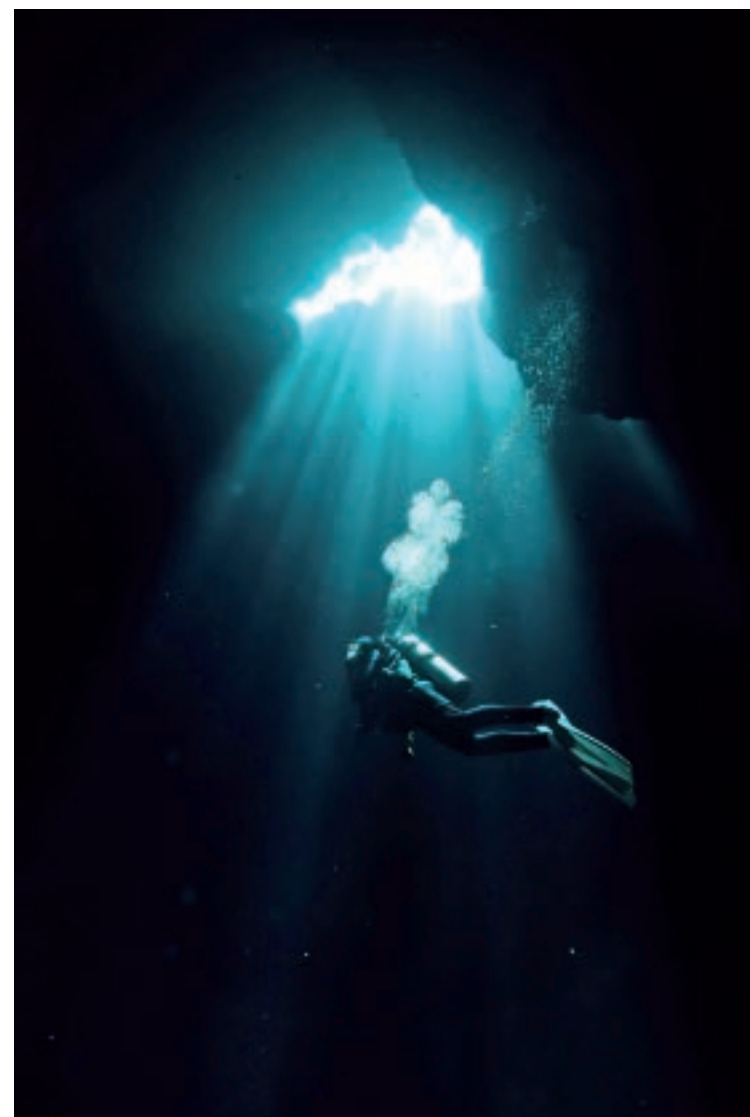


Bilikiki Cruises' fish extravaganza



Diver silhouetted inside a coral cave.



Giant anemones are home to Clown fish, *Amphiprion perideraion*.



A rare moment when a Blue Spot Ray is out in the open.

**Text and photos
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The Solomon Islands has some of the healthiest coral ecosystems and most diverse fish populations of any reef on Planet Earth. Bilikiki Cruises and its purpose built live aboard dive boat MV Bilikiki takes you on an incredible journey of exploration to discover this marine wealth. I did the ten-day circuit of Russell Islands, Marovo Lagoon and the Florida Islands.

Is there a better lifestyle than cruising the South Pacific seas? Yes, there is. It's cruising on a luxurious liveaboard dive boat and diving up to five dives a day. The water temperature is thirty degrees. The visibility averages around thirty metres on wall dives and twenty metres on inner reefs. The two on board chefs keep on producing great, healthy food and the dive staff keep your dive gear primed and ready to go. Every dive site is next to a jungle clad picture postcard perfect tropical island. This is the lifestyle on board MV Bilikiki that has thrilled divers for more than twenty-five years. I like it!

The attractions of the Solomon Islands include incredibly healthy coral ecosystem, an amazing diversity of fish life amongst the most abundant of any coral reefs

to be found anywhere in the world, and World War Two history. Its wall diving is renowned and will tantalise big fish watchers while its small fish life will keep you thrilled. The night diving is superlative. There is a strong experience of wartime battles, wrecks and stories of bravery, survival, death and destruction.

On top of all this is the rich cultural heritage of the Solomon Islanders, which include the carvings from Marovo Lagoon, the happy idyllic tropical island lifestyle and even the recent history of head hunting. The people of the Solomon Islands are friendly and welcoming.

Incredible Fish biodiversity I challenged myself to photograph rare and elusive Angelfish. However, I did see a lot of other wonderful tropical fish. I found that some were elusive and hard to photograph by day. Maybe I should get a rebreather. However, I was lucky enough to get some good photos at night.

My best experience was while I was diving at Wickham Island in the Marovo Lagoon. This was a really great night dive. I watched a White Lined Cod out hunting. These are a sleek and aggressive predator. They emerge from the safety of a table coral, where they live, to hunt actively. They even seem to tolerate my bright lights and keep on hunting. They are

brilliant hunters. I feel sorry for their prey. They don't stand a chance when the White Lined Cod is out on the prowl.

I found a Coral head about three metres tall. Inside there were a few small tunnels and passages. A Navarchus angelfish ducked down into one of them. Within a few seconds, it poked its head out with the curiosity typical of many reef fish. I was able to get a couple of photos before it scurried away into a deeper crevice to sleep. I checked my play back button and saw that I had got a nice photo.

Soon after, my dive buddy waved his torch to alert me to a beautiful Blue Spot Ray right out in the open. As soon as I approached, the ray ducked for cover. In those brief few seconds, I was thrilled to have successfully got my first ever portrait. I have never got a reasonable shot of these very nervous rays. Sometimes, it takes hundreds of dives until you get the opportunity to photograph something special.

We had dived this spot in the afternoon. It is a fifty metre wide sandy 'muck dive' with rich coral gardens at either end. One of the coral gardens has a resident Crocodile fish, the biggest one I have ever seen. We had seen him in the afternoon. My buddy and I headed over to where it was. By now, our tanks were getting low and bottom time was running out.

While looking for the right spot, I saw a Blue Faced Angel fish in a coral cave. Forget the crocodile fish. What a wonderful sight!

I always try to turn my torch to the side to approach the fish in the shadows. This tactic was successful and I managed to get close enough. The fish had entered a cave with two blind tunnels. It was able to move back and forth across my camera. Then, it made its escape. These Blue Faced Angelfish are a contender for the most beautiful fish in the ocean.

When I checked my photos, I was thrilled to have some nice looking shots to add to my collection. For me, getting good shots is the pinnacle of great diving.

We surfaced filled with that tranquil exhilaration after having had a really amazing night dive. We motored back to MV Bilikiki in the hazy full moon over a glassy smooth sea with a trace of bioluminescence in the wake of the boat. Does it get any better than this?

After a quick shower, I downloaded the photos and serviced my camera and it was time to hit the sack. The next day starts with an early morning dive to see some big fish immediately after breakfast.

Pelagic action
Our dingy dropped us off near the point at Kicha Island. The wall

was covered in bright red Fan Corals, Whip Coral clumps and caverns with overhangs. These sea caves were festooned with alluring soft corals. I positioned myself near a brightly coloured coral window and hoped that some of the divers would pass inside my window of dreams.

Further along the reef, fifteen Bump Headed Parrot fish could be heard crunching away at the coral. We followed them slowly for several minutes. However, they kept moving at the same safe distance of ten metres away from us. Sometimes, we got a little closer. Four of the adults were massive, much bigger than any I had seen before. Their heavy bodies get longer and higher, looking far more powerful. What a grand spectacle! The Solomon Islands has more schools of Bump Headed Parrot fish than I have seen anywhere.

These giant Parrotfish have a nasty response to approaching threat that is a bit like the octopus squirting ink to help it to escape. They blast out large smoky plumes of coral poo as they make their escape in the hazy cloud of crushed up coral crud. How rude!

Down along the point, a school of beautiful Big Eyed Barracuda cruised in formation across the reef. Then they made a series of circles across the face of the divers. These are a smaller, sleek Barracuda but are very beautiful.

There is no greater human endeavour than watching and discovering the amazing creatures that Mother Nature has created.

Then again, learning about the ingenious survival tricks and adaptations of a million incredible creatures is most certainly the pinnacle of human existence. You combine the thrills and spills of the greatest close encounters on the planet with the knowledge of their ingenious adaptations for survival in the wildest and most dangerous of all places, the ocean.

To stand back in wonder and awe and observe some of these magnificent creatures in the wild can drive your pulse into overdrive and thrill your emotions into the greatest of all heights. That, of course, is why I go diving!

Fish extravaganza
Once we had dived the pelagic part of the dive, the usual plan was to move up to shallower water to check out the rich and diverse coral gardens. On many of these dives, I wished that I had brought my wet Coral Finder identification kit. The variety of hard corals was simply incredible.

However, I was interested in small fish watching. There were so many brightly coloured little fish indicating the excellent state of good health of these reefs.

I was fascinated by the beautiful Melanesian Wrasse. I could see groups of five or six wrasse including a dominant male scurrying about energetically. At first, it reminded me of a Flasher Wrasse. I had to check the Fish ID books to identify this pretty little fish.

The Melanesian wrasse behaves in a similar way by raising and lowering its dorsal fins. It is not as showy as the stunning Flasher Wrasse but it is still very captivating.

These fish dart about at great speed, changing direction every few seconds. It is like trying to photograph a blowfly on a hot summer's day.

I had to resort to extreme trickery to get the autofocus to work. The technique here is to move the focus window to nine o'clock and aim to focus on the wrasses eyeball as it zooms past at a hundred kilometres an hour. I ask myself, why do we set ourselves these crazy impossible challenges?

This dive site is known as Mirror Cave. It

has the most unbelievable fish life and one of the richest coral gardens I have ever seen. My dive guide showed me the colony of tiny Paguritis Hermit Crabs. These Hermit Crabs have learned to colonise the vacant Christmas Worm holes in the hard coral colonies. They have the tell-tale giant claws, typical of Hermit Crabs but they only grow to a few millimetres across.

I think to myself about the conflict between freedom and security that life presents us. For these Hermit Crabs, their entire existence depends on the safety and security of this tiny habitat. The freedom bit is restricted to emerging a few millimetres from its 'prison' to forage for food.

There are many examples of this very humble life style. Whip coral shrimp live on a single tiny line of coral. It represents safety and its lifeline. It is home.

I sit in one spot for a few minutes and begin to see how many Damsel Fish I can see. In no time at all, I notice eleven different species in a circle of about six metres. I cannot believe how different they are. The variety of shapes and colours is awesome.

I moved to another spot and did the same. Most of the Damsel Fish I saw were different and there was a huge variety again. Scissor tail varieties, colour variations. I wonder if you spent an hour doing this over fifteen different coral heads, would you have more than one hundred species. The answer of course is yes, definitely! The fish life here is simply incredible in its diversity and its sheer numbers. The closer you look, the more you see.

Solomon Island Light show
The Solomon Islands consists of 992 islands and many more islets. Many have cracks, caves slots and tunnels into the coral walls. We get to dive inside a number of these coral cuts when the sun is directly overhead. There is Mirror Cave and Leru Cut.

The highlight of these coral caves is the light show produced when the sun is high. Sunbeams flicker down into the darkness of the cave creating scintillating patterns. They are a photographer's dream, as long as you can get in before the other divers. I was last getting into one of these stunning caves and had to resort to turning off my strobes as the suspended particles in the water were far too great.

The suspended particles are caused by divers' bubbles dislodging silt from the walls of the caves. This is simply unavoidable. The only thing to do is to take turns and try to be the first in line. I managed to be first into another cave called Leru Cut to try my luck with the tantalising beams of light.

Some of these caves open up to the surface and have trees overgrowing them. These produce reflections of trees combined with sunbeams. The scenario is dripping with potential for photographers.

MV Bilikiki's ten-day adventure is the ultimate scuba diving adventure. There is such a wealth of great diving on offer here.

Mike Scotland visited the Solomon Islands as a guest of Dive Adventures, the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau, Solomon Airlines and Bilikiki Cruises.

For more information on Bilikiki Cruises, visit www.bilikiki.com
For more information on Dive Adventures visit www.diveadventures.com.au
For more information on the Solomon Islands visit www.visitsolomons.com
For more information on Solomon Airlines visit www.flysolomons.com



White Lined Cod taking refuge under a coral ledge.



This beautiful Tambja is not in any of my identification reference books.

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