



**GO NATIVE**



### MELPA AND HULI WIGMEN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Study a 20 kina note and you'll notice a boar's head framed by shells. This is Papua New Guinea, where pigs are ranked higher than children and women in the social pecking order. Indeed, a pig is more useful than a sack full of notes when visiting the Melpa people, who live in the Wahgi Valley near Mount Hagen. In this extraordinary community, 'big men' (a highly coveted status) swap swine and seashells rather than money. The primary way to achieve power is to amass wealth and give it away in a ceremonial exchange known as *moka*.

Wild and remote, this area of the Western Highlands wasn't discovered by the outside world until 1934, and as you spend a day in a Melpa village you'll realise that life has changed very little in the 9,000 years that it has been their home.

Sweet potatoes make up the staple diet, as they flourish in the shade of the mountains which tower 4,000m above. The men live together in a round house, while the rectangular women's house has stalls for the pigs. The few concessions they've made to capitalism are coffee plantations and accepting tourists in exchange for money. Tourism is one of the only industries where prices, opportunity and training are controlled entirely by this grassroots community, and it is therefore key in allowing them to continue their traditions in the age of smartphones.

As part of Cox & Kings' tour, you'll also spend three nights at Ambua Lodge, an eco-friendly escape close to the Southern Highlands' Tari Valley, home to the flamboyant Huli Wigmen. As soon as you visit their village, you will see where the tribe get the inspiration from for their 'sing sing' ceremonies. Wearing wigs of human hair studded with plumes from iridescent birds of paradise, they sing and dance, mimicking the birds' mating ritual.

All lodges on the trip are comfortable and serve local plates such as pork cooked in a *mumu* (underground oven). The open fireplaces and 180-degree views of the Kubor Mountains from Rondon Ridge elevate it to something really special.

**THEDETAIL** Cox & Kings' 11-night Papua New Guinea Highlands Discovery tour costs from £8,395pp, including all flights, accommodation, local transfers and activities. Flight time from London is 22 hours. [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk) »

Photos by Gary Latham

*Detached from society and upholding millennia-old tradition, the last remaining tribes on Earth are a window into the society from whence we came. Imogen Lepere and Francesca Hool have uncovered those you can visit, learn about and give something back to. So pack a camera, because the tribal drums are calling*



Clockwise from left: Padaung women wear rings around their necks; a full set of coils can weigh more than 10kg; Mursi women in Ethiopia; they start inserting discs into their lips from the age of 15

*'Help bathe elephants in the nearby rivers and at night watch them roam freely in the verdant valley'*

### PADAUNG AND HILL TRIBES MYANMAR

Prepare to be amazed by the intricate tapestry of Myanmar, an enthralling land with more than 100 ethnicities. In recent years it has regained its sense of self, emerging from the clutches of dictatorship and isolation into a new dawn of democracy. The scattering of shimmering pagodas and faint murmur of monks quietly confirms that Buddhism is still a way of life here.

Amid the bamboo groves, rice paddies and tea plantations on the western edge of the Shan Plateau, you'll find Kalaw, a former colonial British hill station. Here in the Northern Highlands set off on a trek with Hidden Places and meet the Padaungs, whose ancient customs pervade. Striking to the eye, girls begin wearing coils of brass rings around their necks from a young age. A full set of three can weigh more than 10kg. Legend has it the more you carry, the more beautiful you are.

Visitors can help bathe elephants in the nearby rivers and at night watch them roam freely in the verdant valley. There's also the chance to mix with the Mandalay locals at a typical beer parlour, where the barbecue never ceases to delight: fish and meat skewers are gobbled up, local brews are sunk and you'll try the sticky rice cakes for which this region is renowned.

Not only will you visit the 2,500-year-old Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon – the most sacred Buddhist site in the country – you'll also help serve a meal for young monks in a monastery orphanage. Overnight stays range from a luxury five-star boutique hotel in the city of Yangon, to a comfortable hotel on stilts over Inle Lake. Explore this unique culture of floating villages to see how local boats are built and Burmese cats are bred before eventually reaching your homestay by skinny boat.

There is an option to hike or bike around the lake, stopping off at various Shan and Intha villages that are interspersed with forest monks and Buddhist temples, allowing you to dig deeper into the tribal culture of the region. Take a horse and cart to Bagan, where the local tribal guide will take you to his home and show you first-hand how they live.

**THE DETAIL** Hidden Places' [hiddenplaces.net](http://hiddenplaces.net) 12-night Tour of Myanmar costs £3,861pp, including full-board accommodation and internal transfers. Flight time is 20 hours. Cathay Pacific has return flights from London from £469pp. [cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)

### MURSI, HAMAR AND KORO ETHIOPIA

It is a curious contradiction that the most decorated people on Earth have never seen themselves in a mirror. The Omo River Valley, 165sq km of riverine forests and volcanic tuff, is home to 200,000 people living pre-industrial lifestyles. The odd plastic jerrycan for carrying water has reached them; reflective surfaces have not. However, this doesn't stop them using their bodies as canvases to express their tribal identities. The Hamar practise scarification, cutting themselves in serpentine shapes and packing the wound with ash so it heals in smooth mounds; from the age of 15, Mursi women begin stretching their lower lip with wooden plates, working up to discs the size of saucers; the Karo tribe mix clay and butter to create red hair dye, as well as daubing themselves in ochre, sulphur and limestone.

Responsible Travel's tour takes you into the heart of this extraordinary area, which is thought to be the cradle of human life itself. Palaeontologists discovered the remains of humans living 195,000 years ago in the cracked mud of the riverbank.

Over two weeks you will visit the villages of six tribes. This is one of the most remote areas on the planet and the accommodation reflects this, although all lodges have en suite bathrooms. Aregash Lodge is built in the style of local Sidama villages. Each *tukul* (hut) is thatched with bamboo and surrounded by coffee plantations and deep forests which come alive with the cackle of hyenas as dusk falls. Soak up the sounds of the night from the open-air restaurant as you scoop up *wat* (fiery red onion stew) with strips of *injera* (fermented sourdough).

If you want to meet these tribes, act quickly. The controversial Gibe III dam was completed in summer 2015. It produces 6,500 Gigawatt Hours of electricity a year, which the government says is key to Ethiopia's development. However, it alters the flow of the Omo River, which local tribes depend on. Your visit will provide immediate income as well as demonstrating that tribal culture holds value and needs to be protected. Once gone, it's gone forever.

**THE DETAIL** Responsible Travel's [responsibletavel.com](http://responsibletavel.com) 13-night Omo Valley Cultural Holiday costs £2,195pp, including most meals, accommodation and transfers. Flight time is 7.5 hours. Ethiopian Airlines has return flights from London from £490pp. [ethiopianairlines.com](http://ethiopianairlines.com) ➔

Photos by Shutterstock; Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism



*'Your visit will provide immediate income as well as demonstrating that tribal culture holds value and needs to be protected. Once gone, it's gone forever'*





## HIMBA NAMIBIA

On this 12-day adventure you'll traverse the truly magnificent terrain of the Namib Desert on the southern Atlantic coast. Gravel roads fade into the distance as you leave Cape Town for Windhoek; the tracks you'll follow here are ancient paths.

You'll meet a small Himba community, one of the oldest of the nomadic pastoralist tribes, who predominantly live in mud huts and *kraals* (enclosures). Descendants of the cattle-farming Herero people who settled in Kaokoland during the 16th century, the Himba spend their life completely unencumbered by the trappings of modernity. Women aren't allowed to use water for washing. Instead they take a daily smoke bath by bowing over a smouldering bowl of charcoal and herbs, the heat causing them to perspire. Porridge is their staple food and they worship the supreme being Mukuru around a ritual fire kept alight by the village headman. The smoke is symbolic of the connection between the living and ancestral spirits.

Expect simple but stunning homestays and elegant lodges and look forward to tasty cuisine such as *braais* (barbecues), *potjie* (sausage stew) and *bobotie* (sweet and spicy mince with an egg-based top). Some nights you'll sit around campfires, sipping on rooibos tea as lions roam in the distance and the rare black rhinos protect their calves. Other highlights include canoeing along the Gariep, South Africa's longest river. If you want to view game, you'll get your chance at Etosha National Park.

**THE DETAIL** Nomad Africa Adventure Tour's [nomadtours.co.za](http://nomadtours.co.za) 11-night Best of Northern Namibia trip costs from £1,155pp, including all activities, full-board accommodation and internal transfers. Flight time is 11 hours. British Airways has flights from London from £650pp. [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)

## GARO, KONYAK AND KHASI INDIA

Take the road less travelled to north-east India, the ancient land that has been largely forgotten by the rest of the world. Sharing a boundary with the most remote parts of China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh has made it one of the most culturally diverse regions on the planet. Around 200 fascinating tribes inhabit its emerald jungles and ragged mountain peaks.

There's the Garos, who live high in the lush hills of Meghalaya and only allow women to inherit property; the Konyaks of Nagaland, the world's last head-hunters (the tradition stopped 20 years ago) and the Khasis of Nongriat, who coax the roots of trees to grow into living footbridges over mountain streams. Meet each of these – plus 40 more – on Greener Pastures' epic 31-day Tribal Frontiers journey that is led by a series of English-speaking tribal guides.

Visit the Konyak village of Longwa, where the *Angh* (king) himself will show you his collection of war trophies. His thatched house straddles the Indian and Myanmar border, and his people unofficially have dual citizenship, allowing them to move freely between the two countries without visas.

This is one of the most authentic tours on the market and the accommodation ranges from comfortable jungle lodges with modern amenities, to homestays and basic tents in Roing, the gateway to the eastern Himalayas. You'll also stay in wooden cottages on stilts built by local Mishmis, with porches from which you can sit and gaze at the stars.

**THE DETAIL** Greener Pastures' [thegreenerpastures.com](http://thegreenerpastures.com) 31-night Tribal Frontiers trip costs £2,798pp, including full-board accommodation, activities and transport. Flight time is 14 hours. Air India has flights from London from £431pp. [airindia.in](http://airindia.in)



*'Enter the chaos of market day, a time capsule to which tribes trek in their Sunday best to purchase their goods'*



Opposite page: a Namibian Himba woman. This page, clockwise from top left: a Himba settlement; the mountains of north Vietnam; Black Tai tribeswomen; Flower H'mong women at the local market. Below: the head-hunting Konyak men of Nagaland



## DZAO AND H'MONG VIETNAM AND LAOS

Embark on a journey into south-east Asia's most remote and beautiful regions. All Points East's tour focuses on intimate encounters with the myriad hill tribes living in the leafy jungles of Laos and the mist-shrouded mountain peaks of northern Vietnam, where tribal rituals exist, crystal-clear streams run and temples nestle in the folds of undulating mountains.

This relatively uncharted terrain is home to more than 50 sub-tribes. You'll travel through H'mong and Khmu settlements, visit a Tai Phong weaving village and Black Tai community near the border crossing at Na Meo. In the serene countryside of Mai Chau and across the Da River to Nghia Lo district you'll meet people from the various Tai or H'Mong minorities.

In Tu Le, where the Dzao are prominent, you'll notice they remove all their facial hair – eyebrows included. You will also experience the chaos and commotion of market day, an incredible time capsule to which tribes trek from near and far in their Sunday best to purchase goods. An assault on the senses, you'll find an abundance of textures and vibrant colours such as fluorescent pink, cobalt blue and luminous yellows against a backdrop of exotic foliage and fauna. Others sport pillar-box red turbans or indigo-coloured cottons with heavily intricate embroidery. It's not unheard of for travellers to bag themselves an invitation to a tribal wedding after a day here.

In Laos, you'll delve your left hand into sticky rice topped with spicy sauces, vegetables and juicy grilled meat, while in northern Vietnam, dishes have a Chinese influence and locals joke they will eat almost anything that moves. The brave should keep their palates poised for the likes of dog fried rice. Fancy a tipple? Expect homemade rice whisky and copious cups of

fresh green tea. These are traditionally poor societies so you might even see tribe members hacking up water buffalo by the roadside and selling it to passers-by for \$1 per kg.

Accommodation styles vary but the standard is high and designed for comfort. Think herbal baths, plush pillows and fans to keep you cool in the humid temperatures. You'll even spend an evening in a stilt house in a Vietnamese White Tai area and two days exploring the bustling city streets of Hanoi, which has one of the best street food scenes in Asia.

**THE DETAIL** All Points East's 14-night Laos and Vietnam Mountains and Hill Tribes tour costs £2,280pp, including flights, accommodation, a private tour guide and most meals. Flight time is 18 hours. [allpointseast.com](http://allpointseast.com) ➤





*'Today, only around 4,000 Yagua are left. This ancient community uses blow darts to hunt for food; spear heads are made from carved wood and dipped in poison'*

## BORA AND YAGUA INDIANS PERU

Pink dolphins may sound almost as plausible as flying pigs but deep in the Peruvian Amazon, reality becomes rather fluid. Huge 'islands' of water flowers occasionally block the river and bibosi and motacú trees grow intertwined like lovers.

You're in the Loreto, lowland Peru, which is home to more species of bird than anywhere else on the planet. An expert from Qoriwayra Peru Travel will paddle you along the Nanay and Momon rivers, where you will be immersed in ancient customs of the Yagua and Bora Indians who have called this surreal rainforest their home since the 16th century.

This intensive two-night tour whisks you into the wild and catapults you back to a primal time where the wisdom of the jungle reigns. Fewer than 1,200 Bora remain and those who do, divide themselves into clans and sub-clans, typically represented by an animal. Known for their astounding drumming rituals, the Boras dance to the rhythm of manguare drums. While men wear long grass skirts, women go through a labour-intensive process of pummelling and pounding bark from fig or palm trees to make the cloth for their intricate dresses.

Then there's the Yagua tribe, an expert group of hunters.

Today, only around 4,000 are left. This ancient community uses blow darts to hunt for food; spear heads are made from carved wood and carefully dipped in poison extracted from vines, a technique that has been passed down for generations. If you're lucky, the Yagua chief will greet you and adorn your face with the *achiote* herb, which doubles as an insect repellent. Like the Bora, the Yaguas are also big on dance. They even distil an alcoholic beverage called *masato* that can only be consumed over a festival period. It's made by chewing the root of the yucca tree, spitting it out and allowing it to ferment overnight.

Other highlights of the trip include a short stint in the city of Iquitos, while a visit to Pilpintuwasi, a world-renowned butterfly sanctuary, will satisfy your more serene side. You'll sleep among the foliage in a comfortable homestay that is only accessible by foot and boat.

**THE DETAIL** Qoriwayra Peru Travel's *machupicchuexplorers.com* two-night itinerary costs £450pp, including full-board accommodation, meals, internal transfers, a tribes expert and all activities. Flight time is 15 hours. British Airways has flights from London from £620pp. [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com) □