



# Explosive action in **PAPUA!**

**A fishing journey into  
the unknown for GT  
and Papuan bass.**

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Papua is a wild and remote destination that can be full of surprises.



## Western New Guinea in brief

The huge island of New Guinea is located north of Australia and is the second largest island in the world (approximately 800,000 km<sup>2</sup>). The island is divided into two countries of roughly equal sizes: Papua New Guinea (PNG) to the east, with capital Port Moresby, and Western New Guinea to the west, with capital Jayapura. This western portion generally called Irian Jaya and then Papua Barat by Indonesia who still claims ownership despite the Papuans' attempts at independence. Bahasa Indonesia is the official language in Papua and this, along with some 270 Papuan languages. Few people speak English! Papua/Western New Guinea is sparsely populated (5 M inhabitants for 420,000 km<sup>2</sup>), covered with dense forest, swamps and the largest mangroves in the world. The Maoke Mountains cross the island from east to west and its highest peak exceeds the Mont Blanc. Papua is a destination for adventurous anglers and bird watchers.



For more information on fishing trips organized by Olivier Helloco in Papua/Western New Guinea: [www.irianjayawildfishing.com](http://www.irianjayawildfishing.com)



French-born Olivier Helloco, the head guide of Irian Jaya Wild Fishing has been organizing fishing trips in Indonesia for more than 15 years.



Pak Nona, Olivier's faithful boatman at Irian Jaya Wild Fishing.

made a trip to Western New Guinea, a country also known as Papua which is the Indonesian western half of the huge island of New Guinea, with fishing guide Olivier Helloco back in 2014. It was a tough but real adventure for me, and I was lucky enough to catch a world-record size Papuan bass, or Papuan black snapper, a ferocious member of the family Lutjanidae.

In 2023, a report in *Fishing & Travel* magazine showcased an area newly explored in Papua by Olivier and a group of French anglers. It made my mouth water. The magazine article allowed me to reconnect with Olivier and rebook a trip. Olivier suggested a combination trip that entailed five days exploring a remote archipelago dotted with shallow reefs where we would find GTs and narrow-barred Spanish

mackerel and another five-day expedition to inland freshwater lakes and marshes to chase the elusive Papuan bass. It was an enticing proposal quickly approved by five friends.

We booked our trip for November 2024 and after two days of travelling from the Netherlands, we were welcomed by Olivier at a small airport on the north coast of Western New Guinea.

The plan was to set off the next morning on two boats for the long trip of more than 150 km to the islands. The wind howled and big waves were crashing on the beach. We hoped the wind would

subside for our long boat journey the next day.

Fortunately, the wind eased but the grey skies did not bode well for our travel plans. The rain poured on us

while loading the boats, but we set off while the sea was calm. After an hour the rain stopped and we saw flying fish, turtles and a few dolphins. Five hours later the first islands came into sight and 30 minutes after that we sailed into a shallow lagoon where we spot fish cruising the white sandy bottom.

Giant trevallies inhabit the coastal waters of Western New Guinea.



The two-spot red snapper is related to the Papuan bass. Both species provide spectacular topwater fishing opportunities.



### Silence Before the Storm

We camped on a small, island, along a narrow strip of sand bordered by a few trees and set off with our popping rods to stretch our legs. I hooked a decent GT which I lost quickly and then saw schools of larger fish cruising on the surface. Their heads are blunt, and they have large, forked tails. What are they? The penny drops. They are milkfish, and big ones too! Unfortunately, no one brought a fly rod or a milkfish fly. We catch some fish for dinner as the sun disappears behind the horizon and the sea becomes oily smooth.





The boatmen traversed remote swamps to reach the freshwater lakes that hold Papuan black snapper.

►► In the middle of the night, we are awakened out of the blue by a huge bang of lightning. The wind suddenly picks up to gale force and we do everything we can to keep the tents from flying into the air.

A strong northeast wind blasts in, lasts for several days and complicates our fishing. The big schools of baitfish are nowhere to be found and likewise the game fish we are after. We make the best of it, casting, trolling, jigging and shore fishing. Fortunately, we catch some nice Bohar snappers and longnose emperors, a few GTs and bluefin trevallies, a couple of large Spanish macks, and we lose two very large groupers.



Our camp was a simple Papuan hut.



Arnout with another Papuan black snapper, a strong, aggressive, hard-fighting game fish!

The wind dies down the night before our departure and we sail back comfortably to the mainland the next morning. Along the way, we swam for an hour with two whale sharks at a fishing platform run by local fishermen. It was a unique and unforgettable experience for all of us!

## Heading to the inland lakes

After a good night's sleep, we begin the long journey to our next destination. We travel three hours by road, ninety minutes in a dugout canoe that included a stop at a police station to obtain our passes and another thirty-minute boat ride to reach a house on stilts at the bottom of a beautiful bay where we spent the night. We depart early the next morning for a one-hour boat trip to the mouth of a river and travel upstream for another 3 hours. Finally, around a bend three stilt houses pop up. The last one shelters us for the next few days, it offers just enough space for our tents and our gear. Looking at the palm-leaf roof, I hope we won't get too much rain...

We leave our hut in the afternoon and enter a maze of creeks, lakes and narrow passages. We see the drag marks of a large crocodile on a dry mud bank. 'Salties' live here too. The guides tell us with a smile that there are crocodiles of more than 4-5 meters. Large fields of water plants and lilies hinder our progress but after half an hour the horizon opens, and we discover a vast lake with mountains further inland.

## Papuan bass equipment

### Rod and reels:

Two set-ups needed:

**Lake fishing:** Heavy (XH) casting or spinning rods, 6.6 to 7.6 ft rigged with PE 3-5 braid (50-70 lb).

**River and estuary fishing:** Super heavy XXH or XXXH travel rods like the Bone Voyage Beast XXXH outfitted with PE 6-8 braid (80-100 lb), tough reels like the Daiwa Tatula TWS 300HSL.

And don't forget a spare rod, or two!

**Lures:** Floating stick baits of 12-15 cm such as, Rapala Precision Xtreme Pencil 130, Duo Realis Pencil 130 and 150 and Sakura Naja 145's.

Medium-sized poppers like the Halco Roosta 135. Jerk baits and twitch baits. The Salmo Fatso 12 cm proved once again its catching power. Spinnerbaits, weedless soft lures and floating medium and deep diving crankbaits like Deps Cascabel, Salmo Hornet 9 cm, Halco Poltergeist 80 and 110, Zerek Colossal Ruby, Rapala X-Rap Magnum.

**Hooks:** 4x/5x trebles and strong single hooks with XXH split rings. It's best to crimp the barbs to avoid potential accidents.

**Shock leader:** Mono or fluorocarbon 60-70 lb for lakes and 80-130 lb for the rivers.

**Boga Grip:** Essential tool to land and handle Papuan bass.



A selection of the floating stick baits used on the Papuan lakes.



Crankbaits are often used in the rivers.

The lake is fringed by wide lily pads and in many places thick weed beds. It's not deep, one or two metres on average, four or five metres maximum. The water here,

unlike the river, is quite clear. We begin fishing with topwater lures, walk-the-dog type stick baits of 12 to 15 cm. We get action on some smaller fish, only one of which



The Rapala Precision Xtrem Pencil had great success with bass on the calm lakes.





►►► comes aboard. I change to a black Super Shad Rap and a nice bass grabs it right at the boat. Back at camp, we hear the other boat had some action and it gives us hope for the next few days.

## Explosive Topwater Strikes

The following days we get a lot of heart-pounding explosive strikes from angry bass on top water lures. Bass can come out of nowhere at any time, even in the middle of the lake but most often strikes occur close to thick weed beds. A couple of 10 kg+ fish have been released with the biggest being a 12 kg bass caught by my companion, Max. The giant fish made a big bow wake before hitting the lure full on. Luckily everything stayed in one piece! We know there are fish of more than 15kg here. On one of Olivier's scouting trips a 17-kilos bass was caught with a floating stick bait.

« Last morning on the lakes; we leave our hut at dawn and as the fog lifts, we hear a fish hunting three times in the distance: BOOF!

It doesn't take long for Maarten to get a violent take on his Xtreme Pencil stick bait and then pose with his beautifully colored Papuan bass of 8.5 kg. He grins from ear to ear. In the clear, shallow water we see a lot of tilapias, a species that was introduced into New Guinea. They are now prey fish that along with frogs are at the top of the menu for Papuan bass. We see another big fish hunting at the edge of a small reed island, but it refuses our lures. Suddenly, in the corner of my eye I see a bass chasing prey. My cast is perfect and instantly my stick bait disappears in a fury of water. It is a brutal fight and afterwards we admire another Papuan bass.

The sun rises higher in the sky, and we won't see fish activity anymore, but we know that another bass can take our lures at any moment. I blind cast my Sakura Naja 145



Mangrove jack (another Lutjanid species) with impressive canines caught at a river mouth.

over a weed bed and, Boommm! There's a huge explosion. Before I can do anything, the fish buries itself into the weeds and it's over. We're all left speechless and bewildered. It was a monster fish. What violence!

We joke with our guides during lunch about the explosive attacks from Papuan Bass. I yell "Boommm!" and they bend over in laughter. The afternoon session starts slowly but changes during the last hour of the day when I get a follow from a large, clearly aggressive fish. It turns away at the last moment because a thick bed of weeds blocks its path. Then, another big fish head butts Maarten's stick bait and kicks it out of the water. Soon after, I see a large swirl behind my stick bait and keep working the lure. My heart rate was near 200 before there's a huge explosion of water and the rod was nearly pulled out of my hands.

« Another 'boommm!', another bass that get unhooked in seconds! It can't spoil the fun, those explosive surface bites are so addictive."

We move locations the following morning and after a period of

rain travel to the coast. We plan to explore two estuaries for a day and a half and target Papuan bass, mangrove jack (aka mangrove snapper) and especially spottail bass (*Lutjanus goldiei*), another type of Papuan bass with a distinctive black dot on its body, but the recent rains have colored the water and dashed our hopes for catching one.

The fishing starts slowly, but in the afternoon, Max gets a huge swirl under his stick bait. Soon after I got a violent strike on my Daps Cascabel. I struggle to keep the rod and line from hitting the edge of the boat while the fish dives toward structure. I tighten the drag to stop the fish but it's all in vain. The boat drifts with the current and I feel the line 80lb braid rubbing branches. The line breaks and its game over before the engine can start. It was a big bass, but my disappointment softens when I catch another decent Papuan bass. Still, the lost fish haunts me.

We caught a few small GTs on the last day and a large mangrove jack with impressive canines. We make one final attempt at the river mouth and after a hundred casts a fish attacks my Cascabel close to the bank and near a palm trunk standing out of the water. Pak Nona, our boatman, puts the engine in full reverse while I try to stop the fish, but I can't prevent it from diving behind the trunk. It's another crazy 'thumb-burning' fight before I land the beautiful 'last minute' Papuan bass. It's the perfect end to another great adventure with Olivier! ♦

