

Have Snorkel will Travel

Words & Images by Tim Roxborough

“You forgot the snorkels??” I couldn’t believe it, but our guide Nelson was so wide-eyed and good-natured that staying angry for more than a minute or two wasn’t really an option. But seriously Nelson! We were in a narrow wooden boat, putt-putting our way to a centuries old, man-made island in Langa Langa Lagoon in the Solomon Islands’ province of Malaita.



Looking over the edge of the boat I could clearly see giant clams on the sea floor. The teal of the water and the clarity was unreal and I couldn’t wait to jump in and explore. Only I would have to wait given we were minus a fairly fundamental piece of underwater equipment. Luckily the purpose of this boat trip was less to do with me getting wet and more about our destination...the island of Busu.

As part of a group of writers, reportedly amongst the very first foreign journalists to set foot in Malaita for some years, this had all the hallmarks of a wild little adventure from the get-go. Malaita is a 4,300 sq. km. slab of pristine tropical rainforest. With just 140,000 people who mainly live a subsistence lifestyle (fishing, taro and sweet potato), almost all of that precious jungle remains. The interior is mountainous, is dotted with waterfalls and the potential for eco-tourism is immense.

A 25-minute flight from Guadalcanal and the Solomon’s capital of Honiara, we were in a tiny little plane as skippered by a pilot I instantly wanted to write a series of children’s books about. Captain Cornelius – immaculate in his uniform – was a generously proportioned chap who had to squeeze and waddle down the narrow aisle to get to the cockpit. From there our chubby-cheeked hero turned around and with a boom of a voice, twinkle of eye and flash of smile gave the safety briefing.

Myself, and fellow passenger Ellen, decided he was adorable which I hope isn’t too patronising for a man of undoubted aviation prowess.

‘Captain Cornelius The Friendly Pilot Saves The Day’, ‘Captain Cornelius The Friendly Pilot Goes On A Big Adventure’, and various other children’s titles popped into my head.

Whether stardom in the field of children’s literature finds Captain Cornelius or not, he showed us just how skilful he is at his job. Our runway in Malaita was little more than a mown strip of grass with coconut trees on the sides and water at both ends. Not a nervous flier, I was transfixed by the density and beauty of the greens all around us. Coming in to land we also noticed we had a bit of a welcome party.

Local children had turned up to see us with the novelty of foreigners apparent. The airport itself was just a small ship container-sized building and once Captain Cornelius had applied the breaks before the plane slid into the sea, we were soon in a van headed for the province’s capital, Auki (population 7,000).

Passing simple but attractive villages along the way, downtown Auki made Honiara seem like Singapore or Paris in terms of development and good looks.



Where the people in the outlying Malaitan villages smiled and looked happy to see us, there was a palpable sense of tension on the boarded-up, barbed-wired streets of Auki.

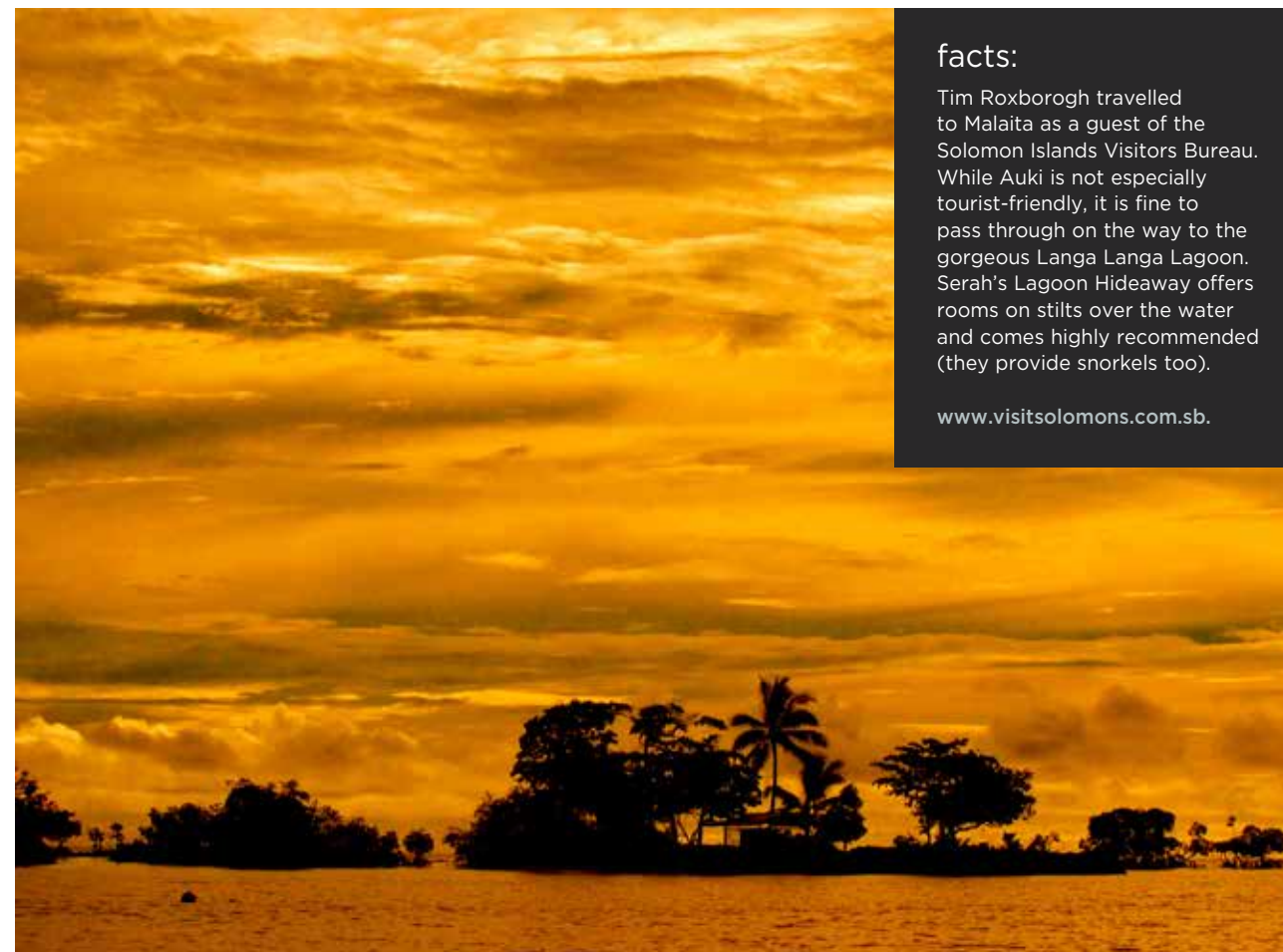
It was sad to see, but from the clothes of the children to the expressions of the adults, it was clear that life in Auki is not straightforward. The reasons for Auki's (and indeed Malaita's) social and economic difficulties are complex and include many young Malaitans leaving their homes for the greater opportunities that may be found in Honiara. But what can't be denied is the splendour of the geography and it was only going to get prettier once we ventured to the waterfront and boarded our boat for Busu Island.

It was at this point I realised Nelson had left the snorkels back in Honiara. Nelson! Not to worry, there was bound to be a snorkel at Busu Island where we were invited guests for just the second ever Artificial Islands And Shell Money Festival.

Sailing for 40 minutes through the still waters of Langa Langa lagoon, the abrasiveness of Auki was forgotten given what we were looking at all around us. Dating back as far as 600 years ago, the lagoon is speckled with artificially built islands, created by tribes tormented and chased by fierce rivals who refused to share the mainland with anyone they didn't have to.

As such, communities sprung up on what had originally been nothing more than sandbars in the lagoon. Some of the islands are so miniscule as to only contain a dozen or so homes and room for little else. Others, like Busu, are larger with a handful of different villages, several hundred residents, a coconut forest, a church...and a cemetery.

Over the course of the two-day festival the people of Busu proudly presented their guests with traditional songs and dances while letting us try our hand at the bamboo/panpipe drumming that is both a melodic and rhythmic hallmark of the province. Perhaps due to the calming reality of island life or maybe the retention of their cultural traditions, the mood of Busu couldn't have been further from Auki's.



facts:

Tim Roxborough travelled to Malaita as a guest of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. While Auki is not especially tourist-friendly, it is fine to pass through on the way to the gorgeous Langa Langa Lagoon. Serah's Lagoon Hideaway offers rooms on stilts over the water and comes highly recommended (they provide snorkels too).

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Beyond the music there was a recreation of a Busu wedding ceremony, a somewhat queasy-making tattoo display and the creating of shell money. A local form of currency/jewellery with a long history, we witnessed firsthand the hammering of shells into necklaces and bracelets that even in the 21st century are still worth a substantial amount.

Given the festival was spread over a couple of days, I figured there'd be plenty of time to duck off for a bit of snorkelling, something this developing nation already has significant international acclaim for. I was right about the availability of time, but not about the availability of a snorkel.

Incredibly for an island in a lagoon where the waters are this clear, there was not one villager in possession of a snorkel.

Well, I wasn't about to come to a lagoon in the Solomon Islands and not snorkel, so it was back to Auki to search for one. One windowless general store had what I was after,



but at the equivalent of NZ \$50 I initially refused. That would be expensive in New Zealand, let alone the Solomon Islands.

Making steps for the door, it dawned on me to view the snorkel

as an act of modest charity. Yes, the residents of Busu (like so many Solomon Islanders) are desperate to show off their culture as a means of generating income through tourism.



But as I would gently explain to the quite remarkable young man who organised the entire festival, you can still present your traditions while also trumpeting the world-class offerings nature has blessed you with.

So with overpriced snorkel in my backpack, I was in the boat for Busu once again. Jumping overboard, I wasn't let down. Fish of all colours, outrageous visibility and more giant clams than I think I've ever seen, the Langa Langa Lagoon was paradise for an obsessive snorkeller like me. Donating my snorkel to the festival organiser afterwards, I left unsure whether this was a good gift for an island of several hundred people or not. Either way, what I'd seen was too striking not to have others see it too, least of all the very people who live there. ■■



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