

A portrait of Bougainville: the remote island aiming to become the world's newest country



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Bougainville voted for independence in 2019 CREDIT: GETTY

- [Mark Stratton](#)

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Governed by dawn chorus of cockatoos and circadian tropical tides, time on Bougainville – the world's newest country in waiting – is a moveable feast.

Take last November's referendum. Bougainville and its dreamy coterie of coral atolls in the Solomon Sea, voted to leave Papua New Guinea with a result any self-respecting despot would purr at – 97.7 per cent of Bougainvilleans opted for independence.

Yet few islanders' have any clue exactly when independence might occur. It might be this year, some islanders say, or maybe ten-years?

And then there's time itself. Clocks are either set to official Papua New Guinea time, or one hour later, to so-called "Bougainville time." The perfect excuse locals say to be

late for a meeting, or an extra hour to chew *bua* nut – a gum rotting stimulant that takes the edge off the island’s slumberous torpor.

My flight to Buka Island Airport, however, to see exactly what sort of country Bougainville might become, is bang on time.

It’s a two-hour journey northeast from Port Moresby crossing the Faberge-egg blueness of the Solomon Sea to Buka Airport, offshore of Bougainville Island, similar in size to Cyprus.

My planned week allows infinitely more time than Admiral Louis-Antoine de Bougainville budgeted in 1768, when breezing by on his galleon and naming all he surveyed after himself. Had he spent more time here, he would’ve discovered a veritable Eden of volcanic ridges rising like shards of dark Easter chocolate and rainforest now hybridised with coconut and cocoa stands. Nowadays the lowlands are cultivated with gardens of yam and purple-veined taro grown by an overwhelmingly agrarian society.

Yet this very same Eden bore a forbidden fruit of copper and gold, the touchstone for the most calamitous war in Oceania since Japan’s Second World War occupation.



American and Japanese soldiers clashed in Bougainville during the Second World War CREDIT: GETTY

The Bougainville War, or 'Crisis' as the locals understate it, claimed an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 lives between 1988 and 1998. Yet there's few outward signs of PTSD.

"It was a big adventure when we were young," says Bosco Miriona, Bougainville's sole tour operator, who like most island men in their mid-forties or above, was an ex-combatant of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).

"It was like a game. I joined with a catapult, then graduated to bow and arrows."

Bougainvillean nationalism slowly fermented during successive occupations by Germany and Japan, followed by Australian administration and incorporation into newly-independent Papua New Guinea in 1975. Bosco says they share a sense of identity with the nearby Solomon Islanders rather than Papuan culture. "Kawas Pawa," they say here in pidgin – "black power."

"We know we are different because we're the blackest skinned people in the region," he says.

Yet burgeoning self-identity wasn't the main catalyst for war. It was a mine. A very big mine called Panguna.

From 1972 until its closure in 1989 not only did Panguna generate billions of dollars of copper and gold but also seething resentment towards the mine's foreign ownership – an Australian mining subsidiary called Bougainville Copper Ltd. Traditional landowners believed the mine's riches failed to benefit them and felt overwhelmed by thousands of foreign workers. The BRA emerged to disrupt mine operations and when the Papua New Guinea Defence Force arrived to quell this rebellion, all-out guerrilla war ensued in the jungles.

The referendum was a proviso of a peace deal agreed back in 2001 that ended the war.

By then, all foreign mineworkers had fled Bougainville. They mostly lived around Arawa, a four-hour buckaroo drive down a rough road from Buka, where I spend three-nights.



Children playing on the beach at Arawa CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

“You can have Bertie Ahern’s room,” says the receptionist of Poonang Nava, a modest two-storied inn with a hot tin roof, where the former Taoiseach stayed when overseeing the referendum. I could have had any of the 12 rooms as nobody else was staying.

There’s little hint nowadays of former mining wealth. Arawa’s international schools and tennis courts have been subsumed into the bush after wartime destruction. There’s a central park where the peace accord was signed and a huge spreading tree nicknamed the World Trade Centre, because deals are made under its boughs alongside sleeping dogs left to lie.

Yet Arawa’s intangible richness proves to be time. Time to take it easy and chew the fat with the English-speaking locals. Bring up topics, like King Noah, and you’ll ignite the biggest smiles in the Pacific. Everybody (except the investors the ‘king’ fleeced) mocks the former pyramid-scheme salesman, who, in the greatest display of hubris since Admiral Bougainville, dons a gold crown in his own self-declared kingdom to the south.

Then there’s Panguna Mine: an excavation into the very character of Bougainvilleans and their recent history.



A miner at Pangona CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

Bosco drives me there, passing dynamited electricity pylons testifying how effectively the BRA flicked the off switch on one of the world's largest mines.

Set in the Crown Prince Range, mining literally moved a mountain to create a two-mile wide pit deeper than Dante's circles of hell, and probably hotter.

Everything is immense and mangled. The photogenic post-industrial steel and iron skeletons of abandoned processing plants, ore-crushers inverted like downed flying-saucers, copper-blue tainted hillsides, and a ruined cinema where Bosco recalls Rambo was showing when the conflict erupted.



Ruined machinery at the Panguna mine CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

Estimates suggest \$58 billion of ore remains, which may well fund independence. Yet local people haven't wasted time rebuilding their own micro-economy here: an extraordinary city of survivors, reusing the old mineworker's quarters and panning alluvial gold on unstable hillslopes.

Some hope it will never reopen.

Tony Tamou, a former mineworker, now farms freshwater fish in the old sports club's swimming pool.



The fish pool at Panguna gold mine CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

“The crisis taught us self-sufficiency from foreigners, living in the bush learning to grow our own food,” he says. “All the mine did was poison our land”.

Indeed, there's still tension in the area. Just this week, a Thai geologist was shot dead when conducting exploration activities for a new gold mine in the region – the second killing at a Bougainville mining project in recent months.

With Bougainville fringed by bottle-green lagoons and a salt-and-pepper coastline of black and white sands, beach tourism may represent a less controversial alternative to mining, so I take a short boat ride to Uranu Bay Retreat on nearby Pok-Pok Island, currently Bougainville’s sole resort.



It is a short boat ride to Uranu Bay Retreat, on Pok-Pok Island CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

The retreat offers nine beds in a rainforest clearing on the beach. “Choose whatever room you like,” says Laurelle Pentanu, with familiar refrain. I pick a large windowed room to catch the sea breezes cooling the top floor of her wooden family house built two-months before the crisis.

Next day I hope to explore the scattered coastal islands and reefs, but my boat never materialises. Ah yes, Bougainville time.

No matter. It’s impossible to feel stressed amid Pok-Pok’s easy island community. Before 9am children arrive for school from local communities paddling their own canoes made from milky-tree wood, lunchboxes balanced on bamboo stabilisers. I chew the fat with Joe Momoa, a Polynesian sea-cucumber harvester, who personifies the ebb-and-flow of Pacific cultures around the Solomon Sea. Dinner is a paleo mound of pit-pit (a lemongrass-looking palm) and starchy taro. Fresh lagoon fish is grilled inside banana leaves.



"It's impossible to feel stressed amid Pok-Pok's easy island community" CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

That evening villagers perform a sing-sing, a traditional musical welcome of sashaying dance with a South Seas flavour, typical all over PNG. Laurelle pays the villagers to perform, it’s much-needed income to this subsistence community.

My boat finally arrives the next day, and I’m taken into a fury of waves near Tautsima Island where a young local surfer scoots beneath rearing 20 foot cobra crests that eventually buck him skywards like a bronco cowboy. The sea is calmer around Arovo Island where I snorkel among fan corals sheltering clown fish and giant blue starfish, near the wreck of a Japanese freighter beached on a utopian white sand beach.



A beached Japanese freighter on Arovo Island CREDIT: MARK STRATTON

The retreat is owned by Laurelle's father, Simon Pentanu, speaker of the house of parliament, who pops by one day, taking time off select committee business.

He's no John Bercow. Softly spoken and unostentatious. "My guess is independence may be two to five years away," he shrugs. "Enough time to prepare ourselves for the future."

"Bougainville's time," he emphasises.

How to do it

Reef and Rainforest Tours are the first company to offer a 10-day Bougainville tour featuring Poonang Nava, Uruna Bay Retreat, and Buka, from £4,495 per person including international flights with Air Niugini from Singapore. Combine this with a 7-day 'PNG on a reasonable budget tour', which features the extraordinary Papuan Highlands, from £2,125 per person including all accommodation, domestic flights and transfers.

The author flew with British Airways from London to Singapore and to Port Moresby and Buka with Air Niugini. A night is required in Port Moresby when transiting onwards. Try the Airways Hotel. See also Papua New Guinea Tourism.