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## Best of the Best



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In honour of

**Mr & Mrs Freddie Tan**

(for their contributions to diplomatic hospitality)  
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## COMMEMORATING "BEST ASIAN MARINA" AWARD



**MAGICAL PAMMUKALE**  
Turkey's Natural Wonder





# FASCINATING ISLAND CULTURES

by Orla Doherty



As people who live on the sea, we continuously seek encounters with other island cultures. For several years, we have known about the Milne Bay Canoe and Kundu Festival in Papua New Guinea, where ancient arts of Pacific seamanship have been showcased, to reignite an old maritime culture. This year, we finally made it to the centre of the action.

The Milne Bay province covers the most eastern apex of the mainland and spreads into the Solomon Sea, with its island groups to the north and east. The region includes the Kula Ring, an ancient inter-island trading circle, made famous by an anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the early 20th century, but operating as an active culture for at least the last thousand years. The province also happens to include some of the most spectacular coral reefs on the planet.

Our task, assigned by the Festival's genius Chairman, John Kaniku, was to rendez-vous a few days before the festival with the *epois* – the traditional kula canoes – and accompany them on their 80 nautical mile journey to Alotau. We spent several days at Fergusson Island, getting to know the captains and crews, some of the traditions and taboos associated with these extraordinary vessels and observing the last-minute preparations for their participation in this festival. The *epoi* sails made from pandanus were laid out on the shoreline for reinforcement, paddles were soaked in the shallows, and masts inspected for strength. The *epois* are paddled when there is not enough wind, but sailed whenever possible. The merest breeze provides an impressive speed, as we all discovered, when the *epoi* crews took us for a ride.

The central market area of Alotau, was transformed into a small city of island cultures for the four days. Canoes clustered on the narrow beaches. Crews camped out behind them. Dance groups adorned traditional costume, dancing



for the crowds in a central square. The harbor was a festive gathering of war canoes, with 22 men paddling at fierce speed; coastal sailing canoes resembling ancient windsurfers; deep sea canoes heeling in the afternoon winds until their outriggers were almost vertical; and the majestic *epois* displaying their unique style. The festival has already attracted international attention, including a team of paddlers who traveled all the way from Hawaii, in their shining white fibre glass Polynesian canoe. A media booth stood in the middle of it all, housing PCRf's *Studio of the Sea* camera teams, with all their Pelican cases of equipment!

The festival ended with a traditional pig and banana/yam exchange between island people, that has been modernized by the addition of crates of corned beef and bags of rice – a recognition of friendship and island to island cooperation. We applaud the spirit of this festival, the enormity of the task of coordinating canoe crews from remote islands with no communications, and the revival of meaningful tradition. Unlike other cultural shows in the country, this is a festival for the people, by the people.

In the coming days, *Infinity* will depart Alotau and sail to Kitava, one of the islands in the Kula Ring. There we will conduct a repeat study of the coral reefs, meet with old friends on the - island and sail mid-December to Solomon Islands. The holiday season will be spent offshore as we celebrate Christmas and New Year with friends at sea!🐬