



# SURFING'S LAST FRONTIER

By John Borthwick



W

ake up - surf check time!" calls Adam Smith, expat Australian surfer and owner of the charter catamaran Tiki Tu.

We're anchored at Kavieng, New Ireland. We throw our boards into his runabout and cross Kavieng Harbour to a right-hand break known as Piccaninies.

"It rarely gets too crowded," explains Adam. "There's a limit of 20 non-locals allowed to surf the Kavieng area at a time. Plus, we've got plenty of local breaks to choose from."

In a world-first, the Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea has developed a Surf Management Plan that aims to head-off the negative impacts that have often accompanied surf tourism in developing countries.

Visiting surfers at Kavieng have to register, usually prior to arrival, and pay a small daily fee that goes to funding indigenous surfing.

After breakfast we scoot out of the harbour to check other reefs.

As in many tropical zones, these waves depend upon the fickle variables of swell, wind and tide.

We're soon overtaken by a dory of excitable, hooting blokes from the nearby Nusa Island Retreat, being shuttled out to the reefs.

Sated, we will all return a few hours later to epitomise the surf-slob-on-holiday life-cycle: morning session, back to base, rehydrate, recuperate, graze, nap, paddle back out and do it again.

Mostly in their forties (or older), like surfers anywhere with the sniff of a wave, these gleeful guys are acting more like fourteen.

Of PNG's approximately 1300 annual foreign surf tourists, many are older, better heeled (and padded) "gentlemen surfers" who want fun waves rather than lethal, overhead barrels, and who can afford the significant airfare and accommodation rates.

Jumping into a truck later that day with local surfers, Luke James and PNG junior national champion, Titima, I head down the Boluminski Highway.

About 35 kilometres south of town, we find a reef known as Kapso pumping nicely a few hundred metres offshore. Given that we're on a sparsely populated jungle shore, I'm

surprised to find another surfer already out there tucking neatly into the barrels.

He is Hawaii-raised Shane Clark, a long-term PNG resident who, along with his parents and New Guinean wife, operates a little guesthouse at Dalom, 170 kilometres from Kavieng, and further south, a very new surf resort at Rubio Plantation.

The Boluminski Highway runs the length of narrow New Ireland Island, tracking beside the "Blue Sepik" of the Pacific - perfect for constant surf checks as we drive. Palm Oil plantations and jungle line the road.

Local folk travelling to their gardens often push their gear in wheelbarrows, so Luke nicknames this the Wheelbarrow Highway.



*Watch me I can surf...young boy in action.*



*On the way...to more surfs.*



*Surflesson at Dalom.*

Dalom is a travelling surfer's paradise. Surrounded by jungle, the basic, six-bedroom guest house and its bungalows sit right on the beach, with a swift little creek as its boundary. We pile out of the truck to see a neat beach-break peeling right and left. Using the creek current as a sort of chair-lift to lazily carry us out the back, we surf until dusk.

Next morning, Shane shows us a new break he has recently discovered. Climbing down a steep hill to the beach, we paddle out around a coral headland to behold a ripping little left that's probably never been surfed by anyone but him. With no witnesses but the teeming jungle and a single thatched hut, we pig-out on a feast of clean one and a half metre waves.

PNG's coasts are littered with waves. Milne Bay, Rabaul, Bougainville, Madang, Mushu and Wewak region - all have good surf, although as Lou, an old hand expat, cautions me, "The operative term here is, 'If only...'"

That is, if only the tide were lower (or higher), the swell from the northwest (or northeast), the wind offshore, and so on.

It's a variation of the classic surfer's mantra, "You should have been here yesterday."

This is sometimes billed as surfing's "last frontier". In which case, PNG's northern, equatorial Admiralty Isles are the frontier's frontier.

I meet Lucas, a young Brazilian, just back from a week's exploration there on MV Kamai, a 14-metre catamaran.



*Surfer in action at Vainimo.*

He describes how the boat would "park" 40 metres from the surf and they would jump straight off, catching barrelling right-handers on the first day then "perfect peaking lefts" on the second.

All this in water "so clear you could barely see the wave as you were surfing it". The local villagers were pretty impressed, too, paddling out in their canoes to hoot at the visitors' hottest rides.

A sleeper until recently on the world wave map, PNG has actually had a surfing community for 20 years - and possibly for hundreds. Andy Abel, president of the Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea, believes that people here have been riding bodyboard-like surfcraft for generations and that surfing here possibly pre-dates its evolution in Polynesia.

Vainimo is a surf that you earn. You fly from Port Moresby to Vainimo, capital of Sandaun Province, take an old taxi eight kilometres out of town to leafy Lido village, weave amid the wooden stilt houses and shade trees, and come at last to an idyllic beach.

A wide flat reef and azure lagoon extend seaward, with a right-hand wave peeling for one hundred leisurely metres down the west flank while a more robust-looking left races down the other side.

The right is working best today. Leaving my belongings with local surf lodge owner Steve Tekwie (who has been surfing here "for 10 wet seasons"), I paddle out amid a small crew of Lido kids and visitors. Everyone's having fun, plenty of long-walled waves for all. So why does this one plump local girl who's wobbling about on a longboard keep dropping-in on me? Perhaps, I should have been here yesterday?





Nisa Island Surf Resort in Kavieng.

## PNG Surf Tips

- Northern PNG swell season runs from November to April.
- You're surfing mostly over coral reefs: no place for learners.
- There are no surf shops; bring all your own equipment.
- The surf is fickle; don't expect perfection in a short stay.
- Hazards include infected coral cuts and insect bites.
- Pack light; there's 15-kg weight limit on local flights.
- The Surf Management Plan quota may sit uneasily with some visitors, but respect it.

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