removed, this is not the type of holiday destination for the luxury-minded tourist. On the other hand, for the curious traveller or art collector, it is an unmatched opportunity. The heat and humidity in the jungle are unbearable. I have had headaches for the past three days since arriving from the cool, fresh Highlands. We discover a couple of alternate methods to transport ourselves down the river. For those who prefer minimal hardships, as well as considerable extra expense, there is a floating houseboat with professional guides, to whisk the deckchair adventurer down the main channels in relative comfort. However, we choose to chart our own course and are able to strike a deal with a local canoe owner to hire his boat, a 15 hp. engine (presumably in good condition) and a guide. But, be forewarned: the canoe



The Okanagan Saturday  
 A storyboard from the village of Kambot shows images of daily life.

file it with the local officer in charge of Pagwi village in the middle Sepik region. The next morning, at 6 a.m., we set off in our 40-foot dugout canoe, accompanying an 8-knot downstream current, to visit villages along the way and experience their art and culture. Our hearts pound as we anticipate the big, muddy river, its narrow channels and whatever surprises it has in store. As each village has its own concept of art, the variance in styles is astounding. Kambot specializes in storyboards, portraying images of domestic life; Yenthen creates large, two-headed wicker masks; Tambanum features wooden statues in form of crocodiles, turtles, or parrots as ancestral symbols. The first village we reach, Korogo, has an international reputation for its shell-inlaid masks. It has a huge 'haus tambaran', or house of spirits, where the most prized carvings, each with its own spiritual significance, are found. In Korogo, like most villages on the river, about three out of every four men carve. Today's artist has taken the concept of traditional art, which was produced at the time of European contact, and evolved it to suit not only sacred purposes, but also appreciative visitors from far-away. We tour and explore the village with an entourage of children following us. We marvel at the skill and craftsmanship of our hosts as they go about their daily chores. One man busies himself with the month-long occupation of carving out a 50-foot canoe, complete with crocodile figurehead on the prow, using only a stone adze.



GREG PERRY/The Okanagan Saturday

owners on the Sepik are notorious capitalists. In recent years they have become accustomed to affluent, complacent visitors or purposeful art dealers who are willing to pay inflated prices. By setting an expensive precedent, this can spoil things for the budget conscious traveller. Be careful! It's now October, the beginning of the rainy season, and we know all too well the fierce reputation of the local mosquitoes. Of all the necessary supplies to consider, none is more important than the weekly anti-malarial pill. "Fansidar" is the most accepted drug as Sepik mosquitoes have developed an immunity to chloroquine. Other important items include at least a gallon of repellent, mosquito nets for sleeping and a substantial supply of food and fresh water. We are now ready for our four-day journey. We set up a route plan and

Continued on page D2

THE OKANAGAN SATURDAY, MAY 18, 1996

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

## Exploring a strange and beautiful world

Continued from page D1

Amphibious children splash playfully in the muddy water while a group of women inspect fishing nets near the riverbank to determine tonight's dinner. Nobody goes hungry on the river.

Masks and carvings are abundant. Prices are negotiable and reasonable when buying directly from the source. Now aware of their value to the Western world, the locals have become shrewd and business-like in dealing with visitors.

We carry our collections to the canoe, where Bandi, our guide, is working on the engine, which has apparently fallen victim to old spark plugs. We continue our journey downstream fighting occasional engine stalls. Our cameras are busy as we stir white egrets from their nests and watch eagles and hawks hovering above us.

In the bullrushes, we keep a constant probe with the binoculars for the usually nocturnal crocodile or perhaps an elusive bird of paradise. In the 1960s, ANZAC hunters cleaned out most of the lucrative 'puk puk' or crocodile population in the river and surrounding lakes. But the government has now passed legislation demanding licences for hunters and restricting take on the protected species.

As it is growing late in the afternoon, we accept Bandi's suggestion to spend the night in the "floating" village of Kamarumba. Reputed once to be an unofficial brothel, this stilts village rests in the centre of a



Photo contributed

**A.R. Lewis kept his camera clicking as he wandered Native villages of the Sepik River basin.**

great flood plain, with door-to-door transportation by canoe in the rainy season. We arrive the night of a large tribal dance. The men are busy chopping large bamboo chutes to serve as drums while others tune an old rachety guitar remaining from a missionary visit 20 years earlier. By the dim light of our kerosene lamp, we uncover what appears to be a year's accumulation of dust and spider webs in the guest hut.

Before the dance, we are invited to join the "big men" in a large house that must have been home to a dozen families. Tonight's menu is "puk puk" tails and what they refer to as "duck."

Meanwhile, the sounds of crickets, toads and a multitude of other jungle creatures accompany the steady beat of drums and the trance-inducing chanting of the dance ceremony.

The stomping and wailing continue through the night, building in intensity until it ceases, finally, at sunrise.

The Sepik River and its many tributaries are in great danger of being choked by a grassy form of vegetation known as salvinia which multiplies, forming small islands that clog up waterways.

Attempting to navigate through the ever-changing maze can become a nightmare, even for locals. A route that existed two weeks ago can become a series of unfamiliar detours leading a party in circles, as we were now experiencing. Combined with our increasing engine malfunctions, we had the making of a problem.

The scorching sun has our bodies fast frying, the water supply is running low, and for every 10 minutes of slow motoring, another 10 are spent cleaning and recleaning spark plugs on a dying engine. The salvinia at one stage becomes so impenetrable that we can't paddle through it, forcing Bandi out of the canoe to walk through the water to free us.

All the while, the day grows longer with no clues or reference points to assist us out of our trap. At any moment I expect to see the remains of the last unsuccessful canoe party run aground on a floating island, unable to free itself, leaving its occupants to expire.

By late afternoon, speculation begins as to whether or not we will be spending the night in this giant swamp with its malaria-infested

mosquitoes, crocs, leeches and water snakes, not to mention the inevitable heavy rain storms that drench the landscape each evening.

After a prolonged period of silence and contemplation, Bandi shouts, "Masta! Plastic house!"

In the distance we can barely distinguish a blue tarp housing a small group of fisherman. Civilization! An elderly woman tending the camp points to two tall dead trees on the horizon, indicating that their lies a small open channel.

With this encouragement we set our course, the engine coughing and sputtering. Soon we find the stagnant, black water becoming slightly murky and showing signs of noticeable movement in the lily pads: finally, a current.

Within a half hour we discover a narrow waterway through the thick salvinia which eventually leads us to a small friendly village back on the Sepik.

With our expeditions now resembling a Hollywood adventure, I carried our prized acquisitions up the mud-soaked trail to our place of refuge. Darkness has now engulfed the jungle basin; threatening thunder reverberates in the distant skies.

Our worst fears are now behind us. In less than 72 hours, the jet age - which has eluded Papua New Guinea - will deposit us back home in Vancouver, to reflect on events and occurrences soon to seem more a dream than reality.

**A. R. Lewis is a travel writer and art collector.**



The Okanagan Saturday

**Masks and carvings are abundant. Prices are negotiable and reasonable when buying directly from the source. Now aware of their value to the Western world, the locals have become shrewd and business-like.**