



A native ROMANCE

BY ROSHAN SUKHLA

From the beach bliss of Gizo to the aquamarine waters of tropical Tavanipupu, the Solomon Islands will make you swoon.

What's that saying about finding something when you least expect it? Well here I am, I definitely wasn't looking for it, but I've found it. It's small and intimate, yet sparse and infinite. It's secluded and open, yet simple and magnificent. As the sun sets, shades of pink and purple are strewn across the sky, and I know I've found it – I've found my dream wedding destination.

I'm here in the Solomon Islands, a world away

from the everyday, yet only a three-hour flight from Australia. My perfect piece of matrimonial paradise is located on the beautiful Small Naru sandbar in the middle of the ocean near Gizo in the Western Province of the country. It's the ideal site for a low-key, high-romance celebration. Just the perfect spot to invite a few close family and friends to celebrate the most important commitment you'll make in your life. All that's left to do now is to find a husband-to-be – that shouldn't be too hard!



GORGEOUS GIZO

The Solomon Islands stretch some 1800 kilometres across nine provinces and consist of 992 islands and atolls, most of which are unoccupied. The island of Ghizo is located a one-hour flight from the capital of Honiara. As soon as you step aboard your Solomon Airlines Dash 8 36-seater or Twin Otter 16-seater plane, the adventure begins. You'll experience captivating aerial views of the islands from your window. The aquamarine tinge of the water below must truly be seen to be believed.

The city of Gizo is the provincial capital of the Western Province and is home to spectacular surfing, snorkelling and scuba diving. From the small Nusatupe Airstrip, we transfer to a boat, and let our hair blow in the wind for the short ten-minute ride to Fatboys Resort on Mbabanga Island.

Named after the character of Joe, the "fat boy" from Charles Dickens's 1836 novel *The Pickwick Papers* who eats a lot of food and is always falling asleep, Fatboys Resort is the place to indulge and relax.

The bungalow-style accommodation is set amongst the natural beauty and unspoilt scenery of the island, whilst the restaurant and bar area can be found at the end of a 100-metre pier overlooking an underwater aquarium.

During breakfast we watched as local fishermen from Gizo pulled up to the pier to sell a boatload of freshly caught seafood, including lobster, painted crayfish, bugs, cuttlefish and humphead wrasse. After dinner, we take a peak at the water below and see such creatures as black tip reef sharks merrily swimming by.

Fatboys caters for authentic island barefoot beach weddings without the price tag of some of their Pacific neighbours. Couples can enjoy a sunset ceremony on the gorgeous Small Naru sandbar, and then return to Fatboys for a fully-catered island-style buffet reception in the restaurant. Packages for weddings are available, and the bridal party would be easily accommodated on the island whilst additional guests could stay in nearby Gizo.

Fatboys' honeymoon bungalow is the perfect post-wedding

pad featuring an open verandah and incredible views out over the ocean. Awake to a gorgeous sunrise and the waves gently crashing ashore. Feel the quiet bliss of your surrounds, and enjoy each other's company because the only other noise you'll hear all day is the sporadic passing boat dropping off new guests or ferrying them out for a day excursion.

One of the best activities to experience around Fatboys is snorkelling. It was only 15 minutes by boat, and we were in the middle of the ocean with the wreckage of an American Hellcat World War II fighter plane clearly visible just ten metres below the ocean surface.

Various plane and shipwrecks are dotted throughout the Solomon Islands, left over from the aftermath of the World War II conflict between Japan and America. A visit to nearby Kennedy Island is also a must. This is where John F. Kennedy, then a Lieutenant in the United States Navy, and his crew swam to during the war after the Japanese rammed their ship. The survivors reached the small island only to find there was no food or water, and eventually swam to the nearby Olasana Island.

You can enjoy a snorkel on Olasana Island too. We spotted plenty of coral and I got a chance to find Nemo, while Fatboys prepared a private feast for us. We sat back and savoured the freshly caught lobsters and fish cooked to perfection on a hot stone barbeque accompanied by grilled bananas and sweet potato.

If you happen to be here on a Sunday, Fatboys can also organise for you to attend the local village's weekly church service, which is a moving and joyous experience – the singing is both loud and spirited.

HAPI HONIARA

The Solomon Islands are commonly referred to as 'the hapi isles' and for good reason. The people here are warm and friendly. English is the official language, but Pidgin is commonly spoken. The capital of Honiara is the central commercial city and the population swells during the day. The area was known as Nahona A'Hara, meaning "in the face of the wind". Over time it was deemed too difficult to



ISLAND CULTURE

Clockwise from left: Kakabona Cultural Village in Honiara; The Central Market, Honiara; Fatboys Resort

Opposite page: Aerial shot of Tavanipupu

Opening image: Fatboys is on Mbabanga Island, off Ghizo



"We sat back and savoured the freshly caught lobsters and fish cooked to perfection on a hot stone barbeque"



pronounce and it became what we now know as Honiara.

The Heritage Park Hotel is a great base for your time in Honiara. You'll enjoy the newly renovated pool, waterfront views, landscaped gardens and all the mod cons of a contemporary hotel. The hotel is located on the site of the first Governor General's house from the 1960s when the Solomon Islands was a British Colony. Today the hotel can accommodate everything from Heads of State conferences to weddings.

History can be found throughout Honiara. Visit the Coastwatchers monument at Point Cruz commemorating Solomon Islander scouts and coast watchers who kept a lookout and provided information during World War II. Observe the US War Memorial, which commemorates the lives lost in the Guadalcanal campaign, and offers views over the city.

The Mbonege Beach World War II shipwreck is worth a visit. The ship is half submerged in the sea very close to the shore. It is rusted away, but still very much intact, and you can dive and swim amongst it. In fact there are so many war ships and plane wrecks in the strait between Honiara and the Florida Islands, that it is known as Iron Bottom Sound.

Our visit to Kakabona cultural village was also fascinating. We were greeted with a traditional "welkam" ceremony of betel nuts, and I felt privileged to witness the old customs in action from clothing to cooking methods.

Stop by Honiara Central Market and join the locals as they go about their day. The busy marketplace sells all types of fruits and vegetables as well as fish, seafood, clothing and jewellery. Kids playfully posed for photographs, as we walked the myriad of stalls chatting to the friendly stallholders.

A RIGHT ROYAL ROMANCE

For a truly exclusive island experience head to Tavanipupu Private Island Resort. From Honiara it's a 30-minute flight aboard a Solomon Airlines Islander nine-seater aircraft to Marau Sound. You'll be awestruck by the beauty that lies beneath you as you fly over the turquoise-coloured waters. These views alone are worth overcoming any fears or trepidations of boarding a small plane.

It's a quick boat ride from the airfield across to Tavanipupu. Be wowed by the towering palm trees and manicured lawns, as your private island awaits you. With resort staff and fellow guests the only ones on the island, Tavanipupu screams exclusivity, although it doesn't scream at all – it's whisper quiet, with only the waves and the birds, and the occasional thud of a falling coconut interrupting the serenity.

There are seven spacious bungalows on the island, each with an impressive king bed and a private outdoor shower for bathing under the stars. Overlooking ocean views, the front porch is perfect for relaxing with a table, chairs and a hammock.

Meals are served in the common open-air dining area with delicious two- and three- course feasts on offer. The food here



is a tasty modern take on Western cuisines using fresh local produce. The sweet potato chips were a particular favourite of mine, as was the rum banana with coconut cream dessert. Private breakfast is served daily to your front porch, at a time of your choosing – it doesn't get more relaxing than this.

Tavanipupu is a haven of tranquility, so it should come as no surprise that everyone's favourite young royals, William and Kate, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, chose to stay here on their Diamond Jubilee royal tour of the South Pacific in 2012. They may have only stayed a night, but they made quite a stir, with locals and paparazzi arriving on boats to catch a glimpse of them. The couple took time out from relaxing (we hear that Wills had a penchant for piña colodas) to plant a coconut tree on neighboring Marapa Island, which you can also visit and meet with the local villagers.

You can do as much or as little as you like on Tavanipupu. Take a walk around the island, ride a bike, go fishing, kayaking, paddle boarding, scuba diving, or simply head to your hammock and snooze the day away. A swim or snorkel in the cyan blue lagoons is an aquatic dream come true. The crystal clear waters are not only beautiful but have a peaceful calming effect, and you'll soon find yourself on 'island time' without a care in the world.

Come night it's so quiet and dark, you'll believe you are the only ones on the island. It's no wonder Tavanipupu is a haven for honeymooners looking for the ultimate island retreat. With massages on offer and private dinners on the jetty or at the atmospheric lookout, you too will feel like royalty.

Tavanipupu also caters for weddings. You can even book out the whole island for your wedding or celebration. Say your vows amongst the pretty palm trees overlooking the blue of the ocean. On the day before we left this magical place, there was a wedding rehearsal in the garden. A couple were practicing their wedding vows, and there was a lot of laughter and love, amongst the gleaming sun and greenery of the beautiful floral setup. I knew in my head it wasn't the real ceremony, but I still found myself smiling like a hopeless romantic anyway.



Which brings me back to my own search for a would-be-husband, I may not have a ring on my finger anytime soon, but I did receive a spontaneous declaration of love from a handsome man on the front porch of my bungalow one night in the pouring rain and in the middle of a blackout. Let me tell you – it doesn't get much more romantic than that! •

Photography by Roshan Sukhla

BEACH ROMANCE

Above: A wedding set up on Small Nara Sandbar, Gizo

Left: A romantic private dinner at the lookout on Tavanipupu

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Solomon Airlines flies four times weekly from Brisbane to Honiara and once a week from Sydney. Solomon Airlines flies domestically from Honiara to various cities including Gizo and Marau. flysolomons.com

WHERE TO STAY

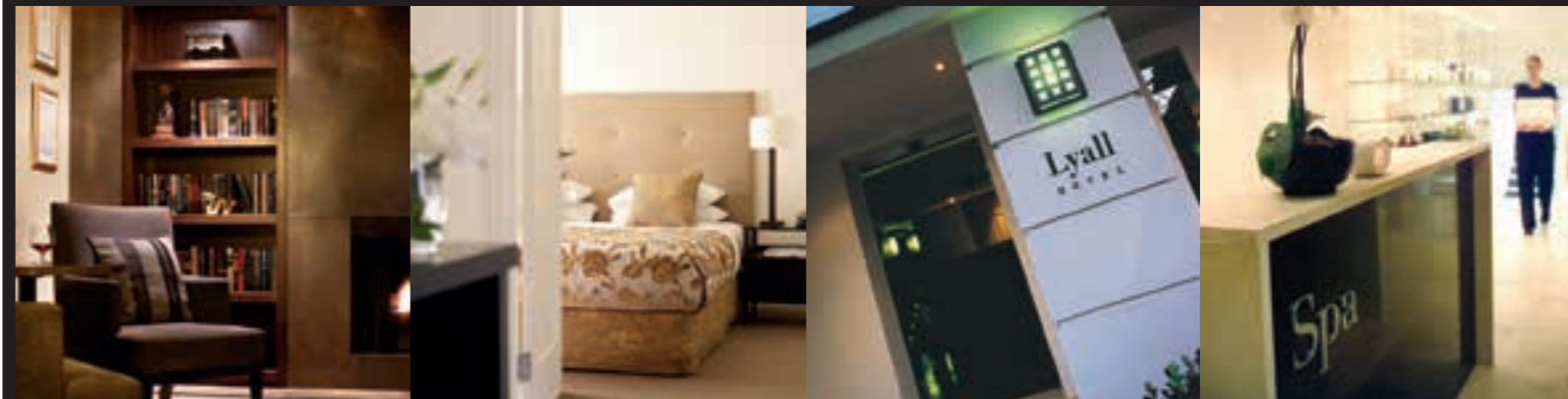
- Fatboys Resort: Mbabanga Island, Gizo; solomonislandsfatboys.com.au
- Heritage Park Hotel: Mendana Avenue, Honiara; heritageparkhotel.com.sb
- Tavanipupu Private Island Resort: Tavanipupu Island, Marau Sound; tavanipupu.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau: visitsolomons.com.sb

Lyall

H O T E L



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