

# Solomon says...

Get out of your comfort zone and into the vibrant culture of the Solomon Islands. Features editor Fiona Ralph tests the waters

**Y**ou could drink cocktails by the pool in the Solomon Islands, but you'd be wasting an opportunity. The real Solomons need to be experienced head-on. Try camping on a deserted island, eating cassava off an open fire, diving through a Second World War plane wreck and mingling with the locals. After all, they're some of the friendliest people you'll ever meet – a mix of Melanesians, Polynesians and Micronesians living on a third of the country's 992 islands. The archipelago lies north-east of Australia and is split into nine provinces, each with its own distinct customs and languages (more than 70 are spoken, with English the official language and Pijin the most commonly used).

The islands are already popular with diving fans due to the crystal-clear water, the sheer number of wrecks and abundant fish populations. But apart from divers and a few fishing and surfing tourists, the Solomons remain largely undiscovered. The country receives around 23,000 visitors a year – just 3 percent of Fiji's traffic. This means you can still have an island to yourself and – hooray! – the locals aren't yet jaded by tourists. Although facilities can be basic, there is beauty in the lack of development, with eco resorts and village homestays offering a refreshing contrast to the polished tourist operations in neighbouring countries.

At Titiru Eco Lodge, you can slip off the balcony of your bungalow straight into the fish-filled lagoon. If you can drag yourself away, it's an easy walk to Ugele village, where a joyful flurry of children follows your

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**Above and below:** Traditional feather money headdresses are worn in the Temotu Province. While feather money is no longer used as currency, shell money is still meticulously crafted (see opposite) and traded in some parts of the Solomon Islands, particularly during wedding ceremonies. **Top right:** Dugout canoes are a typical mode of transport in the islands. **Opposite:** Roadside markets, such as this one in Guadalcanal, are where most of the country's fruit, vegetables and seafood are purchased.







**Above:** It's deserted sandspits and glassy seas for miles in the Solomon Islands, where divers and snorkellers can roam colourful reefs and Second World War wrecks. **Top right:** A few of the country's many war relics can be viewed at the Vilu War Museum in Honiara. **Below:** Some of the best snorkelling is just a jump away from the convivial Fatboys Resort in the Western Province. **Opposite:** Diving platforms made from timber and driftwood are a favourite haunt of local children throughout the islands.



every move as you are entertained by local musicians and treated to delicacies such as ngali nuts.

If you're a history buff - or even if you're not - you're in for a treat. The country offers a fascinating insight into the Second World War. Some of the most significant battles of the war were fought there between Japanese and American troops. An island (and a fair few islanders) are named after former US President John F. Kennedy, who, as a young navy lieutenant during the war, was shipwrecked in the Western Province when a Japanese vessel rammed his patrol boat.

You can snorkel or dive for days through wrecks, from tanks to bombers and warships. In a village in Munda, in the Western Province, there is a pile of vine-choked trucks and Jeeps to discover (the Americans dumped vehicles rather than transport them home). You can also check out the small, open-air Peter Joseph WWII Museum, where Barney Paulsen has amassed a collection of guns, helmets, Coke bottles, razors and more.

Access to the museum and many islands in the Western Province can be organised through the Agnes Gateway Hotel, a three-minute walk from the Munda airstrip. The rustic hotel is owned and staffed by the community and is a handy base for diving and tours. Be sure to visit Skull Island, where the skulls of former chiefs are enshrined as a chilling reminder of the country's head-hunting days. Only a descendant of the chiefs can invite visitors onto the small island, and must request permission from his ancestors' spirits first.

If spirits and skeletons aren't your cup of tea, take a picnic to Agnes' private island, Hopei. Catch a few fish on the way (or get larger ones delivered for dinner) and sleep out under the stars.

A 90-minute boat ride or a quick trip from a tiny island airstrip will deliver you to Fatboys Resort. Here you can lounge like Charles Dickens' "fat boy" (in *The Pickwick Papers*) or get adventurous and surf a deserted reef break - although the sight of the waves might be thrill enough. If you're feeling frisky after dinner, grab a snorkel for a nightcap with reef sharks, or watch the nightly feeding from above. For a change of pace, the busy markets in nearby Gizo are worth a look, as is the restaurant at the Gizo Hotel. Finally, take a paddleboard to nearby Kennedy Island, where JFK's crew swam ashore after their boat was destroyed.

Before you leave the Solomons, spend some time in the capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal. If you're still craving pool time, there's plenty of space at the Heritage Park Hotel or Coral Sea Resort. For a culture fix, try the colourful Honiara Central Market, or get schooled on the Battle of Guadalcanal at the Solomon Islands National Museum or the open-air Vilu War Museum an hour's drive away. The 75th anniversary of the battle is to be commemorated this year.

Perhaps of most interest is the Lumatapopoho Cultural Village on the city outskirts, where one family is attempting to preserve Guadalcanal's Moro culture for future generations. Primo Pukukesa, wife Paola and





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## ADVENTURE SOLOMON ISLANDS

their family live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, surviving on wild pork and home-grown plantains, cabbage and coconuts, and wearing handmade bark loincloths.

The food Paola serves is simple but delicious, as it is throughout the country, where fish and lobster are caught daily and usually served with locally grown kumara, cassava and plantain. Refreshments include the local beer (SolBrew), jugs of bush lime juice, coconuts and plates of pineapple, pomelo and pawpaw. A traditional meal of fish and veges cooked unwrapped on hot stones is worth experiencing. The stones are also placed in flax baskets to boil coconut milk and water – quicker than a kettle, aside from the fire-lighting and stone-heating bit.

Don't expect the luxuries found at some tropical resorts. But they'll be worth forgoing for the intimacy of the smaller, often family-run establishments in the Solomons. (Who needs air-con when the sea breeze flows

through your bungalow, anyway?) It's the authenticity of each experience that makes this country so exciting. Embrace the local ways, learn a few words of Pijin and get outside your comfort zone – whether that means snorkelling with sharks or sampling a lobster omelette. You'll find there's a vibrancy and individuality to the culture that is hard to leave behind.

### GETTING THERE

> Solomon Airlines flies to Honiara from Brisbane and Sydney. Holiday packages can be booked through Our Pacific; see [ourpacific.co.nz](http://ourpacific.co.nz). Our writer flew courtesy of the Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau and Solomon Airlines. See [visitsolomons.com.sb](http://visitsolomons.com.sb) and [flysolomons.com](http://flysolomons.com). •