



1 Supachat Vetchamaleenont

PHOTOGRAPHER

Perfect Exposure
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Before shooting Bangkok's hot new gallery, House of Lucie, Vetchamaleenont had to find it. "It is hard to find. The door is small, but inside you're transported to a big, bright space, like going in a tunnel and emerging in a new place." It heralds a new era in the arts scene. "In Thailand, in the past, a photographer wasn't an artist. Paintings, not photos, went in galleries. But now people are interested in photos as creative work." He, though, is interested in some of the old ways. "I like to take my family to the floating markets near Bangkok so my kids can see the way people live on the river, making do with the simple boat life."

2 Joe Cummings

WRITER

Alone With the Gods
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"Compared to Angkor Wat, where you are almost never alone," says Cummings of a new immersive glamping program in Cambodia, "at Banteay Chhmar you can explore in depth for hours without seeing another soul. I could wander the ruins any time. I loved being so close to the amazing 32-armed Avalokitesvara relief." He wasn't just soaking it in but also giving back. "The project has pulled together the entire community in support of archaeological and cultural conservation. I sensed an immense pride in Banteay Chhmar history among almost every local I met." *Instagram: @joejcumings.*

3 Adam H. Graham

WRITER

Birds of a Feather
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"Birds-of-paradise have the most bizarre mating displays that transform their entire bodies," says Graham, who went to Papua New Guinea to spot them. "They're also increasingly threatened and need as much protection as possible." You might think the same of tourists to PNG, due to its crime problem. "But I found the opposite during my trip to the Highlands. People were incredibly friendly and kind. No one asked for money. I felt a special kinship with the shy Wigmen. I also learned a lot from my Mt. Hagen guide Natasha, who spoke honestly and candidly about sensitive subjects." *Instagram: @adamgraham.*

4 Nan-Hie In

WRITER

The Banh Mi Bandit
Page 22

In the slowing Hong Kong economy, In says, many new kitchens have replaced old-guard ones, making the dining scene dynamic. "Luke Nguyen is the Vietnamese equivalent of Jamie Oliver," she says. Look out for obscure duck dishes from Sapa, and his *banh mi*—options include a "pho-guette," with oxtail smothered in hoisin sauce and *pho* garnishes like chilis, citrus and bean sprouts. "Chef Nguyen is this lively, gourmand. He's experienced many culinary and adventure travel hijinks. His passion to raise the ante of his native cuisine on a global level is as infectious as it is admirable." *Instagram: @nanhiein.*

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SUPACHAT VETCHAMALEENONT; COURTESY OF JOE CUMMINGS; COURTESY OF ADAM H. GRAHAM; COURTESY OF NAN-HIE IN

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features

ON THE COVER
Vivid colors of Tamil Nadu and its temples.
Photographer: Val Shevchenko.

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The Gods are in the Details

Spirituality infuses all of Tamil Nadu, from temples to the trees. *Horatio Clare* journeys through the Indian state's colorful layers. Photographed by *Mahesh Shantaram*

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Birds of a Feather

In Papua New Guinea, *Adam H. Graham* packs his binoculars for the rare birds-of-paradise, but finds equally enriching human encounters. Photographed by *Tim Laman*

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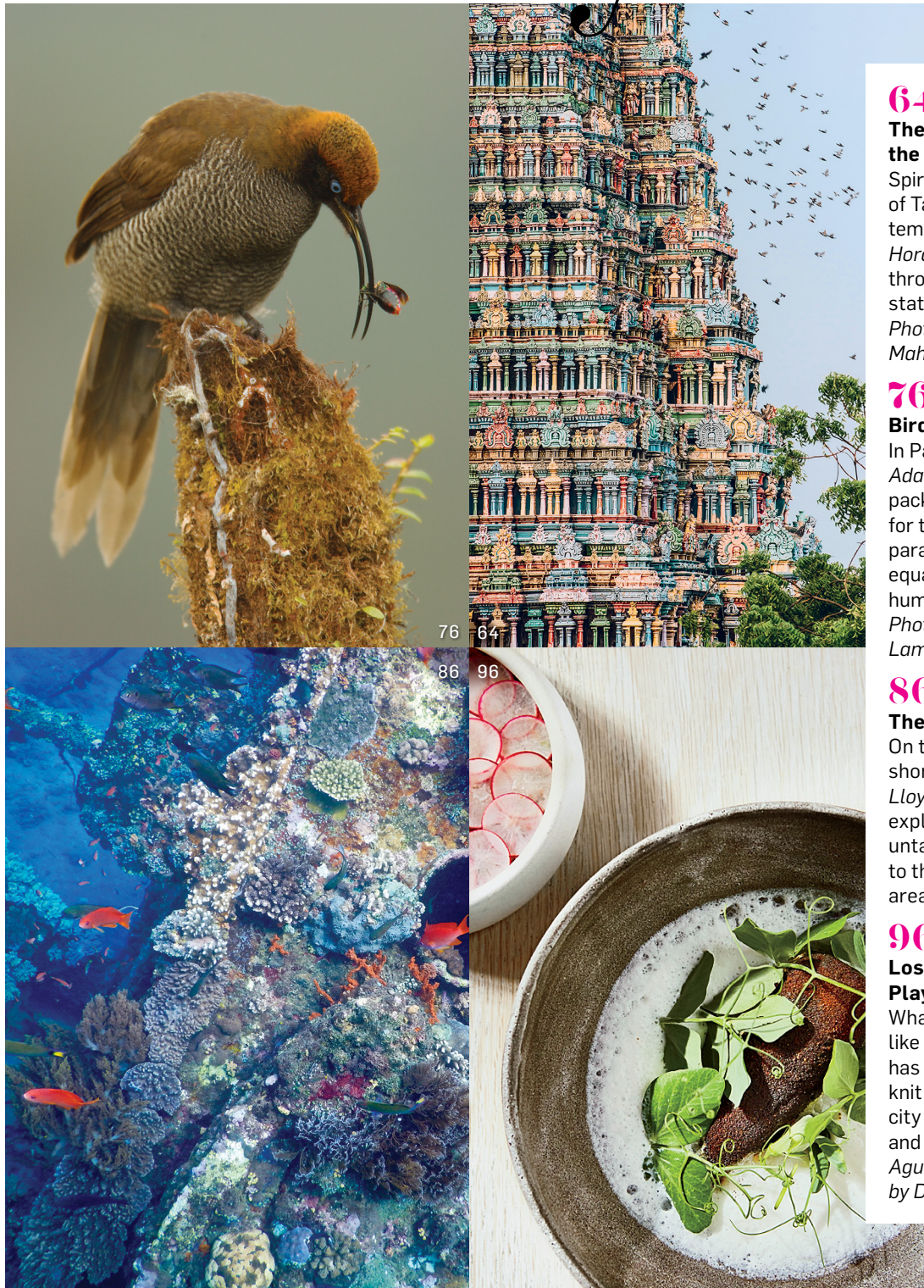
The Lost Coast

On the far eastern shore of Bali, *Ian Lloyd Neubauer* explores a still-untainted alternative to the more touristy areas of the island.

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Los Angeles Plays Itself

What once seemed like so much sprawl has become a close-knit and accessible city driven by culture and cuisine. By *Abby Aguirre*. Photographed by *Dylan + Jeni*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TIM LAMAN; MAHESH SHANTARAM; DYLAN+JENI; IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER

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hole-in-the-wall charm or sky-high glamour, Singapore's new bars have a myriad of influences.

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Upgrade

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FROM LEFT: JOHN LAURIE; DIANA HUBBELL; COURTESY OF YAANA VENTURES; COURTESY OF KEN SAMUDIO

An adult male King
of Saxony bird-of-
paradise waves his
head plumes in a
bouncing display.





Birds of a Feather

PAPUA NEW GUINEA IS AFLUTTER WITH AVIAN DIVERSITY. **ADAM H. GRAHAM** PACKS HIS BINOCULARS FOR THE RARE BIRDS-OF-PARADISE, BUT FINDS EQUALLY ENRICHING CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE HUMAN KIND.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TIM LAMAN



The sky is an inky blur and I'm marching up a steep, wet trail in a forest 2,000 meters above the city of Mount Hagen, in Papua New Guinea's Highlands. I'm a hiker, but I struggle to keep up with my local guide Joseph—who's short on words and long on uphill strides. We've no flashlights nor

rain gear, and I'm delirious with jetlag after the 24-hour journey here. But I push myself because it might be my only chance to witness the Superb bird-of-paradise, which has one of the world's most bizarre mating rituals.

As dawn seeps into the cool, moist forest, Joseph suddenly hears the snapping and clicking call of the Superb and we scramble through a patch of dewy ferns to a clearing. There, atop a lanky grove of casuarina evergreens, is the tiny, dull, black and blue creature responsible for the noise. It swoops down to a low branch before emitting a crescendo of pops, clicks and snaps, like some mechanical drone in *Star Wars*. Joseph, whose gaze is fixed on the bird through his binoculars, whispers with exhilaration, "Lucky. A male courtship display!"



I look again: the bird has morphed into a black semi-circle with an iridescent sapphire stripe across its center and two matching false eyes. It begins gyrating back and forth. Surely this is a sleep-deprived hallucination. It is unlike anything I've ever seen, even in the movies. The dance is voodoo-like, with the bird jumping back and forth in an attempt to mesmerize a mate. Ornithologists wait their entire careers to see this extraordinary creature and Joseph has led me to it less than 12 hours after I landed.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: A male Ribbon-Tailed Astrapia; a lush valley near the Enya Highlands; Huli Wigmen do a traditional dance, with human-hair wigs adorned by plumes of several species of birds-of-paradise.


For the uninitiated, Papua New Guinea is home to the world's highest concentration of birds-of-paradise. The country—also boasting the planet's most diverse population of humans, with 700 cultural groups and 838 languages—is on the eastern side of the Wallace Line, a faunal boundary between Bali and Lombok separating the two eco-zones of Asia and Australia. All 43 of the planet's birds-of-paradise are found in this region, with 38 of them in PNG, 12 of which are endemic, found nowhere else. I'm here on a nine-day journey through the highlands with tour operator Cox & Kings to track these beautiful and increasingly threatened birds.

These mysterious avifauna flit across the entire country, from Fergusson Island's hill forests to the rain-forested foothills of the northern Morobe Province. But the densest concentration of species is here in the rugged cloud forests of the Papua Highlands, home to brightly colored show-ponies like the Superb, the Blue, The King of Saxony and the fantastic Ribbon-Tailed Astrapia. This



A male
Stephanie's
Astrapia bird-
of-paradise
goes foraging.



A photograph of a dark-colored bird, possibly a frigatebird, perched on a branch. The branch is covered with clusters of small, bright red berries. The background is a lush green forest with sunlight filtering through the leaves. The text is overlaid in the lower half of the image.

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last is the most recently discovered bird-of-paradise and brandishes dual white tails stretching more than a meter long, proportionally the longest in the bird world.

The Superb's courtship display was only captured on film for the first time in the 1990s and led to a much greater understanding of the Paradisaeidae family. I had been so looking forward to experiencing it in person that it is almost a buzz-kill to do so this early in my journey. But I'm later grateful, for I realize it allows me to focus on spotting additional birds without the pressure of constantly seeking my Moby Dick. And during the hike back down, we see three more species: Stephanie's *Astrapia* marked with a dramatically long tail and a jade-green mask, the buff yellow King of Saxony with its flicking blue wiry antennae, and the black-billed Sickiebill noted for its mottled cinnamon plumage and clear, piping call. Each sighting is a revelation.

EXHILARATING AS IT IS IN THE FOREST, I am glad to get back to Rondon Ridge for a shower and breakfast. My room—with tribal carvings and a million-dollar view of the Wanghi Valley—is comfortable, but not luxe. There is no WiFi (which I welcome) and the TV has one channel, MTV China (less of a bonus). Breakfast at Rondon is full-on fortification for long treks—fatty cuts of bacon, thick slabs of toast, pots of local jam and creamy Highlands butter. Rondon is also home to the Meri Market, a farmer's market designed to support local women and organized by the lodge's cheery manager, Jean.

My stay includes two daily excursions, natural or cultural. So my next guide, Natasha, a stylish young local from Mount Hagen, picks me up for visit to the Mudmen, one of the Melpa clans in the area. A truck wobbles us down the bumpy dirt road past tidy thatched villages and lovingly kept vegetable gardens. Along the roadside, handsome young men hold hands with one another, afro-ed women wear flowery Meri dresses, and scruffier types with red stained teeth congregate on corners occupied by betel nut hawkers. Nearly everyone smiles and waves as we pass. Of the 100 countries I've visited, none has been this friendly. Skipping the cultural tours would have been a huge mistake.

Forty-five minutes later we arrive at the Mudmen village. Natasha leads me through a thicket of woods to a clearing, where I sit on a wicker bench. Slowly, three Mudmen, with bodies painted ashen and wearing oversized white masks, emerge from the woods with bows and arrows, reenacting the legend of their origin. Despite the stronghold of Christian missionaries, many locals are reluctant to abandon traditional beliefs. These clans' theater respectfully showcases their ancient customs and crafts.

Afterwards, Natasha takes me to the Mount Hagen Market, a bustling jumble of vendors selling produce like ginger and passion fruit, and later to a roadside market where pyramids of purple and white sweet potatoes lay stacked on the ground.

FROM TOP: Ambua Lodge; a woman from Chimbu Province with King of Saxony bird-of-paradise feathers in her nose. OPPOSITE: A female Brown Sickiebill in the cloud forest near Mount Hagen.



“Mt. Hagen is known for its sweet potatoes,” Natasha says with a wide smile. “We eat them all the time because we have the best in the country.” Though botanists agree that potatoes come from Meso-America, a local theory argues they originated here. Regardless, the potatoes are delicious, especially with a pat or two of salted Highland butter. As we drive back up to Rondon past the many mobile-phone shops and missionary offices, I notice there are no major fast-food chains. It doesn’t entirely surprise me; the Highlands’ first contact with the outside world was only in 1930. But I ask Natasha if they have McDonald’s, Starbucks, or KFC. Her response says it all: “What’s McDonalds?”

THE NEXT MORNING, I set out for Ambua Lodge, 200 kilometers west, to continue my bird tour. The 45-minute flight to Tari Airport on a new Hamilton single-prop was knuckle-whitening, but offers magnificent views of the Central Cordillera without a sign of human development during the entire flight. We fly over volcanoes, jagged limestone ridges, gushing waterfalls and steamy tropical rainforests teeming with flora and fauna still being discovered. There are more than 3,000 species of orchids here and a staggering 708 of birds, the planet’s most varied, a reminder that this bio-diverse country is

OF THE 100 COUNTRIES I’VE VISITED, NONE HAS BEEN THIS FRIENDLY



FROM TOP: Rondon Lodge; a view of Mount Hagen through low clouds. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A male Superb bird-of-paradise works his voodoo in a rarely seen courtship display; Wigmen clan members.

located five degrees below the equator. Fortunately, these mountaintops are considered sacred and development atop them is strictly forbidden.

My guide Thomas welcomes me and a few other new lodge guests at the airport and we drive straight to Ambua, a snake of thatched huts surrounded by manicured gardens at the end of a long mountain road. After settling in, we head out on our first excursion to meet a group of Huli Wigmen, who create helmet-shaped headdresses from their own hair. The shy and kind Wigmen are just one of many Huli clans in Tari, each with their own customs. Other clans paint their faces red and yellow, or wear elaborate headdresses decorated with birds-of-paradise feathers. Interestingly, the Huli people along the roadside are generally not as friendly or smiley as their Melapa neighbors. I eventually come to understand why. Tari is at the crossroads of tourism and oil and a recent Exxon deal that promised to bring in millions went bust, so the sight of foreigners left a sour taste in the mouths of many.

In Tari, conservation is in a nascent stage and awareness lacking. Typically lodges like this draw dyed-in-the-wool naturalists, but Ambua attracts a different ilk. Three fellow guests are U.S. Embassy diplomats from Port Moresby. During a visit to a Huli market, one of them holds up a black band of cassowary feathers and asks how much it cost. She then looks at me to ask if the cassowary bird is endangered. I blurt out a solemn “Yes” before the Huli vendor can respond with a price. During our





bumpy drive back to the lodge, Thomas suddenly stops the driver. On the roadside is a man with red-stained teeth selling an elongated King of Saxony feather antennae. Thomas buys it from him and puts it into his hat, already festooned with local ferns, flowers and moss.

“The government don’t want us to kill birds-of-paradise, but many will anyway,” he says. “They can make a lot of money selling their feathers.” Thomas hands me the antennae, perhaps hoping I might offer to buy it from him. To many, the idea of keeping a small piece of wild Papua New Guinea for yourself is madly alluring. But it’s that very mentality that’s beginning to chip away at the landscape.

AFTER RETURNING TO AMBUEA, I hike the property’s 60-minute waterfall trail linked by a few rope bridges. Along the way I encounter scrubwrens, honeyeaters, mannikins and cuckooshrikes. Later from my room’s window, I see a yellow-browed melidectes, an ominous butcherbird, a squawking colony of yellow-billed lorikeets and a brilliant-red-flanked lorikeet. There’s such an abundance of birdlife here that even for a conservationist like me, it’s hard to imagine any of these animals are threatened.

The next day, Thomas takes me on a pre-dawn hike to a logging forest, ironically the best bird-watching spot because of its clearings and worn paths. It’s fog-choked when we enter, but by 7 a.m. buckets of golden light pour into the clearing, which becomes atwitter with birdsong. We spot three more birds-of-paradise in the clearing: a male King of Saxony twitching his antennae in hopes of a mate, a brown sicklebill with its elongated azure tail, and finally, a ribbon-tailed *Astrapia*, whose elegant and pendulous dual tails float silently through the air. We come upon a band of positively intimidating loggers walking barefoot through the muddy forest towards us



with machetes and plastic bottles filled with amber petrol. But like most locals, they’re incredibly warm and offer nothing but huge smiles as they pass us on the narrow trail.

Moments later, we hear buzzing chainsaws and felling trees. “Like us birders,” Thomas says, “loggers pay to access this land, too.” It is a stark reminder of Papua New Guinea’s delicate emergence into the complicated modern world. ☸

*Nine-day tours of Papua New Guinea’s Highlands with **Cox & Kings** (coxandkings.com) including stays at Ambua Lodge and Rondon Ridge, from US\$6,775. From Southeast Asia, **Air Niugini** (airniugini.com.pg) flies non-stop from Hong Kong, Manila and Singapore. Check **papuanewguinea.travel** for visa regulations.*