



# The Sepik

POP 530,000 / AREA 79,100 SQ KM

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## Best of Culture

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## Why Go?

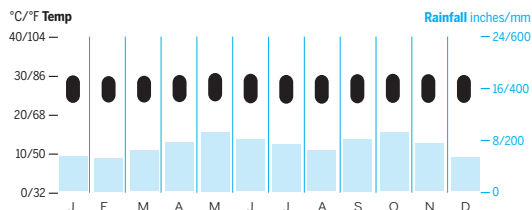
The mighty Sepik is one of the great rivers of the world. In serpentine fashion it flows for 1126km through a largely undisturbed environment of swamplands, tropical rainforests and mountains. However, the Sepik is more than just a river – it's also a densely populated repository of complex cultures, dying languages and the most potent art in the Pacific.

As you motor around one of the endless river bends, the scale of the river, the towering facades of the *haus tambarans* (spirit houses), the bird life, the eerie lagoons and the beautiful stilt villages make it all too easy to believe that you've travelled clean out of the 21st century and straight into an adventure.

The Sepik region also takes in the sleepy provincial capitals of Wewak and Vanimo, two beachside towns that attract a small trickle of surfers who come to tame the seasonal swells.

## When to Go

### Wewak



**Jun–Oct** The dry season has fewer mosquitoes but temperatures vary greatly between regions.

**Mid-Oct–late Apr** Monsoon swells bring waves between 1m and 2.5m to PNG's northern coast.

**Dec–Apr** Expect drenching rain at any time, but during the wet season it's virtually guaranteed.

## 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. Dr Otto Finsch named the river Kaiserin Augusta, after the wife of the German emperor.

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. Angoram, the major station in the lower Sepik, was established at this time.

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.

Vanilla, once a lucrative crop for Sepik villagers, has seen its price spiral downwards in the last few years. A scarcity of buyers

and a glut on the international market have seen the 2004 record highs of US\$500 per kilogram nose dive to a mere US\$20 per kilogram in 2010, placing additional hardships on impoverished communities.

## Wewak

As Wewak was once the site of the largest Japanese airbase in mainland New Guinea, it was 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 an attractive town, and while most people pause only long enough to arrange their Sepik expedition and stock up on provisions, it does have its charms. A series of beaches with golden sand and backed by swaying palm trees start here and stretch along the coast.

## Sights

**Mission Point to Cape Boram** WATERFRONT  
(Map p122) Near the main wharf lie the rusting remains of **MV Busama**. 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. The **Japanese War Memorial** marks the mass grave of many troops. The soldiers' bodies were later exhumed and returned to Japan.

**Japanese Memorial Peace Park** PARK  
(Map p122) This peace park contains 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.

## Activities

**Swimming & Snorkelling** BEACH  
Wewak's beaches are excellent – long stretches of sand that fall away gently under the water. The water is clean and clear, warm and very inviting.

There's excellent snorkelling around the Wewak headland, over the outer reef and off the nearby islands. Like many coastal