



The wreck of a Jeep.



By Beth and Shaun Tierney/Seafocus.

Tales of the Unexpected

Glancing at our computers we realise we've just gone beyond 45 metres. We're deep but we're captivated. To one side is a tractor, wheels intact, tire treads standing proud despite the film of sponges covering their surface. A few more fin strokes and there's some sort of lifting contraption, a crane perhaps. And a little further on are the remains of a truck.

Damn! Why are we so deep? We can't stop long enough to really explore this mechanical detritus from the Second World War but as we travel back up to a reasonable level, we see more and more military items: bullets, old shells, even a jeep's steering wheel embedded in the reef. It is so encrusted in coral we almost swim past before recognizing the shape. We are bowled over – this is definitely not what we expected of the Solomons.

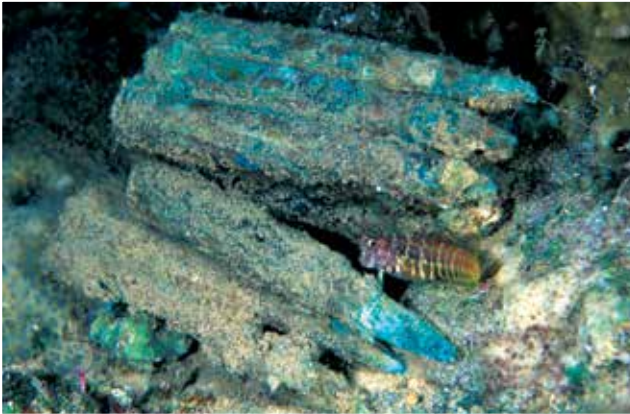
We'd always wanted to dive these beautiful islands, yet looking back, we're not really sure why. We knew there were splendid reefs with extensive biodiversity,

but somehow the war history had passed us by. Maybe that's why we were so impressed by it. Not long after we had settled onto our liveaboard, *MV Bilikiki*, we asked our cruise directors what we should expect. They replied simply, "a little bit of everything". We soon learnt that was true enough, but still no preparation for what we were to encounter on the trip.

On our first morning, we awoke to a gorgeous view of deep blue sea and emerald green shores. We were at the Russell Islands where the islanders live a traditional, sea-bound life, their days spent in dugout canoes over coral reefs. Where there isn't a section of reef it's usually

because there's a small cave complex. The shores are riddled with underwater caverns that open into tree-lined pools.

The most famous is Leru Cut. We dropped through water that seemed a little murky but as we swam into a deep cut in the reef wall we discovered what makes this site so popular. The channel led back under the island about 75 metres with a bend in the middle. At its end we ascended inside a tiny pool surrounded by deep green jungle. The filtered rays of light were very moody yet illuminated the rock formations inside the cavern. We had taken turns to enter in pairs, so that everyone could experience the surreal



A blenny has made its home in a pile of bullets.

atmosphere undisturbed. It wasn't a problem waiting outside on the splendid reef wall with large schools of rainbow runners, midnight snapper and bumphead (Napoleon) wrasse. We also found plenty of smaller creatures, even an ornate ghost pipefish hiding in crinoids.

Next stop was Mary Island, or Mborokua, an inactive volcano that sits partway between the Russells and Marovo Lagoon. Mary is ringed by coral reefs but her star attraction lies in a current swept promontory that juts out from the coast and has sloping walls on either side. *Bilikiki* moored up for the day, allowing divers to hop in and out of the water. Each time we entered we were met by all the pelagic animals that are attracted to the site – a huge ball of jacks circles ceaselessly over the top of the tongue while countless numbers of needlenose

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barracuda swarm the point. In deeper water there are forests of whip corals, fans, elephant ear sponges and several whitetip sharks. On the top of the reef, the hard corals are pristine and swarmed by smaller, colourful fish and several Napoleon wrasse that follow divers curiously.

Our third destination was Marovo Lagoon, one of the largest lagoon systems in the world and unusual in that it has a clearly-defined double barrier reef. There is incredible marine diversity. Soft coral rainbows that stretch as far as the eye can see, tiny pygmy seahorses nestle in fans, while hulking wrecks sit in shallow waters and quietly rust away.

The variety of dive types was outstanding but our favourite was at Wickham Island, a classic tropical speck of white beach backed by greenery. We started on a wall covered in fans, crinoids and whips. It was




Above: Abundant growth on a wall. Below: The Who Maru wreck.



all very colourful – but the real action was up on the sand slope that extends from the beach. The shallow seabed was a fantastic critter dive with more varieties of shrimp than you would care to name, ditto with gobies in the sand. There were harlequin crabs, seahorses, *Inimicus didactylus* – or devilfish – and mantis shrimp to name just a few of the local residents.

Eventually we found ourselves retracing our route to the Russells where history claimed our attention with the site that became our favourite of the trip. White Beach is located in Sunlight Channel on Mbanika Island. Dives centre around a US munitions dump. When the troops shipped out they dropped everything into the sea. *Bilikiki* moors up and divers are free to leap into the water whenever and as often as they want. Our first dive was the one that took us down past 45 metres, but naturally the rest of our time was spent moving slowly across the shallower part of the reef looking at the stray vehicles, unexploded bombs, torpedoes and masses of bullets. The damage may have been done in the 1940s but now there is healthy coral reclaiming the refuse. Small fish colonies live under bullet piles and unusual creatures like mantis shrimp and opisthobranchs slip beneath metal beams or unexploded shells. In the shallows there are three flat-topped barges, originally lined up along the shore and tied to wooden pylons. Now they hover, partially below the sea and are smothered in small corals and critters. Taking the time to float at these shallow depths revealed nudibranchs, squat lobsters and gobies, blennies and pipefish and, under the nearby mangroves, schools of archerfish. We sat watching them shoot jets of water at the flies in the trees above. Day or night, deep or shallow, this site really did have the promised little bit of everything.

Although for us the Solomons became more about the history that lies beneath the waves, there was still masses to see on the pristine reefs. There were ghostly wrecks like the *Ann* and unusual

fish like the rare hybrid white bonnet clownfish. There were plenty of those marvellous creatures that you can never stop loving ... crocodile and leaf fish, octopus and cuttlefish. Every day we would ask the same question ... small stuff, big stuff, wide angle or macro? And the answer was always the same – yes! 



Octopus at Velvia.



A blood-spotted Glossodoris.

SOLOMON ISLANDS



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INFO-SNIPPET

Info Location: North-east of Australia, 5–12° south of equator

Day time temperature: 28–32°C

Water temperature: 28–30°C

Language: English and Pidgin English

Currency: Solomon Dollar

Five airlines currently provide regular scheduled services into Honiara. Solomon Airlines, Virgin Australia, Fiji Airways (formerly Air Pacific), Air Niugini and Air Vanuatu all provide international flights to the Solomons. Honiara International Airport on the island of Guadalcanal is the only international airport in the Solomon Islands and the main port of arrival.



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