



The Highlands

POP 2.9 MILLION / AREA 62,500 SQ KM

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Best of Culture

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Why Go?

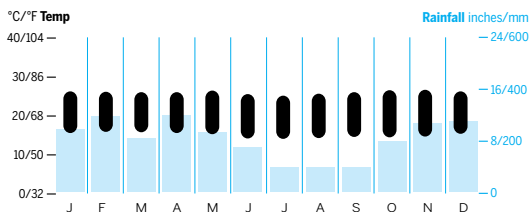
When European explorers made it into Papua New Guinea's rugged interior in the 1930s, they didn't find the unbroken tangle of mountains they had expected. Instead they stumbled into broad, heavily cultivated valleys bordered with sawtooth mountains and home to a million-plus people.

These impressive mountains are now accessible by road, and those with determination can seek out the celebrated birds of paradise, and even summit Mt Wilhelm (4509m), the tallest of them all. From its craggy top, you can see right across the country.

Today, the fiercely proud Highlanders maintain many aspects of the traditional culture that so fascinated the Europeans. During the region's celebrated Highland shows, Western clothes are exchanged for flamboyant feathers, shells, wigs and skins. And while the massive investment in oil and natural gas fields will continue to bring change, the far west remains a treasure trove of extraordinary cultures and body adornment.

When to Go

Goroka



Year-round The area's high altitude ensures a 'perpetual springtime', with fresh veggies and low humidity.

May–Nov The dry season sees an easing of rain, although heavy showers are still possible.

Aug–Sep Tourism ramps up as travellers arrive for the Highland shows.

History

In 1930 Mick Leahy and Mick Dwyer came to the Highlands searching for gold and walked into the previously 'undiscovered' Eastern Highlands. Three years later, Leahy returned with his brother Dan and they stumbled upon the huge, fertile and heavily populated Wahgi Valley.

The film *First Contact* (1983) includes original footage of this patrol by Mick Leahy and is a priceless record of the first interaction between Highlanders and Europeans.

Missionaries followed the Leahy brothers, and government stations were built near present-day Mt Hagen and in the Simbu Valley, near present-day Kundiawa, although gold was never discovered in any great quantities.

Even during WWII, the mountains largely protected the Highlanders from the foreign forces. Not until the 1950s were outside influences really felt, and many areas remained largely unaffected until the 1960s and even into the '70s. The construction of the Highlands (Okuk) Hwy had a huge impact on the lives of Highlanders, as did the introduction of cash crops, particularly coffee. The Highlanders had long been traders and skillful gardeners and adapted to the cash economy with remarkable speed.

Dangers & Annoyances

Parts of the PNG Highlands are genuinely high in altitude. You should give yourself a few days' acclimatisation at lower altitudes before taking on any serious mountain climbing or excessive physical activities if you are to avoid acute mountain sickness.

Bus travel through the Highlands is not necessarily dangerous, but there is an element of risk. Very occasionally there are hold-ups, buses are ambushed and the passengers are robbed. Ritual warfare has always been an integral part of Highlands life and to this day payback feuds and land disputes can erupt into major conflicts. During times of political tension and tribal war, seek advice from the police and locals in each town before heading to the next town in a PMV (public motor vehicle). West of Mendi can be particularly volatile, so either avoid overland travel or seek local advice.

Parts of the Highlands are designated 'dry regions' and alcohol cannot be purchased outside licensed premises, such as hotels, clubs and resorts. However, there's a booming black market in beer and all of PNG

has a problem with wickedly strong, home-brewed alcohol and associated violence.

EASTERN HIGHLANDS PROVINCE

Undulating grass-covered hills and neat villages of low-walled round huts are the defining characteristics of the Eastern Highlands. Listen carefully for the secrets whispered by the tufts of grass fixed to the peaks of the roofs of these houses.

The most heavily populated of all the provinces, the region has had longer contact with the West than the other Highland provinces, and was the first to feel the impact of the missionaries, prospectors, mercenaries and misfits who have visited these parts.

Goroka

Goroka has grown from a small outpost in the mid-1950s to a major commercial centre, and is now the main town in the Eastern Highlands Province.

Mountains encircle the town, which in turn almost encircles the airport. At 1600m, Goroka enjoys a pleasant year-round climate of warm days and cool nights. More relaxed than Mt Hagen, safer than Lae and endowed with essential services, Goroka is one of PNG's more attractive towns.

Goroka's main cash crop is coffee and you'll see it growing under the canopies of larger trees in the hills throughout the district.

Sights & Activities

JK McCarthy Museum

MUSEUM

(cnr Makinono & Morchhauser Sts; admission by donation; ☺ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, by arrangement Sat & Sun) JK McCarthy was one of PNG's legendary patrol officers and wrote one of the classic books on New Guinea patrolling – *Patrol into Yesterday*. Among the exhibits are pottery, weapons, clothes and musical instruments, and even some grisly jewellery – Anga mourning necklaces of human fingers. 'Peer through the mists of time' courtesy of a fascinating collection of photos in the Leahy wing, many taken by Mick Leahy in 1933. There are also WWII relics, including a P-39 Aircobra mounted out behind the museum.

Raun Raun Theatre

HISTORIC BUILDING

(☎ 532 1116; Wisdom St) The theatre is a superb building, which blends traditional