

DO YOU LOVE CHASING
LITTLE STUFF
IN THE SHALLOWS?

+

FINNING THROUGH CURRENT
WITH 20 SHARKS AT A TIME?

+

EXPANDING YOUR EXOTIC
FISH-ID LIST?

+

EXPLORING HISTORIC
WWII WRECKS?

+

CAPTURING AMAZING IMAGES
IN PERFECT VIZ?

+

WHAT DESTINATION OFFERS
ALL OF THIS, PLUS A WELCOMING
CULTURE THAT GOES BACK
5,000 YEARS OR MORE?

THIS IS THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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“DON’T POKE THE BOMBS.”

Eight divers titter as we settle into our liveaboard’s spacious interior salon, where briefings are augmented by maps and critter lists displayed on a big-screen TV. In capital letters topping the map of a Tulagi harbor site called Garbage Patch is written this admonition. A joke, right?

It’s not. “You’re gonna get your rust fix today,” says Mossy, one of the Australian divemaster/instructors aboard Solomon Islands Dive Expeditions’ *Taka*. What’s left of an old Japanese fishery wharf now overlooks a graveyard of wrecks. Its dramatic centerpiece is the bow of the USS *Minneapolis*, which, incredibly, approached Tulagi in November 1942 with that bow dangling, blown open like a tulip in the nearby Battle of Tassafaronga, scattering shells and armaments from open magazines as it limped into port. With little but palm fronds for air-raid camouflage, its crew and a Seabee unit removed the damaged bow — dropping it in the harbor — and improvised repairs sufficient to sail all the way back to California, where a new bow was attached; the *Minneapolis* served with distinction for the rest of the war and beyond.

Submerging in the murky harbor feels like descending through time. The site includes a landing barge and more recent wrecks of a fishing boat and a tug, piled on one another. Even in the harbor’s low viz, torpedoes and shells — many still live — are outlined below, making what happened here 75 years ago suddenly, vividly real.

A nearby transport, lying on its side on a slope, looms from 60 feet almost to the surface, a massive metal bulwark decorated incongruously with delicate corallimorphs, like doilies on a doomsday machine. It’s hard not to think of the fear — inspired and endured — created by these awesome engines of war. They retain that aura still, of ferocious creatures not dead but only sleeping.



The USS *Minneapolis* (above); huge stands of pristine hard and soft corals are common-place across the Solomons.

THE IMPRINT OF WAR

Mention the Solomon Islands to most Americans and you’ll get blank looks. Not many could locate this nearly 1,000-island archipelago in the southwest Pacific region known as Melanesia.

Mention Guadalcanal, and that changes. From August 1942 to February 1943, Americans and their allies fought a bitter land-and-sea campaign here against the Japanese. My grandfather was one of those Americans. In a way I’ve come here looking for him, curious to understand how his wartime experience shaped the man I knew, and to learn how the presence of those troops affected the Solomon Islands and its people.

Today, military tourism — Japanese and Allied — is popular in this emerging destination where wartime wreckage is hauled out of dense jungle practically every day and Quonset huts still dot the main road through the capital, Honiara. The

lingering effects of battle also are unmistakable underwater. Ironbottom Sound, between Guadalcanal and the nearby Florida Islands (known locally as the Nggela Islands), contains more than 50 wartime wrecks, a few of them at depths accessible to tec divers. Cruising between Guadalcanal, the Floridas and Savo Island, the sound seems crazy-small for how much traffic was passing through here 75 years ago — you and your enemy would have been right on top of each other, and every islet could conceal a hostile plane, ship or sub.

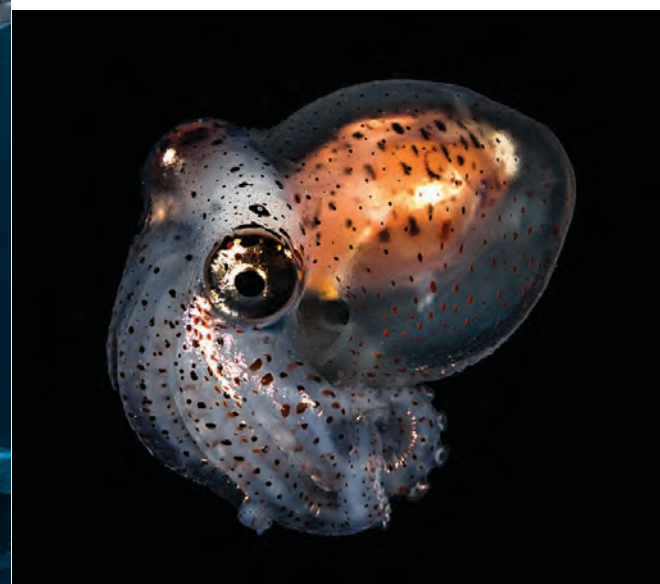
Solomon Islanders are proud of the critical part they played alongside Allied forces, mostly as scouts and porters. Open-air museums of salvaged artifacts are lovingly maintained by families who own the lands that house them. Separate, somber memorials to Allied and Japanese forces crown two hills overlooking Honiara and its harbor.

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WWII 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

On August 7, 1942, Allied forces composed mainly of U.S. Marines landed on Guadalcanal and in the Florida Islands to try to deprive the Japanese of bases that threatened Allied supply and communication routes between the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand. The Allies also intended to use Guadalcanal and Tulagi as bases to support a campaign to destroy an important Japanese base at Rabaul on New Britain. The Japanese made multiple attempts to recover Guadalcanal, leading to months of major land and sea battles until the Japanese gave up the attempt in February 1943. This year on Aug. 7 — recognized annually as Solomon’s Veterans Day — ships from the United States, New Zealand and Australian navies are expected in port at Honiara, the Solomons’ capital, on the big island of Guadalcanal. Wreath-laying ceremonies are planned over the wrecks of warships lying off-shore in the infamous Ironbottom Sound, named for the plethora of warships, some divable, that litter its depths. A dawn service is planned at the United States War Memorial on a hill above Honiara. To learn more about planned anniversary events, go to visitsolomons.com.sb



Schools of big-eye trevally are a treat for divers; opposite: a Denise's pygmy seahorse and a baby octopus; the Russell Islands are known for their clefts and caverns.

at about 10 meters, and an “X” in the blue for our drop zone. An exploratory dive! Everyone perks up.

We do a live drop into a pretty good current and, right away, everywhere the eye falls is a beautiful scene: huge elephant ear sponges in soft pastel greens, peach and lavender, and massive, diver-size gorgonians — lacy yet substantial — in brilliant greens and gold. There’s every kind of critter and reef fish, including two or three anthias, an angel and a parrot I have never seen before; on the other end of the scale, we spy a massive bumphead parrotfish the size of our divemaster Mike, who’s 6 feet 4 inches tall. A big Maori wrasse cruises by, and then

an eagle ray. As the current drops us in a little cove at about 60 feet, here comes another ray — “Manta!” I think, but it’s too small: devil ray! It makes an artful, swooping pass very close, clearly checking us out, and then a little blacktip reef shark distracts us, its markings sharply contrasting in viz that’s easily 150-feet plus, illuminated by the morning sun. The devil ray must have been a scout — a minute later comes a squadron of eight or nine more, flying in a perfect “V” formation like geese.

The next site is called Switzer for its huge underwater mountains and meadows teeming with life. No wonder photographers love these islands: There’s a



Vilu War Museum About a half-hour’s drive west of Honiara, along a coastal road that did not exist during the war, when all traffic was by boat, you’ll find the Vilu War Museum, a fascinating collection of war machines in varying states of decay, pulled from the jungle and assembled here by locals. (Guadalcanal’s interior still yields such finds with some regularity; any human remains are repatriated to the United States.) The museum offers a self-guided stroll with some explanatory signage and a collection of wartime photos inside a small gatehouse; admission is approximately \$12 US.

MARY FRANCES EMMONS; COURTESY DAVID L. EMMONS;

picture to be made here about every 10 feet. The current gives us a perfect ride past the smorgasbord of life that is the Solomons. We hook in here and there just for fun, to take it all in; so many durgons, fusiliers, anthias — everything that schools is busy doing so, in so many directions it’s dizzying. We end up high over a gentle slope of acropora in pristine condition, a million little eyes peeking out, colorful small bodies flashing here and there in the protective thicket. Suddenly we see an odd paddle-shaped fish at the surface — it *is* a paddle, and the outline of a dugout canoe, a common sight in the Solomons, where man is never far from the sea.

Nearby Tanavula Point is another stunner — white cliffs above scooped out like ice cream, swirled with shades of gray and tan, little Seussian lips of greenery just barely overhanging all. Below, huge coral fields almost break the surface; a sheer wall goes on and on, with no bottom in sight, and avalanches of anthias give new meaning to the phrase “living color.” As we approach the point, a strong down draft sends us zipping back the way we had come. We surface in shallows at the top of

the wall, startling a villager snorkeling in the washing-machine-like boil at the tip.

We wave, but it’s not easy to interact with shy villagers on scuba. It’s fun to try to follow *Taka’s* friendly crew speaking to one another in the local pidgin dialect, which has many English influences. We get the chance to really appreciate local culture with a village visit at Olevugha Island, in the western Floridas. As soon as we wade in from the panga I feel the Earth tilt — before me are women adorned with sisal and flowers, nut bells twined around their ankles, who have just stepped out of my grandfather’s photographs, as though no time had passed at all. About 100 villagers are assembled, whether for the performance or the novelty of foreign guests isn’t clear. Islanders across Melanesia compete in song and dance teams, we’re told, and these women are regional champions. We don’t need the interpreter’s help to understand a funny dance about a praying mantis, or a sweet lullaby, or a song



The author’s grandfather, then-Capt. David B. Emmons, talks with a group of Solomon Islanders on Guadalcanal, probably porters or scouts, in this 1942 photo.



called “Schooner,” performed by a men’s group on bamboo pan flutes, that evokes European sea chanteys, enfolding elements of invading cultures as the Solomons always have, and still do today.

THE LONG GOODBYE

I didn’t really find my grandfather, who survived the war and a long career in the Army, retiring decades later to begin an unlikely second act as a social worker. But I did hear voices.

We moor at a site called White Beach, on the south side of Mbanika, in the Russell Islands, occupied in February 1943 by U.S. troops after Guadalcanal was secured. The action was part of a push west toward New Britain and Rabaul, where my grandfather — then an Army captain attached to the famous “Carlson’s Raiders,” the 2nd Marine Raiders Battalion — would serve before returning to Washington to share what had been learned in the battles around Guadalcanal.

To a 21st-century American, the first reaction to a wreckage-strewn site like White Beach is embarrassment: *Um, sorry for the mess!*

But today that historic devastation is a muck paradise. Sinking slowly in the dawn light, we pick out the remains of a wharf, its jagged pilings piercing the

DIVERS GUIDE TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Getting there: Virgin Australia (virginaustralia.com), Fiji Airways (fijiairways.com) and Solomon Airlines (flysolomons.com) are recommended; travel to the Solomons generally requires a stop in Australia or Fiji.

When to go: Located close to the equator, the Solomons have a year-round tropical climate with temps ranging from the high 60s in evening to mid-80s during the day. High season is dry season, from April to November.

Water temperature: Water temps range from 82 to 85 degrees F.

Average visibility: Visibility of more than 100 feet is common off out islands; wreck dives in or near harbors are much murkier.

What to wear: Hardier divers will find a swimsuit sufficient, but for intensive days of multiple dives, a 3 mm fullsuit with a vest or light hood does the trick.

Dive operator: Solomon Islands Dive Expeditions (solomonsdiving.com)

For more info: Go to sportdiver.com/solomon-islands-dive-expeditions

surface; a mighty, upside-down landing barge and a jeep; and a split-open fire extinguisher revealing a tiny nudi. All over the Solomons, when the war ended or campaigns moved on, unneeded materiel was simply pushed off docks and left where it fell. I could almost hear the laughter and feel the presence of relieved young men making a party of these final acts — *We’re outta here!* — witnessed by myriad beer and Coke bottles still resting on the bottom.

Whether from the gloom or the awe induced by the doomsday machines below, I feel a pleasurable frisson as from a rousing ghost story. So many voices speak from the past here, it’s hard to sort them out. The world was changing along with the Allies’ fortunes, although no one knew it then — arguably the beginning of the American era, for better or for worse.

Yet at White Beach as all over the Solomons, life — inexorable, unstoppable — takes over from death and destruction. On every surface and in every nook and cranny, life grows, beauty emerges, and the great, mysterious cycle revolves anew.



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