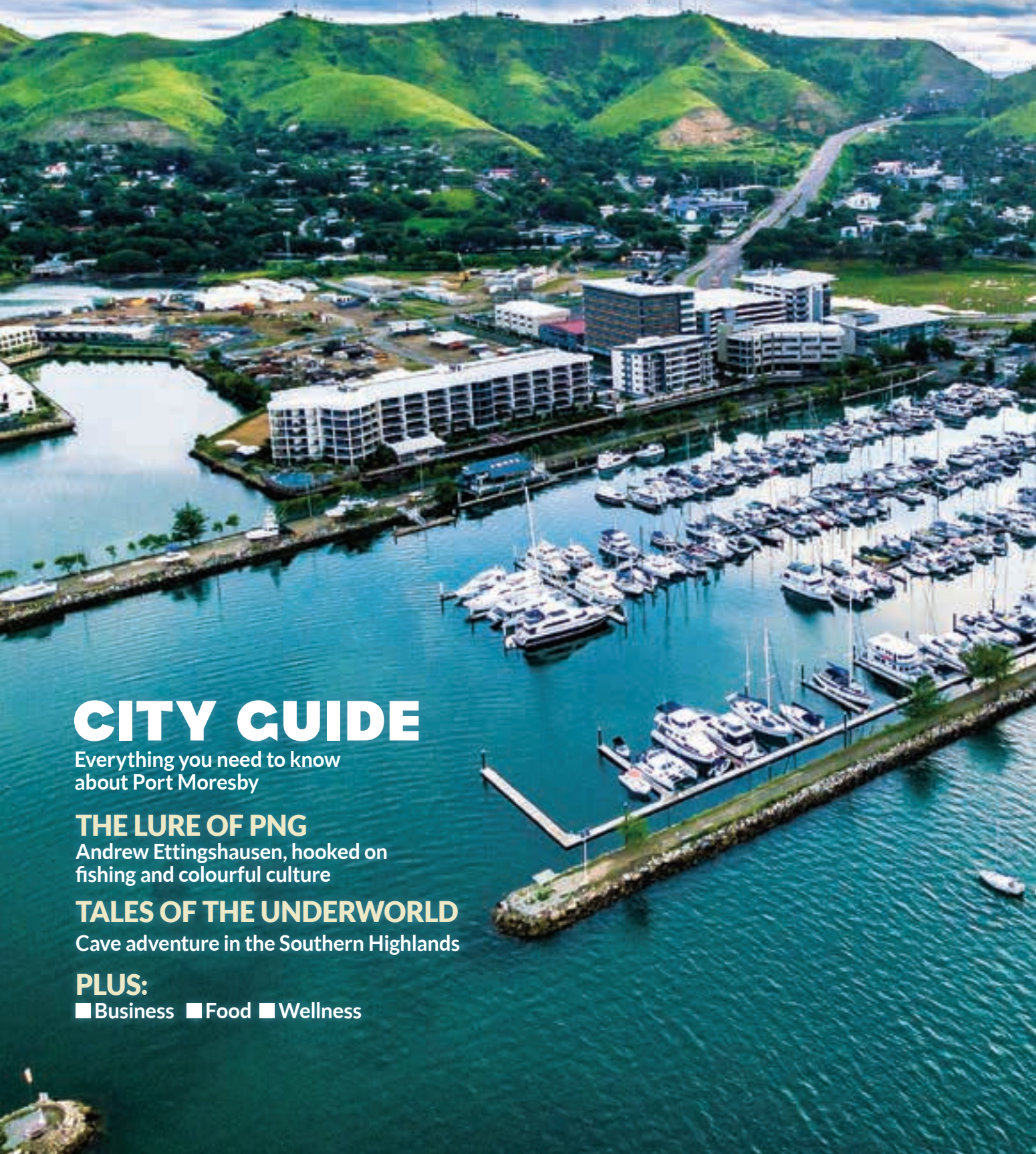


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PARADISE



CITY GUIDE

Everything you need to know
about Port Moresby

THE LURE OF PNG

Andrew Ettingshausen, hooked on
fishing and colourful culture

TALES OF THE UNDERWORLD

Cave adventure in the Southern Highlands

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Peter Maitz ... has embarked on a project to chronicle *Unserdeutsch* before it is lost to the world.

PNG's endangered language

Unserdeutsch might be the world's most unusual and endangered language. Brian Johnston investigates a PNG linguistic oddity with a fascinating history.

There are many unusual things about *Unserdeutsch*, a hybrid blend of old-fashioned German and Papua New Guinean creole that emerged in the Rabaul region over 100 years ago.

Spoken today by just a handful of people – most of whom live in Australia – *Unserdeutsch* is so endangered it will likely vanish soon. Only ever spoken among a small and unusual community, *Unserdeutsch* is a time capsule that

preserves a particular moment in PNG's history, and tells an unusual tale. The story begins in PNG's almost forgotten German colonial past. There are few remnants of Germany's short-lived occupation of New



Guinea these days: the odd gravestone, old postage stamps, remnant architectural styles on Rabaul buildings. Mostly, the period is remembered in geographical names such as Mount Hagen, Mount Wilhelm and the Bismarck Archipelago. The Germans arrived late on the imperial stage in 1884, and by 1914 were gone.

Nevertheless, trade and religion played an important role in the German colonial empire, as everywhere else on the colonial scene. Many plantations were in the hands of the church, missionary order Sisters of the Sacred Heart was active, and the Catholic diocese New Pomerania was founded in Rabaul. This is where the story of *Unserdeutsch* – literally, ‘Our German’ – begins.

In 1897 a Catholic orphanage was opened on the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain among the mixed-race community of Vunapope near Rabaul. Mixed-race children remained at the mission in social isolation and weren’t allowed to speak anything but German, though most spoke Pidgin, an early form of Tok Pisin. Eventually, the children developed their own very particular creole among themselves.

Unserdeutsch can be compared with Tok Pisin, as both emerged during the German colonial period and both are creoles with a European vocabulary, yet a local language grammar. However, Tok Pisin uses only a handful of words of German origin, such as *ananas* for ‘pineapple’, *gumi* for ‘rubber’ and *bensin* for ‘petrol’. Nearly all *Unserdeutsch*’s vocabulary is German. The language sounds like German to outsiders, and regular German speakers can understand much of it, even though it doesn’t follow German syntax or sentence structure.

“*Unserdeutsch* emerged to define a particular mixed-race group in an environment in which they were considered neither white nor local,”

explains professor Peter Maitz from the University of Augsburg, who is spearheading research into the disappearing language. “Their own secret language gave them a group identity, so it primarily had a social rather than communication function.”

Whereas most languages take hundreds of years to emerge, *Unserdeutsch* appeared rather quickly, perhaps within 30 years, which is one reason it managed to survive despite the shortness of German colonial rule. It developed in a concentrated situation in which children

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lived in social isolation and, as adults, were employed by the same mission. It was a closed, tight-knit community in which intermarriage was common.

Though such creoles are relatively common, they generally develop among adult communities of traders or slaves as a necessity of communication. *Unserdeutsch* is unusual in emerging among children who already had another language in common.

“We find something similar in New Caledonia in the French-based creole, Tayo, that apparently emerged in a boarding-school setting, but otherwise *Unserdeutsch* might be unique,” says Maitz.

This is also the world’s only German creole. “What’s more, it’s the German of a hundred years ago, using words that nobody uses in contemporary German,” marvels Maitz. “It’s like a fossil in a stone, preserving something from the past.”

With PNG independence in 1975, many of the *Unserdeutsch* community, who had always suffered mixed-race discrimination, migrated to Australia. Most now live in Brisbane, Cairns or Sydney. That, too, makes it unusual among languages, which, even if they spread elsewhere, generally remain rooted to their country of origin.

Remarkably, it was only in 1970’s Australia that *Unserdeutsch* came to outside attention when University of Queensland student, Craig Volker was teaching German on the Gold Coast and met an *Unserdeutsch* speaker. The university thesis on *Unserdeutsch* that he wrote (Volker is now a professor of linguistics) later inspired Maitz to re-examine the nearly extinct language.

Today, only some 100 *Unserdeutsch* speakers remain, and many are into old age. The increased mobility of the community and marriage with non-speakers has eroded the language and, although younger family members may comprehend *Unserdeutsch*, few can speak it.

Maitz is heading efforts with colleagues in PNG, Germany and Australia to document the language in a digital archive of recorded interviews with *Unserdeutsch* speakers. Based on this data, researchers hope to systematically describe the language’s grammar, vocabulary and history. A rather specialist interest certainly, but one that shines a light on a fascinating corner of PNG history. ■

TALKING POINTS

UNSERDEUTSCH is a hybrid language blend of old-fashioned German and Papua New Guinean creole. About 100 people speak it.

CREOLE is a mother tongue formed from the contact of a European language with local languages.

ENGLISH, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu are the official languages of PNG. (Sign language was added as a fourth in 2015.)

TOK PISIN is the most widely spoken language in PNG. *The Economist* recently reported that four million people speak it.

OF PNG’S 850+ languages, ethnologue.com reports that 41 are dying and 121 are in trouble.

