

LAND OF PEACE & PALMS

The WWII legacy of the Solomon Islands just might be the key to a brighter future for this remote archipelago, discovers
Nick Walton.

A trail of shimmering bubbles in our wake, the hull of the *Hirokawa Maru* slowly takes form as we descend, first as a faint shadow against the deep blue Pacific waters, and then, as we draw closer, as a towering darkness that threatens to suck up all the light. As my eyes adjust, the vessel's sheer size begins to reveal itself; at 156 meters long, the *Hirokawa Mari* isn't the largest of the wrecks which litter Ironbottom Sound, a strip of water between the islands of Guadalcanal, Savo and Florida where dozens of ship and aircraft wrecks remain, but it's one of the most accessible. Caught by American dive bombers in November 1942 while unloading supplies for the occupying Japanese forces on Guadalcanal, the largest island in the Solomon archipelago, the Japanese transport ship now lies on its port side, with its bow in five meters of water and its stern reaching down 60 meters into the darkness.

I'm diving on the Hirokawa with guides from Honiara's Tulagi Dive, the Solomon Islands' leading dive company, and a pair of experienced New Zealand underwater videographers. Wreck diving has been a major drawcard for the Solomon Islands for decades and sites like the Hirokawa are ideal for mixed groups; accessible from both boat and beach, the wreck offers divers



of all skill levels a mesmerising introduction to the archipelago's turbulent history – while I enjoy the vivid coral gardens that now cling to the Horokawa's iron plated hull at 30 meters, and the schools of snapper, fusiliers and lionfish that now call the ship's foredeck home, the tech divers descend deep into the interior of the doomed vessel, their light rigs tiny beacons penetrating the gloom far below.

The Solomon Islands is a place where time seems to stand still. A postcard perfect South Seas paradise of over 900 islands, the Solomons lie east of Papua New Guinea and north of Vanuatu, in some of the world's most fertile waters. During the Second World War the islands saw some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific campaign; the defining Battle of Guadalcanal, codenamed Operation Watchtower, the 75th anniversary of which took place last August, raged among the



(Clockwise from top left) a WWII artillery piece in Honiara; a boat cruises across the Langa Langa Lagoon; a child takes a break from grinding shells for shell money.

undulating jungle-clad hills and coral-wreathed seas surrounding the capital Honiara.

After diving on the Horokawa and a nearby American B17 bomber, its twin cannons now encrusted with coral, we clamber into the back of a flat bed truck and make our way down one of the island's few roads, through tiny villages of thatch-roofed, stilted huts, the turquoise splendor of the South Pacific to our left, the deep green of Guadalcanal's lush interior to the right, the capital ahead.

While its rich and tumultuous history has drawn intrepid travellers to the Solomons since the 1970s, there's much more on offer here than just ghosts of the past. The vibrant Honiara Central Markets is a timeless and fascinating corner of the town, where prices are haggled, and gossip swapped, a gentle sea breeze cooling stall owners dressed in brightly coloured sun dresses, their ebony skin glistening in the mid-day heat. At each market stall mountains of taro, breadfruit, cassava and coconuts are stacked beside bags of tiny, fiery chilis, recycled beer bottles filled with natural remedies and oils, and coolers packed with fresh coconut crabs. Down the road, Coral Sea Resort & Casino is the town's newest sensation; it's modern guest rooms, including several

luxurious Waterfront Villas, wreath a contemporary Malaysian street food restaurant that wouldn't look out of place in Hong Kong or Sydney. The new hotel and casino is catering to a new generation of affluent travellers looking to swap the rat race for this forgotten South Pacific Eden.

Such an escape can be found at Papatura Island Retreat, located off the coast of Santa Isabel, to the northwest of Guadalcanal. To get there I board a Solomon Airlines twin otter for the 45-minute flight to a simple grass strip that once served as a bomber base. Here I'm met by Pete Blanche, a retired builder from the Australian Gold Coast who, with wife Marge, spent two decades travelling through the Solomon Islands before deciding to make it their home, building Papatura Island Retreat from scratch on an idyllic 300-hectare island fringed by swaying coconut palms and white sandy beaches.

A blissfully simple hideaway of rustic thatch bungalows connected by a risen timber boardwalk, it's as if the Swiss Family Robinson opened a B&B in paradise. The only creature comfort in my loft-styled bungalow, which sleeps four, is an AC power point, and at night I fall asleep beneath a mosquito net to the serenade of the lagoon's waves, lapping just steps away.





While there’s plenty to do, from surfing and dolphin safaris to local village visits, Papatutura is especially popular with anglers hoping to catch Spanish mackerel, giant trevally, or sail fish among the swells that roll down from the Philippines, or to cast for mangrove jacks or rare spot tail bass in local community-owned rivers. During one fishing cruise, Rolly, one of the resort guides, navigates us between the islands of the local Eti Eti people, pointing out where the best lobsters can be speared at night, and a rocky island where the bodies of defeated enemies would be sent during the Solomon’s head hunting past. When I ask if there’s still headhunting he grins a smile red with betel nut. “Not anymore, now we’re Church of England.”

Each night guests come together around the resort bar, hand-crafted from bamboo and island timber, for cold local beers and tall tales of island living told by our hosts. “We love this place,” says Marge. “We will be here until we die.” Many guests are frequent visitors – one Australian woman is in the first week of a six week stay – giving this beautiful



little hideaway the vibe of a remote family summer home. Beyond the bar, the retreat’s dining room serves simple, yet delectable local fare laced with ingredients from the island’s own gardens; that first night, after feasting on potato cakes, coastal fern and tangerine salad, and mud crabs the size of dinner plates, I walk the length of the beach back to my villa under a mesmerising canopy of stars, sheets of amethyst lightning flickering above the horizon.

I’d admit Papatutura takes a little getting used to. A world away from a world gone mad with technology, timetables and temptation, there’s no phone access, no wifi, and what little electricity there is, is produced by solar panels. “It’s amazing what such isolation does to these guys, these captains of industry,” Pete tells me over breakfast one morning. “First we encourage them to take off their watches and slowly they adopt to island time and island living and before you know it they’re talking about things that have nothing to do with work!” But adapt I do, slowly

(Clockwise from top left) Fresh crayfish at Serah’s Lagoon Hideaway; a bride in traditional shell money; the Solomons is famous for its warm welcome; a boat builder takes a break from his work; a betel nut stall owner day dreams in Auki.

finding myself less concerned with signal bars and more concerned with tracking down the hornbills that live in the fig trees at the end of the bay, or watching tissues of cloud cling to the towering mountains of nearby Santa Isabel.

It’s over these mountains I fly again, this time bound for the island of Malaita. After touching down on another jungle strip, and weaving through the village of Auki in a dilapidated local taxi, I meet shy Serah Kei, a native of the Langa Langa Lagoon, where she has built a beautiful little resort atop a traditional coral island. My guide Chris Nemaia and I climb into Serah’s little runabout and begin the 45-minute cruise across the mirror-like lagoon waters. When a tropical squall passes over we retreat under umbrellas but Serah just smiles as the rain streams down her face, deftly navigating the tiny boat through the torrent. By the time we arrive at her immaculate little resort the sun has emerged, and we’re dry again.

As simple and rustic as Papatutura (sans the power points), Serah’s Lagoon Hideaway boasts a different vibe. Encircled by the waters of a lagoon, the setting is so quiet and tranquil it’s almost



deafening to my city-accustomed ears. From the sun deck of my lofted bungalow, which sleeps four, fish dart through spectacular coral gardens only inches below the surface, and beyond, a trio of children in immaculate white uniforms cruise past in a traditional canoe on their way home from school.

The Langa Langa Lagoon is famous for its *asi*, traditional man-made coral islands constructed by the lagoon’s *Kwara’ae* or ‘salt water people’ to evade the headhunters of Malaita. Despite Christianity arriving with missionaries in the 1960s, the rich animism of the lagoon lingers, including the practice of shark worship; priests would call

sharks to the surface, believing they were reincarnations of their ancestors, and stranded fishermen would call to the sharks for aid, offering them sacrifices upon a safe return to dry land.

Another fading tradition is that of shell money and Serah guides me through the intricate process of converting four specific shell types into a currency that is used for dowries across the Solomon Islands. Langa Langa is to shell money what Antwerp is to diamonds and Serah's collective family all contribute to the process of chipping and grinding the shells, using traditional tools to create long necklaces, their different colours representing their value.

That evening, after a dinner of local crayfish and grilled scampi, I watch a bride, wrapped in shell necklaces, journeying across the lagoon to the home of her new husband. She is followed by a flotilla of canoes and runabouts packed with villagers singing and beating drums, the melody lingering over the serene waters of the lagoon with the last of the day's light.

On my way back to Auki I venture to learn more about the boat building traditions of the Lanagalanga people. Made for fishing and cargo, the hulls of boats under construction tower above the simple homes of their owners. Built by specialist building crews from heavy vassa wood, these traditional vessels are major investments on the part of the community and often take decades to finish, but are also prized throughout the Solomons.

Back in Honiara, I tour the battlegrounds of WWII with Stewart, a local historian, finishing at The Guadalcanal American Memorial, which sits atop one of the hills overlooking Henderson Field, the county's sole international airport. The Battle of Guadalcanal claimed



(From top) Rolly collects coconuts on a uninhabited island; Pete at Papatura Island Retreat.

50,000 lives, as well as 1,200 aircraft, and 49 ships, bronze plaques in the grounds of the memorial indicating the direction of each vessel's final resting place in Ironbottom Sound. It's a dark chapter in the nation's past, but its legacy, the beauty of these islands, and the inherent hospitality of its people, herald a brighter future to come. ✈

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Fly: Qantas connects Hong Kong with Brisbane (www.qantas.com.au) with connections with Solomon Airlines on to Honiara (www.flysolomons.com).

Stay: Coral Sea resort & Casino, from US\$194 per night, twin share; www.coral-sea-resort.com

Papatura Island Retreat, AU\$1,030 (US\$799) per person, twin share, for six nights, including all meals; www.papatura.com

Serah's Lagoon Hideaway, SBD500 (US\$64) per person, per night, twin share; www.solomonislands-hotels.travel

Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel, Honiara; US\$153 per night, twin share; www.kitanomendana.com



Jin Qiao

Parkside

Jinlin Tiandi

OVER 20 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP
est 1996

One Sunland

Aroma Garden

Tianfu Square

 **LANSON PLACE**
Hotels & Serviced Residences

Our Presence in China

Shanghai

• Jinlin Tiandi • Aroma Garden • Parkside • Jin Qiao • One Sunland

Chengdu

Tianfu Square (Q3, 2017)

www.lansonplace.com   

