

Southern New Britain

— *The Secret Place in Papua New Guinea*

Text and photos by Don Silcock

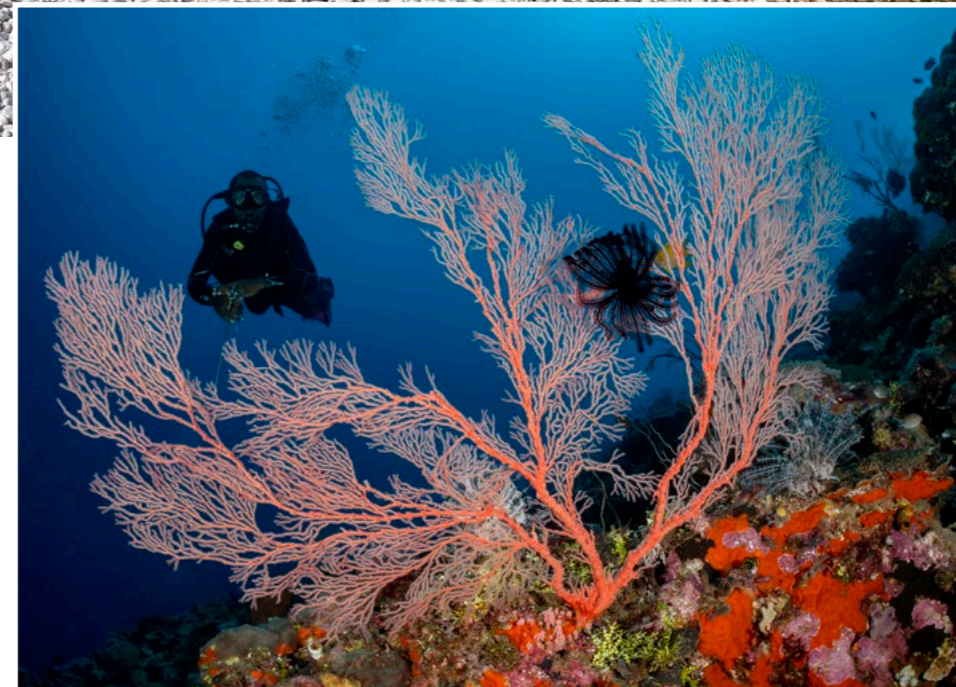




Diver with large sea fan (right) at Waterfall Bay (above) on the southern coast of New Britain in Papua New Guinea. PREVIOUS PAGE: Large pink barrel sponge, sea fan and feather stars at Elsie's Reef

The southern coast of the large island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea is a truly remote location isolated from the northern coast by high, rugged mountain ranges with no real roads through them. There are no commercial airports here—only landing strips and old WWII airfields used for small-scale charter flights. Practically, the only way to get to the southern coast is by boat from Rabaul, on the eastern tip of New Britain.

It involves a long and usually overnight journey, which will take you down through the St George's Channel, in-between New Britain and nearby New Ireland. The channel needs to be navigated with respect, as there are some fierce and complex currents flowing through it. It is a journey that Alan Raabe, the skipper and owner of *MV FeBrina*, has been making regularly for well over 20 years, but only for a few months of each year, during the dry sea-



son in the south when pristine underwater visibility returns.

Alan has been exploring New Britain and many other parts of Papua New Guinea since 1991 and it is a basic fact that nobody knows those areas as well

Large red barrel sponge and sea fans on reef at The East Channel dive site in Linden Harbour



Aerial view of Linden Harbour (above); Villagers in canoes at Waterfall Bay greet visiting boats of tourists with fresh produce and goods to sell (right); Diver with leather coral at Waterfall Bay (below)



as he does. Interestingly enough, he considers the southern coast as one of the absolute gems of Papua New Guinea diving.

Waterfall Bay

As we emerged from St George's Channel, the journey to the southern coast became both tangible and



inspiring, as the sheer size of those mountain ranges could really be appreciated for the first time. Dense rainforest seemed to cover everything, and I wondered how it was possible to survive in such a remote place.

We finally arrived in Waterfall Bay—the first port of call on the southern coast. Clearly, they do not get a lot of visitors here; very quickly, the back of the boat was surrounded by canoes from the local villages. Some had women selling fresh vegetables, a few had curious men, but most had kids who were very



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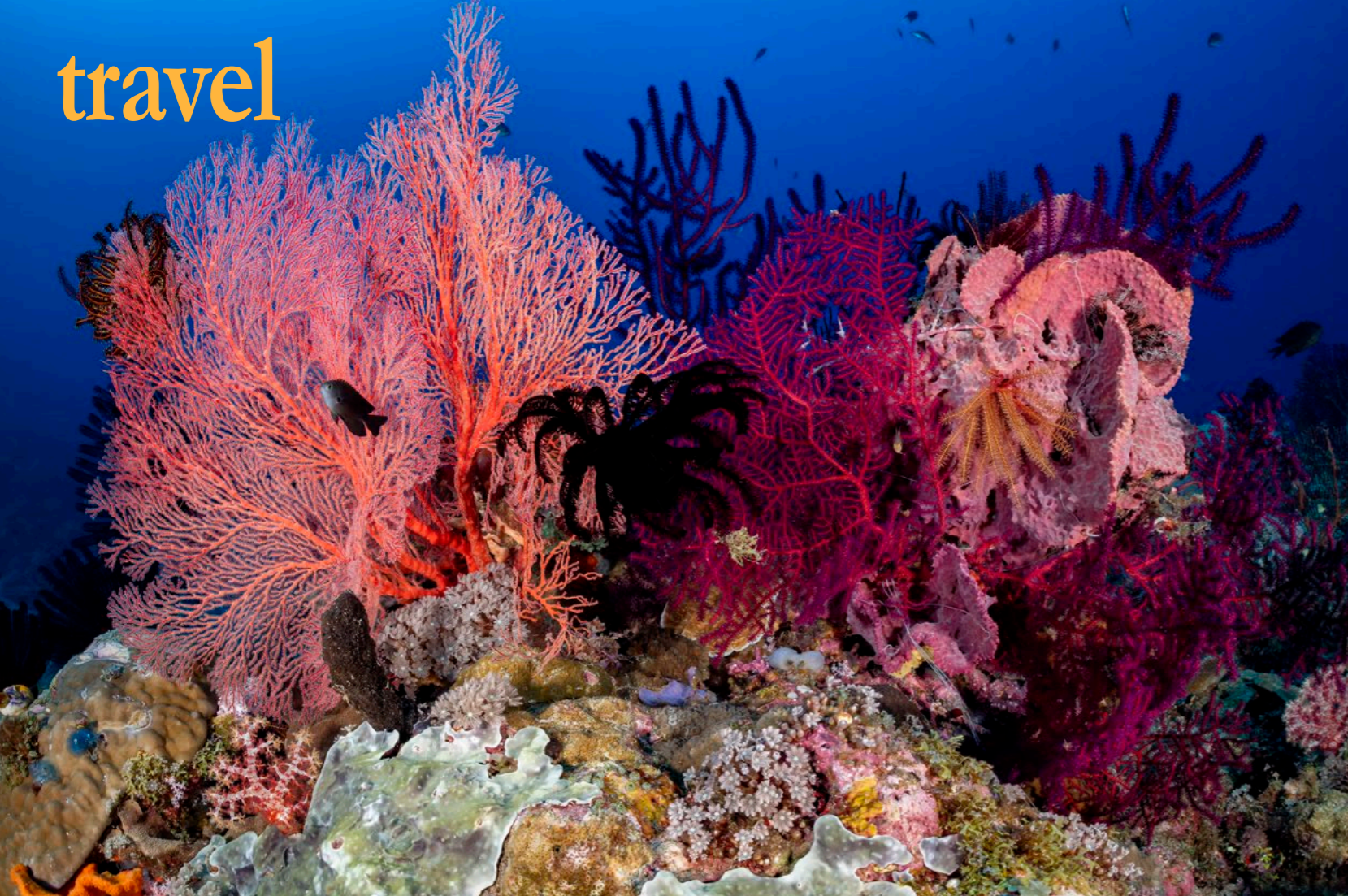


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Brilliant pink sea fans and sponges (top left), dense patch of cabbage coral on reef (above), yellow sponge and sea fan with feather stars (far left), and diver with crinoid (left) at Mocklon Islands

excited to see us.

There were two main areas to dive in Waterfall Bay: The Mocklon Islands on the western tip, near Cape Kwoi, and around the jetty at the village of Matong. Both offered quite different, but really interesting, experiences.

Mocklon Islands. The location of these two islands (one large and one small) meant they were exposed to the powerful, nutrient-rich currents of the Solomon Sea. Those currents fed and nourished the vibrant fringing reefs around the islands, and there were several sites from which to choose.

Where we actually dived depended on the time of day and the prevailing current. But overall, the diving was really nice, with healthy reefs and interesting sandy slopes that hosted intense patches of cabbage and other hard corals.

Matong Jetty. This small pleasant village was located on the eastern side of Waterfall Bay, not far from the Mocklon Islands. It was well worth taking the time to go for a walk around Matong, as the village was well kept and the people were open and friendly. The villagers were particularly



Local village children pose for the camera at Matong Jetty (above and left)

proud of their school, which had received quite a lot of support from AusAid.

But it was the jetty at Matong that got one's full attention. And you have two choices when diving it. Firstly, you can put on your macro lens and go fossicking for critters in the accumulated flotsam and jetsam; or you can go wide-angle and take advantage of the endless stream of young swimmers, vying for your attention. The jetty seemed to be the place to go after school, with all the kids performing competition acrobatics off it.

So, when divers turned up with underwater cameras, it generated a great deal of excitement and it did not seem to matter that the kids could not see the actual results. Their reflections in the dome port were enough to keep them energised for hours! Signaling them to come closer to fill the frame had them almost bumping into the dome. The sheer exuberance of the



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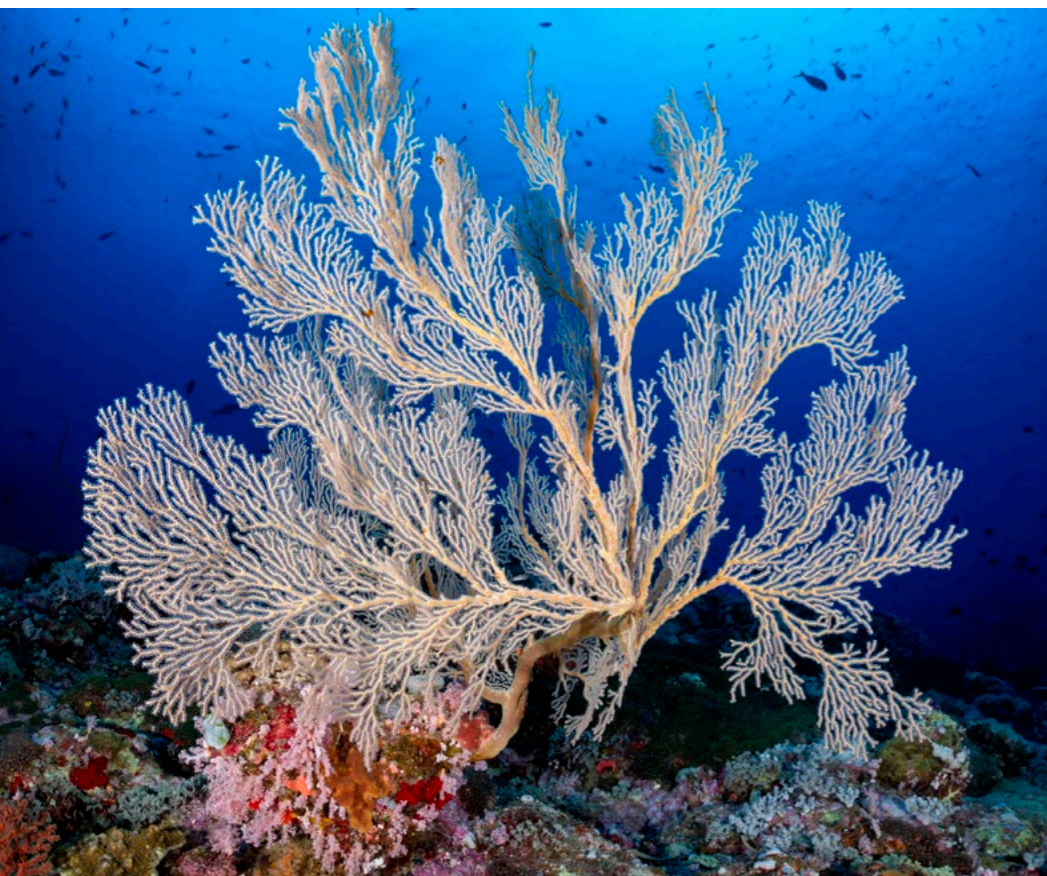
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Large yellow elephant ear sponge (above); Pink elephant ear sponge and soft corals (top left) and large gorgonian sea fan (bottom left) at The East Channel dive site (left) in Linden Harbour

Linden Harbour

Roughly halfway along the southern coast of New Britain was the incredibly photogenic location of Linden Harbour, with its superb lagoon, bounded by a series of outer barrier reefs, which provided an excellent safe anchorage. In-between those barrier reefs were astonishingly

Overall, there was a lot to see and enjoy underwater in Linden Harbour, but without doubt, the number one thing that will stay with you from diving there will be those channels. Much of southern New Britain is swept by the currents of the Solomon Sea, rich with nutrients swept up from the deep basins and trenches to the south. And it is those nutrients that are the life source of the marine life and reefs of the southern coast. But with the channels at Linden Harbour, the daily tides bring in that rich water at considerable velocities, creating the perfect conditions for marine growth to flourish on an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord.

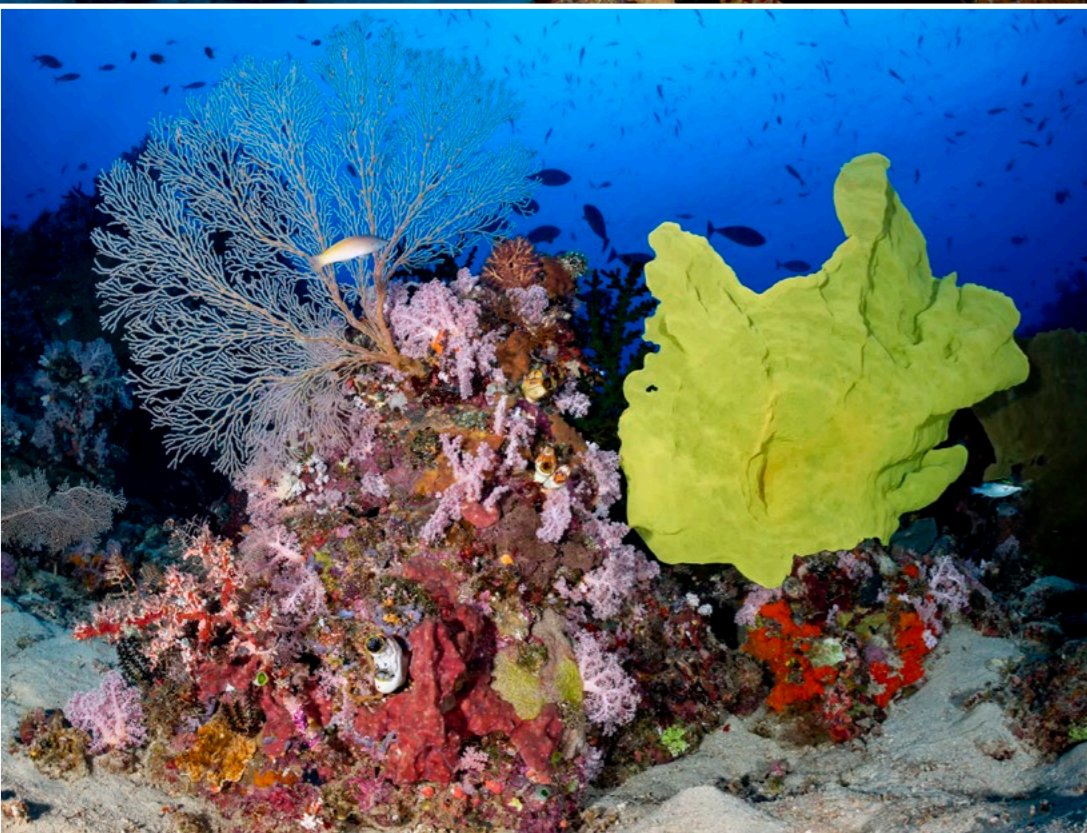
At the other end of the spectrum was the wreck of the Japanese WWII "Jake" seaplane, which rested on its back in the lagoon by

kids at Matong village jetty was what made the place so special. Sure, the photo opportunities were great, but they were not unique; however, rarely will you find such willing and enthusiastic models!

rich channels, which offered some of the very best diving on the southern coast. Add in a few beautiful reefs inside the lagoon and a WWII aircraft wreck, and one could see why Linden Harbour is rated so highly.



Crystal clear blue waters, pink elephant ear sponge with feather stars (above) and diver with coral bommie covered in colorful crinoids (right) on Elsie's Reef



Large pink elephant ear sponge at The East Channel dive site in Linden Harbour

Poronga Island. In just 18m of water and easy to dive, the wreck was a great counterbalance to the vibrant channels and reefs of Linden Harbour.

The East Channel. Diving the eastern channel at Linden Harbour on an incoming tide was simply spectacular. The walls of the channel were covered in a rich marine growth of fans, sponges and soft corals. Scattered across the bottom of the channel were several incredibly beautiful bommies. Although the incoming tide brought clean water from the deep waters to the south, as the channel narrowed, it delivered them at a considerable velocity—so, you can easily find yourself rocketing along. The trick was to duck behind one of the bommies and enjoy the scenery.

Elsie's Reef. Located inside the lagoon at Linden Harbour was this exceptional reef named after one of the former dive guides on *MV FeBrina*. Elsie's Reef was a crescent-shaped reef that started at just 5m and then sloped down gently before dropping off into the depths.

There was much to see on the reef with beautiful elephant ear sponges, gorgonian sea fans and incredibly colorful crinoids. In particular, the shallow area on top of the reef at Elsie's was a great place for wide-angle photography, with excellent light, clear blue water and an abundance of vibrant subject matter to fill the frame.

Jake seaplane. At ground level, there were almost no signs that Linden Harbour was a Japanese seaplane base during WWII. But from the air, it was easy to see why its sheltered lagoon would have





Jake seaplane propeller (far left) and ordnance (left); Huge sea fans with feather stars, soft corals and sponges on reef at Mocklon Islands (above)

made it prime real estate, which, combined with its strategic location on the southern coast, would have made it an excellent place from which to operate.

Not a great deal is on record about those operations, but there are a few aircraft wrecks that have been found in the lagoon, the best of which was a largely intact Aichi E12A1 “Jake” seaplane. The plane rested on its back, with one of its two floats pointing to the

surface, in 18m of water just off from Poronga Island. The plane was relatively intact, apart from the second float, and although it was

not that big, it still made for an excellent dive. Exploring the wreck was really a straightforward and interesting dive, but one should not miss the open bomb bay,

with its open doors and quite large ordnance plainly in sight for all to see.

The name “Jake” comes from how the Allied Forces identified Japanese aircraft

during WWII, as the actual naming convention was both difficult to understand and pronounce. The Japanese gave two names to each aircraft, with one being the manufacturer’s alphanumeric project code and the other being the official military designation. So, code names were used by the Allies instead, with western men’s names given to fighter aircraft, women’s names for bombers and transport planes, bird names for gliders and tree names for trainer aircraft.

Afterthoughts

Papua New Guinea is an amazing country with some incredible diving, but there

are very few places that can match the southern coast of New Britain.

Currently, there is really only one choice if you want to experience the southern coast of New Britain—and you should, if you enjoy great diving with a good slice of adventure! The MV *FeBrina* does nine-day trips to the southern coast every February and March, starting and ending in Rabaul. ■

Asia correspondent Don Silcock is based in Bali, Indonesia. For extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and “big animal” encounters globally, please visit his website at: indopacificimages.com.

fact file



Papua New Guinea



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, PAPUANEWGUINEA.TRAVEL/DIVING

History Papua New Guinea is a developing country in the Southwest Pacific, located on the eastern half of New Guinea, which is the second largest island in the world. In 1885, it was divided between the United Kingdom (south) and Germany (north). In 1902, the United Kingdom transferred its half to Australia, which occupied the northern portion during World War I and continued to administer the combined areas until independence in 1975. After claiming some 20,000 lives, a nine-year secessionist revolt on the island of Bougainville ended in 1997. Today, Papua New Guinea relies on the assistance of Australia to keep out illegal cross-border activities from Indo-

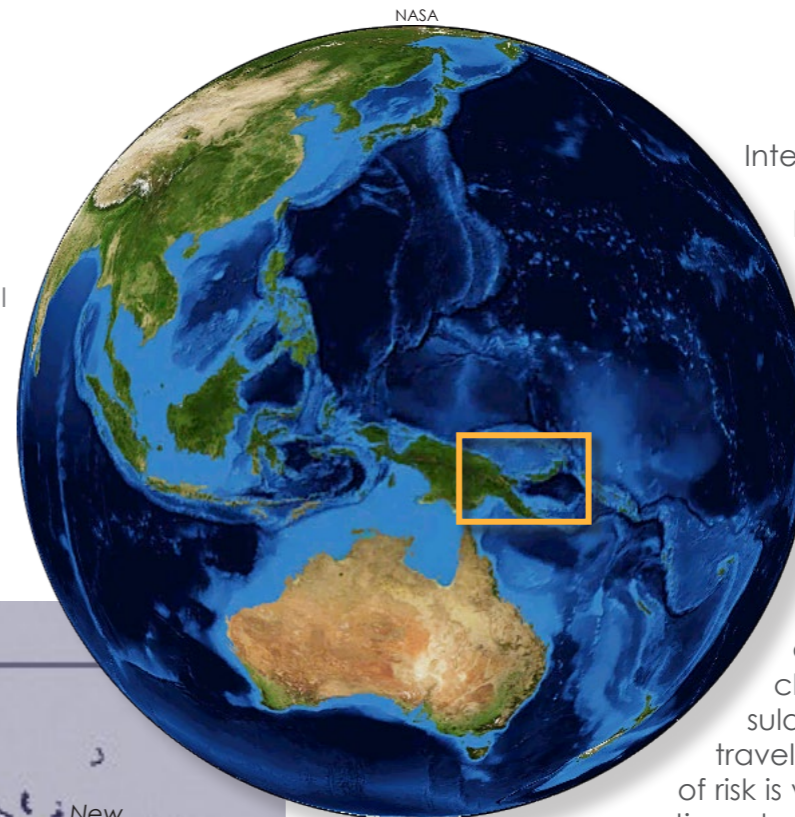
nesia primarily, including illegal narcotics trafficking, goods smuggling, squatters and secessionists. Government: constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy. Capital: Port Moresby

Geography Oceania, Papua New Guinea is a group of islands east of Indonesia including the eastern half of the island of New Guinea between the Coral Sea and the South Pacific Ocean; Along its southwestern coasts, it has one of the world's largest swamps. Coastline: 5,152km. Terrain: mostly mountainous with rolling foothills and coastal lowlands. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m; Highest point: Mount Wilhelm 4,509m.

Climate Tropical climate with slight seasonal temperature variation; the northwest monsoon occurs December through March; the southeast monsoon occurs May through October. Natural hazards: active volcanism, as PNG is situated along the Pacific "Ring of Fire". The country experiences frequent and at times severe earthquakes, mudslides and tsunamis.

Economy Natural resources abound in PNG. However, getting to them has been difficult due to the rugged terrain, issues with land tenure as well as expensive infrastructure development. Around 85% of the population live on subsistence farming. Two-thirds of export income comes from mineral deposits such as copper, gold and oil. Estimates of natural gas reserves come to about 227 billion cubic meters. Construction of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) production facility planned by a consortium led by a major

RIGHT: Global map with location of Papua New Guinea
BELOW: Location of Waterfall Bay on map of Papua New Guinea
BOTTOM LEFT: Colorful sponges at Elsie's Reef, southern New Britain, Papua New Guinea



Internet users: 125,000 (2009)

Language Melanesian Pidgin serves as the lingua franca, English is spoken by 1%-2%, Motu is spoken in the Papua region; there are 715 indigenous languages—many unrelated.

Health & Safety

Papua New Guinea has a high crime rate. Please check state advisory consular information before travelling to PNG. The degree of risk is very high for major infectious diseases; food or water-borne diseases include bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever; vectorborne diseases including dengue fever and malaria are high risks in some locations (2004)

Currency

Kina (PGK). Exchange rates: 1USD=3.03PGK; 1EUR=3.32PGK; 1GBP= 4.37PGK; 1AUD=2.15PGK; 1SGD=2.13PGK

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Websites

Papua New Guinea Tourism papuanewguinea.travel



that involve physical security for foreign investors, building investor confidence, increasing the integrity of state institutions, bettering economic efficiency through privatization of state institutions operating under par, and continuing good relations with Australia, which ruled PNG when it was a colony.

Environment

Growing commercial demand for tropical timber is causing deforestation of the Papua New Guinea rainforest. It also suffers pollution from mining projects and severe drought.

Population 6,552,730 (July 2014 est.) Ethnic groups: Melanesian, Papuan, Negrito, Micronesian, Polynesian. Religions: Roman Catholic 27%, Protestant 69.4%, Baha'i 0.3%, indigenous beliefs and other religions 3.3% (2000 census).

American oil company could develop export of the resource in 2014. It is the largest project of its kind in the history of the country and could help the nation double its GDP. Transparency will be a challenge for the government for this and other investment projects planned. Other areas of development by the government include more affordable telecommunications and air transport. Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and his administration face challenges

