

THE LURE OF THE SOLOMONS

The South Pacific's biggest secret lies in the fish-rich waters of the Solomon Islands, a fishing paradise just hours from Australia.

By Ben Caddaye



Aerial shot of
a sport fishing
paradise.

WHY do you always hook the biggest fish at the end of a long poppering session, when your arms are heavy and aching and you can barely hold the rod and reel let alone control 25-plus kilos of rampaging GT?

We were fishing the Solomon Islands' famous Vona Vona Lagoon, at a spot my guide referred to as "the bubble".

The bubble, he explained, nearly always yields a fish – but just one fish. You have to make the most of this single opportunity. Fluff your lines and there's no second chance. The bubble bursts.

On about my fifth cast, the GT engulfed my popper in spectacular fashion, leaving a boil on the surface the size of a dining table.

It then bulldozed towards the coral below, ripping line from a near-locked drag. In shallow water, my only option was to put the clamps on and hope for the best.

Leaning back on the rod and thumbing the spool, the fish's run appeared to slow. But then everything went limp. I'd pulled the hooks.

Crucially, I'd also blown my one chance to extract a fish from the bubble. Pop. Gone!

The great thing about fishing the Solomons, though, is there's always another fishy spot just around the corner.

That's the stand-out feature of the Solomons – the diverse range of fisheries visiting anglers have at their fingertips.

There are few places I know of where you can troll for marlin and sailfish, jig and popper for GTs and red bass, wade the flats for trevally and cast lures into the snags for mangrove jack all in a half-day's fishing.

But you can do all that – and more – in the Solomons.

ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

People say visiting the Solomons is like visiting Fiji or Indonesia 40 years ago before full-blown tourism took off.

Don't expect five-star resorts, shopping centres, swim-up bars or crowds of tourists. It's quiet, laid back and, most importantly, unspoilt.

The majority of Solomon Islanders live a very simple and traditional life, which revolves around the sea.

FACT BOX

GETTING THERE

The Solomon Islands is a three-hour flight from Brisbane. Solomon Airlines flies direct from Brisbane to Honiara four times a week. If you're visiting the Western Province, Solomon Airlines also flies between Honiara and the islands of Munda and Gizo – stepping off points for Fatboys and Zipolo Habu resorts. Visit www.flysolomons.com

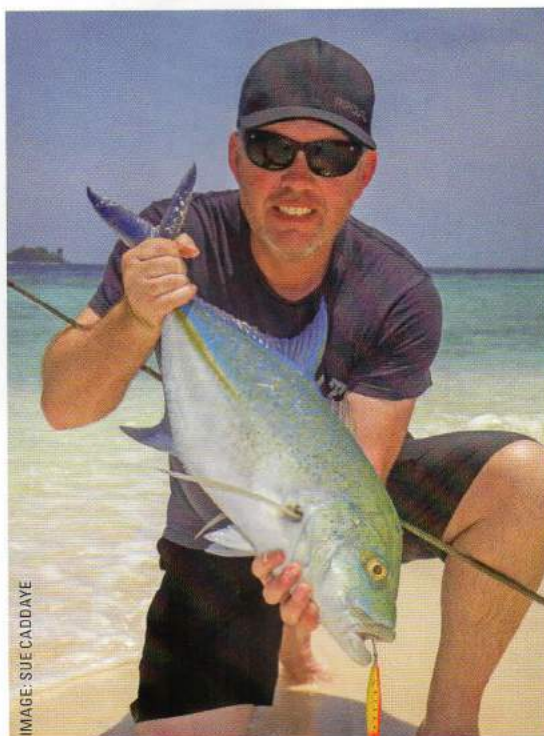


IMAGE: SUE CADDAYE

We saw far more boats than cars during our stay, and with 900 islands making up the Solomons, it's not surprising.

You could spend months – or even years – island hopping in the Solomons and only scratch the surface.

It's a mecca for history buffs, too, given the crucial battles fought in the islands between the Americans and Japanese during World War II.

None of this history is behind glass cases or security guards, either – you can literally walk in the footsteps of JFK or touch and feel a 75-year-old war relic.

The Solomon Islanders are delightful people. Centuries ago they had a fearsome reputation as head hunters; these days they're happy, welcoming and proud of their island home – earning the country the nickname, The Hapi Isles.

I'd be happy too if my country boasted the brand of fishing on tap in this sublime part of the South Pacific.

BLUEWATER

The offshore fishing in the Solomon Islands is simply outstanding and very accessible.

From our base on Lola Island, in the Western Province, it was an easy 30 minute boat ride to deep water harbouring yellowfin and dogtooth tuna, wahoo, marlin, sailfish and more.

These fish bite year-round but autumn is generally regarded as the peak season.

A series of FADs in 500 metres of water are popular sport fishing locations and a couple of trolling runs with skirted lures past the first FAD produced an acrobatic mahi mahi and a sizeable rainbow runner – a new species for me.

Given the Solomons is comprised of a chain of

islands, it can be dead flat out wide on some days, but there was a decent swell rolling in from the east on this particular occasion. A bout of sea-sickness forced me to throw in the towel and request a move inshore – but that simply presented an opportunity to sample more of the diversity this area has to offer.

REEF

Reef fishing is arguably the Solomons' strongest suit. There are so many islands in the Solomons so you don't have to go far to find productive looking reef edges and drop-offs.

The Vona Vona Lagoon, one of the world's biggest and a drawcard for anglers fishing the Western Province, is chock-full of coral outcrops bordered by deeper water – the perfect place to cast poppers, stickbaits and metal lures for big GTs, coral trout, barracuda, red bass and Spanish mackerel.

We popped 'til we dropped in the lagoon, reminding me how hard this form of fishing is on the back, arms and shoulders. It's even harder when a burly red bass, another new species for me, grabs your stickbait and heads for cover.

There isn't any ciguatera in the Western Province so the bass made a tasty meal back at the resort!

FLATS

The flats fishing in the Solomons has enormous potential. From what I could ascertain, few anglers wade the shallows casting lures or flies for trevally and other species that feed over the sand, but the fish are definitely there.

The flats produced the most memorable session of my Solomons trip.

It all took place on a fishing a tiny speck of





ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:
Every fish caught is kept to the
feed the locals in the Solomons.
This nice dolphinfish became
dinner; There are picture-postcard
scenes everywhere you turn in
the Solomons; A stunning bluefin
trevally lured from the shallows –
one of several caught in a snappy
session in beautiful surrounds.





Big, angry red bass pull hard and taste great (there's no ciguatera in the Western Province of the country).

sand no more than 50 metres wide and maybe 80 metres long.

My first flick with a 60g metal slice produced a long tom, but there were some larger, darker shapes shadowing it.

Halfway into my third retrieve a pack of four broad-shouldered fish materialised from the deep water and crash-tackled the lure. One engulfed the orange chunk of metal and bolted.

The drag on my little threadline screamed as

cod abound in the estuaries and provide light-tackle excitement at close quarters for fishos throwing hard-bodied minnows and soft plastics in tight against the mangroves.

In some of the larger river systems, big spot-tail bass are being unearthed in the freshwater reaches.

The almost impenetrable jungle surrounding these bass fisheries prevents most traveling anglers from fully exploring them, but the reports I've read and photos I've seen suggest it could be well worth the effort.

TACKLE

It would be tempting to take an entire tackle shop with you on a dedicated fishing trip to the Solomons, but obviously that's not practical.

Depending on what brand of fishing you're doing, you could probably get away with two quality outfits.

The first would be 10-15kg threadline outfit for poppering the reefs and, at a pinch, trolling for mackerel and tuna.

The second could be a lighter, 5-8kg spin stick for use over the flats and in the estuaries.

Naturally, if marlin, sailfish, wahoo and large dogtooth and yellowfin tuna are your targets, a dedicated medium-to-heavy overhead trolling outfit would be very useful, too.

Pack a decent cross section of lures, including large poppers, stickbaits, deep-divers (a variety of sizes), skirted lures (for trolling), plastics and metal jigs.

"The bubble, he explained, nearly always yields a fish – but just one fish. You have to make the most of this single opportunity."

a chunky bluefin trevally made a beeline for the drop-off, forcing me to give chase.

Five or six minutes transpired before I was able to subdue the stocky, 3kg fish and slide it up onto the sand for a few quick pics.

It was one of a succession of stunningly-marked trevally I landed in a lively session that will be etched in my memory forever.

RIVER

This is where the Solomons has the most untapped fishing potential. The numerous river systems in the Solomon Islands are under-explored and lightly fished by visiting anglers.

Mangrove jack, trevally and various species of

FACT BOX

WHERE TO STAY - LOLA

Hand feeding a dozen metre-long blacktip reef whalers is pretty cool. Dining out on a freshly-cooked coral trout you caught yourself less than an hour ago is also cool. You can do both of these – and plenty more – at Zipolo Habu Resort, on Lola Island. Run by Joe and Lisa, Zipolo Habu caters specifically for visiting anglers and is among the best fishing resorts in the Solomons. Comfortable, well-appointed bungalows look out over the magnificent Vona Vona Lagoon. The food here is excellent and the beer is cold. When you've settled in, one of the resort's experienced and hard-working guides will take you to your fishing spot of choice – all of the top locations are within a short boat ride. You can even fish from the resort's jetty, which juts out from the bar! The resort is also a stone's throw from the world famous Skull Island, which is a must-see. www.zipolohabu.com.sb

WHERE TO STAY - FATBOYS

One of the best-known holiday retreats in the Solomons, Fatboys is a great place to base yourself for snorkelling, diving, sight-seeing and fishing. The highlight of this place is the restaurant that sits over the lagoon, affording diners with a unique, close-up view of tropical fish and reef sharks. The staff at Fatboys are friendly and happy to help organise a range of activities. The snorkelling around the resort is breathtaking, and it's a short trip to the famous Kennedy Island, where former US President JFK swam to shore after his PT boat was rammed in WWII. The resort has fishing guides but you can also hire one of the small Polycraft tenders and go exploring for yourself! www.solomonislandsfatboys.com.au

CONCLUSION

In terms of South Pacific holiday destinations, the Solomon Islands are off most Aussie's radar. In fact, I reckon some of us would struggle to quickly locate the Solomons on a map.

That's changing slowly, with word gradually spreading about the Solomons' natural beauty, incredible history and world-class fishing.

If you're looking for a destination where you can literally get away from it all, yet still enjoy amazing food, culture, history and leisure activities (apart from the fishing, there's blue ribbon diving and snorkelling), I'd be putting the Solomons firmly on my list of "must-visit" locations.

But don't wait too long – the Solomons won't remain a secret forever!

Ben Caddaye fished the Solomon Islands courtesy of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau and Solomon Airlines. ●