

Weekend escape to Kavieng

Gemma King

Edlyne – who handles the front office at Nusa Island Retreat – stands beside part of co-owner Shaun Keane’s curious whale bone collection

It’s our first visit to Nusa Island Retreat just off Kavieng and we can’t help but notice the bones dotted in and around the trees, some hanging from branches and bigger ones sitting proud on the path. This is co-owner Shaun Keane’s curious collection of whale bones, as well as the odd dolphin, dugong, turtle and crocodile bone for good measure; the remains of dead carcasses that have swept up on nearby reefs and islands. They’re an example of how the slow pace of island living lets you appreciate the simple things, Shaun says. “Bones are beautiful when you look beyond the flesh. There’s beauty in their structure – sounds morbid but there’s a peculiar peacefulness around them.” When we return to Lae a friend and bone expert confirms from our photos that one of the larger ones is the jawbone of a sperm whale! Meanwhile, Shaun says that when time permits, a full killer whale frame awaits assembly into some kind of order. Really quite extraordinary. But back to our visit, and the animals that are still breathing on the island – and (mostly) living in harmony with resident dogs Buka and Skuda – include ducks and chickens casually roaming around, a beautiful blue and green Nicobar pigeon (one of the closest living relatives to the dodo), tame brahminy kites and a one-legged cockatoo permanently perched on a tree waiting to greet guests as they jump out of the banana boat. If you’re lucky he’ll have something cheeky to say! New Ireland in the northeast of PNG is considered one of the country’s most safe and relaxed provinces, with its capital Kavieng on the northern tip of the island. Nusa is a couple of minutes’ boat ride from Kavieng. Flying from Lae with PNG Air is a long day of travel but worth it, especially on a clear day when

you get fabulous views of East New Britain and its coastline on the descent into Rabaul for the short scheduled stop to set down and pick up passengers. The Friday morning flight leaves at the very sociable hour of 11am from Lae and arrives in Kavieng with plenty of time for a drink before the sun goes down; a favourable schedule for making the most of a weekend getaway. My husband Angus and I did just that, being greeted on arrival at Kavieng airport by Nusa staffer Jono, who put our bags in the back of a ute, drove us 10 minutes to the harbour, then in another five minutes it’s shoes off as we step in to the shallow water at the edge of the retreat.

A little bit of history before we go on. About 20 years ago three siblings – Shaun, Shannon and Nick Keane – born and bred on East New Britain’s north coast, scouted out some of New Ireland’s more hidden treasures with an idea to build a retreat, riding purely on the memory of stories their parents had told them of how magical it was. The trio were not naive to the challenges of starting a business in PNG – and they

Finding a quiet spot on Nusa Island isn’t difficult

“The idea to build a retreat in New Ireland was built purely on the memory of stories their parents had told them of how magical it was.”

have faced their share – but, with self-proclaimed “hare-brained determination”, they have successfully established an eco-tourism retreat that offers world-class surfing, fishing and diving, and enjoys repeat visitors and a high guest rate year after year.

For our weekend visit, Nusa’s motto to “do as little or as much as you like” suits me to a tee and is one of the best things about staying here! It’s made very clear that if you want to hide away and lap up relaxation, no one is going to bother you. Walking on the sand through the retreat, the open bar sits to the right and the restaurant on the water’s edge to the left, while further along is the ping-pong table and the kitchen. A few steps more and we’re



The verandah of our over water bungalow, complete with hammock

at our bungalow, a hammock on the verandah providing an unobstructed view across the water to Kavieng. Ten minutes

later with a beer in hand and hearing the gentle waves below, I am making myself comfy. We have arrived.



Fresh kuka (mud crab) – above – and below, a variety of reef fish on sale at the Kavieng market



The free-standing bungalows are of a traditional island style, either elevated along the beachfront or perched over water, and made with a mix of PNG hardwoods and local “Niu Ailan” bush material. Each has its own large verandah with lounge area and hammock, perfect for whiling away hours with a good book, plus two double beds so big enough for two children if staying as a family. We paid extra for a premium room with its own bathroom (the toilets are dry composting using woodchips) and we weren’t disappointed. In each room there’s a security box if you feel more comfortable locking away valuables but Shaun assures us there has never been a problem with theft in the past. A jug of drinking water is filled up throughout the day, and staff can provide extra towels, sheets and pillows if needed. There is also a laundry service available, but to be honest, wearing the

same swimmers with a sarong or pair of shorts every day is part of the deal. After a few drinks on the verandah watching day turn to night, we wander barefoot across to the sand-floored bar. Here we discover stories are told each night when those who have been retreating crawl out of their bungalows, and those who have been exploring share their adventures. Perching yourself on a stool for a drink before eating is a great way to get to know the staff and fellow guests before enjoying a meal together. Shaun’s sister Shannon heads up the kitchen, managing a team of locals who cook up an incredible spread every night. Soup and homemade bread appear at 7pm, which for the first night was Moroccan sweet potato soup with poppy seed knot rolls. Half an hour later, the buffet is ready with plentiful seafood and fresh local vegetables.

“A few steps more and we’re at our bungalow, a hammock on the verandah providing an unobstructed view across the water to Kavieng”

so much about his island adventures the daughter dreamt of one day visiting and had finally made it. We also meet European dive enthusiasts and, of course, domestic PNG travellers like us escaping city life for the weekend. Early every Saturday morning Shannon takes a banana boat to the market just across the bay and welcomes guests keen to tag along. Depending on how long you propped up the bar the night before, it’s a great opportunity to interact with the locals if you can pull yourself out of bed in time! I am eager to take a look and the dawn sky full of colour as I wake makes me not regret setting the alarm. On her own mission to buy bags of fruit, vegetables and mud crabs for the restaurant, Shannon leaves guests to wander alone for about an hour before meeting back at the boat to return to the retreat. This is plenty of time to walk the length of



Banana pancakes and kulau (coconut water) for breakfast!

No two dishes were the same during our three-night stay and I’ve got to say Shannon is running one of the best restaurants I’ve ever been to in PNG!

Among the choices: chilli chicken stirfry, fish goujons with lemon caper butter, rocket watercress salad, vegetable spring rolls, steamed trout with

ginger and shallots, and of course the famous New Ireland delicacy, mud crab, always followed by a cake or brownie with ice cream... when room permits! The long tables and open plan of the restaurant encourage guests to eat together, and soon we are also sharing stories of where we came from and how we came to be there. For example an American couple we meet are following in the footsteps of the daughter’s late father, who was a doctor in the Solomons and PNG studying malaria and other tropical diseases. He had talked



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PARADISE IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK...



Angus with a chinamanfish – not great eating unfortunately!

the market and the perfect time of day before it gets too hot. After some friendly chats with the locals, who love to have their photo taken, I buy a laplap (sarong), and of course kuka (crab) to take back for lunch. First call of the day for Angus is breakfast, and I am back with plenty of time to enjoy banana pancakes and a fresh market-bought kulau (young coconut) with him, after asking the kitchen staff to look after my crab!

You could easily spend an entire

weekend not venturing further than the bar, restaurant, and the sea for a dip, but after a good dose of this we are up for exploring. Angus has his spearing gear and I've brought a snorkelling mask and fins so we head to uninhabited picture-perfect Ral Island, a 15-minute banana boat-ride away, where my husband is intent on spearing a trout or mackerel for dinner. Our driver Grindai (pronounced Green Day) drops me off at the island, where I can easily follow the



Shallow reefs with colourful coral are perfect for snorkelling enthusiasts

edge of the reef. With beautiful red, green and blue coral and an abundance of fish, it's a special place. Angus continues on the boat for another five minutes or so past the Ral Island reef before jumping in because, as a key tourism reef, there is no fishing or spearing allowed there as part of an agreement with traditional owners to keep it pristine. Unfortunately the trout and mackerel elude him and instead he returns with a chinamanfish, which we later learn is not great eating in PNG waters. He also sees stingrays and plenty of reef sharks and joins me for a snorkel in the shallower waters back at Ral before we return to the boat. Boat hire is K100 an hour including driver, while snorkelling equipment can also be hired. Other options are half and full-day island trips with lunch to experience the myriad nearby reefs. There are also two snorkelling sites within an easy paddle from Nusa by canoe or kayak (free for guests); an Asian-style long-line shipwreck that lies just to the north off the Nusa Lavu blowhole and the sunken WWII 'Jake' seaplane off a shallow reef inside the harbour.

Another big drawback for visitors is diving, which is



Kayaks such as these are free to guests, with snorkelling sites a short paddle away



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A trip to Kavieng would not be complete without visiting Cathy Hiob to see her slimy pet eels

“The eels slither among our feet and we feel their silky skin until the pot is empty and they disappear downstream as quickly as they came”

available all-year-round. Well known for its diversity, divers can experience colourful reefs, interesting WWII wrecks, and freshwater sinkholes for the more experienced. For guests staying on Nusa, trips are organised through Scuba Ventures. Although not divers ourselves, we watch fellow guests being picked up to join small groups and on their return excitedly tell of exceptional

diving that is easy and hassle-free to arrange. After a fresh crab lunch and a few beers – then a few hours in the hammock to digest! – Angus heads back out for a late afternoon spear while I settle for a walk. The retreat sits on what is known as Little Nusa, while Big Nusa is next door. You could easily swim from one to the other but, wanting to take my camera, I ask one of the staff

boys to drop me over by boat. A pathway has been cleared so it's easy to follow the length of the island to the blowhole that sits at the top. It takes me just short of an hour one way but I take my time and stop to look at the many war relics on the way. It is very peaceful and shaded and I pass only two people the whole way, locals who are very friendly and assure me I am going the right way with enthusiastic hand



One of many war relics on Little Nusa Island



Uninhabited Ral Island

gestures. It's a little overgrown in parts (in other words, you may need to climb over a few trees) so you feel you're deep in the jungle until you catch a peek through the trees of sun glistening on water. When I reach the edge of the island I find an idyllic, deserted beach and lap up the opportunity to dip my feet in the water before walking back. I don't have to wait too long before hailing a passing boat for a lift. For a shorter walk, guests can follow the path behind the resort that leads to the village on Little Nusa, where local women display their jewellery for sale – pretty earrings, necklaces and bangles, a perfect memento. Famous for its uninterrupted northern Pacific Ocean swells, Kavieng attracts a dedicated surf crowd during monsoon season from November through to April. The retreat takes the sport very seriously and staff have all the know-how, with waves typically reaching up to 1.2m over the reef while larger swells of up to 2.5m cater to a more experienced surfer. Not being surfers, we were happy to visit in the off-season but still found all 10 bungalows occupied so it pays to book whatever time of year.

Another worthwhile half-day excursion is a visit to Cathy's eels. We had heard of Cathy so headed off with Shaun the next day to borrow a ute and drive the 90km down the Boluminski Highway to see these famous eels. Cathy Hiob was an air hostess for 22 years before returning to her home village of Laraibina just off the east coast highway of New Ireland. Here she began training a group of large freshwater eels in a stream beside her house to appear for feeding on demand, becoming a big hit with visitors. When we arrive at the village, we are led to the eel stream a few metres from where we leave the car,



Smile, you're in Kavieng

and stand ankle-deep in the water as Cathy's helper calls the eels. What attracts them is the promise of tinned fish, but not any old tin – it has to be Besta mackerel! Fortunately we were warned in advance and have a good supply. The tinned fish is emptied into a pot which is then rattled with a knife, and within

minutes we are surrounded by giant eels. They slither among our feet and we feel their silky skin until the pot is empty and they disappear downstream as quickly as they came. Cathy is quite a character and full of stories to share with visitors who make the journey to see her unusual “pets”.

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Sunrise over the water on our final morning

Borrowing a car or arranging transport with a driver and a map showing key points of interest can be done at the retreat. It's a very nice drive on a smooth road with pretty surrounds. On the way back we turn off at a freshwater swimming hole where a group of locals are enjoying a Sunday picnic and offer me a kulau that has been pulled from the tree and cracked open



Chilli mud crab on the menu

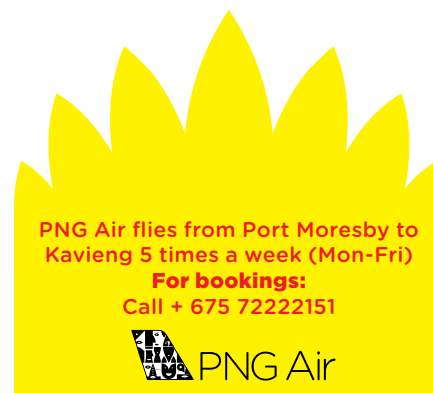
moments before. Drinking the cool coconut water and splashing around with the kids is the perfect way to end the excursion. One thing to keep in mind, women will feel more comfortable and attract less stares if they dress for swimming like the modest local women do, in shorts and T-shirts rather than bathers. Returning to the retreat that afternoon, we learn that on Sundays the restaurant attracts a small crowd of local business owners and expats living in Kavieng. They come for the day to enjoy lunch and a swim and it is interesting to chat with them about life on the island. We decide late that afternoon to take one of the boats and a driver for a fish. They take their fishing pretty seriously at Nusa if that's your interest; Kavieng claims to have rewarded many a sport fisherman's expectations with the area boasting a great range of estuarine mangrove systems as well as reefs and bluewater fishing. Nusa operates open Yamaha longboats set up for trolling the reef's edges, but for anglers looking for

something more, there is a Bluewater 2550 centre console power boat. All the boats come equipped with driver and equipment, with the cost dependent on the length of the trip. We didn't have much luck with the rod on our evening cruise but really enjoyed watching the sun go down with a few drinks before returning for our last supper.

It's not unusual to be casually asked the night before if there is something you'd like to do the next day so staff can coordinate where needed. With the exception of diving, it's very easy to organise kayaks, boats, equipment, drivers and guides at short notice if you're on less of an agenda. If Shaun isn't around, staffer Luke, who is from the area, is your man as he knows the land and the sea like the back of his hand.

Our final night is an early one as we have a 5am departure back to Kavieng to catch our return flight to Lae. The sunrise takes my breath away and I promise myself that we will be back. The flight gets you back to Lae at 11am so if you can drag yourself back to reality and into the office that same morning, it's the perfect long weekend getaway.

Based on their success so far, Shaun and his team are slowly expanding their base to other nearby locations. If Nusa Island Retreat is anything to go by, they will undoubtedly get the mix right. ▲



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