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Solomon Islands' bloody history makes Pacific archipelago a must-see for war buffs

Once home to headhunting cannibals, the Solomon Islands' more recent – but still bloody – history makes them a must-see for divers and people interested in the war in the Pacific

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The small brass medallion is worn at the edges and scuffed from being buried for more than half a century, but the raised lettering reads: "1932 Marbles Champion. The Columbus Citizen. District Champion."

Alphy Paulsen turns the medallion over in his fingers and buffs it with a thumb. Its owner is unknown but his remains most probably were those of a soldier who died in the war. The United States Marines knew the area as Bloody Hill.

Today the jungle has reclaimed the battlefield at the western end of New Georgia, in Western Province of the Solomon Islands. Bloody Hill is inland of the beaches along which US forces came ashore on July 2, 1943, in one of the earliest Pacific amphibious landings of the war.

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Within a couple of days, the Japanese had reorganised their defences to protect the town of Munda and its critically important airfield. The fighting on and around Bloody Hill was precisely that.

"Looking at it now, you wouldn't know what went on there," says Paulsen, a wiry 55-year-old who lives in Munda behind Munda's soccer field and who 20 years ago set up a private museum.

"I go out a couple of times a week and I used to have to rely on a metal rod that I would push down into the soil at different spots until I hit something solid," he says. His search for the detritus of war has been made far simpler since he was given a metal detector.

Whether the solid contact is by rod or electronic beep, the subsequent procedure is the same. Paulsen gets down on his knees and starts digging. And he digs extremely carefully, as he often comes across live – and badly corroded – ammunition. More than once he has found a booby trap with the capacity still to maim or kill more than 70 years after it was set.

Sea-level rise claims five islands in Solomons

"Sometimes it will be a mess tin, either Japanese or American, or a helmet or the head of an entrenching tool," he says. "Other times, if I've found one of the foxholes that they dug, there will be lots of ammunition, bayonets, buttons, cleaning rods for their weapons and even guns."



Alphy Paulsen with some of his private museum.

No matter that he has hundreds of identical belt buckles, first-aid kits or Bakelite receivers from field radios, he brings whatever it to the museum, meticulously cleans it and adds it to his collection.

Live like a Papuan: back-to-basics homestays in a marine paradise

He has the skeletal remains of a Thompson submachine gun and a Japanese officer's Nambu pistol. There is a trench knife, with stamped with the date 1918, and Coca-Cola bottles. The fins of mortar shells stand alongside tent pegs, hurricane lamps and the p a landing craft. Just outside the door is the casing of a 250lb bomb excavated during the recent extension of Munda airfield. He as has been made safe.



A monument in Honiara pays tribute to the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatcher units.

Inevitably, Paulsen also discovers human remains. When he does, he marks the site and officials at the appropriate embassy in Honiara, the capital of the Solomons, so the body repatriated. On a chain in the museum are dozens of dog tags bearing the name, number and town of some of the men who died on Bloody Hill: Albert Fiore of Pennsylvania; Wilford York; Ernest Higgs of New York.

The Solomons were the scene of some of the most vicious fighting in the Pacific and were a mark for the Japanese advances, which had begun with the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. Japanese high command had designs on Australia; they were thwarted by dogged resistance on the ocean and across the hundreds of islands that make up the Solomons.

The nation is this year marking two anniversaries one of an event that took place in the 1942, the other of a birth 25 years earlier.

trouble

Indonesian cruise is a luxe look at animals both touching and terrifying b

August 7 will be the 75th anniversary of landings by US forces on Guadalcanal, the largest island in the archipelago, which triggered a month-long campaign of attrition against Japanese troops desperate not to give an inch. Historians suggest that, had that invasion been successful, the entire campaign would have been in jeopardy. May 29, meanwhile, will mark 100 years since the birth of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who would go on to be US president and whose own legend is entwined with the war in the Solomons.



Fishermen paddle off Kennedy Island, in the remote Western Province of the Solomon Islands.

Shortly before his 25th birthday, Kennedy was given command of motor torpedo boat PT-109. He would lead 30 missions against Japanese shipping off New Georgia.

That came to an abrupt end on August 1, 1943, when his boat was rammed and sunk by the destroyer Amagiri. Two of his crew were killed. Kennedy and 10 other survivors swam 5km to a small island. After reaching Kasolo – now universally known as Kennedy Island – the survivors swam to a larger atoll and gave a message, carved into a coconut, to native coast watchers to pass on to US forces. A Japanese ship rescued the survivors more than a week after the sinking.

A short plane hop north of Munda, Kennedy Island is a must-see for visitors interested in history, and a local entrepreneur is building barbecue pits, having already located some rusting machine guns around the teardrop-shaped isle.

Maldives on a budget: former British military base of Gan

Far fewer people make the journey to Lubaria Island, across the lagoon to the west of New Georgia, where PT-109 was based. Paired up the concrete foundations of a handful of buildings that once stood here. A short distance away is what remains of an expansive runway made of large oil cans filled with sand. Skipping once more over the ultramarine waters of the lagoon in an open whaleboat, my gaze shifted to the left and right to indicate where other reminders of the war lay virtually untouched on the shallow seabed. And more, he said, discovered every year.

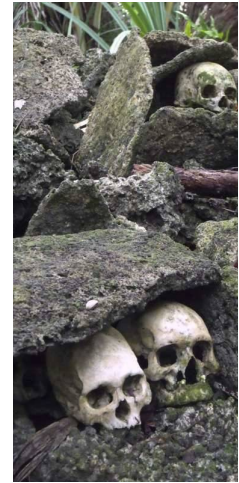
One of the newest discoveries was made by Dive Munda. A Bell P-39 Airacobra lies on the sandy seabed in crystal clear waters off Munda. Other sunken aircraft within easy reach of the dive company's base include a Wildcat fighter, two Corsairs and a Japanese "Nell" bomber.

A highlight among divers, though, is the wreck of the 1,365-ton Kashi Maru. Launched in 1940, the auxiliary minelayer and merchant ship was unloading fuel and vehicles when she was sunk by US aircraft. Listing significantly but only 18 metres below the surface, visibility is excellent and shows off the coral that has made itself at home.

Tombatuni is known locally as Mushroom Island and after I flip backwards from the boat into its lagoon, I find myself hovering above a gently sloping coral reef that plunges sharply into inky blackness. Exhaled bubbles rushing past my mask, I descend into that darkness – the Blanche Channel bottoms out at 500 metres, I'm told – to marvel at the life that clings to the wall beside me.

The colours are startling and delicate fan corals as tall as a man stand proud from the face. Soft corals and sea whips are dappled with light from above. Reef fish dart between crevices, caves and the shelter of coral heads. A silver shoal turns and parts yards ahead of me and a pair of barracuda flash into sight before veering away. No turtles, rays or black-tip, white-tip or grey sharks put in an appearance today, but one of the deeper divers reports seeing a bull shark, one of the more aggressive species.

After yet another boat journey – not a bad way to commute, all in all – I approach one more reminder of the islands' violent history.



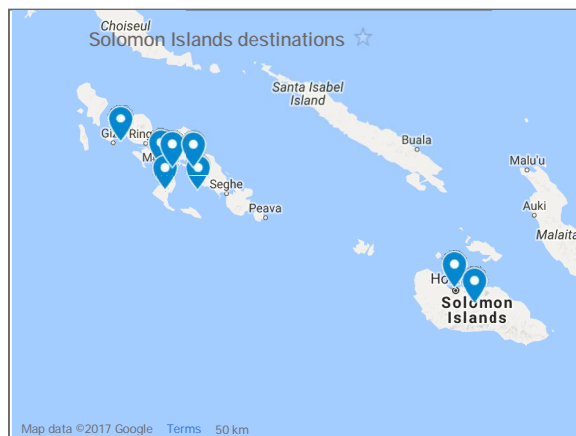
Trophies collected by headhunter on the island.

At a distance, Skull Island looks little different from the many other tree-clad islets that dot the lagoon. Ashore, palm fronds and coconuts form a carpet as we walk up a short incline to the highest point, where coral rubble has been piled chest high. Amid the rough coral and human skulls, some bleached perfectly white, others grey with age or covered in green moss. These are the trophies of headhunting returned with them after raids on neighbouring islands.

Pride of place atop this macabre shrine goes to a hollowed-out log with a panel of wood over the front. My guide removes it to reveal shelves of skulls that once belonged to local chiefs, going back hundreds of years.

The Solomons were once known as the Cannibal Isles and tribes that lived on the shores of Roviana Lagoon had a reputation for being the most enthusiastic headhunters of them all.

A little more than 130 years later, the welcome is decidedly warmer.



TRAVEL
How long it takes to get there, what to eat and drink, and where to stay. [2083059/ct](#) [kyoto-where-to-eat](#)

How to get there

Fiji Airlines and Solomon Airlines fly from Hong Kong to Honiara. Air Niugini and Solomon Airlines fly from Manila and Singapore to Port Moresby. Solomon Airlines serves Brisbane and Sydney from Honiara.

