

FALLING FOR FATBOYS

Just a few hours from Australia's east coast lies a tropical paradise that's pretty much unknown to tourists.

CLAIRE CHAFFEY discovers one of the most beautiful – and remote – resorts on earth.

There are very few places in the world that can lay claim to being truly unspoiled. Mbabanga Island, in the Solomon Islands' Western Province, is one. With this enviable descriptor comes the necessary element of remoteness, which means getting to the island is nothing short of a grand adventure.

An hour's flight in a Dash-8 from the Solomons capital, Honiara, is a spectacular family of about 50 islands that make up the Western Province. A further 10-minute motorboat ride from the tiny island that houses Gizo Airport is Fatboys Resort – a small sliver of heaven.

On approach to the Australian-owned resort, it's difficult to reconcile the name "Fatboys" with a location of such intense beauty. The reception area, which juts out over dazzlingly azure coral reef and also happens to be the bar, restaurant, and general lounging and swimming area, is the thing dreams are made of.

And there's one obvious thing missing: other people. The only company in this idyll is a gentle sea breeze, the echo of Bob Marley on the radio, and a freshly-made cocktail served by one of the few staff.

Founded in 2003, Fatboys is the brainchild of an adventurous Aussie who came, saw, and simply couldn't leave. There are just four bungalows and one self-contained unit here, so even when the resort is at capacity there is only a

handful of guests. The rooms are clean and comfortable and have fans, fridges, hot water and mosquito nets. This is a no-frills paradise – forget air-conditioning or televisions. But who needs it in such stunning surrounds?

Once settled into the slow rhythm of life on Mbabanga (and it doesn't take long) the aptness of the resort's name – which is derived from the character Joe in Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* whose sole aim was to eat, drink, sleep and avoid work – becomes apparent.

A typical day at Fatboys consists of a lazy breakfast of crayfish omelette and coffee followed by swimming, snorkelling, reading, paddle boarding and kayaking. Grilled crayfish and an icy Sol Brew or two make up lunch, followed by a well-earned snooze by the water's edge. More of the same fills up long, lazy afternoons, and the staff make every meal and activity an absolute pleasure.

Once your body clock adjusts to the languid pace of "island time" and you accept that things will happen when they happen, it's the perfect antidote to frenetic city life.

For those wanting to explore beyond the resort, it gets even better. Booking an afternoon of snorkelling within the so-called Fatboys Triangle – three unpopulated islands, including the famous Kennedy Island on which JFK was marooned during WWII – is an absolute highlight. The pure white sand, crystalline water and clutches of palm

trees on the islands are only bettered by what's beneath the surface: every species of tropical fish you can imagine (including families of clown and angel fish), reef sharks, turtles, and stretches of thriving, electric coral.

If you've got the energy, you can even catch your own dinner, with master seaman Panda on hand to take guests on the fishing adventure of a lifetime. Chances are you'll haul in a decent catch of parrot fish or mackerel that the chef will throw on the grill a bit later, and you get to enjoy the spectacular sunset on the way home. Make sure you're home by 7pm to witness the daily ritual of feeding the black tip reef sharks (or puppies of the sea, as they're affectionately known) that inhabit the waters.

There's pretty much no limit to what you can do at Fatboys: take a guided excursion to the subsistent Mbabanga village or the larger towns of Gizo and Munda, snorkel the nearby WWII Hellcat wreck, devour a crayfish barbecue on Kennedy Island, hike the volcano, surf the nearby bombora, or take your very own glass-bottomed boat as far as the eye can see.

For those more on the relaxation train, packing an Esky with champagne and heading out to one of the uninhabited islands to watch the sunset is a spiritual experience. It is almost impossible to believe that such remote and pristine beauty exists – and that you can have it all to yourself. **LSJ**



CHECKLIST

FATBOYS RESORT SOLOMON ISLANDS

Solomon Airlines flies daily from Brisbane to Honiara and Gizo. Flights start from about \$1,200 return to Gizo via Honiara.

Bungalows at Fatboys start at about \$250 per night. Activities requiring boat transport incur extra charges and can be arranged on site.

Wifi is available in the bar area.

solomonislandsfatboys.com.au

