



Central, Oro & Milne Bay Provinces

POP 732,600 / AREA 67,940 SQ KM

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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Ulumani Treetops Lodge (p74)
- ➔ Nuli Sapi (p76)
- ➔ Butia Lodge (p81)
- ➔ Tufi Resort (p68)
- ➔ Tawali Resort (p74)

Best Village Stays

- ➔ Garewa (p68)
- ➔ Kofure (p68)
- ➔ Okaiboma Beach Huts (p81)
- ➔ Kaibola Beach Guesthouse (p81)
- ➔ Orotaba (p68)

Why Go?

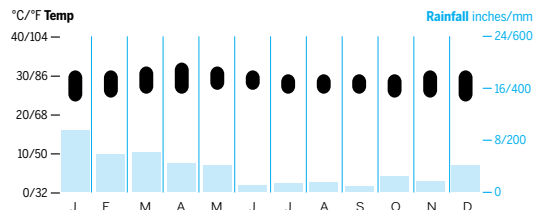
In these eastern provinces, the legendary Kokoda Track zig-zags relentlessly through the jungle-clad mountains, throwing down the gauntlet to those who wish to walk in the footsteps of WWII's fallen. Further east, amid the fjords of the rugged coastline, some of the world's most biologically diverse reefs have divers gasping through their mouthpieces. Coastal villagers welcome visitors with old-fashioned hospitality and can show them the sacred skull caves of their ancestors.

North across the Solomon Sea, the Trobriands are a world apart: yams rule supreme, 'free love' is occasionally practised, magicians bring rain and cricket is played aggressively.

Head south and the land dissolves into thousands of islands, islets and atolls, where the adventurous can spend weeks island-hopping. This watery world celebrates its seafaring heritage during the Milne Bay Canoe & Kundu Festival, during which island warriors race their splendidly decorated ocean-going canoes.

When to Go

Kokoda



Jun–Aug Catch the raucous Milamala Festival on the Trobriand Islands.

May–Sep Dry, cooler weather in Central Province, ideal Kokoda trekking weather.

Oct–Dec Calm, dry weather in Milne Bay – best for diving and snorkelling.

History

The coastal people and islanders of this region have traded for centuries in extensive barter networks. The *hiri* trade between Motuans in Central Province and villages further around the gulf was conducted in huge two-masted *lakatois* (sailing boats).

In 1606 Spanish mariner Luis Vaéz de Torres, after whom the Louisiade Archipelago was named, abducted 14 children and took them to Manila in the Philippines to be baptised. He was followed by an array of explorers, including the famous Frenchman Antoine d'Entrecasteaux, but it wasn't until 1847 that Europeans sought to settle the region. In that year, Marist missionaries arrived on Muyua (Woodlark) Island, but the locals, it seems, were unenthusiastic about Christianity and the Marists were gone within eight years. Apparently undeterred, the London Missionary Society (LMS), Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and finally Seventh-Day Adventists opened for business between the 1870s and 1908. Most notable among them was Reverend Charles W Abel, a dissident member of the LMS, who in 1891 founded the Kwato Extension Association on Kwato Island, providing skills training to the indigenous people of Milne Bay.

Apart from men of God, the region attracted 'blackbirding' opportunists who forcibly removed local men to work in northern Australian sugar plantations well into the 20th century.

On the north coast early European contacts with the Orokaiva people were relatively peaceful, but when gold was discovered at Yodda and Kokoda in 1895, violence soon followed. A government station was established after an altercation between locals and miners, but the first government officer was killed shortly after he arrived. Eventually things quietened down and the mines were worked out. Then came WWII.

Milne Bay became a huge Allied naval base and the gardens and plantations inland from Buna and Gona had barely recovered from the war when Mt Lamington's 1951 eruption wiped out Higaturu, the district headquarters, killing almost 3000 people. The new headquarters town of Popondetta was established at a safer distance from the volcano.

Geography

The region stretches down the 'dragon's tail' at the eastern end of mainland Papua New

Guinea and out into the Coral and Solomon Seas, taking in the hundreds of islands and atolls of Milne Bay Province.

The mainland is divided by the Owen Stanley Range, which rises rapidly from the northern and southern coasts to peaks of 3500m to 4000m. Major roads are few: the Magi and Hiritano Hwys extend from Port Moresby, while in Oro Province the only road of any length runs from Popondetta to Kokoda.

Mt Lamington, near Popondetta, remains a mildly active volcano and further east there are volcanoes near Tufi. The section of coast around Cape Nelson has unique tropical 'fjords' (*rias*); their origin is volcanic rather than glacial.

The islands of Milne Bay Province are divided into six main groups: the Samarai group; D'Entrecasteaux group; the Trobriand Islands; Muyua (Woodlark) Island; the Conflict and Engineer groups; and the 300km-long Louisiade Archipelago. They range from tiny dots to mountainous islands such as Fergusson, Normanby and Goode-nough; the last, while only 26km wide, soars to 2566m at the summit of Mt Oiautukeke, making it one of the most steeply sided islands on earth.

CENTRAL PROVINCE

Stretching for more than 500km either side of Port Moresby, Central Province lives in the shadow of the national capital. Overlooked by tourists and long ignored by politicians, infrastructure is, even by local standards, *bagarap* (buggered up).

Kokoda

POP 550

The Owen Stanley Range rises almost sheer as a cliff face behind the Oro Province village of tiny Kokoda, where the northern end of the infamous Kokoda Track (p35) terminates. The grassed area in the centre of town houses a small **museum** that has photos and descriptions of the campaign. Ask around to have it opened. Postmistress Grace Eroro (p66) is a great source of information. Opposite the post office is a branch of the Kokoda Track Authority where trekking permits can be bought if you haven't already done so in Port Moresby. Trekkers finishing the trail should also report here to be officially stamped off the trail.