

PICTURES: DAVID KIRKLAND

# CASTAWAY PLEASURE

Greg Clarke samples the simple pleasures of lobster, icy cold beer and deserted beaches in the Solomon Islands, which once hosted one of the world's most famous castaways.

From the over-water bar at Fatboys Resort in the Solomon Islands, lobster tails and cold beers are served with views to nearby Kennedy Island. The confection of sand and trees is a castaway idyll and the island was the temporary home of perhaps the most renowned castaway (other than Robinson Crusoe) in history.

There are 992 islands in the Solomon Islands. Some 300 are

inhabited. Kennedy Island takes its name from the 35th president of the US, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was shipwrecked there during World War 2.

In 1943, Kennedy was commander of a Patrol Torpedo (PT) boat that was sliced in two by a Japanese destroyer one night. Two men were killed but Kennedy, 26, swam to the island that would later be renamed in his honour (it has had various names,

including Plum Pudding Island).

After long swims at night searching for patrolling naval colleagues who might offer rescue, JFK and his comrades hid from the Japanese during the day.

The fighting here was some of the most critical during the war in the Pacific and strategically linked to the Papua New Guinea campaign. When the Japanese were defeated in the Solomons they retreated to Rabaul. The

simplified version of wartime logic went something like this: control the Solomons and PNG and win the war for the Pacific.

This year marks the centenary of Kennedy's birth, as well as the 75th anniversary of the beginnings of the campaign in the Solomons after the Japanese invaded in 1942.

Divers have long since been lured to the Solomon Islands – there are 52 war wrecks in Iron Bottom

Sound, the body of water east of Honiara's main port.

It's about 500 metres from Fatboys Resort, on Mbabanga Island near Gizo in the country's Western Province, to verdant Kennedy Island. After taking a boat from Fatboys I take on a circumnavigation (sort of) while staff from the resort begin to cook lunch on a wood-fired barbecue. Lobster tails, Spanish mackerel and coconuts are on the menu.

“  
The fish we catch become dinner, cooked whole and local style on a fire covered with stone-like chinks of broken coral.  
”

The name, Fatboys, is taken from the character Joe in Charles Dickens' novel *The Pickwick Papers*. Fatboy's life revolves

around eating, sleeping and making every attempt to avoid work. The resort does its best to encourage visitors to indulge in this

life. There are some, however, who spend their days diving on nearby wrecks and at night swim with the apparently friendly covey of reef sharks.

The water under the bar is home to hundreds of beautifully coloured fish, and in this free-ranging aquarium guests can watch through, or dive into, waters clean as a child's conscience. ➤





Castaway pleasure

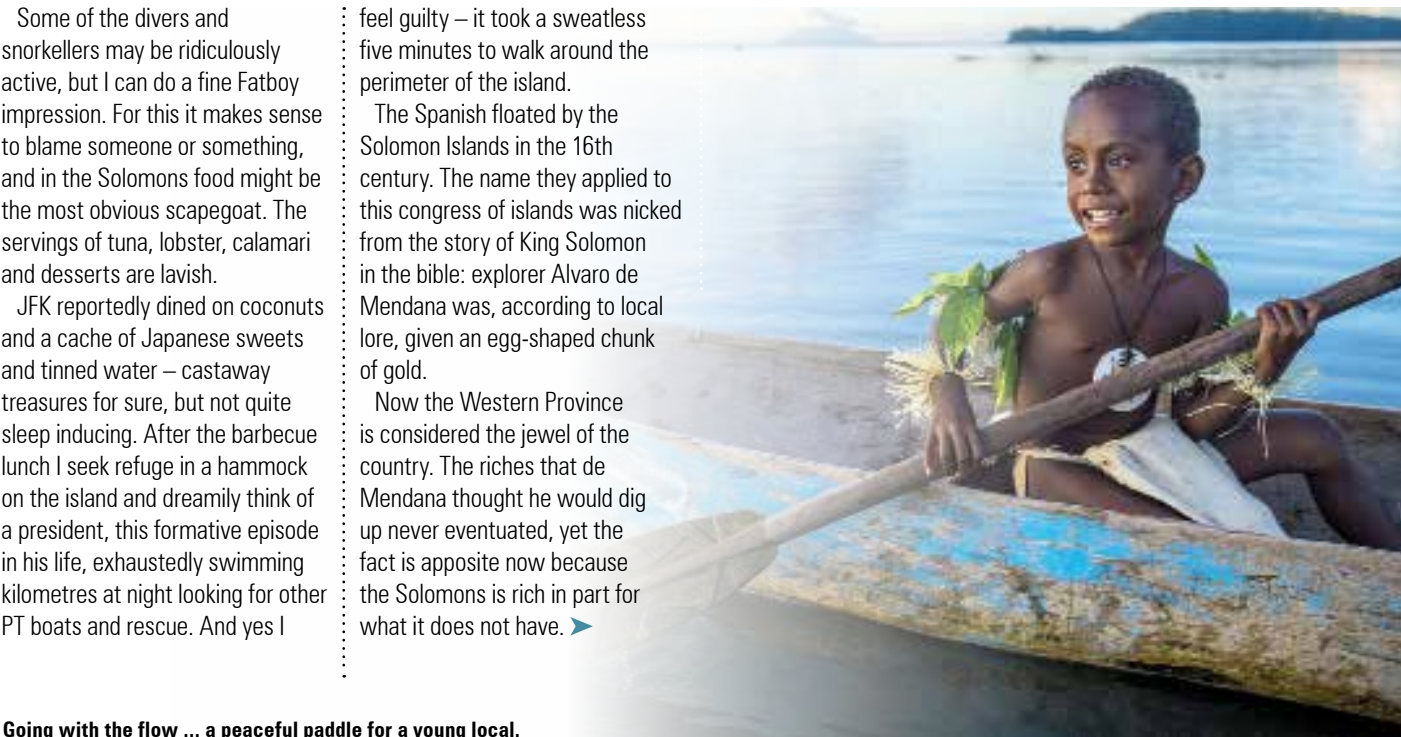
Some of the divers and snorkellers may be ridiculously active, but I can do a fine Fatboy impression. For this it makes sense to blame someone or something, and in the Solomons food might be the most obvious scapegoat. The servings of tuna, lobster, calamari and desserts are lavish.

JFK reportedly dined on coconuts and a cache of Japanese sweets and tinned water – castaway treasures for sure, but not quite sleep inducing. After the barbecue lunch I seek refuge in a hammock on the island and dreamily think of a president, this formative episode in his life, exhaustedly swimming kilometres at night looking for other PT boats and rescue. And yes I

feel guilty – it took a sweatless five minutes to walk around the perimeter of the island.

The Spanish floated by the Solomon Islands in the 16th century. The name they applied to this congress of islands was nicked from the story of King Solomon in the bible: explorer Alvaro de Mendana was, according to local lore, given an egg-shaped chunk of gold.

Now the Western Province is considered the jewel of the country. The riches that de Mendana thought he would dig up never eventuated, yet the fact is apposite now because the Solomons is rich in part for what it does not have. ➤



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Castaway pleasure

The islands are free of garish resorts. The word ‘resort’, when applied to the Solomons, connotes thatched roofs, rooms without TV or Wi-Fi. This is part of the country’s appeal and even in the Western Province a ‘resort’ is an exception rather than rule.

We have a castaway experience on Hopei Island. No-one lives on this small island off Munda (about a 50-minute flight north-west of Honiara).

The fish we catch become dinner, cooked whole and local style on a fire covered with stone-like chinks of broken coral that swiftly readies the fish and cassava. We encounter a small amount of phosphorescence in shallow water just metres from the tent we will

sleep in. No one else is staying on the island apart from our huddle of campers.

All of this, bar the fish on the end of our lines, is organised by an extraordinarily accommodating man called Billy, the tour supervisor at Agnes Gateway Hotel, a village-owned hotel just a three-minute walk from Munda Airport.

Near to Hopei and Munda, we snorkel to more deserted islands and around a Japanese fighter laying in about four metres of water. Diving skills aren’t necessary to explore some of the islands’ World War 2 wrecks.

Earlier, Billy had taken us on a walking tour east of Munda, where he showed us abandoned American landing craft and other



accoutrements of war slowly being ravaged by time and jungle. We visit a village museum curated by a man who has been collecting war artefacts – from dog tags and saki bottles to plane engines – from the

forest since 2002. He has more than 1000 pieces.

Billy also takes us to Rendova, the island from which the Americans launched an assault to defeat Japan’s Munda stronghold. Enroute

Solomon sights ... (from left) war relics, Fatboys Resort, a deserted beach.

Castaway pleasure



to Rendova, about 40 minutes by small boat from Munda, we’re on the lookout for dolphins, fail in our quest but happen upon Titiru Eco-lodge, a hideaway within a cove where two over-water bungalows

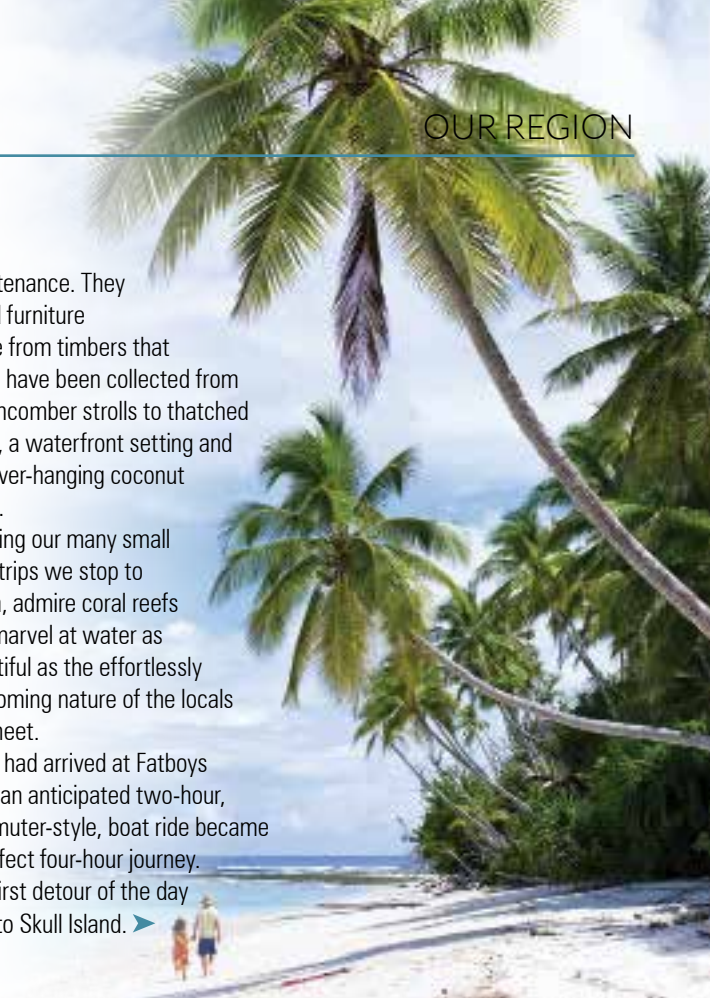
are the only imposition upon the water-edge mangroves.

Titiru and Hopei are not the only escapes that’ll rekindle fantasy. Oravae Cottages, north-west of Gizo, have a Swiss Family Robinson

countenance. They blend furniture made from timbers that could have been collected from beachcomber strolls to thatched roofs, a waterfront setting and the over-hanging coconut trees.

During our many small boat trips we stop to swim, admire coral reefs and marvel at water as beautiful as the effortlessly welcoming nature of the locals we meet.

We had arrived at Fatboys after an anticipated two-hour, commuter-style, boat ride became a perfect four-hour journey. The first detour of the day was to Skull Island. ➤





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Castaway pleasure



Lobster is served ... food is one of the delights of the Solomon Islands.

Just off its shores, we waited on board while the wonderfully enthusiastic Billy asked permission from his ancestors for our group to enter the island.

After wading through shallow water we see up close the human remains that give the island its name. Head hunting was practised by Billy's forebears.

Soon after, we stop at Zipolo Habu Resort, a place popular with fishermen, divers and expat families based in Honiara. Not surprisingly there are village-loads of locals and expats who believe that tourism is the Solomon's future.

JFK was tortured by tides during marathon swimming efforts to rescue himself and his crew. He

was ultimately reacquainted with his Rendova base after locals delivered a message he had carved into a coconut shell.

After his rescue, Kennedy was reunited with the shell, had it encased and reportedly used it as a paperweight in the Oval Office. The message read in part: '11 ALIVE ... NEED SMALL BOAT ...'

JFK's castaway ordeal lasted seven days, the same length of time as my visit. While our circumstances couldn't be more different, we do have something else in common. Just thinking about the Solomon Islands can make visitors hunger for a small boat. ■



NEED TO KNOW

**STAYING THERE** Rooms at Fatboys Resort start from \$S1560 a night; \$S1770 at Titiru Eco-lodge; \$S1800 at Oravae; and \$S300 at Agnes Gateway Hotel.

**MORE INFORMATION** [visitsolomons.com.sb](http://visitsolomons.com.sb), [facebook.com/titiru.ecolodge](http://facebook.com/titiru.ecolodge), [oravaecottage.com](http://oravaecottage.com), [agneshotelsolomon.com](http://agneshotelsolomon.com)

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