En route to the hamlet of Ambunti, it’s hard to imagine what secrets are hidden in the surrounding thicket. The Sepik headwaters are fed by the Star Mountains in remote Papua New Guinea and run eastward through hills, valleys and tropical rainforest until eventually flowing into the Pacific after 1126 kilometres. Although it’s considered Papua New Guinea’s main traffic artery, very few gravel roads connect the mighty river with the outside world. With the annual Sepik River Crocodile Festival, outsiders are given a unique chance to interact with the local people. Every August, the tribal heartland pays homage to the revered crocodile; for centuries, it was believed that humans evolved from the predatory reptile, but today it’s a source of income driven by a rising cash economy. The event showcases an authentic blend of chants and dances from various tribes, like the acclaimed crocodile hunters of Swagup, who come to display their cultural heritage. Carefully applied body paint adorns the performers who swing their live crocodile mascots and traditionally crafted bilum bags through the air to the beat of Kundu drums.
To this day, some villagers talk to crocodiles, possums, rats and mosquitoes. This is used to confuse the enemy or simply gather food.

A girl presents the crocodile her tribe caught the night before. Usually, these small crocs are farmed until they reach trading size.

Feathers of rare birds are a typical adornment and represent a tribe's society, as does bilum – woven reeds used to make clothing and bags.

This dance, accompanied by chants and drumming, is usually performed at weddings and celebrations, with Christmas a recent addition to the calendar.
A Nenets woman and her child stand in front of their camp with their reindeer. A performer wears a warrior outfit from Swagup’s Insect tribe. These people are fierce hunters and the main suppliers of crocodiles for a farm in Pagwi.

A dugout canoe is used to travel up the Sepik to the crocodile hunting grounds. Covered in charcoal and ready to rock. The appearance of the Insect tribesmen is among the most intimidating at the festival.

An Insect tribesman watches as a masked dancer takes centre stage. The Swagup performers make up one of a dozen tribal cliques who showcase their traditions at Ambunti.

A small crocodile is caught on the banks of the Sepik. During the hunt, torchlight is shone on the riverbank until the eyes of an unlucky beast are reflected. A tribesman swings his crocodile through the air to entertain spectators. Over the years, the once worshipped reptile has become a source of income.