





Kastom Made

CLINGING TENACIOUSLY TO TRADITIONS AGAINST THE ONSLAUGHT OF MODERNISATION, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IS PROTECTING A VERY SPECIAL HERITAGE.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS JULIE MILLER

The bride is draped in shells and carries a coconut; her bridal party, resplendent in grass skirts and tapa-cloth, dance alongside, stroking at imaginary water with wooden oars. Meanwhile, the family of the groom, fearsome in war paint and banana leaves, bounce and jiggle to the beat of a pan-pipe orchestra, welcoming their new tribe member and the dowry she promises.

It may not be a real ceremony, but the mock wedding performed at the 2nd Annual Shell Money and Artificial Islands Festival at the Busu Cultural Centre in Malaita showcases the joyful celebration, sublime harmonies and deep-seated traditions of a tribal wedding in the Solomon Islands.

Although just a three-hour flight from mainland Australia, the Solomon Islands is one of the final frontiers of tourism, a refreshingly unspoilt, unpretentious and stunningly beautiful destination where a traditional lifestyle – or ‘kastom’ in the local Pijin dialect – is largely still adhered to.

Of the nearly 1000 islands dotting 28,400 square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean, only around 150 are inhabited, with up to 90 distinct cultural groups and languages in play. While 94 per cent of

the population are Melanesian, there are also thriving Polynesian and Micronesian communities; and only 10 per cent of the population live in urban centres.

Tourists arriving into the main city of Honiara, however, may get a different first impression, its pot-holed roads and shanty-town appearance far from the Pacific paradise idyll. Excellent accommodation is available, however, at the Heritage Park Hotel, while a smattering of cool cafes and restaurants indicate that the town is picking up economically.

For an overview of the produce and handicrafts of the islands, don't miss the daily market near the waterfront; while the town's two hilltop war memorials (one honouring fallen Allied soldiers, the other Japanese soldiers lost in WWII) offer a sobering remembrance of the crucial role the Solomons played in the battle for the Pacific.

There are literally hundreds of wrecks from these skirmishes scattered over Honiara's harbour, earning it the name Ironbottom Sound. Some are so close to shore – such as the wreck of the Japanese transport ship Kinugawa Maru off Bonegi Beach – that they have created their own reefs, easily explored by snorkelling or scuba diving. ►



Shell money.



The beaming bride and attendants.



'Driving' to the wedding.



Family of the groom, dressed for the occasion.

History buffs will also appreciate the Vilu War Museum, a private collection of WWII relics located in beautifully-tended tropical gardens about an hour's drive from Honiara. Finding this attraction is somewhat of a challenge – there's no signage, with the turn-off leading along a dirt track through tall grasses – but the effort is rewarded by a staggering collection of aircraft including a Corsair, a Japanese Betty bomber and a Wildcat – the latter with foldaway wings that still work.

In a small village just outside of Honiara, another family is making its own humble contribution to the Solomons' fledging tourism industry by showcasing their traditional way of life for visitors. We are greeted by Primo, dressed in a tapa loincloth, and his bare-breasted wife Paula, who proceeds to show us how to cook in a hot stone oven, utilising tools made from bamboo and shell. While grandson Paul shimmies up a coconut

tree, another family member demonstrates how to braid sago palm leaves to create thatch roofing – “traditional corrugated iron,” Primo jokes.

“I'm doing this for the children,” he explains when I ask why he eschews modern ways. “I fear the new generation will lose out on our culture if someone doesn't promote it.”

Similar schemes exist throughout the islands as communities recognise that old ways are not only worth preserving for future generations, but are also of interest to visitors. Malaita's Langa Langa Lagoon, for instance, is one of the last places in the Solomons where shell money – the traditional currency used for exchange of goods and land, in disagreements and reconciliation, and as a dowry for brides – is made and still in circulation.

The process of creating shell money is labour intensive, involving the whole community. After shells – very specific



types and colours – are fetched from the lagoon, they are pounded into shape by a row of women, a job involving dexterity and care. The round discs are then pierced and assembled, before being grinded until smooth and shiny. A four-string, two-metre necklace is worth approximately SBD\$800 – around A\$145 – with the handcrafted white, red and black necklaces coveted as precious heirlooms.

But the real beauty is in the presentation of these treasures at a traditional wedding ceremony. Witnessing this event at the annual Shell Money Festival is a rare treat indeed – as well as fantastic harmonies, there's a great deal of laughter and even a few tears (mine!) as the whole village comes together in song, dance and celebration.

This is what makes the Solomons such a special destination – a place where vibrant traditions survive against the odds, clinging tenaciously in the onslaught of modernisation. May it never change. •

TRAVEL FACTS

✈ Getting there

Solomon Airlines flies four times a week from Brisbane to Honiara and once a week from Sydney. See [\[@\] flysolomons.com](#)

🏠 Staying there

Heritage Park Hotel offers comfortable luxury accommodation in Honiara, see [\[@\] heritageparkhotel.com.sb](#) The 3rd Annual Shell Money and Artificial Islands Festival will be held at the Busu Cultural Centre in August, 2016. Busu is on the island of Malaita, a three-hour boat ride from Honiara.

📍 More information

[\[@\] www.visitsolomons.com.sb](#)

