

5 islands in 5 days

I've never really been a fan of fishing, probably because on the few occasions I've ever been I've never caught anything – but clearly I have been trying in all the wrong places. After an overnight stopover in Honiara it's just a one hour plane hop to Munda, on the island of New Georgia, and I'm about to learn something about fishing from experts. Fishing is a way of life in the Solomon Islands – there's a plentiful supply and it's a staple of the local diet but when a big catch is required – for a large family or community gathering – they have a unique way to ensure a big catch.

DAY ONE

We're invited to tag along on just such a fishing expedition and told to wear swimmers and bring a snorkel! Out in the lagoon on the edge of a shallow reef we watch from a distance while a canoe drifts out from the island shore, a huge mass of green vine piled up in the middle. Slowly, the vine is rolled out from the canoe and a team of fishermen walk in the shallows to hold it in place in a massive circle, then when it is all out, they slowly draw the circle in, smaller and smaller. When the circle is quite small we are invited to help hold the vine and draw it in ever smaller, and a quick dip under the water is like looking into the Seaworld Aquarium – by now the shallows are teeming with coloured fish of all shapes and sizes and, surprisingly, they make no attempt to swim beyond the vine.

The next bit is nothing short of stunning. On the signal from the senior fisherman, a 'magic mix' is thrown into the water – apparently some special blend of vine leaf and sand – which acts like a natural sedative and the fish are almost immediately tranquilised. Most float, while others jump and dart in a frenzy and we, and the fishermen, are catching and scooping as quickly as we can to get them into a canoe. When we're finished it's almost full.

It's been an hilarious dance in the shallows on our part with lots of whooping and splashing but it's been an extraordinary experience – and we're rewarded for our efforts with some fish for lunch which we have on a nearby shore, barbecued over hot coals and washed down with coconut milk, spicy seaweed, sweet potato, rice and salad. There's time for a swim before we had back to Agnes Lodge at Munda.

DAY TWO

The next day it's a rollercoaster ride to Rendova, a large volcanic island about 40 minutes from Munda. The slight swell on the deep water is enough to cause our boat to slap from crest to crest all the way to the wharf at Titiru Eco Lodge, where we're met in fine island style by a band of musicians. In contrast to the island beaches we've seen so far these sands

are black and the south west coast of the island is an important nesting ground for endangered leatherback turtles. Local villages there are a base for a local conservation program.

Titiru Eco Lodge is less than five years old and is considered a model for environmentally sustainable tourism in the area. It's a gateway to local villages for visitors and it provides an opportunity for locals to learn hospitality skills. The closest village of Ugele is just a short walk away and the locals are happy to demonstrate their talents in carving, making 'toys' bracelets and headbands from palm fronds and impromptu 'cooking classes' in how they make favourite dishes – one from a nut that would be poisonous if not treated the right way! While we're here just for a day, guests of Titiru can try climbing Rendova Peak, visit the Wild Cave (if you like bats, crabs and snakes), go night crabbing or exploring in a dug-out canoe.

DAY THREE

There's a reason we're told to keep our bags to 16kg or less once we leave Honiara – it's a smaller plane ride to Munda, but from Munda we're travelling by boat to Gizo and a spinner suitcase is no help on a plank jetty or a sand track to beachfront bungalows.

It's fitting that we arrive at Fatboys Resort on nearby Mbabanga Island in time for lunch and the boat pulls up alongside the restaurant on a jetty 100 metres from shore. The resort, owned by Brisbane locals, takes its name from the character Joe in the classic Charles Dickens novel *The Pickwick Papers* – Joe, 'the fat boy', loves eating, drinking, sleeping and generally avoiding every effort to work at all and we need no convincing to do the same, starting with a lunch of crayfish and salad.

By now we've been dining out on crayfish almost three meals a day. At Fatboys it's delivered by canoe every morning and so it's possible to have it at breakfast (omelette), lunch (barbecue grilled) and dinner (curry). Manager Mano and barman Timmy are perfect hosts.

The afternoon is free for snorkelling (straight from the beach), kayaking, paddleboarding, swimming or snoozing, but two of us take out a Polycraft (a little plastic boat) to a sand cay we see in the distance for a Robinson Crusoe adventure. It turns out to be only about 15 minutes away and we jump out on the sand to make first footprints on a truly untouched piece of paradise. It's perfect for a swim, a little walk and a dramatic skyline view, which changes quickly as we take photos.

As the distant sky gets greyer we decide to head back and as we do we keep an eye on the rolling clouds behind us. There's an adrenalin charge as we scoot back as fast as the little craft will take us and we make it back just

With more than 900 islands to choose from in the Solomon Islands, it's hard to stop at just one, as Heather McWhinnie discovers

before the rain hits and the screens are pulled down in the bar.

From Fatboys it's less than 10 minutes by boat to Gizo township where there are shops, hotels, dive shops, and small villages to visit on the way.

DAY FOUR

Like many of the Solomon Islands, Kennedy Island is uninhabited but it's a popular picnic spot, made famous by John F. Kennedy who hid out here after his boat was gunned down in World War II. There was an heroic rescue – he swam to another island and a message scraped on a coconut alerted the navy base on Rendova to where they were hiding. Emboldened Polycrafters now, we navigate our own way there and join the others for a barbecue lunch and an afternoon of storytelling and snorkelling around old jetty pillars.

On our last night at Fatboys, we celebrate new friends with a local tradition called the 'wine down' and the esky is packed, folding chairs stacked and wine chilled in the boat for a cruise out to another sand cay, Simbu-Batu, to watch the sunset. Beautiful.

DAY FIVE

Guadalcanal is the first and last island for travellers from Brisbane, home to the capital city Honiara and international airport. It has all the city trappings – luxury hotels like the Heritage Park, hot showers, day spas, busy streets and traffic jams – but it's also the place to learn about the role the Solomon Islands played in World War II.

The Guadalcanal American Memorial on Skyline Drive not only tells the story of the Allied offensive on huge granite tablets, it provides a magnificent aerial view of Honiara. Another place to see war relics is Vilu Museum on the western side of Honiara. It would be impossible to find without a tour guide as it's camouflaged in the bush but it shelters some hidden treasures, from both sides of the war, including cannons and remnants of aircraft such as a Japanese Betty Bomber and a Wildcat with its signature folding wings (still working). Tours can be booked from the Heritage Park Hotel.

For more information see www.visitsolomons.com.sb

Fly direct from Brisbane to Honiara with Solomon Airlines four times a week, with local island connections. See www.flysolomons.com



Main image: Almost all accommodation is waterfront. This page from top: Tangiri bungalow can accommodate up to four people and has direct access to the beach at Fatboys resort, a short boat ride from Gizo township; Munda is a base for exceptional diving; crayfish served fresh and three meals a day if you want it at Fatboys; steering the boat through shallow reef waters is a challenge; boats are the only way to travel. Image opposite page by Kirkland Photography; this page, Heather McWhinnie and bottom, Solomon Island Visitors Bureau.

