

A WALK ON THE Wild Side

BY JADE HARRISON

The Solomon Islands is an untapped resource for those wanting to escape the tourist route and create their own adventure.

Reminiscent of what nearby Fiji may have been like 30 years ago, the Solomon Islands is still finding its proverbial 'tourism' feet, making it ideal for avid travellers who want to venture off the beaten track and succumb to a world of discovery and adventure.

Iridescent turquoise water, vast coral reefs and sandy deserted islands are the prominent offering of the Solomon Islands, however they are just a façade for the raw and unexposed experience that can be had by the ardent explorer who wants to reach out with both hands and grab it.

Positioned on the main island of Guadalcanal and home to the international airport, the capital Honiara is every bit the busy trading hub you'd expect from this sovereign country.

While it doesn't showcase the Solomon Islands in all its glory, it's best regarded as the gateway to a plethora of untouched pristine

islands that lay just off its coastline.

The main wharf is the centre for trade, and the Honiara Central Market is a Mecca for locals and merchants from nearby islands who trade fresh fish, vegetables and fruits on any given day.

The dusty roads, which are gridlocked at peak times, are dotted with humble one-storey buildings and shopfronts that spill locals out onto the busy footpath. Teenage girls walk along the side of the road, chatting with their scarlet-stained mouths as they chew on betel nut en route to school.

Stray dogs and chickens share the landscape alongside ramshackle housing that is propped up into the undulating hillside, but it's the US War Memorial that takes pride at the highest point, overlooking the city and beyond to Florida Islands, which impose the horizon.

The important monument highlights the Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II, when Allied forces fought off the Japanese who were





“Trevor, Chooky and Malcolm are three resident black-tip reef sharks that frequently visit the restaurant”

threatening the supply and communication routes between the US, Australia and New Zealand.

A number of new vibrant cafes and Honiara’s two main resorts, the Mendana Hotel and Heritage Park Hotel are a haven for Westerners who use the city as a base to explore the nearby tropical islands.

A short, 70-minute flight from Honiara is the quickest and easiest way to access the islands and get to the country’s second busiest city of Gizo. With a small wharf and town centre, Gizo is a portal to lagoons of clear, green water and quaint islands with sandy beaches and bending coconut palms. Local villages, tropical rainforest and the occasional eco-resort make up some of the larger islands, while others are simply deserted, sans footprints.

It’s a glorious eight-minute boat ride from Gizo to Mbabanga Island, where one village and an Australian-run resort resides. Fatboys Bar Restaurant Resort comprises of four bures nestled along the water’s edge, outdone only by the restaurant - a freestanding water pavilion built right out in the lagoon. It’s linked to the sandy shore by a long timber boardwalk, which hovers above the resident tropical reef fish that swirl in the waters below.

Decked out with recycled timber and oozing character, Fatboys restaurant has two timber jetties on either side, with

ladders straight down into the water, so you can snorkel around the restaurant anytime of the day or night.

Trevor, Chooky and Malcolm are three resident black-tip reef sharks that frequently visit the restaurant, and if you’re lucky, you may get to see them while you’re lolling about in the lagoon or sipping on a drink at the bar.

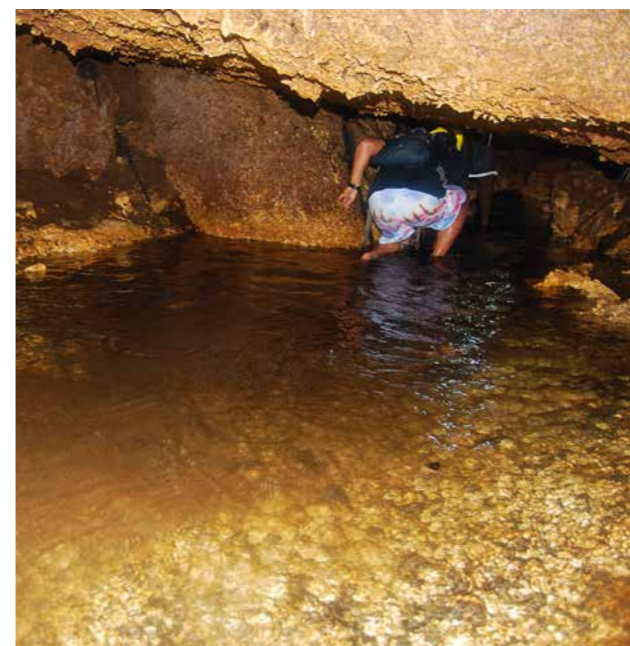
The resort looks straight across the lagoon to Kennedy Island, an island made famous by John F. Kennedy. During World War II, and prior to his reign as president, John F. Kennedy and his crew survived on this tiny island after their boat, the PT109, was rammed by a Japanese destroyer and sunk.

Originally known as Plum Pudding Island, it was renamed Kennedy Island and is now deserted, but stared at frequently from across the lagoon at Fatboys.

Kennedy Island and surrounding atolls are best explored by one of the canoes or boats, which dock at the resort. Fatboys only hosts about 20 guests at full capacity, and as a result, you get exceptional service.

If you decide you want to island hop in your own boat for the day, they’ll pack you a picnic, load you up with snorkelling and fishing gear and will even stock you an Esky from the bar.

Nearby Naru Island is just a few minutes by boat and has perfect white sandy beaches plus a cute beachfront pavilion-cum-chapel for weddings and functions. Just a few minutes



GONE TROPPO

Clockwise from top left: Kids jumping from a local jetty; One of the bungalows at Titiru Eco Lodge; Venturing through Chief Willy’s Cave

Opposite page: The boat trip from Fatboys to Naru Island, near Gizo

Opening spread: Happiness is that perfect mix between tradition and today

across the lagoon on the other side is Sandy Island, a magical, deserted, white-sand oasis with nothing but a small clump of trees and a pristine reef that teeters off the edge.

The snorkelling is magnificent. Just pull the boat up onto the shore and walk straight out to a fantastic coral reef shelf that houses an abundance of tropical fish and turtles. The experience is so raw, you feel as though you’re the first human to ever set foot on the island.

To put fish on the menu, you just have to boat a few minutes out from Sandy Island to a fishing hotspot the locals at Fatboys call Nathan’s Garden. Trawling with lures is the best way to hook yourself a coral trout or kingfish and the chef at Fatboys will cook it to your liking for lunch or dinner.

As you venture throughout the Solomon Islands, you’ll indulge in a mostly organic diet of fresh fish, coconuts, chicken and vegetables. It’s a self-sufficient community where the ocean and the rainforest provide a staple diet and islanders who trade and swap produce on a daily basis.

In the islands just off Munda, you can get lost in the wilderness and experience village life first hand. On the edge of Sagiri Cove is a quaint eco lodge with four timber bungalows set amongst virgin forest. Here, you can get a taste of what Solomon Island life is really like.

Titiru Eco Lodge is run by Kilo and his wife Esther, who built the

lodge on a parcel of land that was handed down by his grandfather. In true entrepreneurial spirit, Kilo invested more than a year of time and money into developing the land, to create something many locals couldn’t quite fathom – an eco lodge.

A few years on and the lodge is now a great source of tourism and employment for the locals of the nearby village – one of the largest in the precinct. Kilo and Ester take guided walks through the village and the locals are still getting used to seeing foreigners, so they’re friendly yet inquisitive at the same time.

As a fairly new establishment in a country that is embracing tourism, Kilo and his team are still fine-tuning their hosting skills. However they are extremely hospitable and the experience is both authentic and truly unforgettable.

The four bungalows are simple and effective comprising beds with mosquito nets, and a small timber deck out the front to take in the serenity.

With no electricity and no reception, the best thing to do here is immerse yourself in nature, relax, and make the most of the activities Kilo has created for his guests - the activity list is hand-written on a timber A-frame in the dining pavilion.

On offer is a guided walk through Chief Willy’s Cave, an 800-metre underground grotto that was first discovered in 1968 by Kilo’s uncle and chief of the local village, Willy Lianga.



BLUES CLUES

Above: A busy day on Sandy Island

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Paradise can be romantic; Some of the fresh produce available at Honiara Market; Snorkelling

Only a handful of people have ever ventured into this cave, so you need to be prepared for the scampering of bats and crabs which flee as you flash your torch into the darkness, not to mention the eels which slither through the fresh water stream that lines the cave floor.

It's a head-bumping tight squeeze in some parts, and you'll need to get down on your hands and knees, but the hard work is well worth it.

After 45-minutes of sledging through thick mud, stomping in fresh water and climbing over rock, you emerge in the middle of the forest, dirty, fatigued and completely in awe of the experience.

En route back to the resort through the forest, Kilo and his friends stop to point out a number of important landmarks including a burial site and certain flora and fauna, which they use for medicinal purposes.

Before night falls, the staff prepare the evening's meal which is a mix of fresh produce gathered from the village, including fish, sweet potato and coconuts.

The dining bure is freestanding and is the main meeting place. It has a boardwalk that stretches through the mangroves to a timber jetty that overlooks the bay.

As the local kids swing from the trees into the water, some

 **travel facts**

GETTING THERE

Solomon Airlines is the national airline of the Solomon Islands. The airline currently operates regular full service flights from Brisbane to its home base in Honiara every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and from Honiara to Brisbane every Sunday, Monday, Thursday and Friday. Solomon Airlines' international network includes Fiji and Vanuatu. The airline also operates an extensive domestic network around the Solomon Islands. flysolomons.com

WHERE TO STAY

The Heritage Hotel in Honiara is well-appointed with 48 luxury rooms and 27 apartments positioned on the waterfront. whph.com.sb

Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel in Honiara has large, luxuriously refurbished rooms on the waterfront. kitanomendana.com/en

Fatboys Bar Restaurant Resort is on Mbabanga Island, just an eight-minute boat ride from Gizo. Transfers can be arranged when booking. solomonislandfatboys.com.au

Titiru Eco Lodge has four bungalows with double and single beds plus very clean shared bathroom facilities. titiruecolodge.com

WHERE TO EAT

Lime Lounge in Commonwealth Street and Breakwater Café (next door to The Heritage Hotel) in Honiara cater well to tourists with coffee and a western menu on offer. limelounge.com/sb

The Capitana Restaurant at the Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel has an extensive menu plus a very popular and affordable buffet on Wednesday nights. kitanomendana.com/en

Fatboys Bar and Restaurant is popular for day trippers as well as guests, with delicious gourmet food and a chef that will cook to your palette. solomonislandfatboys.com.au

Sanbis Resort near Gizo is a few minutes' boat ride from Fatboys and it has a restaurant specialising in wood-fire pizzas. sanbisresort.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

Solomon Island Visitors Bureau visitsolomons.com.sb



of Kilo's staff notice something in the water. They gather on the jetty, and watch the resident seven-foot crocodile floating through the bay. Having just swum in the same water, Kilo assures us that the crocodile has never taken anyone.

"It's OK. I've talked to the crocodile and told him that I will look after him if he looks after us. He will stay in the water and we will stay on the land. He no eat us. We have an understanding," he says with a smile. •

Photography by Jade Harrison and Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau



So Solomons, So Different!

Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific archipelago, comprising of a vast group of 922 breathtaking tropical islands. Experience a culture, rich with traditional customs, art, dance and the panpipe music of 'Are Are'. See the fierceness of the World War II battles on land and underwater. Explore Honiara's cosmopolitan and colourful food market in downtown Honiara. Feel the spirit of adventure, enjoy a special piece of paradise or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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