

## Bougainville: Emergence of a Nation



You should remember the flag, because it probably belongs to the 194th member state of the United Nations. A red and white emblem in the center represents the typical headgear of the newly initiated youths. Black stands for the remarkably dark skin color of the inhabitants. A green and white zigzag ring and the blue area symbolize fertile islands with shell currency in the Pacific Ocean.



Male youths in Bougainville wear the upei on their heads when they are accepted into the adult circle. This ritual hat is a central part of the national flag / © Photo: Georg Berg



The flag of Bougainville flies on the mast of the Australian expedition ship True North underway in the waters of Papua New Guinea / ©

Photo: Georg Berg

## Exuberant spirit of optimism

300,000 people are spread over several ethnic groups that live relatively isolated from each other. Although they speak 30 different languages and have few points of contact due to the rugged landscape, everyone is now united in a good mood with which they are looking forward to their country's independence.



Newcomers to Bougainville are welcomed in an unusual way. For the island baptism, the feet are washed with water from a bamboo cane / © Photo: Georg Berg

However, the country's economic future still depends on the trade agreements to be negotiated. The tourism sector could be one of the most important sources of income and give people a development perspective.



After decades of isolation, people can look forward to foreign visitors again. Weapons are only carried by children as toys / © Photo: Georg Berg

## Colonial times and civil war are over

With the Australian expedition ship True North we anchor off Bougainville and have a prominent guest on board. Raymond Masono is vice president of the autonomous province of Bougainville, which was incorporated into the new state of Papua New Guinea in 1975 without considering its cultural roots. After the colonial period, this area has been under an Australian protectorate since 1947 as a trusteeship.



The abandoned Panguna copper mine in Bougainville / © True North, photo: Oliver Oldroyd

It is not surprising that Australian passengers are specifically asking whether copper mining will return. After all, the world's largest open-pit mine, the Australian-managed Panguna mine, was responsible for widespread environmental destruction and thus also the cause of a ten-year civil war against the central government's army.



Bougainville's Deputy Prime Minister Raymond Masono gives True North passengers a first-hand account of the results of the independence referendum / © Photo: Georg Berg

Deputy Prime Minister Masono is also responsible for the mining department and makes it clear that a license for copper mining will only be possible for companies that first make the poisoned valley below the Panguna mine habitable again.



Captain Gav Graham and Deputy Prime Minister of Bougainville, Raymond Masono on the bridge of the True North / © Photo: Georg Berg

At the time of the meeting, Raymond Masono was a member of the commission negotiating the terms of the withdrawal and transition period with the central government of Papua New Guinea. Parliament in the capital, Port Morsby, then has to formally confirm the independence of its formerly autonomous region. However, approval is considered a mere formality. In the referendum in December 2019, the majority of 98 percent of the votes for Bougainville's independence was too overwhelming.



With a talent for improvisation and a rope found in the flotsam, the young people outdo each other in an artistic jump into the water / © Photo: Georg Berg

The independence vote was prepared by an international commission. Since all voters entitled to vote first had to be registered, an up-to-date inventory of the population data and the country's infrastructure was created.

## Explore active volcanoes from the air

Bougainville Island has some active volcanoes that are difficult to access and best viewed from the True North's onboard helicopter.



Pilot Alan Carstens explains all the important natural phenomena to his fellow pilots via headphones / © Photo: Georg Berg



As we approach from the air, the Bagana volcano emits plumes of smoke / © Photo: Georg Berg



The water-filled formation of Lake Billy Mitchell appears behind the active Bagana volcano / © Photo: Georg Berg

## The old capital is about to come back to life

From 1968 to 1989 Kieta was the capital of Bougainville. Then almost all the buildings in the city were destroyed and the survivors had to flee to the mountains. The weapons of the civil war are not yet completely overgrown by the tall grass. Today, young people climb tall trees and acrobatically swing into the sea on long ropes. The few adults we meet in town still remember with horror the air raids that killed many friends and relatives.



Palm trees and ruined houses are evidence of Kieta's once magnificent boardwalk. The wealthy employees of the inland Panguna copper mine resided here / © Photo: Georg Berg



In the last 20 years, grass has not yet grown over the traces of the civil war everywhere in the city of Kieta / © Photo: Georg Berg



Peanuts are offered fresh in small bunches / © Photo: Georg Berg



The former office building of the German governor in the administrative center of the province of Bougainville, the city of Buka / © Photo: Georg Berg

## Music and dance invite you to join in

The songs from the time of the embargo are an integral part of the musical repertoire on the island of Bougainville. During a ten-year naval blockade, the island was cut off from all imports. The reflection on traditional natural medicine, exchange of ideas and technical improvisation talent have welded the population together and made a virtue out of necessity.



Cultural identity and cohesion are cultivated by all population groups on Bougainville / © Photo: Georg Berg

All populations on Bougainville live according to the matrilineal principle of inheritance. Relationships and family possessions are passed from mother to daughter. The sons also receive their mother's family name.



Even the young women on Bougainville are very self-confident / © Photo: Georg Berg



In a bamboo band, bamboo tubes of different lengths are rhythmically hit with flop-flop soles / © Photo: Georg Berg



Cultures meet at Sing-Sing. Guests and crew of the True North are asked to dance and are enthusiastically received / © Photo: Georg Berg

**Additional literature** : Georg Berg, [spirit of optimism](#) , [Bougainville votes for independence after eco-revolution](#) , Politics & Culture 02/2020 (pdf, 428 KB)

## Traces of World War II in the jungle

In the European consciousness, little attention is paid to what happened in the Pacific region during the world wars. Bougainville was fiercely contested during World War II between Japan and the United States, allied with Australia and New Zealand. Deep in the jungle lies the wreckage of the plane where the Japanese admiral who ordered the attack on the US naval base Pearl Harbor sat.



The wreckage of the Mitsubishi G4M plane in which General Yamamoto Isoroto was shot down on April 18, 1942 is still lying in the jungle of Bougainville / © Photo: Georg Berg

Reportage about an unusual mission: [Yamamoto wreck in the jungle of Bougainville](#)

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