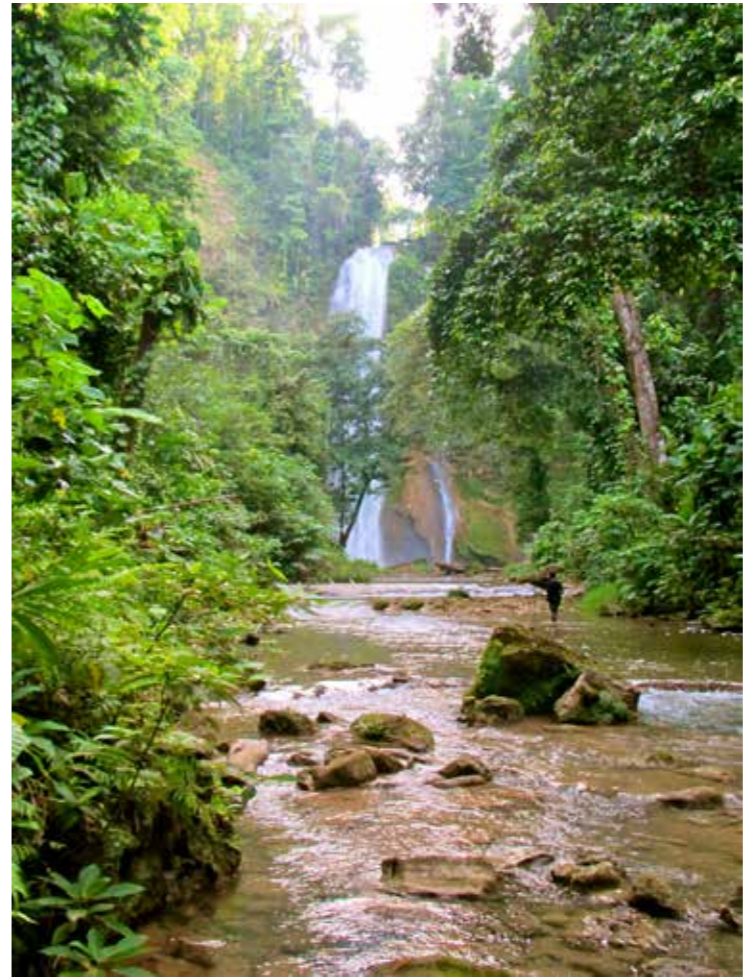


Guadalcanal – Back to the Future

Words and images by Tim Roxborough

Legends and myths thrive in the Solomon Islands, but perhaps none so captivating as the stories of giants who live deep within the jungles of Guadalcanal. Rumours tell of a race of giants, as tall as 10-15ft, inhabiting the mountainous forests of the island's interior, only occasionally leaving their homes by the cover of night to terrorise the low-lying villages.



I spoke with locals who chuckled as they dismissed the giant tales as nothing more than the old fashioned folklore of a country where fear, hardship and unexplained death give natural rise to myths. But I also saw the stony-faced expressions of Solomon Islanders who genuinely believe there's a humanoid subspecies hiding in what is reportedly the most significant rainforest in all of the South Pacific.

We were right in it too, though less in search of giants and more on a muddy mission to find a waterfall. With fellow explorer and travel writer Annabel, and our barefoot local guide Godfrey, we'd been driven by 4WD high into the jungles. Passing logging trucks on the steep, dirt roads along the way, I prayed they weren't doing too much damage. As it stands, more than 70% of the Solomon Islands remain as virgin tropical rainforest and in a desperately poor country, environmental groups are hoping that potential eco-tourist dollars will outweigh the short-term economic gains of tree-felling.

The wilds of the jungle combined with cultural triggers of being in a developing nation where English (as well as pidgin English) is spoken, reminded me of Belize in Central America. Belize is an adventure; a tiny country with spectacular dark jungles, ancient Mayan caves and a heavy air of intrigue. With its underwater riches as similarly special as those in the Solomon Islands, I kept thinking I was back there.

Having left the 4WD at a small mountain-top resort with views all the way out to the coastline below, Godfrey had us setting a good pace through the forest. As I clambered and perspired, Godfrey did it all without shoes and seemingly without a bead of sweat. A young man in his 20's, he told us how his family hadn't had enough money to always send him to school. He was shy but friendly and as relaxed as if we were guests checking out his backyard. Perhaps we were.

Descending through the jungle towards the Chea River, we clung to vines, bounced from tree to tree and ultimately gave in to the mud. Reaching the river was worth it. Towering from both sides was untamed jungle of such beauty I realised I was slowing down Godfrey and Annabel to keep pressing click on my camera. Walking over rocks and wading through the water, after 90 minutes we could hear the pounding.

Rounding a bend, vines dangled from branches straddling the river, only slightly distracting from what was behind: the 61m high Tenaru Falls. Widely hailed as one of the must-see waterfalls of the South Pacific, we ditched our bags and jumped in the circular pool at the foot of the falls.



A flat, dusty city with not one set of traffic lights, not a solitary cinema and some of the least inspiring architecture you could imagine paints a picture of Honiara that is not particularly attractive. But it's also a simplistic snapshot of a place that has emerged from civil unrest some years ago to be regarded as generally pretty safe. There are now some good international standard hotels with one - the Heritage Park - serving excellent meals courtesy of an acclaimed Sri Lankan chef.

Then there are things like the Botanic Gardens, tucked away behind a prison and with little signage to let you know that 'Yes', heading down a path next to the barbed-wire fence is not the wrong way. There are rewards for the curious because down that path next to the jail was a largely unkempt botanic garden almost as sensational as the jungle by the waterfall.

Central Honiara is just 15 minutes by coastal road from Bonegi Beach and a pair of shipwrecks so close to the shore you can put your snorkel on, jump in the sea and be swimming amongst the fish and the ruins within minutes. This is hardly the only spot in the country where a love of adventure and an interest in WW2 history can combine. There are literally dozens of WW2 aeroplanes and shipwrecks to snorkel or dive in the Solomon Islands (the Battle of Guadalcanal killed more than 38,000 soldiers and was America's first WW2 involvement after Pearl Harbour) with one stretch of water so littered with vessels it's known as Iron Bottom Sound.

One of the more remarkable WW2 sights on Guadalcanal comes at an outdoor WW2 museum next to Tetere Beach, 40 minutes west of Honiara. Lying virtually as they were in 1942 is a collection of American amphibious tanks whose primary purpose was to transport the troops to shore. While some of the tanks were used for parts and others driven further afield, many were simply abandoned at this beach.

As the years passed the jungle has reclaimed these rusting vehicles of war and the sight of huge trees, sprouting from inside the tanks, had echoes of the temples and tumbling roots of the silk trees in Cambodia.

Unable to get right underneath due to the force of the falling water, the visual of the jungle and the curve of green rocky walls that flanked the falls was magic.

Godfrey kept watch on both of us and the position of the sun in the sky, ensuring we didn't get lost in the jungle in the diminishing light. Burning more calories than I have in a long time, the return along the river and back up the hill along the muddy trail was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. Farewelling Godfrey at the mountaintop resort, it was back in the 4WD for the hour-long drive to the Solomon's capital, Honiara.



As a developing country in the South Pacific, this WW2 history is a unique selling point as far as tourism goes. Add to that the jungle and the vibrant underwater sights and there is real potential for overseas visitor numbers to lift. That to one side though, the locals we met seemed most keen to show off their culture to the outside world.

We were welcomed into a small, traditional Melanesian village (Lumatapopoho) as well as a much larger ethnically Polynesian village (Sikaiana). The sight of dozens of school children at Sikaiana singing songs and waving flags to herald the arrival of our party won't be forgotten anytime soon.

facts:

Tim Roxborough travelled as a guest of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. Visits to cultural villages such as Lumatapopoho and Sikaiana are recommended and can be organised through the Bureau. The Bureau can also arrange for day tours to Tenaru Falls and the various WW2 sites of Guadalcanal.

www.visitsolomons.com.sb

To then be seated to a feast on banana leaves as women waved away the flies while we watched the adults perform traditional song and dance reinforced just how humbling this was.

It's too easy to get blasé about visiting the places people live when we travel, but there was something very infectious about the sincerity of the Sikaiana welcome, just what our presence meant to them and how much it's tied up with their hopes for the future. I hope good days are ahead. ■

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