

Getting Closer to West Papua Culture through the Grand Baliem Valley Festival

Cultural events in **West Papua** are something every traveler to eastern Indonesia must see. Baliem Valley Festival is a popular cultural event held every August in Baliem Valley, Wamena. Challenging access only serves as a boost for travelers to come and see the excitement of this festival.

Here are things you should know before planning your trip to see the event.

The Origin of Baliem Valley Festival

Baliem Valley Festival rooted from actual tribal wars between the Yali, Dani, and Lani tribes. The three tribes used to fight among themselves because of various things, from avenging killed warriors to protecting villagers from raids and attacks. However, in 1989, the tribes decided to make peace and converted these battles into an annual festival, which was later opened for outsiders.

The festival has attracted foreign travelers and media, which later spread the words. Just like in actual tribal wars, the Yalis, Danis, and Lanis send their best warriors to participate in mock battles. Each warrior wears distinctive regalia from his respective tribe, complete with weapons such as spears, bows, and arrows. The warriors even throw spears and shoot arrows to each other, accompanied by battle cries.

While the festival does not evolve into an actual battleground, the warriors still show exuberance and ferociousness; so intense that first-time viewers may think it is real. The aim is to mimic the real battle, but without any killing involved. When a participant gets injured, he will be immediately carried outside the venue. Visitors also watch from safe distances, to minimize the risk of getting hit by flying spears and arrows.

Activities in the Festival

Baliem Valley Festival is a place where the cultures of different tribal groups clash, which makes the sceneries very diverse and colorful. Thousands of tribe members that join wearing vibrant regalia, complete with modern accessories such as sunglasses. The highlight of the festival is a mock war, so visitors can expect cheers, shouts, roars, and other loud noises during the event. You are even encouraged to cheer loudly along with the warriors, making the event livelier.

Mock battles are not the only things visitors can witness. You can also see massive feast where the locals show how to cook pigs and roots on earth. There are also traditional dance and music performances, along with competitions such as archery and spear-throwing. Visitors can also buy authentic handicrafts on the spot, made by the tribe members specially to be sold here.

After the festival ends, visitors can visit nearby Dani Market and buy handicrafts, souvenirs, traditional foods, and herbal remedies. The more adventurous travelers can do a two-hour climbing to see Dani women making salt using traditional, centuries-old methods in salt springs. There are several villages that are open for tourists, such as Aikima and Wauma, which can be reached by car. You are advised to go in a group for these extra adventures.

Why You Must See Baliem Valley Festival

Baliem Valley Festival is held in a difficult venue, and the cost to visit Wamena is not cheap, so why should you go there?

Visiting this festival will give you opportunities to see the representations of various West Papua cultures at one spot. The three “warring tribes” that participate have distinctive cultural identities, such as their regalia, body paints, and dances. The festival is your opportunity to witness diverse cultures without going to different parts of West Papua.

You can also witness parts of authentic culture that you cannot witness elsewhere. For example, when the locals cook pigs and roots, they will use stones and leaves to roast the

foods on the earth. If you prefer to buy authentic handicrafts that are 100 percent locally-made, this festival is a great place for shopping.

Finally, Baliem Valley Festival is a great destination for adventurous travelers. Since the trip is quite challenging, travelers will feel rewarded once they arrive at the venue. The venue is surrounded by rainforests and valleys, making the experience even more exhilarating.

How to Reach Baliem Valley

Indonesian government opened certain parts of Baliem Valley for the festival. However, reaching this place is still quite challenging. Travelers can fly from Jakarta to Jayapura, the capital city of Papua Province, and continue with the smaller plane to Wamena. There are several airlines that offer flights to Wamena, such as AMA, Trigana, MAF, Manunggal Air, and Yajasi. Travelers who board flights to Wamena directly after landing in Jayapura can arrive on the same day.

Travelers must also prepare well to spend time in Wamena. The prices of simple meals in food stalls, for example, can be twice higher than standard rates in Jakarta. Travelers must also dress appropriately to face challenging terrain, with comfortable clothes, shoes, and hats. Reporting the itinerary to the local police station before heading to the venue is necessary.

Baliem Valley Festival is an exciting and memorable cultural event. Grab your camera and see the rich culture of **West Papua** represented in this festival.