

8 great reasons to visit the SOLOMON ISLANDS

Just three hours north-east of Brisbane by plane, the Solomon Islands is a sparkling collection of 900-odd emerald jewels stretching across aqua waters. Here are just some of the reasons you should visit this Pacific paradise.

WORDS Christine Retschlag



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1 *You can eat lobster every day for a week*

Who ordered the lobster? For those who adore these colourful crustaceans but can't afford the price tag usually attached to a lobster dinner, welcome to your nirvana. In the Solomon Islands you can order lobster every day, in every way, without breaking the bank. Start at the Heritage Park Hotel (heritageparkhotel.com) in Honiara where you can feast on this beast, bathed in garlic. At Fatboys Resort (solomonislandsfatboys.com.au), near Gizo, the lobster practically jumps out of the ocean on to your jetty restaurant plate, with fishermen making daily deliveries out here. At Tavanipupu Island Resort (tavanipupu.com), at Marau Sound, dine on lobster mornay cooked by one of the country's finest chefs. Or head to Sanbis Resort (sanbisresort.com), near Gizo, where you can enjoy a lobster pizza cooked in what must be the Southern Hemisphere's only over-water pizza oven. Fancy lobster for breakfast? Order the omelette at the Agnes Gateway Hotel (agneshotel.solomon.com) in Munda.

2 *It's one of the last digital-detox spots on the planet*

If your idea of a relaxing holiday is truly escaping, then you're in luck. While phone and internet connectivity is available at most Honiara hotels and in some outer resort receptions, Wi-Fi can be patchy. Even if you buy a local SIM card from Solomon Telekom, you may not always be connected. Our advice: simply switch off. At Fatboys Resort they'll even offer to boat you out to a remote sandbank where you can enjoy the setting sun and not even have to tell another soul about it.

3 *There's no place like a homestay*

There's a wide variety of lovely accommodation options in the Solomon Islands, but for a truly authentic experience consider staying in a local village or homestay. Saeragi on Gizo Island claims to be the Solomons' "most beautiful beach" and here you'll find two comfortable huts perched right on her sandy shores. During your stay you'll be invited to interact with the local villagers, where you'll learn anything from palm frond weaving and coconut husking to fishing, cooking and traditional dancing. And at Oravae Cottage (oravaecottage.com), a 20-minute boat ride from Gizo, you'll find an open-plan wooden bungalow plus a penthouse and treehouse.

4 *The drinks are cool*

Forget the coconut water craze that's currently sweeping Australian cities. Here, it's the real deal: fresh coconuts plucked straight

from the tree and sold at the markets and on restaurant menus. For a really cool cafe, head to Honiara's Lime Lounge Café (limelounge.com.sb). You'll find coconut and fresh juices and great coffee among their extensive food menu. For those who prefer a cold beer on a hot day, the Solomons' own SolBrew is sold almost everywhere and is a tasty, inexpensive ale. Forget a drive-through: for a really cool experience, ask your boat driver to pull in at the Gizo bottle shop and float right up to buy takeaway wine and spirits at reasonable prices.

5 *You can enjoy overwater spas*

Imagine indulging in a relaxing massage in a thatched overwater hut and you've pretty much got the picture at Tavanipupu Island Resort. With two treatment rooms, the menu includes Balinese, Swedish and deep-tissue massage, as well as Ayurvedic Indian head therapy, deep tissue, shiatsu and sports therapy. Herbal spa body treatments use local ingredients and spices blended on the island. At Sanbis Resort near Gizo, there's a dedicated massage parlour at the end of the jetty where you can enjoy a Lomi Lomi or Swedish massage.

6 *There's history galore*

From the moment you land at Honiara International Airport (formerly known as Henderson Field, but more commonly referred to as "Fighter One"), you've entered the pages of a history book. It was on this very strip back in 1942 that the Americans landed after the attack on Pearl Harbor to protect the Pacific. Nearby, "Fighter Two" was another landing strip for the Americans, and is now a golf course. There's World War II history dotted everywhere around these islands, both on land and under water.

7 *Shop like a local*

While Honiara has plenty of optimistically named shops such as Excellent Fashion, Fantastic Hardware and the Happiness Shop; visitors will find plenty of colour and life at local marketplaces such as in Gizo. Wade through stalls selling mangoes, watermelon, green coconuts, red peppers, betel nuts and fish.

8 *The culture is strong*

Home to three groups of people (the Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian) who speak more than 70 languages, tradition and culture cut deep here. From festivals celebrating shell money used in marriage, to skull shrines and dugout canoes, this is one of the last bastions of authenticity.

The writer travelled as a guest of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau; visitsolomons.com.sb



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