

Ports of New Guinea Revisited

(A Trip Down Memory Lane)

By

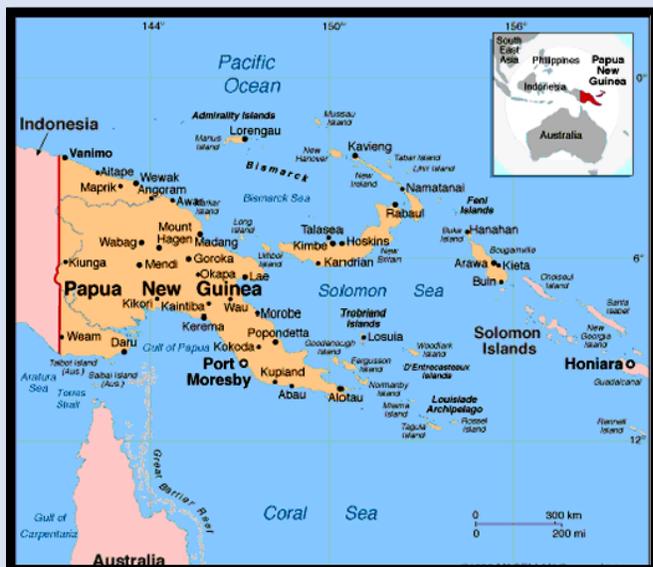
Geoff Walker



Not named the “Paradise Islands” without due reason. Papua New Guinea and its outlying islands must rank amongst the top in the global scale of beauty for both Fauna and Flora, not to mention the pristine Aquatic attributes these islands possess. If crystal blue water, silver sandy beaches, swaying palms, coral reefs, lush tropical rainforest, reptiles, and birds together with a country steeped in history and culture stokes your imagination, then this should become your choice of destination.

It is true that Papua New Guinea is not blessed with an extensive infrastructure of highways and good roads and the only realistic way to explore these islands is by light aircraft, or better still, by ship. I spent a memorable 4-5 years of my sea-going career in the Pacific Islands, including New Guinea, and it is based on my observations and experiences that this narration is derived.

During the 1970s and early 80s I was fortunate to have the opportunity to sail around these waters in my capacity as a professional seafarer. It covered a relatively short period, but it was a time of great adventure and feeling of exploration, bearing in mind that during those years New Guinea was completely unspoiled by the influences of Western society and retained much more mystique and feeling of the “unknown” compared to today. What follows is a personal recap and description, of what I can remember of those years I spent in the region.



Map showing main Ports of New Guinea

DARU Island - this is a small elliptical island close to the mainland in the western region of Papua New Guinea. The Island of Daru is only about 3 miles across at its widest point and is separated from New Guinea Island by Daru Roads which is just 2 miles wide at most. It has only a small population but nevertheless serves as the capital and center of administration for the province and is the principal Port of Entry for international ships using the River Ports in the area. These ships are usually

Loggers loading at the upstream logging camps that are numerous in the lower reaches of several of the province's major river estuaries.

Daru is relatively low lying and not so heavily covered with Jungle, compared to the mainland. The surrounding waters are fast flowing, discolored due to sand and sediment, mainly due to the outflow of the nearby mighty Fly River. By comparison to other New Guinea Ports it is rather unspectacular but is renowned for its variety of Aves.

Bristow Island (Australia) lies only about 1 mile to the south west. Daru is one of the few Torres Straits Islands that do not fall under Australian sovereignty.



An example of the unspoiled coast around the Paradise Islands

PORT MORESBY is the capital city of Papua New Guinea and lies about 270 miles southwest of Daru, on the eastern shores of the Gulf of Papua. Roughly between March to August there are strong southeasterly trade winds, which create heavy going for ships transiting west to east across the Gulf of Papua. The terrain is relatively mountainous in the coastal planes of southern New Guinea and the approaches to Port Moresby from seaward are quite grand.

Approach is made to the Northeast aligned with the highly conspicuous white leading marks positioned on the mountain side, for guiding ships between the reefs. Keeping these marks in transit (in alignment) ensures safe navigation through the narrow Basilisk Passage between Sinavi Reef, which lies to port and the Nadeave Reef to starboard. At the narrowest point, each reef is marked with a conspicuous beacon. Nestled within and surrounded by the Sinavi Reef is the small island of Daugo, which has on it a coral airstrip. Having passed through the Basilisk Passage, the sea swell drops away quickly and ahead lies a pristine Bay, which is used as a protected anchorage by ships. The Township of Port Moresby lies towards the northwestern end of this Bay, where executive's residences domineer the several hillsides, overlooking the Harbor and Township. From seaward the harbor looks very picturesque and still to this day has a colonial "air" about it. The port is not large by world standards, but the new port and drydock

established at Motukea (3.5 nm to northwest of the Town) will have a significant impact in future of the Port's regional importance, trade and development.



An aerial shot of Port Moresby as it was when I made a visit in the early 2000s. However, it has since developed as shown in the slide below. I well noted the changes on my last visit in 2019. Development of Port Moresby is now more, or less, ongoing.

There is a real effort made by successive local Governments to retain the cultural charm of the City, whilst not hindering modernization in any way. Security remains an issue in Port Moresby and one needs to be weary of groups of "Rascals" that roam the streets from time to time. Most residences are heavily gated because of this.



A modern Port Moresby showing development works in progress

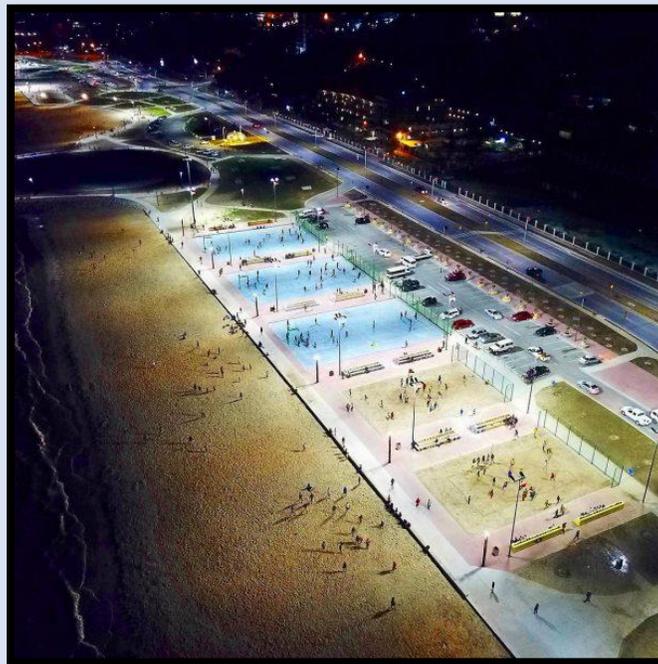
Some of my favorite haunts for the odd libation was, the Aviat Club, Crown Hotel, Yacht Club and Airways Hotel. All had their own character and tropical ambience. There were several good Chinese restaurants close to the Yacht Club, that featured excellent Won Ton soups, and other seafood delights on their Menus, as well as Laksas of the spiciest variety. I must confess making a pig of myself on every visit.

Not too distant from downtown Port Moresby is Ela Beach, which fronts Walter Bay, with its golden sandy beach. In times past it was a dingy beachfront area with roads full of deep potholes, but no longer. Recent renovations have transformed this popular spot into an up and coming tourist area, with many new sporting facilities, waterfront eateries, and improved roads. Below is a photograph showing today's Ela Beach front and the completely renovated Ela Beach Hotel which is a Port Moresby icon. The new Ela Beach Hotel offers the best in PNG hospitality accompanied with a traditional welcoming smile for all visitors.



Credit: Oil Search

Image of APEC Haus constructed at Ela Beach to host 2018 APEC Conference



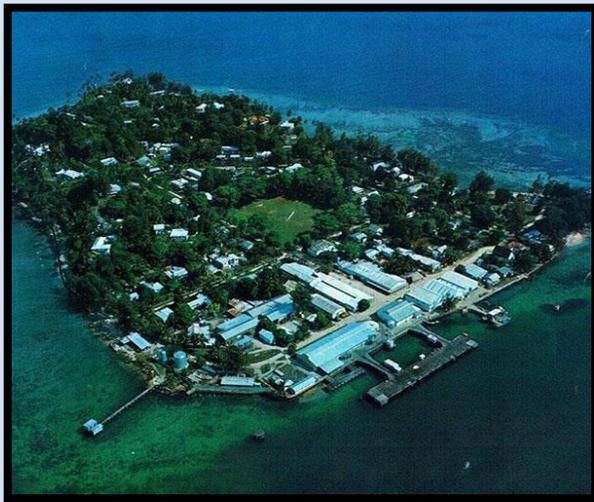
Evening activities at Ela Beach sporting venues.

It is understood that other major developments are planned for the Ela Beach and adjoining Paga Hill Estate which will feature Luxury Hotels, Residential Apartments, Restaurants, Retail and Commercial outlets and Exhibition and Cultural venues. The sleepy, lay back town we all used to know is now a thing of the past.

Sailing at about 11 knots it takes only about 20 hours to reach the Alotau, Samarai and Milne Bay area, from Port Moresby. One of the most interesting aspects is passing through the China

Straits which lies at the tip of Papua New Guinea Island. This is a narrow strait, about 4 nautical miles long and a tad under 1 nautical mile wide and separates the Solomon Sea and the Coral Sea. The beauty of the area, including the small Island of "Samarai" along with others is breathtaking, especially the bright blue water and stark white coral reefs.

Samarai Island was used as a port for mainly ships loading Copra, at the old Government Wharf, which could accommodate quite large ships in years past. The Burns Philp passenger ships from Australia also called regularly. Unfortunately, due to the cessation of these trades, the wharf, sheds, and infrastructure has fallen into disrepair, and is now only suitable for the small coasters. The Island is a delight and an energetic person can walk around the entire island in under an hour. It is hard to imagine that Samarai Island was the administrative and nerve center for the Milne Bay Province until 1968 and housed many expatriate Government employees and officials, mainly Australian, many of their families being of mixed race. Countless old colonial homes remain, discretely nestled amongst the lush island flora. No longer can bags of Copra, be seen piled high on the wharf ready for shipment, like in the old days.



Samarai Island at its peak with the Government Wharf being the main feature. Although the infrastructure did fall into disrepair, recent efforts have been made to restore much of it since it lost its status as provincial capital and headquarters.



Alotau lies only about 25 miles beyond the China Straits and is situated on the north shore on a narrow coastal strip at the head of Milne Bay, which extends over a length of about 22 nautical miles and is about 9 nautical miles across at its widest part. The terrain is very mountainous and heavily forested with lush jungle extending right down to the shoreline which enhances the beauty and tranquility of the area, making it a favorite port of call for cruise ships. The image shows the main wharf at Alotau with a cruise ship in the process of docking

The town lies in the forested foothills of an eastward extension of the Owen Stanley Mountain Range. Cocoa is grown locally, and coconut plantations are situated along the coast to the east of the town. There are also mangrove swamps and Sago palms growing prolifically. Overseas and coastal wharves, completed in 1975, have made Alotau a prominent regional port and Copra is brought in for overseas transshipment. Alotau is now the provincial capital for the Milne Bay precinct. Milne Bay is exposed to the Solomon Sea.

Popondetta, the town lies on the tributary of the Girua River. In addition, Popondetta is the focal point of a road network 300 miles long, extending from the port of Oro Bay to Kokoda, in the Owen Stanley Range of the central highlands. The area is renowned for producing cocoa, coffee, rubber, and palm oil. It offers little more than a single “T” jetty with a laydown area but is frequented by a wide variety of ships including Palm Oil tankers, virtually all these products are exported overseas. Like all other New Guinea coastal Ports, it is pristine with its clear brilliant blue waters and tropical rain forests right down to the coastline. Oro Bay faces the Solomon Sea and is a superb place for those who may be interested in birds and highly colorful butterflies.



Due to the relatively good road network linking Popondetta with other provincial townships, most of the commodities for export by ship are trucked to Oro Bay. For its size, the port is relatively busy.

Our next important coastal port visited was Lae, about 165 nautical miles distant up along the coast.

LAE is the second largest city in Papua New Guinea, after Port Moresby and is the capital city for the Morobe province. Situated on a typical narrow coastal plane at the northwestern shores of the Huon Gulf, Lae is a busy and thriving Port city by New Guinea standards. Main exports are cocoa, coffee, copra and sugar as well as bananas and coconuts. The coastal plain east and west of Lae is scattered with Mangroves, Nipa Palm and Sago Palm, especially along the banks of the Markham River. The Markham River flows for over 100 miles, the source originating at the Finisterre Ranges and it empties out into the Huon Gulf close to Lae. The rapid downflow from the river carries a lot of mud and sand sediment which is deposited at the river mouth and is responsible for the discoloration of the waters surrounding Lae. The coastal plain has a backdrop of magnificent heavily forested mountains which extend for as far as the eye can see.

The small settlement of Salamau lies farther down the coast from Lae. This settlement was established on a small isthmus between the coast with mountains on the inland side and a

headland. The closest city is Lae, which can be reached only by boat across the gulf. Fast “Banana” boats are most favored by locals and villagers for this trip.



An aerial view of Lae Port as it was in the 1990s. There has since been a development of new Tidal Basin which commenced in 2016 and was completed in 2019. This new facility includes a Container Terminal, General Cargo as well as facilities for (wet and dry) Bulk Cargoes. Completion of these upgrades will ensure that Lae remains the largest and most important Port in Papua New Guinea.



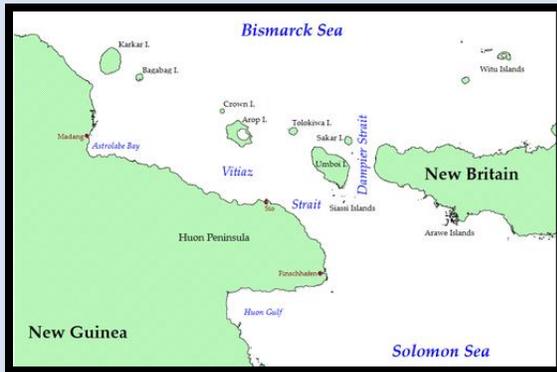
Plan view of the new East and West Tidal Basin at Lae Port.

Lae is known as the “Garden City” and is quite widely spread out compared to other cities in New Guinea. Nevertheless, it maintains its charm from its past German and Australian colonial heritage.

A good aerial photograph showing the sprawling port city of Lae. The new Port development can just be seen to the upper right of the image. Water discoloration is because of the nearby Markham River outflow.



Our next destination is the Port of Madang, on the fringes of Astrolabe Bay, but to get there the ship is first required to transit the Vitiaz Straits, once having passed the Huon Peninsula and the small settlement of Finschafen, founded in 1884, which lies about 45 nautical miles east of Lae. It later became an established Lutheran Mission station, which still has a significant influence in the religious beliefs of many regional villagers.



The Vitiaz Straits is quite a large strait which separates the main Island of New Guinea and that of New Britain. This strait can be quite treacherous, especially during the Southeast Monsoon, when the seas can become extremely rough quite quickly and there can be strong and unpredictable surface currents. Over the years, this has caused several smaller craft to founder and come to grief, in the vicinity of the strait.

There is also the Dampier Strait, which flows between New Britain and Umboi Island and is used for marine traffic heading to and from the Bismarck Sea. Just to the north of Umboi Island lies Ritter Island. In 1888 there was a massive eruption of a volcanic peak on Ritter Island, which completely collapsed into the sea, causing a Tsunami, the effects of which were felt 500km away. Also, volcanic ash from the eruption fell as far away as Finschafen. The volcanic mountain remains below sea level and all that is visible today is a mountainous rim running northwest/southeast. The entire area of outlying Islands and New Britain is extremely mountainous and volcanic, adding to the natural beauty of the country landscape.



enhances its tropical atmosphere, appeal and charm.

Madang – Claimed by many to be one of the most beautiful towns in the Pacific, it is positioned on a picturesque peninsula in the northeastern sector of Astrolabe Bay. It is a fine well protected, deep water port and is the capital city of the province of Madang. The approaches to the port, and mountainous backdrop are beauty personified. There are widespread coconut and palm plantations fringing the coastal plain, yet another feature which



Arrival at Madang is further augmented by the sight of the volcanic Kar Kar Island, which is still active and lies about 35 nautical Miles to the north, but its volcanic peak is easily visible on a clear day, often with a rising plume from its summit.

A ship seen entering the Port of Madang, and in the process passing the monument dedicated to the legendary Coast Watchers of WW2. Coast Watchers, many of whom being Australian, were posted throughout New Guinea and the neighboring islands to

report Japanese military movements during WW2.

The Port of Madang has undergone limited expansion and transformation in recent years and is capable of accommodating quite large oceangoing vessels, including Container ships and Cruise



Liners which call quite regularly, mainly due to Madang's outstanding beauty and appeal, which becomes evident immediately one approaches the port and transits the narrow tree

lined entrance, which opens into Madang Bay or Madang Lagoon as it is sometimes called, where the actual port itself is situated. The port provides several decent wharfs for ships and is therefore relatively busy. Madang is amongst the most favored of places for expats to reside and has quite a large foreign community. Similarly, it is popular tourist destination, especially with the scuba diving set, because of the many beautiful dive sites it offers.

Across the Bismark Sea lies the Island of New Britain on which are located the ports of Kimbe and Rabaul. The island of New Britain is visible from a great distance due to its volcanic mountains and peaks. Steep cliffs form some sections of the coastline; in others the mountains are further inland, and the coastal area is flat and bordered by coconut palm plantations and coral reefs. The numerous volcanic peaks are very conspicuous and easily seen and identified from seaward.

Kimbe is the capital of the province of West New Britain, and the largest township on the island. The bustling town of Kimbe is the third largest port in Papua New Guinea and is now claimed by some to be the fastest growing city in the South Pacific, so no doubt more port upgrades will follow.

Kimbe is located at the foot of Kimbe Bay, which is an inlet off the much larger Stetin Bay. The area has numerous reefs and shoals which are hazards to navigation and should be negotiated

with caution. Until the 1960's most native residents of West New Britain lived a subsistence lifestyle, but with the introduction of oil palm land settlement schemes in the late 1960's and early 1970's economic prosperity of the area has changed significantly. Palm Oil has become the most important export commodity and dominates the rural economy of the area. Kimbe is not only a thriving port it is also the capital city of West New Britain province. Its main wharf can accommodate vessels up to a max draft of 11 m.



A Palm Oil tanker alongside at Kimbe. Going by the light draft of the vessel she has yet to commence loading. Even this industrial scene is overshadowed by the natural beauty of the mountainous hinterland.



Just one of the many Islands and reefs that are strewn across Kimbe Bay, requiring the full attention of any prudent navigator. This image is typical of the reefs around the Bismarck Archipelago, and together with the numerous volcanic cones on the island of New Britain, have become a major tourist attraction and important asset to the provincial economy.

A typical seascape showing the many reefs that are dotted along the shores of Kimbe Bay. Of course, they are not limited just to the coastline, but also extend well beyond out into the bay itself.





The coastal vessel “Papuan Coast” seen in the process of berthing at the recently constructed coastal wharf at Kimbe.

Rabaul is situated at the top end of New Britain Island and is about 110 nautical miles distant from Kimbe.

The town of Rabaul before the devastating 1994 volcanic eruptions, was known as the Pearl of the Pacific, built by the Germans on a mangrove swamp and on the rim of a giant volcano.



A very panoramic view of Rabaul’s spectacular harbor, prior to the volcano of mount Tuvurvur erupting in 1994. The harbor is almost fully enclosed within the bay and was pristine and exuding natural beauty in every way imaginable.

The sad remains of Rabaul following the eruption of mount “Tuvurvur”. The residents were evacuated to the town of Kokopo, some 15 miles away. In 2020, there are indications of some reconstruction but to completely renovate the entire township will be a mammoth task, and almost nigh on impossible. The memories and nostalgia many sailors may have held for this town, will now only remain as a memory, as the township may have gone forever. Most of the buildings collapsed, under the weight of the



volcanic ash. The volume of shipping traffic has been reduced due to the loss of the town's infrastructure and is now mostly limited to coastal craft supplying those who remain living in Rabaul and surrounds. Nevertheless, on average one cruise ship calls each month. Regrettably, not much more can be said about Rabaul at this juncture.

Kavieng is the principal town for New Island province, being located at the northern tip of the island on Balgai Bay. It has a main berth for ocean going vessels with a draft up to 12 meters which permits the handling of most types of ships and cargoes. Main exports are Copra and Palm Oil, loaded directly to the vessel alongside the wharf. Coastal craft have their own facilities and cargo ramps. The port is renowned for its spectacular beauty and is a haven for tourists and divers. Like most other New Guinea ports, it attracts cruise ships quite regularly because of its tropical atmosphere. This port is the definition of "Paradise".



Main wharf at Kavieng Port.

There are various other ports that could be mentioned such as, river ports, logging ports, Vanimo, Lorengau, and Manus Island. Lihir Island and Simberi Island (both Private Ports supported and operated by mining ventures). However, I will keep them for another article to be uploaded in due course.

End

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