

Solomon Sojourn

Only a few hours flight from Australia's East Coast, the Solomon Islands is an untapped sport fishing paradise waiting to be discovered. LUKE REILLY reports.



THE quaint island of Lola is situated in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, bordered by white sandy beaches, the clearest, vibrant, blue waters imaginable and coral reefs teeming with marine life. Unbeknown to most Australians, Lola is home to a fishing tournament attracting over 300 competitors: the annual Stunned Mullet competition, now in its eighth year. I was fortunate to attend the recent tournament and experience what has to be one of the most diverse, abundant and accessible fisheries in the Pacific.

If you're anything like me, chances are you've got a mental sportfishing map in preparation for that "fishing trip of a lifetime". There's a strong likelihood it's a very expansive map, containing those angling destinations we all dream about: the Northern Territory, Papua New Guinea, Africa, America, Mongolia, amongst many

others. I bet, much like mine once did, your map overlooks the Solomons.

Aside from the fact it is a tropical paradise with the most varied fishing imaginable, it should be known to anglers, especially those from the East Coast, that the Solomons are only a short distance away. For this reason a Solomon sojourn represents excellent value for money. Yet these beautiful islands seem to fall off the sport fishing map. Maybe it's time to put them on your bucket list?

Unique

You'd struggle to find a more diverse fishery in the world. With a short boat ride from Zipolo Habu Resort on Lola Island, the host of the annual Stunned Mullet tournament, you can be creek fishing for spot tail bass and mangrove jacks, popping for GTs or trolling for billfish. Such is the uniqueness of the Solomons. There are





Views like this
are a bonus for
visiting fishos to
the Solomons.

OPPOSITE
PAGE: Spanish
mackerel are
plentiful around
the islands.

river and creek systems feeding into large, deep lagoons defined by shallow barrier reefs and islands. On the outside of the lagoons, water depths of hundreds of metres are within close proximity to shore due to the most astounding drop-offs, allowing game fish to push up hard against the coast.

There are four main styles of fishing that are practiced here: Popping, trolling, deep sea bottom bouncing and creek lure casting. I'd suggest a variety of other techniques would also be well worth trying in the Solomons. Deepwater jigging would be a suitable way of targeting the incredible snapper and jobfish the locals take on thick handlines. Also, fly fishing would be worthwhile in the crystal clear waters, and I must make mention that I'm certain I saw a

bonefish under the resort jetty one morning. The Solomons serves as a playground like no other for the experienced, well equipped angler, yet will also accommodate anglers of all skill levels, including those new to fishing.

The lodges are well equipped with boats, all necessary tackle and guides that could navigate the waters with their eyes closed. And I can attest to the latter, as on a night time boat transfer between resorts, it was so dark I don't think it would have impacted on navigational abilities if our driver did have his eyes closed, yet we managed to avoid countless shallow reefs, sandbars and islands arriving at our destination safely.

Before I go into greater depth on Solomon angling prospects, I feel that you should be aware

of a special local fishing deity which was introduced to me by Geoffrey, a likeable fella from the township of Munda. Of cult status amongst fishers in the Solomons, "Kesoko" is a half human, half bird creature believed to have supreme fishing abilities. Although I wouldn't consider myself overtly religious, upon learning Kesoko is the key to angling success I soon found myself alongside Geoffrey and the other locals dropping a quick prayer to the god before each outing. It must be noted, the great Kesoko never once let me down.

The experience

With the resort on Lola Island and its specialist fishing boats booked out for the Stunned Mullet tournament, I stayed at the comfortable Agnes Lodge of Munda, 20 minutes boat ride from Zipolo Habu at Lola. Sitting back at the "Munda Bar" of Agnes watching the territorial wharf dwelling archer fish had my fishing blood boiling. Keen to wet a line in the lead up to the tournament, my travelling companion, Nelson from the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau, was able to hook me up with some locals for an

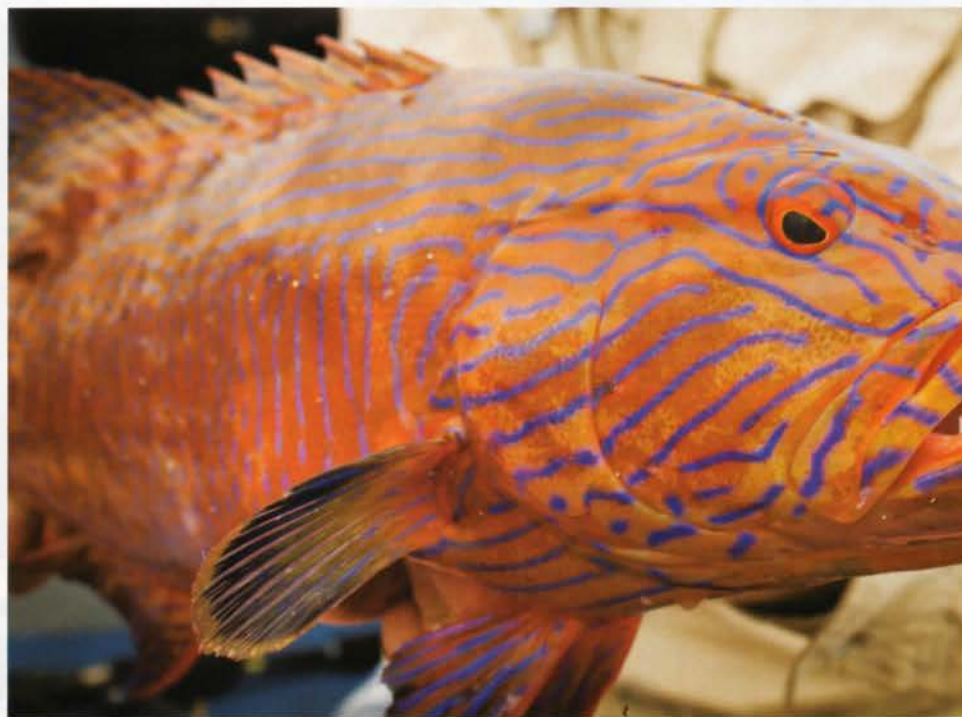
outing. Myself and three others soon piled into an interesting fishing vessel, which I would more or less describe as a large scale canoe equipped with a significantly-sized outboard.

Sporting a miniscule amount of freeboard and 60 horses of two stroke grunt we smashed our way out of the calm, clear waters of the lagoon, over a shallow bar and into the deep blue waters of the Pacific.

"We troll" was the instruction offered by Taska, the fishing guide from Zipolo Habu resort. I soon found Taska was well on the money, as my deep diving hardbody lure hadn't been over the side of the boat for more than a minute before it was snaffled. With a potent spin outfit loaded with 30lb braid it was not long until a feisty barracuda was soon tailed canoe-side. Such was the aggression of this fish the rear treble of the lure was wedged well down its throat. The intrepid Taska removed the hooks from the toothy predator with his bare hands, before putting the barracuda aside for dinner; it was a local favourite. I was to later learn that half a metre of 100lb wire trace is a necessary inclusion in your rig, as most fish in the Solomons have a serious set of chompers.

We continued trolling, working the drop off edge of a shallow reef protruding into the ocean. As we rounded the point through a current line my lure was taken again. Despite using a 16cm long Savage Gear Manic Diver to appease big predators, I assumed I had hooked something small as the fish came in with minimal resistance. A moment later, all hell broke loose.

"Seen the boat" Taska said with a cheeky smile, as my rod buckled over in response to a



ABOVE: If game fishing or GT popping isn't your thing, the Solomons has great areas to target reef fish.

RIGHT: A smallish trevally caught on a popper. There are plenty of big ones around for GT popping fanatics.

MAIN OPPOSITE: The Solomons has extensive areas of shallow sand flats – a paradise for fly and light tackle fishos.

INSET OPPOSITE: Lola is a short 45 minute flight from Honiara.





My popper spooked a school of nervous bait ... It was on the first pop that it was demolished in a demonstration of red fury."

blistering run. The spool of my 10000 sized spinning reel emptied at an alarming rate before my line went slack for no apparent reason. After winding up, Taska undertook an up-close examination of the remaining tail end of my leader, and said: "Wahoo...that was a big one." Such was his conviction and fastidious analysis of the clean-cut line I was surprised he wasn't able to announce the sex and age of the fish!

Despite such a loss, my faith in godly Kesoko waned only briefly. Our next adventure was to try some popping. I readied a potent seven foot rod rigged with 50lb braid, 80lb leader and a big shiny popper with through-wire construction. Taska prepared a 10cm long lure with a shallow cup face. It was lucky to have a single fragment of paint remaining, such were the scars of previous battles.

With our luxury canoe equipped with an overhead shade at the rear, Taska and I ventured to the bow in preparation for casting. There was one slight issue, the bow piece we stood on was not flat but rounded like a half moon. This didn't offer the ultimate in stability when it came to throwing big heavy lures and maintaining one's balance in the choppy water off the shallow reef.

My popper spooked a school of nervous bait as it landed on the edge of the atoll. It was on the first pop that it was demolished in a demonstration of red fury. My heartbeat soared in panic as the locked up drag and rampaging fish combined forces in almost pulling me off my precarious position on the unstable bow. In a hasty attempt to remain in the boat I relaxed some pressure off the fish, just enough for the suspected quality red bass

to do a quick job of busting me off in the corals.

Over the course of my fishing in the Solomons popping proved to be without doubt one of the most exhilarating, testing and rewarding forms of angling I've experienced. After finding myself onboard a centre console, more applicable to casting, I soon encountered an especially giant, giant trevally where my 50lb mainline was quite undergunned!

The GTs are perhaps the meanest fish residing in the shallow reef systems, taking poppers and stickbaits with enough force to rip your arms out of your sockets. I caught a number of these on poppers, with other entrants of the tournament managing to pull some absolute crackers. The key with popping seemed to be the presence of nervous baitfish, most lures that landed amongst shimmering garfish didn't last long. GTs and other trevallies, red bass, coral trout, barracuda, kingfish (Spanish mackerel) and sharks all loved to explode over a surface lure.

After the inclusion of a wire trace, I was able to land a number of fish trolling both inside and outside of Vona Vona lagoon and along the stunning mountainous escarpments of Rendova Island. Your typical fare here are wahoo, barracuda, kingfish and island bonito, although billfish, dogtooth and yellowfin tuna are also on the cards. The offshore FADs also hold dolphin fish and rainbow runner.

On top of the fishing, a typical day on the water here often includes bearing witness to enormous pods of dolphins or huge, feeding mantas. Watching flying fish race the boat by sailing parallel to the water's surface for up to ten seconds at a time is something I'll never forget.

FACT BOX

Getting there: Solomon Airlines fly to Honiara four times a week from Brisbane and once a week from Sydney (3hr flight). It's then a 45min domestic flight from Honiara to Munda, where a 20min boat transfer will deliver you to Zipolo Habu Resort at Lola.

Precautions: The Solomons share the same time zone as Sydney and identical power sockets and plugs. The only precaution one needs to make is to acquire a course of antimalarial drugs before departure and pack plenty of insect repellent and sunscreen.

Contacts:
Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau:
www.visitsolomons.com.sb/
Solomon Airlines:
www.flysolomons.com/
Agnes Lodge at Munda:
www.agneslodge.com.sb/

To attend the next "Stunned Mullet" or to organise a guided fishing holiday contact Zipolo Habu Resort:
www.zipolohabu.com.sb/



Culture and history

Describing the lifestyle as laid-back would be an understatement! The Solomons are referred to as the happy isles for a reason. The islanders are a nice people, very accommodating and most speak sound English, although the local language here is Pigin. Everywhere you go there is WWII history, from monuments to airfields to makeshift museums of artefacts locals have collected from their surrounds. There are a number of plane wrecks which are popular diving sites. My visit to the fish markets in Honiara was a cultural eye opener and I'd recommend such an experience as a must do for any angler who visits the country. The climate is tropical and humid over the summer months but I never felt uncomfortable during my stay. Do be mindful of the fact that there are saltwater crocodiles in the rivers, although the only ones I saw were kept in pens in people's backyards!

Stunned Mullet

Held over two days on the weekend before Melbourne Cup, the annual Stunned Mullet competition grows in popularity every year. Zipolo Habu resort does an excellent job of organising and assisted by the sponsorship of a number of significant Solomon based companies



they are able to offer a delicious buffet dinner each night and free entry for all competitors along with complimentary ice and bait. What is special about the Stunned Mullet is that it brings together anglers from all circles, whether one spends the day in a game fishing boat or a dugout canoe there's still a fair chance of being competitive due to the various prize divisions. The fish that are weighed in are also donated to the local hospital, so nothing goes to waste.

The best catch in the most recent competition was a 100kg marlin by Team Solbrew, who were guided by Taska, the man who is undoubtedly the godly Kesoko's closest living descendant.

There were a number of interesting people at the tournament, including Douglas Rowland of WWF who was working with local villages to develop their own fishing regulations. A great step towards a positive, sustainable future for a marine environment with stunning biodiversity.

I would suggest fishing in the Solomons is not solely about catching fish. The confluence of the travel, the friends you make, the culture, the history, the stunning tropical scenery and crystal clear, fish rich waters are what make it so unique. It's a destination with incredible angling potential that hasn't quite made it on the sport fishing map. What that means is all the dream, highly-coveted species are there waiting – and they have likely never seen a lure – what an appealing thought... Regardless, as an angler you know you have come to the right place when the fishing is that special the locals dedicated a god to it.

Luke Reilly fished the Solomons as a guest of the Solomon Island Tourism.




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So Adventurous



Photo courtesy Papatuna, Island Retreat

Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific, an archipelago comprising a vast group of 992 breathtaking tropical islands. Feel the spirit of adventure and enjoy your own special piece of paradise - dive, fish, surf, hike, kayak or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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www.visitsolomons.com.sb

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