Papua New Guinea's Highlands & Islands

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2  Depart London / in flight
Day 3    Arrive Port Moresby, afternoon birding at PAU
Day 4    Varirata National Park
Day 5/7   Rondon Ridge
Day 8    Port Moresby
Day 9/13  New Britain
Day 14   Depart Papua New Guinea
Day 15   Arrive UK

Departs
May or June

Focus
Papua New Guinea’s wildlife, natural history and culture

Grading
Grade B. Moderate day walks but some trails are steep and can become muddy or slippery making them difficult to negotiate. One trail at Rondon Ridge is a hard walk.

Dates and Prices
See website www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code PNG02)
Introduction

New Guinea is home to the third largest expanse of tropical forest in the world (after the Amazon and Congo rainforests), is a biodiversity hotspot and a major centre of endemism. The landscape is dramatic, with the Central Cordillera stretching unbroken for some 1,600km – almost the entire length of the island! The island has an estimated 25,000 species of vascular plant (c. 10% of the world’s species, with more than 70% endemic), almost 1,000 species of butterfly, 219 species of freshwater fish, 320 species of frog, 384 species of reptile, 780 species of bird and 245 species of mammal. And all of these remarkable totals are conservative estimates, as the island is poorly studied, with large areas remaining completely unsurveyed to this day. New Guinea is tremendously exciting for both what is known, and what is unknown, of its biodiversity.

This exciting new tour focuses on one highland site on the main island of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the coastal and forest habitats of New Britain Island. We will encounter a wide range of vegetation and habitat types and a bewildering diversity of wildlife.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1-2 In flight

We depart from London Heathrow on an overnight scheduled flight to Singapore where we connect with another overnight flight, crossing more time zones, to Port Moresby, arriving early the following morning.

Day 3 Arrive Port Moresby & PAU

From the international airport we will transfer to the nearby multi award-winning Airways Hotel. After lunch we will travel to the grounds of the Pacific Adventist University (PAU), a well-known birding site about 30 minutes’ drive from the hotel. PAU, set in a landscape of dry woodland typical of the Port Moresby area, has small patches of riparian vegetation, open spaces and a number of waterbodies.
Here we will be introduced to some Australo-Papuan bird families through species such as Black-backed Butcherbird, Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, White-shouldered Fairywren, Helmeted Friarbird and Rufous-banded and Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters. We will also search for Red-cheeked Parrot, Papuan Frogmouth, Blue-winged Kookaburra and Yellow-faced Myna, among others. The ponds should provide a variety of waterbirds such as Pied Heron, Nankeen Night Heron, Little Black Cormorant, Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks, Dusky Moorhen and Comb-crested Jacana.

Day 4

Varirata National Park

This morning we will leave early for a full day’s birding in Varirata National Park, an hour’s drive away in the foothills, up to 800m. Varirata was PNG’s first national park and provides an excellent introduction to birding in New Guinea forest. Indeed, it is one of the premier sites in the country with a long list of species, somewhat surprisingly considering how close it is to Port Moresby.

There are a variety of habitats and a series of good trails will take us into the wetter evergreen hill forest. We should see a selection of fruit-doves, cuckooshrikes, kingfishers, honeyeaters, Australasian warblers and flycatchers of various families. The birds will be excitingly unfamiliar and could include an endemic New Guinea family, the berrypeckers and longbills (Melanocharitidae), as well as pitohuis, jewel babblers, gerygones, monarchs, whistlers and myzomelas. The early start will improve our chances of seeing a displaying Raggiana Bird-of-paradise, an iconic lekking species that is PNG’s national bird. Other possible bird of paradise species are Growling Riflebird (recently split from the more widespread Magnificent Riflebird) and the Crinkle-collared Manucode, a less flamboyant, somewhat crow-like species. We will also search for some rarer, or simply shyer, possibilities such as Yellow-legged Brushturkey, Barred Owlet-Nightjar (at roost), Brown-headed Paradise-Kingfisher, Chestnut-backed Jewel Babbler and Painted Quail-Thrush. The night will again be spent at Airways Hotel.
Days 5 -7

Today we depart Central Province and fly from Port Moresby to Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands Province. We will be staying for three nights at Rondon Ridge Lodge, one of PNG’s premier lodges, located on Mount Kuta and overlooking Wahgi Valley, which has some of the oldest evidence of agriculture anywhere in the world. The lodge is just less than an hour’s drive from the airport, with stunning views across the valley, and there’s plenty of bird-watching to be enjoyed in the grounds themselves. There are trails in the surrounding forest and close by the lodge may be found Superb Bird-of-paradise, Brown Sicklebill, Princess Stephanie's Astrapia, MacGregor’s Bowerbird, Red-collared and Mountain Myzomelas, Common Smoky Honeyeater and Yellow-browed Melidectes.

During our stay we will spend a full day in the high altitude forest behind Rondon Ridge. Possible species near the lodge, in addition to those mentioned above, include Mountain Fruit-Dove, Goldie’s Lorikeet, Orange-crowned Fairywren, Yellow-streaked Honeyeater, Black-breasted Boatbill, Loria’s Satinbird, Friendly and Dimorphic Fantails, Wattled Ploughbill, Blue-capped Ifrita, Black Pitohui, Blue-faced Parrotfinch and the elusive and taxonomically enigmatic Mottled Berryhunter (now a monotypic family, Rhagologidae). We will also search for skulking terrestrial species such as Forbes’ Forest-Rail, Lesser Melampitta and Lesser Ground Robin. Further afield we may increase our bird-of-paradise species list with Black and Black-billed Sicklebills, King of Saxony Bird-of-paradise (with its extraordinary head plumes) and Short-tailed Paradigalla. Loria’s Satinbird, along with Crested and Yellow-breasted Satinbirds, was considered a bird of paradise but the three species are now considered to belong to an endemic New Guinea family, the Cnemophilidae. Which is even more reason to want to see one! At night we may search the lodge grounds for nocturnal species such as Papuan Boobook and Large-tailed Nightjar.
One day we will travel to Kumul Lodge for a half-day, prior to spending the afternoon visiting a some of the local tribes. Kumul Lodge is famous for a bird-feeding table that attracts Brehm’s Tiger-Parrot, Princess Stephanie’s and Ribbon-tailed Astrapias, Brown Sicklebill, Belford’s Melidectes and Common Smoky Honeyeater, among others. The feeding table provides excellent photographic opportunities and the lodge gardens also hold other montane species (the lodge is at 2860m), including Crested Satinbird, Island Thrush, Grey-streaked Honeyeater and White-winged Robin. Crested Berriypecker, which belongs to yet another endemic New Guinea family, the Painted berrypeckers (Paramythiiidae), may be found near the lodge. Calaby’s Pademelon (a small forest wallaby) is also occasionally seen on the lodge lawns and Speckled Dasyure (a small carnivorous marsupial) sometimes visits the feeding table during the day.

There are a number of tribal groups around Mount Hagan and we will take time to visit one or two of these during our time at Rondon Ridge. The Melpa People are one of the last large groups to be brought into the world community, with the area not discovered by the outside world until 1934. In many ways the lifestyle in this area of Papua New Guinea remains relatively unchanged today. These people were among the world’s first horticulturists and even today sweet potato gardening is the basis for many things in the area, such as trade. Pigs are a sign of wealth among the Melpa people and it is not uncommon to see women looking after the family pigs and tending to their sweet potato gardens.

The Melpa people are referred to as pre-adapted to capitalism, demonstrating a form of ebullient materialism. Their leaders are mankind’s quintessential entrepreneurs, amassing wealth in extended systems of ceremonial exchange, called moka or tee. Ceremonial exchanges became the measure of a man and men begged and borrowed from their clansmen to sponsor a great moka or tee ceremony. The bigger the presentation, the bigger the man. Trade partners accepted gifts, only to become obliged to reciprocate in the future. However the trick with moka or tee is the need to return an equal amount plus more. It is a system of incremental exchange, not of balance. People are locked into escalating relations of generosity and debt.
Another group are the mud men of Polga Village. The greatest change within the Melpa people has been the suppression of inter-group warfare. The traditional cultural values which placed importance on battle skills, sorcery and ritual cult knowledge have given way to more material prestige, however, many of the old customs are still practiced and an encounter with the Papua New Guinea Mud Men will be a truly unforgettable experience.

There is also a small group of the Huli tribe or “wigmen” within the Wahgi Valley, who paint their faces and wear exotic wigs made from their own hair, decorated with plumes from birds of paradise, cassowaries and parrots. Although these adornments are only worn for special ceremonies we shall take time to visit the local tribesmen and learn about the various styles of wigs and the cultural significance of each.

Days 8

Port Moresby

We leave the mountains and fly back to Port Moresby. Flight schedule permitting, there will be time for a final morning of wildlife watching around the lodge, before we must make our way down to Mount Hagan Airport. From here we will fly back to Port Moresby and overnight.

Days 9-13

New Britain

This morning we will take another short flight from Port Moresby to Hoskins on New Britain island. As we fly it’s possible to appreciate just how densely forested the islands are and why land travel is very difficult. On arrival we will be met for our transfer around the south and west edges of Kimbe Bay, through Kimbe town, to Walindi Plantation Resort. During the drive it’s difficult to miss the impact that palm oil production is having on this island, although this does provide good habitat for some species, such as the comical Willie Wagtail.

After settling into our accommodation, we will go out on an afternoon nature walk to get an introduction to the local avian residents and other wildlife. In the resort grounds there are often Blyth’s Hornbill, Variable Goshawk, Eclectus Parrots, Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon and Collared Kingfisher. The shorelines are patrolled by hunting Brahminy Kite and White-bellied Sea Eagle, while in the forests nearby we can find New Britain Friarbird, Metallic Starling, Red-flanked Lorikeet and Ashy Myzomela.
During one day will we head out into the Bismark Sea in search of pelagic species such as Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Red and White-tailed Tropicbird, Brown and Red-footed Booby, Great and Lesser Frigatebird and the possibility of the rarer Beck’s Petrel and Heinroth’s Shearwater. The Bay is also home to a number of cetacean species, which we may encounter if we are fortunate. Spinner Dolphin are the most frequently seen of these and may come and bow ride the boat if they are in a playful mood. Time permitting, we may stop at one of the reefs for an introductory snorkel.

Another day will be spent back on land, looking for forest species. The area around Walindi contains tracts of thick lowland rainforest that provides habitat for an abundance of bird species, including Black Imperial Pigeon, Finsch’s Imperial Pigeon, Buff-faced Pygmy Parrot, Violaceous Coucal, Bismarck Pied Monarch, Dull (Lesser Shining) Flycatcher and Bismarck Flowerpecker. Although there are a number of mammal species found here, we are unlikely to see them as they are mostly small, shy rodents.

Later in the afternoon we will make our way towards one of the low ridges where there are open views across the forests and gardens. It’s a known roosting place of parrots and hornbills. On a warm evening we can catch up with Blue-eyed Cockatoo, Song Parrot and Bismarck Woodswallow. Nankeen Night Heron sometimes nest in the trees, blue eyed Bismarck Crows perch atop dead branches, calling loudly, while colourful Eclectus Parrots squabble noisily from within the foliage.

For those who wish to, there will be an optional evening/night excursion out in search of nocturnal species. There are New Britain Boobok in the area and we may be able to find one. Another possible species to look for at night is the rare Golden Masked Owl, and we would be very fortunate indeed to see it. Under the canopy there are places where fireflies dance, their electric green luminescence glowing in the darkness.

Back out on the water, another day will be focused on exploring some of the off-shore islands, where it’s possible to find Nicobar Pigeons, Island Imperial Pigeon, Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove, Bismarck Flowerpecker and Sclater’s Honeyeater.
We will also include some snorkelling. An early start will required to make the most of the day. Restorf and Schaumann Islands can be landed on (although it will be necessary to wade ashore). These islands are home to breeding pigeons and we should be able to catch up with a number of endemic species during our visits.

Once we’ve explored the island slopes, there will then be opportunities to don your snorkelling gear to look at the huge variety of underwater species that are found in the bay. The reefs are in great condition and there is much to see during a snorkelling session, with a kaleidoscope of corals and fish in multi-coloured hues. Sponges, sea fans, sea stars, seahorses, nudibranchs, 860 species of reef fish and around 400 corals are found on these reefs, making them some of the most biodiverse in the world. Occasionally around the islands and shorelines a Dugong makes an appearance and we may be fortunate enough to see one during our visit.

On our final full day we will head out into the lowlands in search of Melanesian Scrud Fowl, an endemic species that uses the geothermal heat found in the mud near the hot rivers to incubate its eggs, and they can often be seen along the river banks. The undergrowth around the rivers is the place to look for kingfishers, including Black-headed Paradise and White-mantled Kingfisher. In the trees we will be looking for Red-banded Flowerpecker, Ashy Honeyeater and New Britain Buzzard. Time permitting, we will make a stop by one of the hot rivers for a short soak before we return to the resort for our final night.

Day 14

Port Moresby

We will need to depart Walindi Plantation Resort early this morning for our return flight back to Port Moresby to connect with our onwards flight to Singapore, where we will then board our flight back to the UK.

Day 15

Arrive UK

After our flight via Singapore we will arrive back at Heathrow from a truly memorable tour.

Focus & Tour grading

Tour grading: B. This is a general interest wildlife tour, although birdwatching will be a key part of the itinerary as birds are among the more visible wildlife in the forests. We will make an effort with regard to mammals, reptiles and frogs, and most of the tour is comprised of relatively short and half-day walks. However, depending on rain, some of the trails can be very muddy and must be
negotiated with care. There is one scheduled walk, looking for Black Sicklebill at Rondon Ridge, which should be considered hard. Please note that although we expect to see a good cross-section of New Guinea’s avifauna, including a number of special birds, birding in New Guinea is recognised as being some of the most difficult in the world and can be quite frustrating at times. There may be days when most birds seem to have disappeared but such days should be more than compensated for by other spectacular occasions. There will also be some time taken to look at the cultural aspects of the areas we visit.

Snorkelling equipment can be hired from the resort. Anyone not confident with snorkelling should arrange a practise session with the tour leader, and floatation devices can be made available if required.

**Weather**

The lowlands at Port Moresby are hot and humid throughout the year, whereas weather in the hills and mountains can be quite pleasant, especially at Varirata National Park. However, it can be very wet anywhere, including Rondon Ridge, and cool at night at Rondon Ridge Lodge.

New Britain is also likely to be hot and humid, often overcast, with the possibility of some heavy rain showers. May and June are the drier months and we are likely to get some days of sunshine during our visit.

**Food & accommodation included in the price**

All food and accommodation is included in the price of the tour, except for meals taken in transit at the airports.

At Walindi Platation Resort the rooms being used are in the Plantation House. There may be an option to upgrade to the Bungalow accommodation. The cost to upgrade would be £245.00 per person for a double or twin room and £295.00 per person for a single room. Please contact the Naturetrek office to check for availability.

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