



# The Sepik

POP 698,900 / AREA 79,100 SQ KM

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## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ In Wewak Boutique Hotel (p130)
- ➔ Naigboi Guest House (p131)
- ➔ Vanimo Surf Lodge (p133)
- ➔ Karawari Lodge (p146)

## Best for Sepik Culture

- ➔ Garamut & Mamba Festival (p128)
- ➔ Sepik River Festival (p143)
- ➔ Crocodile Festival (p29)
- ➔ Middle Sepik *haus tambarans* (p141)
- ➔ Maprik *haus tambarans* (p132)

## Why Go?

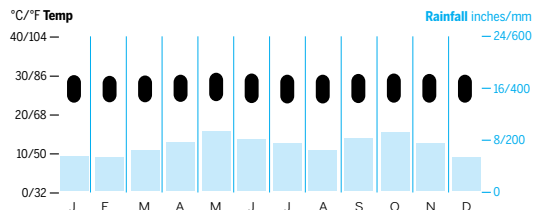
The mighty Sepik is one of the great rivers of the world. In serpentine fashion it flows for 1126km through swamplands, tropical rainforests and mountains. However, the Sepik is more than just a river – it's also a repository of complex cultures, a place where some men have crocodile skin while others place masks on yams in celebration, where mysterious rituals live on in *haus tambarans* (spirit houses) and master carvers still create the most potent art in the Pacific.

As you make your way around one of the endless river bends, the scale of the river, the bird life, the eerie lagoons and the traditional stilt villages make it easy to believe that you've travelled clean out of the 21st century and into a timeless, wondrous place.

On the coast, the two main towns attract a small trickle of intrepid surfers who come to tame the seasonal swells.

## When to Go

### Wewak



**Jul–Sep Festival**  
time: yam harvests  
in Maprik, Sepik  
River Festival and  
Crocodile Festival.

**Oct–Apr Monsoon**  
swells bring waves;  
bring your surf-  
board to Vanimo.

**Dec–Apr** The wet  
season is a good  
time to see birdlife,  
and high water  
levels make it easy  
to get around.

## History

The Sepik's first contact with the outside world was probably with Malay bird-of-paradise hunters – the feathers from these beautiful birds were popular in Asia long before fashionable European millinery incorporated them into late-19th-century women's headwear.

The first European contact came in 1885, with the arrival of the German New Guinea Company. The Germans established a station at Aitape on the coast in 1906, and in 1912 and 1913 sent a huge scientific expedition to explore the river and its vast, low-lying basin. They collected insects, studied local tribes and produced maps of such accuracy that they're still referred to today.

The early 1930s saw gold rushes in the hills behind Wewak and around Maprik, but development and exploration ceased when WWII started.

The Japanese held the Sepik region for most of the war. Australian forces pushed along the coast from Lae and Madang, and the Japanese withdrew to the west. In early 1944 the Americans seized Aitape and the Australians moved west from there. When a huge American force captured Hollandia (now Jayapura in West Papua) in April, the Japanese in Wewak were completely isolated. A year later, in May 1945, Wewak fell and the remaining Japanese withdrew into the hills. Finally, with the war in its last days, General Adachi surrendered near Yangoru. The formal surrender took place a few days later on 13 September 1945 at Wom Point near Wewak. Of 100,000 Japanese troops, only 13,000 had survived.

## EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

East Sepik Province is much more developed than Sandaun Province and includes the most-visited and heavily populated sections of the Sepik, as well as several large tributaries. It was here, in 1945, that the Japanese finally surrendered to the Allies and various vehicles of war can still be seen, rotting where they were left.

## Wewak & Around

POP 37,800

Wewak was once the site of the largest Japanese airbase in mainland New Guinea, and subject to a barrage of bombs during WWII.

A short distance inland the coastal mountains of the Prince Alexander Mountains separate the Sepik Basin from the narrow band of flat land and headland peninsula on which Wewak is built.

Wewak itself is a rather disjointed place, with most services concentrated in the tiny Town and the rest spread along the coast, en route to the airport. While the majority of visitors pause only long enough to arrange their Sepik expedition and to stock up on provisions, the town does have its charms.

## Sights

### Mission Point to Cape Boram

WATERFRONT

Near the main wharf lie the rusting remains of **MV Busama** (Map p130). Further down at Kreer, on the road to the airport, there's the wooden hulk of a **Taiwanese fishing junk**. On the beach between Kreer Market and the hospital are some rapidly disappearing rusting Japanese landing **barges**. There's a gorgeous **beach** stretching pretty much all the way to the airport, with gentle waves, clean sand and good swimming.

### Japanese Memorial Peace Park

PARK

(Map p130) This peace park marks the mass grave of many troops. The soldiers' bodies were later exhumed and returned to Japan. Here you'll find a memorial and a fish pond. Tok Pisin doesn't have a word for peace; 'peace' sounds like *pis*, which means fish. Thus, most locals refer to the park as *pis park*, which is perhaps appropriate given the fish pond and the general ambivalence that many modern Papua New Guineans have towards WWII.

### Cape Wom International Memorial Park

MEMORIAL

(admission K10; ☀ 7am-6.30pm) Fourteen kilometres west of Wewak, Cape Wom International Memorial Park is the site of a wartime airstrip and a war memorial that marks the spot where Japanese Lieutenant General Adachi signed the surrender documents and handed his sword over to Australian Major General Robertson on 13 September 1945.

To get here, catch a Dagua-bound PMV and get off at the turn-off to the cape at Suara. From the turn-off it's a 3km walk to the memorial park.

There's a ranger at the gates but you shouldn't come here alone.