

SPELLBOUND IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

By Fiona Taylor



Fat Boys Resort





The Solomon Islands are a staggeringly beautiful archipelago of volcanic islands and luxuriant rainforest. It's a place where a traditional life of fishing on the reefs and tending lush gardens is still very much the norm. And it's this magical mix that makes this destination so appealing to those in search of a genuine Pacific adventure.

Exploring The Western Province

The birds and the fish have got it right. We people are just fortunate to be able to experience a glimpse of the spellbinding beauty these creatures are free to explore and live in.

Flying from the capital of Honiara to the New Georgia Islands which are part of the Western Province of the Solomon Islands is a sight to behold if you are lucky enough to secure a window seat. You are guaranteed to capture a magnificent view of the vast number of scattered coral reefs, luxuriant forested islands and atolls, and the world's largest saltwater lagoon - Marovo Lagoon - which has also been proposed as a World Heritage site.

Your descent onto Gizo Airstrip feels like a birds-eye experience too, the length of the runway is only just shorter than the length of the island on which it is positioned, and not a lot narrower. Once disembarked confinement to an enclosed space, seat belts and airconditioning ends, as in this part of the world, you are at one with the elements and the life it supports.

Island hopping in 'runabout' boats are the main form of transport and when on the water large schools of small silvery fish frequently sweep alongside you. Pods of dolphins provide excitable entertainment, in fact "another day, another dolphin" became almost a regular catchphrase. And so it was within this environment, abundant with colour and nature resonating, that we explored.

Fat Boys Resort

Our home for four nights and a place that felt like a centrepiece in the region, based on its location on Mbambang Island and the activity and energy it seemed to generate. The views across to the mighty Kolombangara Island and Kennedy Island in the foreground, provide an interesting and ever-changing panorama from the resort's waterfront bungalows.

A 100 metre jetty walk takes you to The Fat Boys communal space. There you'll sit hovering over the lagoon, and it's where guests and visitors congregate to eat, drink, relax, socialise and pursue various water-related activities.

It is also where the local fishermen arrive early each morning to present their catch to the cooks. Lobsters, Moreton Bay bugs, spanish mackerel and red snapper are a staple of each menu, along with the fresh accompanying flavours of chilli and lime. Delish!

Coastal Village Homestays

Another choice of accommodation conveniently located on Mbabanga Island are these two solid and separate Coastal Village Homestay bungalows.

Spacious bedrooms, a self-catering kitchen, bathroom facilities and wrap-around sheltered verandahs perched above and beside the water's edge are stand-out features. The adjacent gardens are well-kept and provide some fresh produce for guests wanting meals prepared.

For those preferring a broader range of menu options, it is only a 10-15 minute stroll to Fat Boys Resort. A wander through the various villages all within close proximity to each other will provide you with opportunities to experience the authentic village culture and life. You will stumble upon wells from where water is collected, a shed selling petrol sold only by the can and church services where you are welcome to attend and enjoy the uplifting and resounding harmonies.

Sanbis Resort

Sanbis Resort is within walking range of Fat Boys and the Coastal Village Homestays, too. And it is an easy 10 minute boat ride from the Nusa Tupe airstrip. There are two main gathering areas - one sitting above the lagoon waters which welcomes the public as well as guests, and offers a full bar service, wood-fired pizzas, cable television and a room full of creative and quirky collected and handcrafted curiosities.

A gorgeous island-style pampering room is situated alongside, with day visitors also welcome to receive special treatments. Sanbis Resort offers six separate beachside bungalows, as well as an exclusive lodge which is self-contained, with pebble-lined outdoor spa pool and the resort provides guests with the use of a small motor boat. This resort is full of character with a variety of activities close at hand, including a sandy court for badminton or volleyball, a table tennis table and watersports equipment.





Kennedy Island

The Solomons is rich in World War II history and one of the most important landmarks is Kennedy Island. It is a 10 minute putter to this wee uninhabited green-tufted island from Fat Boys Resort. Known originally as Kasolo Island, also called Plum Pudding Island and now commonly referred to as Kennedy Island, it is famous for the exploits of a 26-year-old Lieutenant John F Kennedy, commander of the American patrol torpedo boat PT107 that was sunk following an attack by a Japanese destroyer in August 1943.

It was to this island that JFK dragged an injured seaman, and led 9 other crewmen to safety, before being rescued from Olesana Island, which they all had swam to in the hope of finding fresh water, which was non-existent on Kennedy Island. Kennedy's heroics earned him a Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his courage, and today visitors can spend time at this historic site via regular day excursions, which can involve an outdoor Solomon-styled barbecue lunch and entertainment.

GIZO. The Solomons second town

Gizo is the second largest town in the Solomon Islands and the capital of the Western Province. It has a population of about 7000 and is located on the island of Ghizo.

Gizo Hotel

Gizo Hotel is perhaps the most westernised form of accommodation in the Western Province, featuring 51 hotel rooms surrounding landscaped gardens and a swimming pool, and many also enjoying balcony views overlooking Gizo Bay. A restaurant and bar cater for both visitors and locals, and island dance entertainment occurs regularly. The food market is situated across the road and tour/excursion operators are in close proximity.

Urilolo Lodge, Saeraghi Beach

Since 2010 this family run lodge has been offering guests an intimate and relaxing village experience on the water's edge of the picturesque Saeraghi Beach. The lodge is elevated, self-contained and meticulously clean and tidy. Cute and colourful cotton fabrics decorate the furniture and windows creating a very homely and comfortable inside environment.

Outdoors, the large tree canopies line the edge of the beach, providing some shelter and respite from glaring hot sun, and light reflecting off the pearly white sand. Picnic tables and chairs are scattered beneath these shady areas, and their number provide evidence of the popularity of this peaceful location – around 25 minute boat ride to Gizo.


Oravae Cottages

For a peaceful and romantic stay on your own tiny coral island, capturing both sunrises and sunsets, the three Oravae cottages are perfect. It is clear owners and hosts, Naomi and Patson Baea have utilised an enormous amount of imagination and resourcefulness to create a unique environment – including an open-plan bungalow with big decks reaching over the lagoon, a treehouse on stilts, and a covered area featuring musical instruments and a hand-made drum kit!

It's a 20 minute boat transfer from Nusa Tupe Airport to Oravae, and on the way guests are likely to catch a glimpse of the boundless marine activity in these sparkling waters. And then you get to be surrounded by it for your entire stay.

The beauty of simplicity

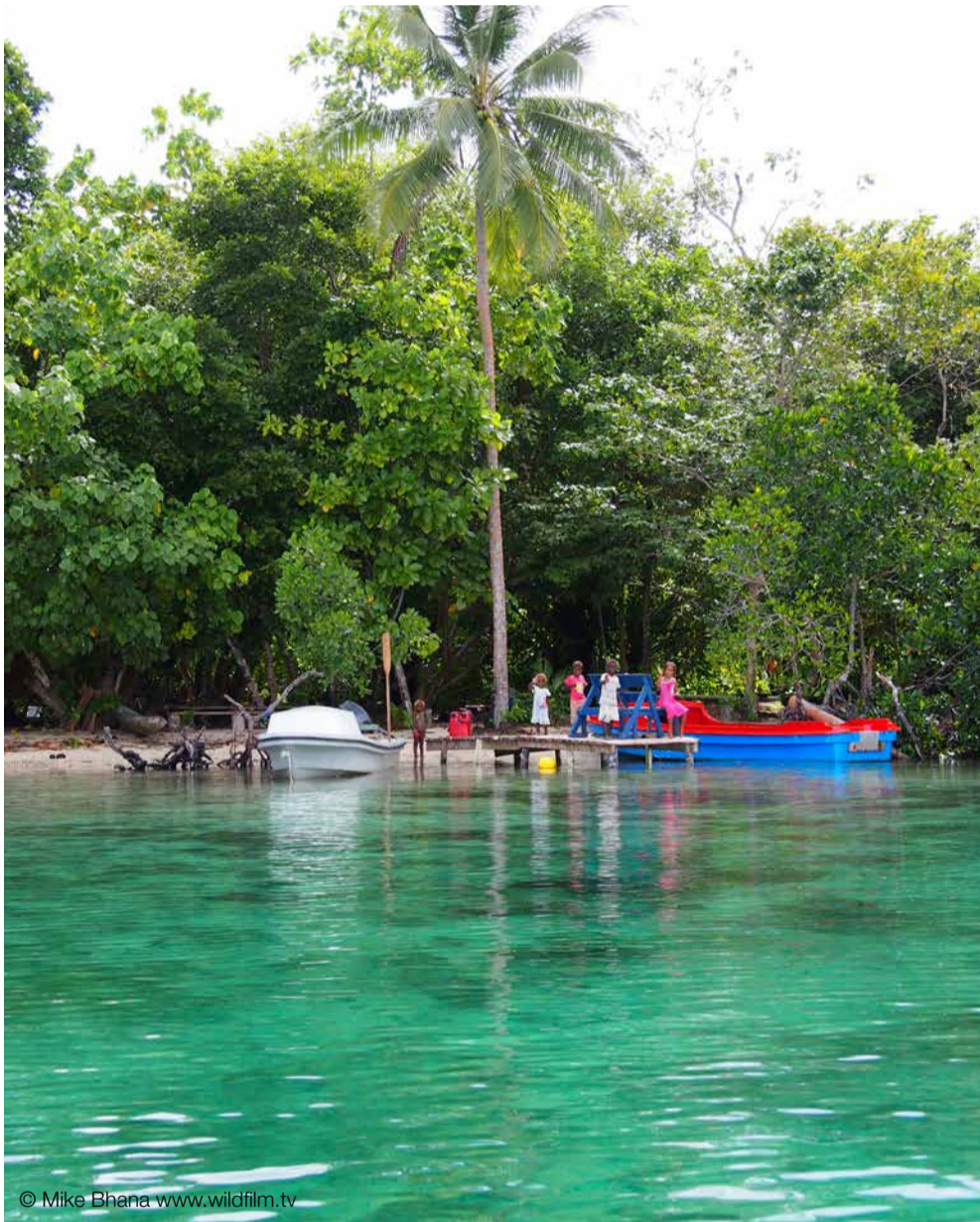
In a part of the world where the majority of the population live simple traditional rural lives, the New Georgia Islands offer an impressive variety of accommodation types and a wealth of outdoor adventure experiences that will delight the environmentally aware and adventurous traveller.

It is important to remember however, that an especially memorable trip away is not possible without a meaningful interchange from the people who live there and are afforded the responsibility of playing "host". The warm and friendly hospitality was matched with a co-operative and respectful manner and as a visitor you feel welcomed and very comfortable. 





Kennedy Island BBQ



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Savu Island

Tourism Policy launched

A new 2016-2019 Tourism Policy for the Solomon Islands was officially launched in early December 2016 by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. It sets the foundation to enable sustainable tourism through niche product development and investment, and to encourage partnerships with other governmental ministries, and private sector interests.

It has been over two decades since the government has had an official tourism policy. Along with an increase in the tourism development budget, and a determination to facilitate the implementation of the policy, the government is confident that with the support of the private sector, tourism will have a strong and positive impact on the country's national gross domestic product.

The Solomon Islands certainly has huge potential to become an established eco-tourism destination. It possesses many of the attractions desired by the environmentally sustainable-conscious traveller looking for an authentic nature-based experience removed from the demands of technology and maddening crowds.

In 2015, over 200 rural based eco-tourism lodge operators and employees were involved in a high-impact training programme aimed at providing much needed support to the tourism sector. Women, community-based tourism owners, youth and small tourism businesses were also participants in this initiative implemented by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Tourism, Visitors Bureau (SIVB) and South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO).

As recent statistics presented by the Solomon Islands National Statistics Office show, tourist numbers have seen healthy increases from Australia, the United States of America and New Zealand.

A bright future for Solomon Airlines

What a lovely surprise it was to be welcomed aboard my first Solomon Airlines flight by the voice of a New Zealand woman, Captain Claudia Walding. Walding was the first female pilot to be employed by the airline in 2000 and to attain a licence to fly their flagship Airbus 320, achieved about one year ago.

The newly refitted interior of the A320 offers economy passengers very generous sized seats with enough leg-room to allow a neighbouring guest to shimmy past without unbuckling your seatbelt. Also impressive are the attentive and professional cabin crew – serving very nice meals, (full service in Business Class) and regularly offering a refill of chilled water. Their role extends to domestic flights as well as international, so familiar faces are likely to be seen when flying to one of the 24 commercial airfields scattered throughout the archipelago.

Four smaller planes serve the Solomon Island regional flight schedules transporting both passengers and cargo. Freight lift revenue has increased in the last year and on occasion, surf boards have been known to be strapped vertically into empty cabin seats when the cargo hold has been packed full.

Increased focus on staff training and promotions, increased use of the recently maintained A320 and renewed attention on all inflight catering matters are some of the measures planned and implemented which aim to improve business in 2017. Also positive is the third IATA Operational Safety Audit Certification (IOSA) the airline has been awarded following a recent audit - a benchmark for global safety management in airlines.

