

Introduction to West Papua

West Papua forms the western half of the large island widely known as New Guinea. Administratively part of Indonesia, West Papua is officially known as Irian Jaya



To experience West Papua is to embark on a voyage into one of humanity's deepest mysteries. This far-away and little known island lies like a curled infant in the lap of Mother Nature.

West Papua is home to the most ethnologically primitive cultures on Earth. No less than 25% of the world's languages are spoken here and obviously you will find a vast display of tribes and tribal customs. These are people largely unaffected by the strictures of the modern world as we know it; a race adapted to

daily life solely through their basic survival elements.

The land of the Papuans is home to an incredibly diverse, rich and unique flora and fauna. No less than 85% of the island is covered by rainforest, much if it primary and untouched by man. Other prevailing ecosystems include steamy mangrove forest and savannah right through to alpine highlands with snow-capped mountains. Wildlife abounds and includes some of the most interesting creatures known to man. This also holds true with the magical beauty of West Papua's coastal underwater world, which hosts some truly amazing coral reefs.

Our singular appreciation and understanding of this island not only allows you the opportunity to visit and appreciate this most primitive of lands, but we also present you with the opportunity to experience and explore a completely unique human reality which can deepen your own sense of being and purpose. Root cultures such as those found in Papua hold an appreciation of deep earth secrets that can be shared only through direct experience. These are humans intrinsically interwoven with the natural fabric of their environment.

Many parts of West Papua still remain largely unexplored by peering, inquisitive western eyes and minds. For example, it has only been around 60 years since the outside world fell upon the tribes that inhabit the Baliem Valley in West Papua. The Korowai tribes were only discovered 25 years ago and other areas remain completely unexplored.



There remains a tremendous gap between those of us raised in western society and the most primitive people still alive on earth. If you are an individual who enjoys the exploration of this mysterious human condition you would certainly find a visit to West Papua immensely rewarding. Equally, if you simply enjoy and appreciate environments totally different from your own, then West Papua is surely for you.

Politics and History

In order to understand the current political situation it is necessary to examine recent history. What is now known as Indonesia was the key Dutch colony until the end of the Second World War. The struggle to achieve independence was hard fought and the Dutch were most reluctant to let go of their Asian jewel. After the Indonesians, led by President Sukarno, declared independence in 1945, the Dutch did not formally cede sovereignty until the end of 1949 and then only after considerable world pressure. All of the old Dutch East Indies became the Republic of Indonesia with the EXCEPTION of Dutch New Guinea or Irian Jaya (*we will refer to this as West Papua from now on*). Through a manner of rather devious tactics the Dutch managed to retain some sort of control of West Papua until the early 1960s.



The fiercely proud, nationalist Indonesians believed very strongly that West Papua was part of their sovereign territory and President Sukarno first tried a diplomatic solution to this problem by taking the case to the United Nations. This failed and Sukarno withdrew Indonesia from the UN in protest and started a military campaign to take West Papua by force, led by General (*later President*) Suharto. Finally in 1962, against a background of relinquished US and European support and an escalating military bill, the Dutch bit the bullet and West Papua was passed into UN control with the aim of an orderly hand-over to Indonesia. The transition was not easy and the Indonesian government clearly made many mistakes in their attempted "Indonesianisation" of West Papua. Some conflicts with the local inhabitants continued but by the early 1990s the process seemed to be proceeding more smoothly even if there were grievances that too little of the vast natural mineral wealth of West Papua was finding its way back to locals.

After the Suharto "New Order" regime was overthrown in 1997, the incipient West Papuan independence movement was re-born. It is that movement that has gained some momentum (*although nothing like as much as in Aceh for example*).

It is understandable if such unrest might put off potential travellers to West Papua. The purpose of this explanation is to allay those fears. We have excellent local contacts in each of the main

areas of West Papua and we are always very well informed of local conditions and activities. If there is any obvious danger, then a trip will not be undertaken. We are immensely respected by Papuan tribal chiefs and ordinary folk, and this alone is almost enough to guarantee the safety of anybody travelling with us. It should also be understood that the peoples of Wamena are the most welcoming and warm-hearted individuals - they love having visitors. Their grievances are with the Indonesian central government and most certainly not with western visitors.

In summary, through our unparalleled contacts and relationships in West Papua, please be assured that we will never take undue risks with any client's safety

Flora and Fauna



West Papua is home to an amazingly diverse flora and fauna. The immense variety is determined by the sheer variety of ecosystems present: from shallow coral reefs, through coastal swamps, altitudinally differing rainforest and heights rising to alpine glaciers.

The alpine high country is permanently covered with ice and snow and the tallest peak, Puncak Jaya, stands at 5,030 metres. Nothing grows at all until you descend to 3,500 metres where the fog forests predominate. These consist of gnarled, crippled trees covered with moss and

epiphytes, making for a most eerie setting. Heather often covers the ground giving an almost European; alpine "carpeted" impression.

In the areas between 2,000 and 3,000 metres, mixed forests predominate and these swarm with climbers, ferns and orchids. This is the region of primal forest, or original growth, totally untouched by man.

In the low mountain region, between 1,000 and 2,000 metres the rainforests are at their thickest and most lush. Similar ferns and orchids grow abundantly in these forests in rich harmony with the many species of tropical hardwood trees. In the lower rainforest alone, there are 1,300 different species of trees with 80 known species of Epiphytes living symbiotically with them and to date, at least 2,770 species of orchid have been positively identified.

Savannah Forest, dominated by Australasian Acacias and Eucalypts, is found only in the south-eastern corner of West Papua (**Wasur National Park**), Similar Savannah occurs in the Port Moresby area of Papua New Guinea.

Moving lower brings us to freshwater swamps where swamp grass, sago palms and pandanus proliferate. Starch extracted from the Sago Palms forms the staple diet of many Papuans.

Towards the coast the freshwater swamps slowly become saline and this is where mangrove and nipa palm forests dominate.

Naturally, given the rich diversity of the flora, West Papua is host to an equally diverse fauna. The pioneering Victorian naturalist, *Sir Alfred Russell Wallace* collected no less than 125,660 specimens in West Papua!

Birds vary from the huge, primitive, flightless *Cassowary* through to the most intricate and spectacular *Birds-of-Paradise* with an awful lot else in between. More than 600 species of birds have been identified in West Papua, many of them endemic.



Most of the interesting mammals are marsupials with Wallabies and Tree Kangaroos being the largest. The cus-cus is a beautiful, woolly tree-dwelling marsupial which is sadly prized by collectors. It has been heavily hunted and is now an endangered species. Echidnas or Spiny Ant-eaters are also found in West Papua with one species being endemic.

The coastal swamps are home to two species of saltwater crocodiles and both are very large indeed! Estuarine Crocodiles found in the Asmat region are known to grow to seven metres in length. Hunting wild crocodiles is now illegal and many crocodile farms have cropped up. Many species of snakes and lizards inhabit West Papua and include the docile, three metre Emerald Tree Monitor and perhaps the world's most beautiful snake - the **Green Tree Python**.

The shallow water coral reefs off the north coast of West Papua are thought to house some 3,000 species of fish making for spectacular snorkelling and diving.

The Baliem Valley



The Baliem Valley was once dubbed Shangri La and it is easy to see why. The Valley is incredibly lush and fertile and is surrounded on all sides by towering peaks of 2,500 to 3,000 metres. The fertility is such that the valley has been farmed for 9,000 years but it was only discovered by westerners

in 1938! There are three main tribes inhabiting the Baliem Valley: The Dani in the base, the Lani to the west and the Yali in the south-east. Each tribe has a distinct culture. One sure and interesting way to distinguish between the tribes is from the Koteka, or penis gourd, sported by the male members. The men of each tribe tend to the growing of the gourds with the three tribes each cultivating a different style. The Dani use a long, thin Koteka, the Lani sport a medium sized, wide cannon-like gourd, and the Yali wear the longest of all.

The Dani

Entering Dani territory involves a journey into a deeper reality. The inevitable pig-feast on arrival is your rite of passage into their unique culture for an engrossing a four or five hour intense experience. You will find yourself in a simple, traditional compound surrounded by fully greased and painted Dani tribes-people wearing their ceremonial best.



whole elaborate affair is deeply spiritual, far more than a photo-session can ever capture. Here you will be warmly greeted by the amazing Chief Yali, our adoptive father who is legendary amongst the Dani for his kindness, generosity and skills in the art of co-operation and avoiding conflict. With this unique and privileged connection you will receive the full weight of Dani hospitality.

The Lani

Like the Dani, the Lani are expert farmers utilising a highly effective and efficient irrigation system to produce abundant crops of Sweet Potatoes (Ubi), Tobacco, Beans, Taro, Spinach, Sugar Cane and Bananas. Much of the Lani lands lie in a beautiful oasis interspersed with checkerboard patterned sweet potato gardens. The Lani are more stockily built than the medium-bodied Dani and their lands are more densely populated. They tend to congregate in largish villages rather than the small compounds which dominate Dani territory. The weather in the Valley is predominantly sunny and trekking along the river amidst the terraced farmlands and wondrous forests is a trekker's paradise. Trails are usually clear and maintained as local people travel them and this makes the trekking pretty comfortable.



The Yali

The Yali tribe lives high up along the valley ridges in the Jayawijaya mountains. The land here is rugged and thinly populated. The tribes-people live in wooden huts with roofs made of tree-bark and they are grouped into small compounds. A vegetable garden and dense rainforest will surround each compound



Trekking in the Yali area is more strenuous than in the lower reaches of the Valley but it is perfect for the fit trekker who wants to experience truly virgin rainforest and the unique people who live amidst it.

In summary, The Baliem Valley will provide a never to be forgotten experience. The inhabitants of the valley are essentially peace-loving agrarians who welcome visitors wholeheartedly.