

Honiara

Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, has had its fair share of civil unrest and political instability. However, more than a decade after peacekeeping forces forged peace, the city of 65,000 is experiencing a golden period in which its tourism infrastructure is becoming more sophisticated. A three-hour flight from Brisbane, Honiara is the gateway to some of the world's most remote and pristine islands. But there's much in the capital to justify making it more than just a stopover, writes **CLAIRE CHAFFEY**.

STAY

There is only one place to stay in Honiara if you want the sophistication of an international hotel delivered with the unmatched warmth of the Solomon Islanders.

The Heritage Park Hotel overlooks the azure and windswept Iron Bottom Sound, so named because of the number of ships and planes shot down during the fierce battles of the World War II. Built in 2009, the hotel stands on the site of the former British governors' residence and attracts international business people, short- and long-term fly-in, fly-out workers, and tourists. The main attractions are the large, air-conditioned rooms, the ocean-side pool and bar, and the three restaurants that serve a range of delights from Indian-inspired bar snacks to sushi and exquisite seafood dishes such as snapper steamed in banana leaf or grilled crayfish – the signature dish of the Solomon Islands. The immaculate hotel grounds are filled with frangipani and bougainvillea trees and the salty, humid air is a constant reminder that, at just three hours from Australia, you're in the tropics.



heritageparkhotel.com.sb



The Heritage Park Hotel

HISTORY

The Solomon Islands, particularly the main island of Guadalcanal, is a mecca for history buffs with an interest in the Second World War.

The fighting here between the Americans and Japanese was vicious, with a particular battle – the Battle of Mount Austen – memorialised in the 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*.

Visitors can seek out the American War Memorial at Skyline Ridge as well as the Japanese Memorial at Mount Austen, but those looking to get up close and personal with remnants of the war can visit the **Vilu War Museum**, about an hour's drive along the pot-holed main coast road.

The tiny outdoor museum is a ramshackle but compelling collection of historic photographs, fighter planes, canons, tanks and bombers all resting in a beautiful cemetery of swaying palms and pink hibiscus. It's an eerie reminder of the lives that were lost here, but well worth a visit.



Vilu War Museum

SHOP

Next door to the Heritage Park Hotel is the **National Art Gallery**, an outdoor market where artists and traders sell their wares. The Solomon Islands is known for its master wood carvers, with artists from all over the 900-odd islands creating myriad treasures including delicate, streamlined bowls lined with intricate mother-of-pearl patterns, tiny fish and turtles carved from coconut shells, and war masks mirroring those worn by their ancestors during the bloodthirsty head-hunting raids of the past.

Buyers can also pick up rarer finds, such as unique paintings and traditional Solomon Islands money, which is carved from the inside of giant clams found in inland riverbeds. Buyer beware, though: some traders try to sell artefacts that would be better off in museums, and some try to sell fakes. Use your better judgment and enjoy the surprisingly friendly process of bartering. There is always a "second price" if you hesitate at the first, and, if you must push it, you can probably get a third. You will always get a smile and a handshake at the end.



National Art Gallery



BEACHES

There is one constant about Honiara: the heat. As such, it's nice to know there are a few beaches close to the city. For a secluded picnic spot, head to **Turtle Beach**, about four kilometres west of central Honiara. Quiet and palm-fringed, you'll avoid the younger and more boisterous local crowds that tend to head for Bonegi (or Mbonege) Beach, which is about six kilometres further down the road. Bonegi's main attractions are the two WWII wrecks – the Hirokawa and Kinugawa Japanese freighters, sunk during the war – that are visible just offshore. When conditions are favourable, you can snorkel here to get a better look. During peak times you may have to pay a small fee to access the beach. Between Turtle and Bonegi beaches you'll find Tangisaliu, another small and secluded spot with a handful of thatched huts and a pebbly shoreline.

CULTURE

One of Honiara's newest attractions is a family-run cultural centre on the edge of town. The **Lumatatapo Cultural Village** is a display village where visitors can get a taste of life in a traditional Melanesian village. Sago-palm thatched houses are surrounded by trees dripping with coconuts, which your host will gladly open for you with a machete after climbing the tree to collect it. Nothing beats coconut water straight from the source. Guests are also able to enjoy a locally-prepared feast of yam and taro and whatever fish of the day is on the menu. The village showcases traditional weapons, cookery and other artefacts that were – and still are – essential to everyday life as a Solomon Islander. The centre is a fabulous place to ask your burning questions about culture, beliefs, modern life and social etiquette, such as the oh-so-common betel nut ritual, which was, in days past, reserved for council meetings and other important gatherings at which a little bit of Dutch courage was needed. Now, it's a social custom for young and old, and as common as drinking a coffee or Sol Brew. Try it if you're game.

GETTING AROUND

The best way to get to Honiara is with **Solomon Airlines**, which flies daily from Brisbane. Economy fares are about \$800 return and great deals on the excellent business class can be found. The Solomon Islands is still very much a developing country. As such, getting around can be difficult. While there are buses, they can be slow (everything runs according to "island time"), packed to the brim and fairly unlikely to take you exactly where you want to go. Taxis are common, affordable and metred. If you have a full day of activities planned, you can negotiate a rate for the day. Although peace has reigned in the Solomons for a while now, it is still best to be aware of current affairs and keep your finger on the pulse of what's going on locally. While Honiara is generally safe during the day, take care walking at night and don't flash your wealth. Overall, your best defence is a few key Pidgin English phrases, patience and a smile.



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