



Papua

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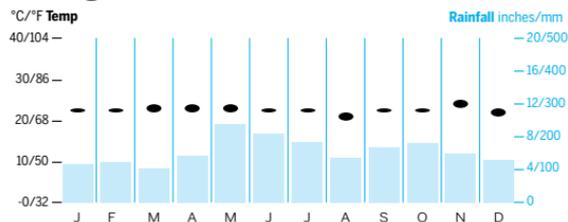
Why Go?

Even a country as full of adventure as Indonesia has its final frontier. And here it is: Papua, half of the world's second-biggest island, New Guinea. It may be the youngest part of Indonesia, but Papua's rich tribal traditions span centuries. This is a place where some people still hunt their food with bows and arrows. A place where roads are so scarce, that to travel between towns you often have no choice but to take to the air or the water. So unlike any other part of Indonesia, the province formerly known as Irian Jaya can feel like a different country – which is what many Papuans, who are Melanesian and ethnically distinct from other Indonesians, would like it to be.

Travel here is undoubtedly a challenge, and not one that comes cheap. But those who take it on rarely fail to be awed by the charm of Papua's peoples, the resilience of its cultures and the grandeur of both its dramatic landscapes and idyllic seascapes.

When to Go

Sorong



Apr–Dec Generally benign weather in the Baliem Valley; perfect for trekking.

Aug Join in with the feasting and the fun at the Baliem Valley Festival.

Nov–Mar Ideal conditions for marvelling at the aquatic wonders of the Raja Ampat Islands.

History

It's estimated that Papua has been inhabited for 30,000 or 40,000 years, but contact with the outside world was minimal until the mid-20th century. Three colonial powers agreed to divide the island of New Guinea between them in the late 19th century: Holland got the western half, and Britain and Germany got the southeastern and northeastern quarters respectively (together these two parts now comprise the country of Papua New Guinea). Dutch involvement with Papua was minimal up until WWII when Japan seized most of New Guinea in 1942. Japan was then driven out in 1944 by Allied forces under US general Douglas MacArthur.

Indonesia Takes Over

When the Netherlands withdrew from the rest of the Dutch East Indies (which became Indonesia) in 1949, it hung on to its half of New Guinea, and then began to prepare it for independence with a target date of 1970. Indonesia's President Sukarno had other ideas and in 1962 Indonesian troops began infiltrating the territory in preparation for an invasion. Under pressure from the US, which didn't want to risk a damaging defeat for its Dutch ally by the Soviet-backed Sukarno regime, the Netherlands signed the New York Agreement of 15 August 1962. Under this agreement, Papua became an Indonesian province in 1963. The Papuan people were to confirm or reject Indonesian sovereignty in a UN-supervised vote within six years. In 1969, against a background of Papuan revolt and military counter-operations that killed thousands, Indonesia decided that the sovereignty vote would involve just over 1000 selected 'representatives' of the Papuan people. Subjected to threats, the chosen few voted for integration with Indonesia in what was officially named the Act of Free Choice.

The following decades saw a steady influx of Indonesian settlers into Papua – not just officially sponsored transmigrants but also 'spontaneous' migrants in search of economic opportunity. Intermittent revolts and sporadic actions by the small, primitively armed Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Organisation; OPM) guerrilla movement were usually followed by drastic Indonesian retaliation, which at times included bombing and strafing of Papuan villages. Indonesia invested little in Papuans' economic or educational development, while the administration, security forces and business interests extracted resources such as oil, minerals and timber.

Papua in the 21st Century

Following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, the *reformasi* (reform) period in Indonesian politics led many Papuans to hope that Papuan independence might be on the cards. In June 2000 the Papua People's Congress (more than 2500 Papuan delegates meeting in Jayapura) declared that Papua no longer recognised Indonesian rule and delegated a smaller body, the Papua Council Presidium, to seek a UN-sponsored referendum on Papuan independence. But the 'Papuan Spring' was short-lived. The second half of 2000 saw a big security force build-up in Papua, and attacks on pro-independence demonstrators. In 2001, the Papua Council Presidium's leader Theys Eluay was murdered by Indonesian soldiers.

The year 2001 also saw the passing of a Special Autonomy charter for Papua – Jakarta's response to Papuan grievances. The major provision was to give Papua a bigger share (70% to 80%) of the tax take from its own resources, plus more money to develop education and health. But many Papuans consider that Special Autonomy has not benefited them significantly, complaining that too much of the money disappears into the hands of the bureaucracy. They also complain that non-Papuans control Papua's economy and government in their own interests, and are exploiting Papua's natural resources with minimal benefit for the native people. The US-owned Freeport mine, digging the world's biggest recoverable lodes of gold and copper out of the mountains north of Timika, and using the Indonesian police and army as part of its security force, is often considered a classic symbol. Its troubled relationship with local communities has seen violence on numerous occasions, and its installations and workers have been targets of attacks usually attributed to the OPM.

Pro-independence activism and OPM activity have increased in Papua in recent years, and killings, torture, rape and disappearances carried out by the Indonesian security forces have continued to be reported by human-rights bodies. Papuans regularly receive jail sentences of 10 years or more for simply raising the Morning Star flag, the symbol of Papuan independence. A new meeting of the Papua People's Congress in 2011 reaffirmed its independence declaration but was broken up by troops, with six people reported killed.

Despite this, living standards in Papua's cities have risen, but the villages and countryside, where most native Papuans live, remain among Indonesia's poorest. The AIDS