



TRAVEL  
SOLOMON ISLANDS



# GO SLOW IN THE SOLOMONS

Home to rustic romance, overwater spas and lobster every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the Solomon Islands' charms will allow you to switch off in every sense of the word.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY / CHRISTINE RETSCHLAG



The room fan clucks cheekily like the garrulous gecko in the corner of my hut and my masseuse wears a scent redolent of woodfire smoke and the coconut oil with which she has just cooked my lobster lunch. I've flown over ribbons of aqua reef and been seduced by the hypnotic hum of the outboard motor of a tinnie to arrive at this moment and place: Fatboys Resort in the Solomon Islands.

Not that you'll find too many fat boys here. Though it's named after the character Joe who ate too much and slept too much in *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens, the only dietary danger around these parts is from eating too much fresh lobster. Even so, when you can snorkel straight off the jetty among colourful tropical fish, where the black-tipped reef sharks like to circle after dark, there's little threat of serious weight gain.

Perched just three hours northeast of Brisbane, the Solomons consist of 900 islands scattered throughout 1600km in the Solomon Sea. While Australians know much about their other South Pacific neighbours, only recently are they daring to venture to these warm waters.

### HISTORIC HONIARA

Thatched huts and rainbow washing flapping on crude lines flank Honiara International Airport on arrival. Some locals still refer to this strip as Fighter One, as it was where Americans landed in 1942 to protect the Pacific after the attack on Pearl Harbor. A field of trees along the airport drive has been planted to remember the fallen servicemen. Nearby, the nine-hole golf course was once Fighter Two — another landing strip for the Americans — and the drive into the capital of Honiara winds pass Iron Bottom Sound where 42 warships were sunk. Luckily for the region, the Americans defeated the Japanese in 1943.

These days, you'll find the "Hapi Islands" and three main groups of people — Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian — who speak more than 70 languages from mouths stained red from betel nut, the trademark of a South Pacific smile. While Honiara boasts a cornucopia of colourful shops with names exploding with enthusiasm, such as Fantastic Hardware, Happiness Shop and Excellent Fashion, as with most South Pacific destinations the real story unfolds beyond the capital.



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Solomon Island delights (clockwise from opposite): serene waters, fancy coconuts, smiling faces and freshly caught fish.



### DIGITALLY DETOX

In the western province of Gizo, the markets shimmer in the sun with freshly caught cod and wrasse and produce plucked that very day, such as green coconuts, peppers, peanuts, mangoes and watermelon. The Solomons equals sunsets, seashells and sandbars.

It's also a destination where internet and phone connection can be patchy. Sure, you can buy a local SIM card from Solomons Telekom, but even

then you are travelling in a developing nation subject to the vagaries of Mother Nature, so connection cannot be guaranteed. The best bet: switch off and embrace the experience.

For those truly desperate for an internet fix, wait until you're back in Honiara and head to The Lime Lounge. Sip on a fresh coconut in this charming air-conditioned cafe and surf the web to your heart's desire with arguably the best internet coverage in the region.



### RUSTIC ROMANCE

The Solomons is not only home to sun-drenched beaches and old-fashioned connection, it is also a land of rustic romance and you'll discover this in the authentic accommodation offerings as well as through its open-hearted people. Solomon Islander Stella married a Fijian man and they have a four-year-old son. Here, she says, dating is done in distinct Solomons style.

"We don't date in restaurants and stuff. We sit along trees and playing fields. We don't sit down for candlelit dinners: we do it by our eyes or pass messages through a person we call 'Solair' after Solomon Airlines.

"Our parents don't allow dating, so we use a friend or sister or a cousin to do it for us. Sex before marriage is very big but very secret. Once someone in the family knows, they can demand compensation money."

These days, mixed marriages are sanctioned in the Solomons, but the most beautiful women head to the central province of Malaita, according to Stella, who has an amusing way of describing her rainbow-nation people.

"Each place has their own idea of beauty ... fair blue blonde, ginger blonde to purple black," she says. "Most of the locals go for their own colour. We are multiple-coloured people. Some you will see are black black, some are chocolate and some are black blonde.

"We speak Pidgin English — that's what unites us."

For rustic romance of a different kind, head to Oravae Cottage, a 20-minute boat ride away from Gizo and where green and purple crabs scurry around the jetty like harried commuters. Sleep in the open-plan wooden bungalow, penthouse or treehouse in this delightful destination where you can hire the entire island and comfortably house 10. Swim straight off the deck and enjoy marshmallow sunsets.

Life hasn't always been so sweet here, though. The 2007 tsunami destroyed the main cottage and forced Oravae Cottage owners, Solomon Islander Patson and his Australian-born wife Naomi and their children, to flee to the nearby hills. In true Solomons spirit, the family rebuilt and if you're lucky their teenage kids will punctuate the night air with their silky voices and softly strummed guitar.

"In our village, there was nothing to do but sing. So you got a guitar and you just sang," Patson says. "Life was that simple. That's the Solomon way."



Sleep in the open-plan wooden bungalow at Oravae Cottage or (below right) settle in for a sunset at Tavanipupu Island Resort. Bottom left: Meeting the locals at Gizo markets.



Local boat driver Panda believes Solomon Islands life is pretty simple too, particularly when it comes to matters of the heart. Panda is married to local woman Sarah and they have four children aged under 10.

"A man looks for a nice wife who is good-looking, hard-working and educated. We have lots of small islands here; you just go and choose one," he says. As for the groom, "He needs to have good resources, some land and a hard job. It is very easy to find a husband here. Once you go to the boys and say, 'I want to marry you', they will say 'Yes', no question."

### FIT FOR A KING

Over in the eastern province in the Marau Sound, Tavanipupu Island Resort manager and Australian Sean Tiesman knows a thing or two about the magic

that rustic romance casts on his guests. Not only did British royals Prince William and Kate alter their travel plans to stay the night at the resort in 2012, it's also rumoured to be where Prince George was conceived.

Curious visitors can book into the Royal Suite or one of the surrounding executive suites with their traditional thatched roofs and shuttered windows and doors. Generous beds are the centrepiece of each hut and are swathed in cool calico mosquito nets. While there is a large bathroom with double basins, a western toilet and indoor shower, throw caution to the South Pacific breeze and step into your own private outdoor shower under the stars.

Tavanipupu island belongs to the Solomon Islands people under the National Providence Fund (NPF), which is the country's superannuation fund,



Explore one of the Solomons' white-sand beaches before heading back for a lobster feast.

and Tiesman employs 25 villagers full-time with more engaged in building work. Tiesman, a former model and actor who became interested in the Solomon Islands in 1988 when he played the role of a 1942 soldier in the film *The Thin Red Line*, is spending \$1.2 million renovating the resort, building more bungalows, a bar and games room, a formal dining area and conference and wedding venues.



Workers have just completed a jetty bar and an overwater day spa, which consists of two massage rooms that have a water view directly under the table. Tiesman, a fully qualified spa therapist who trained at the Bali International Spa Academy, has created a five-star spa menu, which includes Balinese, Swedish, Ayurvedic and Indian head massage as well as deep tissue, shiatsu and sports therapy. Spa body treatments use local ingredients and spices blended at the resort. By the end of the year, Tiesman plans to build a bunkhouse bungalow and begin massage training courses for Solomon Islanders.

"There is no other facility like this in the Solomons," he says. "My vision is to pioneer a whole new industry that will hopefully see students become qualified and begin a wonderful career path in this growing field."

## ESCAPE ROUTES

### ■ Getting there

Solomon Airlines ([flysolomons.com](http://flysolomons.com)) has regular flights from east coast Australian capitals. Domestic flights all depart and return via Honiara and many destinations require boat transfers once you've arrived.

### ■ Staying there

**The Heritage Park Hotel** in Honiara is considered the best in the capital and offers wireless internet coverage, a great pool and a bar overlooking the water. It's also in the heart of the CBD and within an easy walk to shops and museums. [heritageparkhotel.com.sb](http://heritageparkhotel.com.sb)

**Fatboys Resort** near Gizo is best known for its trademark jetty and restaurant perched over the ocean, from which you can swim and snorkel in the warm waters. Ask for the honeymoon *bure* here. [solomonislandsfatboys.com.au](http://solomonislandsfatboys.com.au)

**Tavanipupu Island Resort** is considered one of the region's finest. Check out the Royal Suite and have an overwater massage in the Solomons' best day spa, replete with local products. [tavanipupu.com](http://tavanipupu.com)

**Saeragi Beach**, near Gizo, which claims to be the Solomons' "most beautiful beach", has two comfortable huts perched on the sand. Visitors are invited to interact with the local villagers and participate in palm frond weaving, coconut husking, fishing, cooking and traditional dancing. [visitsolomons.com.sb](http://visitsolomons.com.sb)

**Oravae Cottage**, a 20-minute boat ride from Gizo, allows visitors to book the entire island with accommodation for 10 in an open-plan wooden bungalow, penthouse and treehouse. Swim and snorkel straight off the deck. [oravaecottage.com](http://oravaecottage.com)

### ■ Travel tips

The Solomon Islands is a developing nation and it's advisable to drink only bottled water. Precautions should also be taken against being bitten by mosquitoes, which can carry dengue fever and malaria in these parts.

Dress standards are cool and relaxed but exercise normal respect by refraining from wearing swimsuits outside the resorts and in local villages

The best times to visit are during the shoulder seasons of April–May and Oct–Nov, when the weather is milder and less affected by tropical heat or storms.

### ■ What to do

Culture and tradition still run deep in the Solomon Islands and one of the best times to visit is during the annual **Shell Money Festival** held around August.

The Solomons is a paradise for underwater sports and is located within a wider area known as the **Coral Triangle**, which has been described as the "Amazon of the ocean". There are almost 500 species of coral forming 5750 square kilometres of reef, making this a perfect diving destination.

### ■ More information

Find out more at [visitsolomons.com.sb](http://visitsolomons.com.sb).

## WHO ORDERED THE LOBSTER?

The last word on the Solomon Islands should belong to the lobsters, which are in plentiful supply around these parts.

At Tavanipupu Island Resort, you can dine like the future king himself on lobster caught by staff in the Marau Sound waters and cooked by one of the country's finest chefs. Back at Fatboys Resort, local fishermen arrive in traditional dugout canoes with fresh daily catches and, at Sanbis Resort near Gizo, which also boasts a dedicated massage parlour at the end of its jetty, you can even feast on a lobster pizza cooked in the Southern Hemisphere's only overwater pizza oven.

The Agnes Gateway Hotel in Munda will cook you a lobster omelette for breakfast and, at the Heritage Park Hotel in Honiara, your lobster is drenched in garlic and best served with a cold local SolBrew beer and an overwater view.

It's simple and good, and simply that kind of destination. Solomon Islanders have a beautiful saying: "*Me lukim iu behind*," which translated means, "I'll see you soon." Once captivated by this chain of islands' rustic romance, you'll be daydreaming to return. 🍷

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