



Understand PNG

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Political turmoil and social unrest vie with hopes for a healthcare- and education-focused government, and for new wealth wrought by natural gas.

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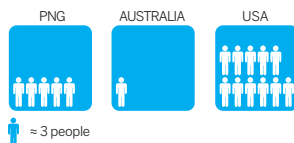
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We look at the rich and varied cultures, belief systems and traditional lifestyles of the peoples of Papua New Guinea.



population per sq km



Papua New Guinea Today

A Chaotic Political Atmosphere

Politics is a topsy-turvy affair in Papua New Guinea, with a parliament often mired in dysfunction. This is perhaps not surprising, given the nation's bewildering political complexities – where 109 MPs representing 820 languages regularly cross the floor to vote with the opposition, often showing little or no allegiance to their political party. As a consequence, since 1975 (when PNG became independent) only one prime minister has served a full five-year term without being brought down in a no-confidence vote. Survival, not policy, tends to be the focus of PNG politics.

The chaotic political scene sometimes takes a turn for the absurd, as happened in late 2011, when two men each claimed to be the legitimate prime minister. The problems began when Prime Minister Michael Somare took leave from the country in 2011 to receive medical care abroad and remained away for nearly five months. During his absence, MPs officially removed Somare from his post and installed Peter O'Neill as prime minister.

Mutiny!

When Somare returned to PNG, he tried to reclaim his position, which led to a ruling by the Supreme Court in his favour. O'Neill and MPs refused to recognise the court order, resulting in deadlock until January 2012, when 'a mutiny' was carried out. Soldiers loyal to Somare seized key military barracks and placed military chief Brigadier-General Francis Agwi under house arrest. The whole affair greatly discredited Somare in the eyes of many Papuans, who felt that after his 43 years in parliament, 18 as prime minister, it was time to move on.

- » Population: 6.31 million
- » GDP: US\$16.7 billion
- » Languages spoken: 820
- » Highest point: Mt Wilhelm (4509m)
- » Bird species: 781
- » Literacy rate: 57.3%
- » Parliamentary political parties: 33
- » Indigenous counting systems: more than 50 (one is based on joints of the body and the nose)
- » Number of airports: 562

Top Books

- » **Beyond the Coral Sea** (Michael Moran) A fascinating portrait of PNG's island cultures.
- » **Throwim Way Leg** (Tim Flannery) Enjoyable account of Flannery's adventures as a biologist in remote New Guinea.

- » **Into the Crocodile's Nest** (Benedict Allen) A masochist-adventurer becomes the first Westerner initiated into a crocodile cult on the Sepik River.
- » **Mister Pip** (Lloyd Jones) Moving story of a white teacher in Bougainville during the war.

Top Docos

- » **First Contact** Extraordinary film about the 1933 discovery of PNG's Highlanders.
- » **Joe Leahy's Neighbours** A traditional society coming to terms with the modern world.
- » **Shark Callers of Kontu** About the ancient art of shark-calling.