

WEEKEND in Lae

Gemma King

“The beauty of Lae sits above eye level. It’s surrounded by incredible scenery; mountains, rivers, lakes and the ocean that will quite literally take your breath away when landing at Nadzab Airport”

Markham River as seen on the descent into Nadzab Airport

There's no point sugar-coating it, PNG's second largest city has earned itself a bad reputation for crime in recent years; you don't roam the streets late at night, and you hold on tightly to your belongings when you're in a crowded place. It's a situation not unlike many cities in the world. What you won't know, if you haven't visited already, is that Lae also has a thriving and active community, and plenty of activities to offer not just its residents, but its visitors too.

The Lae I have lived in for the past six years unfortunately doesn't resemble the scenic

Garden City it was renowned for being some years ago. It is the country's industrial hub and sits on a major port, and there's no denying some parts of the town are very ugly – but as someone once told me, the beauty of Lae sits above eye level. It's surrounded by incredible scenery; mountains, rivers, lakes and the ocean that will quite literally take your breath away when landing at Nadzab Airport. As PNG's gateway to the Highlands, Lae is also rich in culture and, if you're willing to scratch the surface in and around town, you'll discover it's rich in beauty too. Only one hour's flight from Port Moresby, it's well worth the trip for anyone visiting this country.

Here is my guide to conquering Lae City in one weekend.

FRIDAY PM

Lae Yacht Club

Kick off the weekend with the rest of town at Lae's only watering hole with a seaview. The club starts to pull in a crowd at 4pm for knock-off-beers. The breeze picks up around this time too, making it a pleasant spot to enjoy spectacular views of the Huon Gulf with an icy-cold SP. It's worth taking a stroll around the club's perimeter too if boats are your thing. The action starts to crank up around 6pm, the same time as the pizza oven. If you're not keen on pizza, the steak and chips is

a consistent crowd pleaser with kids meals also on the menu.
www.laeyachtclub.com.pg

Salamaua Harbour is a peaceful snorkelling spot near Lae



Lae Yacht Club is a pleasant spot to unwind at the end of the week



SATURDAY AM

Lae Main Market

Saturday morning is the best time to visit Lae Main Market and it pays to go early for the freshest produce, the best pick of the flowers, and to beat the crowds. Centrally located, it's a vibrant melting pot of coastal and Highlands produce including fruit, vegetables, meat and fish. You can also pick up a souvenir from the interesting selection of meri blouses, necklaces and bilums on display. Don't leave without a look at the flying fox (black bokas), witchetty grubs and salted fish, but be warned, this section of the market is not for the fainthearted. Tips for your visit: wear closed-toe shoes as it can be muddy underfoot; take a hat for exploring the uncovered area; carry 'market money' (small change in coins) and a bag for your produce; keep an eye on your valuables. Located on Air Corps Road, open 7am-noon.



The freshest fruit and vegetables are to be found at this market

Lae War Memorial

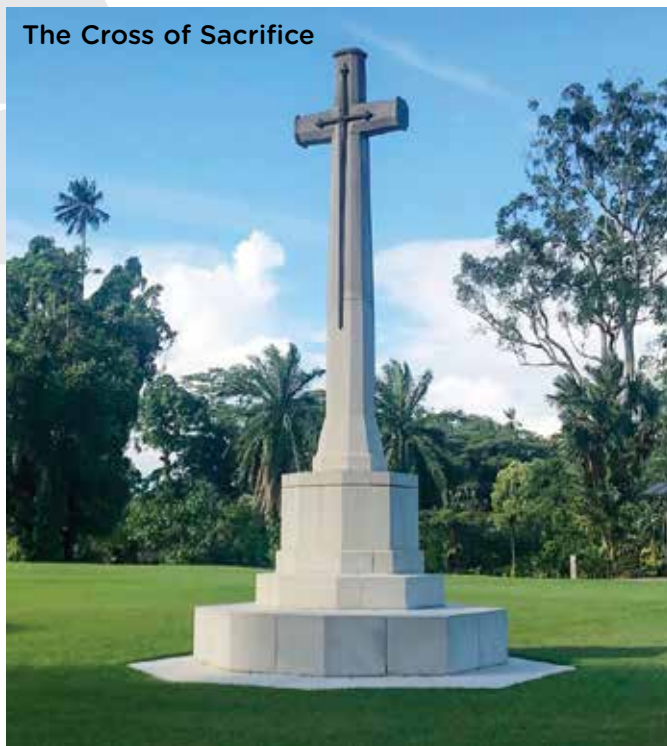
An icon of the city, drawing more international visitors than any other attraction, the war memorial embodies a significant time in Lae's history. It houses close to 3000 gravestones (2363 of which are Australian, the rest being Indian, New Zealand or British), each with an engraved brass plaque honouring the men and women who served and subsequently lost their lives in PNG during World War II. Sitting just south of the botanical gardens, it's by far the most peaceful place in town and has beautifully manicured lawns and shrubbery, thanks to onsite groundkeeper Henry and funding from the Australian Government. Allow 30 minutes to an hour to wander the perimeter and don't forget to sign the visitor's book. Located on Memorial Ave, open 7am-4pm.

(Side note: Lae Botanical Gardens itself, which was reopened in 2015, is also worth a look but it's not as simple as just rocking up. At the time of press, management was working on a visitor's access tag, but in the meantime you need to call in advance and arrange payment to enter. Contact Michael Lovave at the Forestry Research Institute on email mlovave@fri.pngfa.gov.pg or phone 4721 041/188).

Close to 3000 WWII soldiers are buried in this peaceful cemetery



The Cross of Sacrifice



Lae International Hotel

By now you're sure to have worked up an appetite! For lunch, this hotel is a good option with its two restaurants and bar open daily. Food choices include pizza, pasta, toasted sandwiches, burgers and curry. The hotel offers full access to its pool and facilities for the cost of K15 per person, and while it's a good-size pool there is no shade. There's also a small gift shop where items are priced higher than direct from street sellers, but if you want to avoid bartering in the hot sun, it's worth a visit. Located 4th Street, Top Town. www.laeinterhotel.com



Poolside dining at Lae International Hotel

SATURDAY PM

Mainland Crocodile Farm

A trip to this farm is a little off the regular tourist path but it's a very interesting way to spend the afternoon. Please note though that private visits are strictly by appointment only so make sure to call ahead. Just 13km outside of Lae, it's one of the largest commercial crocodile farms in the southern hemisphere, with facilities including an abattoir where you learn how the meat and skin are prepared, and an incubator to watch a baby croc hatching from its egg. Even if a tour cannot be arranged, it's still worth stopping by to check out the range of affordable croc-leather handbags, wallets, belts and key rings on sale if you're looking for an authentic piece of PNG to take home. The farm's high-quality skins are used to make some of the finest luxury French handbags in the world - but you won't find any of those pricey designer brands here. To enquire about a tour, phone 4721288 or email crocfarm@mainland.com.pg



Baby crocodile hatchling tank

One of the snappy residents at Mainland Crocodile Farm





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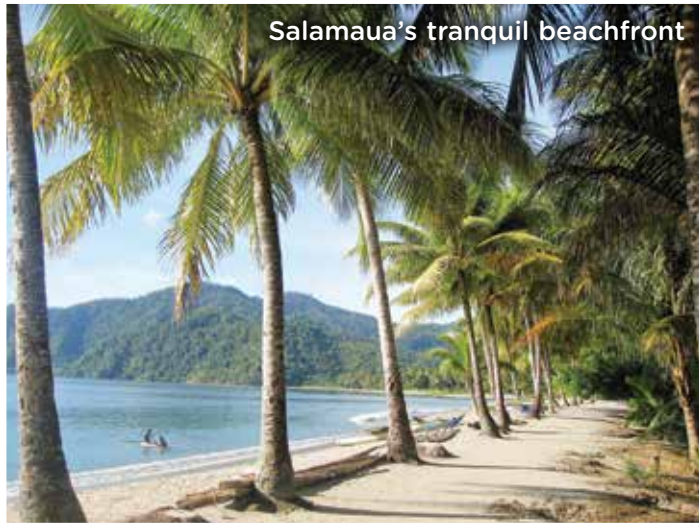
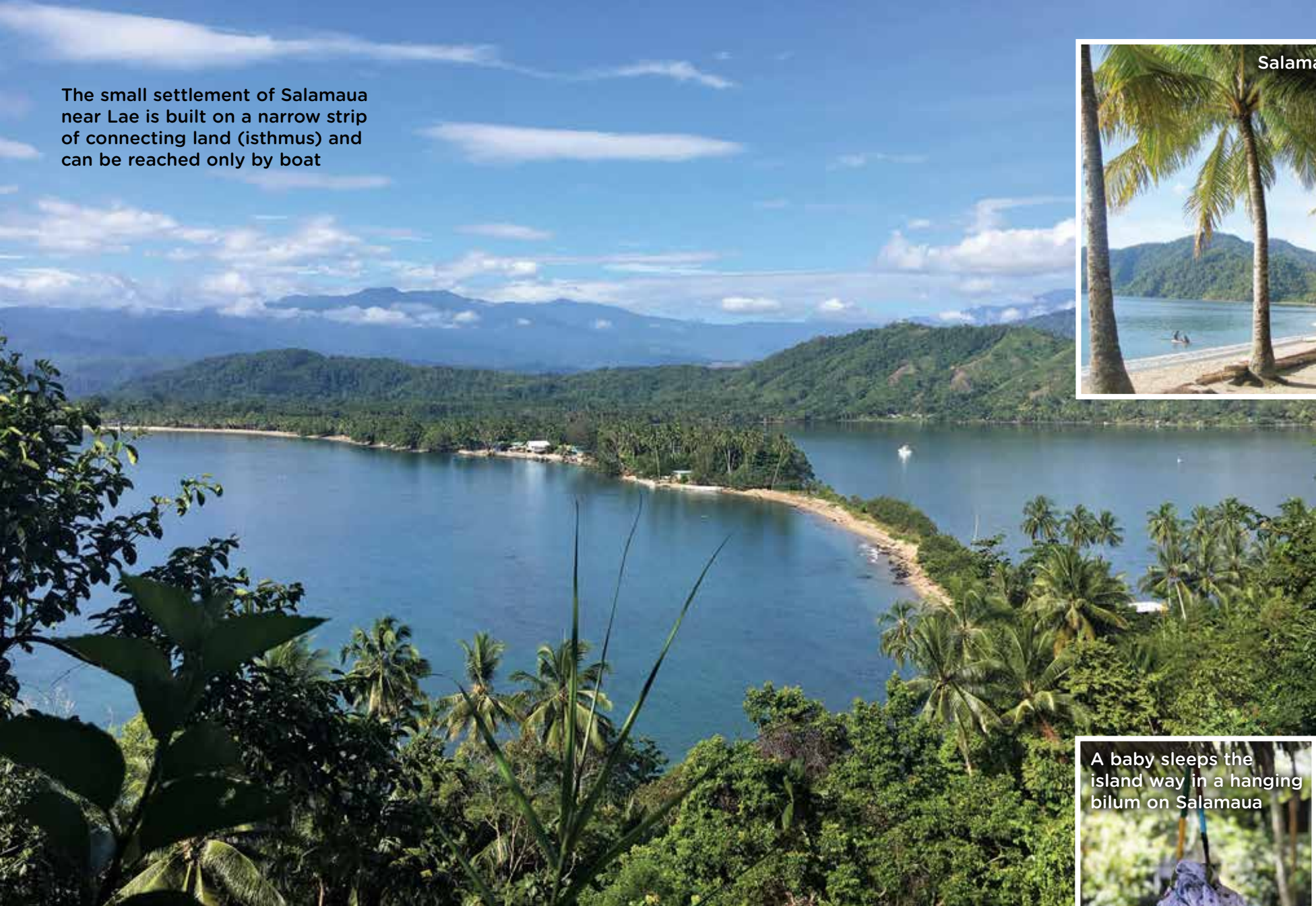
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The small settlement of Salamaua near Lae is built on a narrow strip of connecting land (isthmus) and can be reached only by boat



Salamaua's tranquil beachfront

SUNDAY

A big drawcard for residents of Lae is its access to the Huon Gulf with stuff-of-legends fishing, plus numerous world-class snorkelling and diving spots that make weekend fun all about getting in or on the water.

Fishing

To arrange a fishing charter, contact Lae Yacht Club. www.laeyachtclub.com.pg

Diving

PNG is considered one of the best dive destinations in the world, with its waters often described as exotic and unexplored. The allure often starts with the promise of white sandy island beaches and tropical resorts, not an industrial, manufacturing city on a major river system with a major port such as

A baby sleeps the island way in a hanging bilum on Salamaua



Lae. Granted, the town is no seaside resort but it is a great jumping off point for spectacular dives and you won't regret getting in the water if you're an enthusiast. Divers of Lae has a full schedule and contact details posted on its website. Snorkellers are also welcome to join day trips. www.diversoflae.org/events.html



The writer Gemma King with a wahoo caught at Rothery's Reef in the Huon Gulf

SATURDAY PM

Puk Puk Bar, Crossroads Hotel

Before heading back into town for the night, just a further five minutes along the Highlands Highway (towards the airport) and you'll come to this little oasis. The hotel's poolside bar has stunning views of the mountains and is a great spot to cool off while recapping the day. The infinity pool is open to the public if you feel like a refreshing swim. Located at Awilunga Estate, 9 Mile. www.crossroadshotellae.com



The infinity pool at Crossroads Hotel is open to the public

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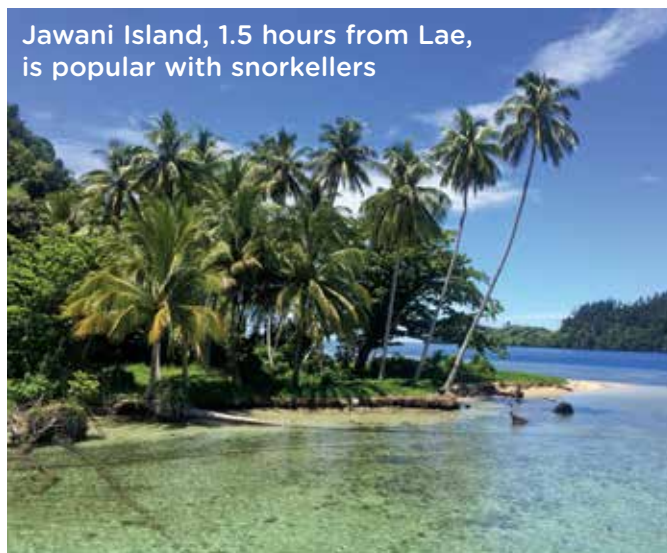
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A favourite picnic spot in Salamaua Harbour

“Granted, the town is no seaside resort but it is a great jumping off point for spectacular dives ”



Jawani Island, 1.5 hours from Lae, is popular with snorkellers

SUNDAY

Salamaua

If you'd rather explore land than sea, a day trip to Salamaua is hard to beat. The small town that once existed here was the capital of Morobe Province when it was captured by the Japanese during WWII. Australian forces later reclaimed it during the famous Salamaua-Lae campaign but the town was destroyed

during reoccupation. Today the villages of Kela and Lagui occupy the quiet isthmus, as well as holiday houses mainly used by expatriates based in Lae. As soon as you set foot on this little slice of paradise it's not hard to understand why many families choose to spend their weekends and holidays here. A walk up the hill will take you past war relics and offers fantastic views. Allow an hour round trip and



Niel Falls is just a one-hour drive out of Lae

pack walking shoes or trainers as the track is overgrown in parts and can be slippery. A little less taxing, a walk to the river is an enjoyable way to get acquainted with the locals. From Lae, Salamaua is a short 45-minute boat ride across the Gulf. Public banana boats can be taken from Voco Point for K30 one way. Alternatively, befriend a boat owner at Lae Yacht Club and hitch a ride as members regularly make weekend trips. Don't forget to pack your swimmers, snorkel, mosquito repellent and a picnic lunch – there's nothing to buy once you're there.

Niel Falls

Another land-based option, and just a one-hour drive from

Lae past Unitech and over the Busu River, is a small waterfall that makes for a great day trip as there is a shady well-cared-for grass area perfect for a picnic lunch or BBQ. It's a nice gesture to ask the local villagers if they mind you setting up camp for the day and they always appreciate the offer of some food such as rice, noodles, sugar and/or teabags. The villagers are very friendly. Directions can be found at www.rainylae.com ▲

PNG Air flies from Port Moresby to Lae four times a day
For bookings:
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