

# New Ireland Odyssey

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**It's an hour-and-a-half by banana boat from Kavieng, New Ireland, to Tsoilik, the northern-most of a string of islands beyond Kavieng. But a new guided sea kayaking trip is promising to extend that journey into a five-day island odyssey.**

*Kayak and canoe at Lamalangit.*

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*Spearfishing at Kabotteron.*



Every day of our five-day trip, which took us from Kavieng to the northern tip of Tsoilik Island, we saw local people in canoes and we'd often paddle over to talk to them, which was a meeting of two worlds. There we were, sitting in our bright yellow, plastic-moulded double kayaks, equipped with high-tech paddles, spray decks (to keep the water out of the cockpits) and PFDs (Personal Flotation Devices, like life-vests). And there they were, perched on the sides of simple hand-hewn boats they'd probably made themselves, using single-blade wooden paddles and a coconut shell as a bailer.

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Day 2 was our longest day. We paddled for three hours from Kabotteron to Nusakelo around a dry reef where gentle open-ocean swells turned into savage kayak-breaking waves, forcing us to keep our distance. Watching black seabirds feeding on shoals of small, splashing fish, I felt as if we were in the doldrums of the South Pacific, not in the Bismarck Archipelago just two short flights north of Australia.

But even paddling for that length of time had a dreamlike quality to it. There was just the water, sky, the heat, big clouds, the shining sun, our three yellow kayaks and our support boat (a banana boat that pattered behind us so quietly we often forgot it was there).

Sometimes we'd take a break by parking the kayaks on a sandy spit to go snorkelling - in water as clear as air and populated by lionfish and sea snakes, reef sharks and parrot fish, and Nemo-like anemone fish.

There's something about the islands north of Kavieng in New Ireland Province. Maybe it's their classic, brochure-worthy, white-sand beaches; their small villages nestled in tropical rainforest that reaches almost to the water's edge; or the aquamarine depths, rich in marine life, that surround them. Maybe it's just that, aside from an occasional cruise ship that drops anchor offshore, they're refreshingly untouched by tourism.

Until recently, the only way to explore these islands was by banana boat or outrigger canoe. Then, in May this year, Melbourne-based adventure tour operator No Roads Expeditions, which has been running Kokoda treks since 2006, started offering a third way to island-hop in New Ireland: by sea kayak.

New Ireland is tailor-made for sea kayaking, by the way. Most of its islands are protected by fringing reefs, making for safe beach landings. They're far enough apart to allow you to get in sync with your paddling partner (two-person, double kayaks are used on these trips), while being close enough to ensure you're rarely paddling for long between landfalls.

It also seems fitting to paddle kayaks in a place where the locals mostly get around in canoes.

*Time for lunch at Eruk Island.*



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But it was the people we met whenever we came ashore - and the opportunity to see them going about their daily lives that made the biggest impression on us.

Wherever we landed, the reception was the same: we'd step out of our kayaks, people would come over to shake our hands and introduce themselves, and then they'd casually return to whatever they'd been doing before we arrived. No fanfare, no cultural performance (except at the low-key "resort" on Tsoilik Island, where we stayed on our last night and were greeted with music and singing



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as a special treat). Somehow, it made us feel included, perhaps because they seemed relaxed enough with us to let us be. And we, in turn, could be with them.

Sitting on the beach, we'd start chatting with local kids who'd tell us how they paddle canoes to school on neighbouring islands. Rinsing off the day's salt in a bucket shower (surrounded by a screen of palm fronds), we'd hear women singing in a nearby hut. One languid afternoon we took turns paddling an outrigger canoe (which was easier than it looked, though not as stable as our heavy double kayaks).

Lots of places like to call themselves the "last frontier" - this part of PNG really is one.

It's the kind of place where it's easy to feel as if you're exploring an undiscovered, or at least seldom-visited place.

One day, we stopped for lunch at a village on Eruk Island where the local women, all with betelnut-stained teeth and wearing colourful "meri"

dresses, had prepared a simple feast of rice, fish, cucumber slices and fresh coconut.

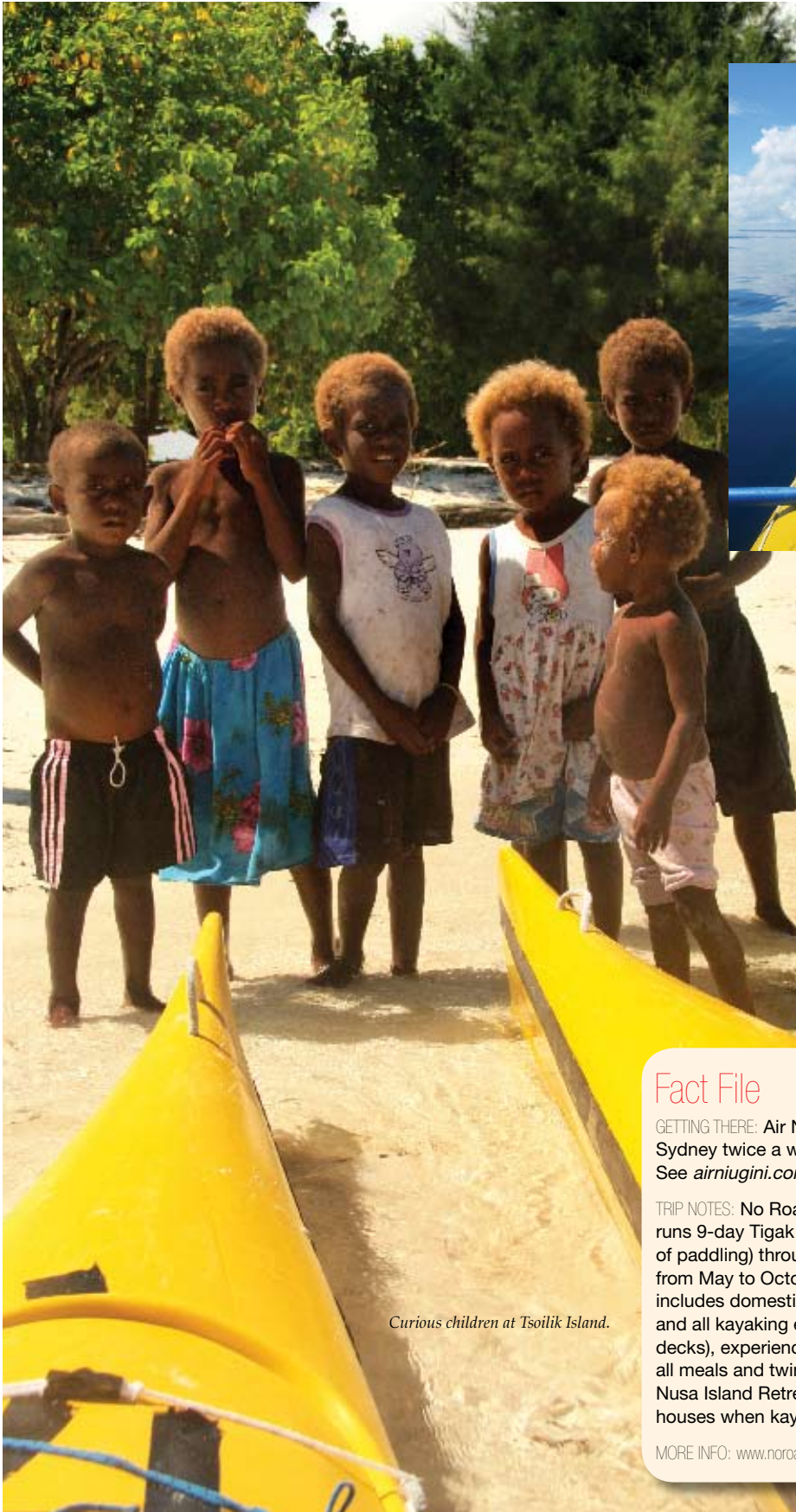
While we ate, they sat on the ground nearby talking among themselves and quietly watching us. Then, before we got into our kayaks to paddle away, I decided to cool off with a quick swim - in my long-sleeved paddling shirt and shorts, for modesty - which brought them all to the water's edge, where they exclaimed and stared with great interest.

Later, I wondered aloud why they'd been so interested. Jarvith, one of our local guides, said they'd been curious to see how I swim because most of them had never seen a white woman before.

This being the 21st century, that seemed hard to believe, until the last day of our trip when I realised we hadn't seen a single other tourist in five days. The only other non-locals we'd seen were missionaries - a friendly Australian couple and their two daughters, aged 8 and 11, who have been living in a village on a remote island for two years.



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*Curious children at Tsoilik Island.*

*Local guide Wotlom.*



On our last day, after hugs and handshakes from what seemed like the entire village at Tsoilik, our kayaks were loaded onto a banana boat and we climbed into ours for the one-and-a-half-hour ride back to Nusa Island Retreat, where we’d started the trip five days earlier.

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## Fact File

**GETTING THERE:** Air Niugini flies direct to Port Moresby from Sydney twice a week and daily from Brisbane. See [airniugini.com.pg](http://airniugini.com.pg)

**TRIP NOTES:** No Roads Expeditions, based in Melbourne, runs 9-day Tigak Sea Kayaking trips (with four and a half days of paddling) through the islands north of Kavieng, New Ireland, from May to October for \$2800 per person twin-share. The cost includes domestic flights to and from Kavieng, double kayaks and all kayaking equipment (paddles, PDF vests and spray decks), experienced Australian and local guides, support boat, all meals and twin-share accommodation in Port Moresby, at Nusa Island Retreat near Kavieng, and in tents and village guest houses when kayaking.

**MORE INFO:** [www.noroads.com.au](http://www.noroads.com.au) and [www.pngtourism.org.pg](http://www.pngtourism.org.pg)