



UNSPOILT PARADISE: A Second World War plane at Vilu War Museum on The Solomon Islands.

PHOTO: JOHN MCCUTCHEON



Fast Facts on the Solomon Islands

- Honiara is the capital of Solomon Islands, on the island of Guadalcanal.
- The average flight time from Brisbane to Honiara is two hours, 45 minutes.
- Two airlines fly direct from Brisbane to Honiara (2127km): Solomon Airlines and Virgin Australia.
- The most popular airline flying from Brisbane to Honiara last month was Solomon Airlines.
- There are six flights a week from Brisbane to Honiara.
- \$681 was the cheapest return price from Brisbane to Honiara last month.
- A Honiara to Munda (Western Province) flight costs \$458 return.

Tourism is the new gold for the Solomon Islands

John McCutcheon travels to the Solomons to experience a new holiday destination

Every few decades, a new destination opens up for travellers.

The Solomon Islands' treasure chest has been preserved fairly intact since Alvaro de Mendana sailed into the heart of the country in 1568.

He was so enchanted at finding gold that he named the islands after the legendary King Solomon.

It's Friday morning at the Yacht Club in Honiara and I am sitting with two fellow travellers planning our journey into the Western Province.

Just down there beneath the wings of this airborne Dash-8 is a patchwork of densely forested coral cays with white sand and crystal-clear water.

As we set foot on New Georgia Island, I am embraced by thick and warm tropical air and the beaming smile of our local boat driver Mano. There are no roads here.

The wind lashes our hair as the 45hp motor cuts through a kaleidoscope of turquoise hues

“Alvaro de Mendana couldn't have imagined the Solomon Islands' abundant assembly of rich and natural beauty would be unspoilt today, 446 years after he sailed into the country.

on the Roviana Lagoon.

It's like vandalising a Rembrandt but this masterpiece is nature.

Within 30 minutes we will be mooring at our hideaway resort Fatboys, and checking into traditional palm leaf-thatched bungalows. The accommodation is modern and airy with comfortable queen-size beds, private verandas, ensuites and lagoon views.

The restaurant is built over the water and beneath it lives a bountiful natural aquarium. A feast of fresh seafood and local dancers eventually blend into dreams.

The sun wakes. A new

adventure beckons as we cruise by dozens of forested havens and slow down to approach Skull Island. It has a timber gate and is the location of a sacred head-hunting shrine.

We abandon the boat in the shallows and wade ashore with our Melanesian guide, restrained by an eerie feeling and propelled by obstinate curiosity. Five metres beyond the gate, I realise it's too late to turn back – they have seen me.

Frozen in a moment of time, I am face-to-face with dozens of white human skulls staring out from nooks in a mound of coral. Moving on, we cruise west to an uninhabited island where we

spend hours beneath the waves.

I hover over purple coral housing purple fish and then float past yellow fish staring back at me from yellow coral.

The next day, we trek to Ughele Village on Rendova Island. A chorus of bird trills along the jungle path are soon interrupted by a piercing scream. A man approaches from the opposite direction wearing a loin cloth and face paint, with a spear poised. This is our welcoming.

As guests, adorned with wreaths of fresh flowers, we venture deeper into the village, escorted by dozens of inquisitive and shy, smiling children.

It's these children, nervously giggling at us “sharp noses”, who hold the collective responsibility for preserving the essence of this remarkable region.

*John McCutcheon was a guest of Solomon Island Visitors Bureau.

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