

Serenity in the Solomons

THE SOLOMON ISLANDS HAVE A SIMPLE SINCERITY THAT DISTINGUISHES THEM FROM THEIR NEIGHBOURS. A RAW AND UNEMBELLISHED CULTURE AWAITS

Words: Elise Galati



We linger outside a whitewashed church, taking in the quiet of the village and waiting for the Sunday service to begin. Barefoot children clad in bright clothes mill about us, cartwheeling and laughing.

It's 9:30 in the morning at Mbabanga Island, and we're here to kill time before flying back to Honiara in the afternoon. Being at the tail end of a jam-packed trip, we've already started to revert to home-mode, not expecting much from this spur-of-the-moment encounter with village life.

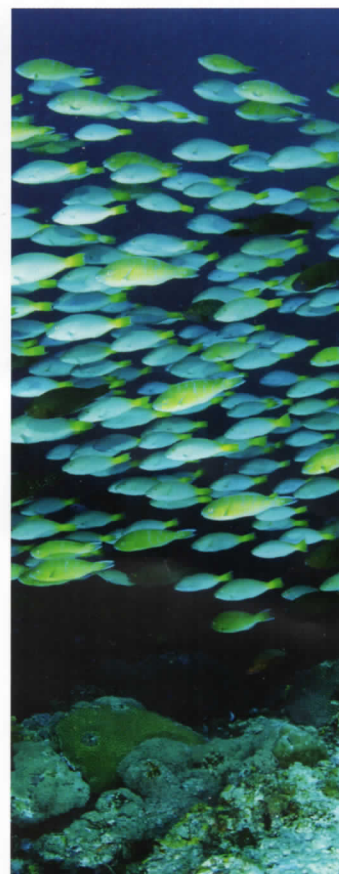
A bell chimes, low and loud, and in an instant the kids spring to attention and dart into the church, limbs flailing. We trail in after them, taking our seats in the splintered pew at the rear. By now the sun is high and light is streaming in through glassless windows, illuminating the plum-coloured altar and giant white cross at its centre. "Singsing gut," says Stella, our guide.

With no further encouragement, a girl with a Katniss Everdeen braid emits a note of a richness and depth that belies her tiny

frame. The others follow suit, smiling and clapping as they behold us – our mouths agape – and echo their leader.

Over the next hour more villagers trickle in – the women on one side, men on the other – their voices weaving together in a rich acoustic tapestry that takes our breath away. Teenage boys belt out lyrics in baritone, while an elderly lady to our right bops along to the music, a toothless grin spreading across her face.

Even for an onlooker lurking in the back pew, the sense of community here is



overpowering, and we are reluctant to leave. The pastor nods at us as if in acknowledgement of our predicament, segueing seamlessly from song to short prayer in the guttural dialect of Mbabanga. As we bid farewell to the congregation and clamber into our longboat, we can't help but gush over the spectacle. "What you see is what we are," says Stella.

And indeed, it is this simplicity and sincerity that distinguishes the Solomon Islands from their more frequented South Pacific neighbours. Whereas the latter are accustomed to hordes of holidaymakers every year, the Solomon Islands is home to a nascent tourism industry, leaving culture raw and unembellished for the few recreational travellers who do visit. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the 386-strong Boboe Seventh Day Adventist community, where our little troupe stops en route to Gizo.

The moment we set foot on the sandy shores of the island, boys streaked with ochre emerge from the bushes, howling and launching spears in our general direction. They circle our small group, teeth bared and eyes flashing, when, all of a sudden, a piercing cry rises from deep within the village. It is the chief, who, according to our resident guide, Rocky, is the sole person in the community able to placate the youthful warriors. This is due not only to

his status, but also owing to his possession of shell money. We're told that once upon a time, this was the currency used to buy one's wife in these parts.

As the chief approaches, brandishing a spear and holding the money aloft, the warriors become boys again, and the traditional (and utterly convincing) welcome draws to a close. The villagers are beaming, as much from amusement at our nervous laughter as from the opportunity to share a custom with outsiders.

Young girls in grass skirts shuffle toward us and hang fragrant frangipanis around our necks, tailing us as we sip our crisp coconut water and traipse about the village. Those who speak English are only too eager to answer our questions, but those who can't translate through Rocky.

We look on as a man weaves a roof panel of palm leaves and bamboo in two minutes flat before heading over to the hut-cum-community kitchen, where Saline and Maggie grate coconut – a Solomon Islands staple – and bake yams motu-style. They jab their fingers at our cameras and pose with a grace that would make any top model envious. Clearly, they're as glad for an audience to their day-to-day customs as we are to observe them, excited by what we represent: an opportunity to expose

foreigners to their culture and, in so doing, preserve it and generate some income.

We encounter a similar kind of enthusiasm at Marau Sound's Maetaraha community, where we're welcomed with all the pomp reserved for royalty. The village women, waist-deep in ocean, slap the waves in an elaborate tattoo that signals the approach of newcomers. The wizened chief, like with Prince William and Kate a few years before, receives us, and in the dialect of his village, thanks us for deigning to visit his humble abode. He's proud to show it off, and we all too willingly accept his invitation to explore it: we watch thatching and cooking and basket and fan weaving and look on as girls play clapping games with coconuts – talk about hand-eye coordination – and perform traditional dances.

Naturally, in situations such as these, where you have the opportunity to engage with a lifestyle that differs markedly from your own, it's normal to mull over the potentially corruptive impact of money and the authenticity of your traditional culture experience. And yet, this is precisely what the current government, via its emphasis on niche tourism, is determined to guard against. The Solomon Islands appeals to those who, like our tight-knit group, relish getting up close and



TOP 5 TIPS

Overworked? Fatigued? Time-poor? At just three and a half hours from Sydney by plane, the Solomon Islands could well be your ideal R&R destination.

1. Visit your doctor so make sure you're up-to-date with routine vaccines before your trip.
2. Pack insect repellent. And we mean the heavy-duty stuff.
3. Learn some Pidgin English.
4. Waterproof your gizmos. If you're serious about exploring the Solomons, you'll be in and out of boats constantly.
5. Pack minimally. In addition to boats, light aircraft are frequently used for inter-island travel.

personal with the locals in a meaningful way, but it also targets aquaphiles of all kinds – from the avid snorkeller to the expert diver.

When we hop off at Marau Sound's uninhabited Sandy Island, we gear up and slip in to what is perhaps the clearest water we've seen anywhere. It's shallow and warm and had we not been breathing through tubes, we'd have had to catch our breath.

Coral of all textures and colours stretches before us – from apricot to yellow and magenta tipped with iridescent purple – and schools upon schools of fish shimmer past, unperturbed by our presence. I spot a sassy Nemo hanging out by a violet-coloured anemone, and we manage a stare-off before he loses interest and weaves his way home through the labyrinthine coral.

I rejoin my group, and we spend the rest of our underwater escapade scanning the sea floor, observing electric blue starfish and creatures that burrow into the sand as we drift past. When we emerge from the deep we lie on the stark white sand beach and watch the clouds go by. It's heavenly.

But the reef structures of the Solomon Islands, irrespective of their beauty, are not the only underwater marvels in the region.

The submerged World War II wrecks are also fascinating, and cement the Solomons as one of the world's premier diving destinations. On this trip we manage to see an American Hellcat fighter, shot down by the Japanese, but like the twisted remains of the aircraft at the Vilu War Museum in the capital Honiara, it is still eerily captivating to behold – especially since it lies at the bottom of the ocean, quite literally out of its element.

We depart the wreck, somewhat solemn, only to have our spirits lifted by a most wonderful sight. A pod of dolphins – 200 strong – mills around us, ducking and weaving beneath the boat and leaping high when we least expect it. We're all blubbing like mad people, of course, darting about the boat and trying to capture the sleek cetaceans from the best possible angle. It's unreal – even Stella is impressed – and we return to our resort with glistening eyes and happy hearts.

For an archipelago of 992 islands, it is surprising that the Solomon Islands' unique fusion of culture, relics and pristine land and marine sites continues to fly under the radar. Nonetheless, for those who do venture here, you'll find that what (and who) you see really is what you get, and it's more than enough.





So Solomons, So Different!

Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific archipelago, comprising of a vast group of 992 breathtaking tropical islands.

Experience a culture, rich with traditional customs, art, dance and the iconic sound of the panpipe music of 'Are Are'.

Catch a glimpse of the fierceness of World War II battles and be touched by the bravery of soldiers by visiting historic war sites in and outside Honiara, on land and underwater.

Explore Honiara's cosmopolitan and colourful food market in downtown Honiara, a vibrant and lively melting pot of the Solomons!

Be mesmerized by the natural beauty of our many wildlife and marine parks including Marovo lagoon in the Western Province, the largest saltwater lagoon in the world and home to an array of teeming marine life.

Feel the spirit of adventure and enjoy a special piece of paradise or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau | Australian Marketing Representative
PO Box 3063, Allambie Heights NSW 2100

Toll Free 1300 713 132 or email solomons@tropicsmarketing.com.au

www.visitsolomons.com.sb

www.facebook.com/VisitSolomonIslands



SO SOLOMONS, SO DIFFERENT!