

DISCOVER 'DIFFERENT' IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS THEY HAVE A SAYING, "SO SOLOMONS, SO DIFFERENT", AND THIS COULDN'T BE MORE TRUE. KATE WEBSTER DIVES INTO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS TO DISCOVER WHY IT IS SO UNIQUE.

The Solomon Islands are nothing like its neighbourhood Pacific Islands of Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Samoa, and it doesn't want to be. What makes the Solomon Islands so special is a uniqueness that can only be obtained when not over run by tourists.

The Solomon Islands are not on everyone's list, but for those travellers who seek out something a little bit different, then it is right up their alley.

The destination is raw and diverse. It has a distinct culture which can be explored throughout the islands. The diving is world class with some of the most incredible wreck dives in the region. This stems from the war history with many places around the Solomon Islands still scattered with remnants from the war in the Pacific. Being an island nation, there is no denying the fishing is top class and the many surfing breaks provide empty waves for the taking.

I took a short three-hour flight from Brisbane to the capital, Honiara, on the main island of Guadalcanal. Reading the inflight magazine on the plane, I quickly learnt there are over 900 islands in total that make up sovereign country. This left plenty of room for exploration.

Arriving in Honiara, there was a familiarity of a Pacific paradise mixed with a bustling city madness. As the locals went about their day to day business, I was drawn into the commotion of messy traffic passing street side market stands. Despite the chaos, everyone was relaxed and friendly, throwing the eminent Pacific island smile and wave my way.

Travelling throughout the Solomon Islands requires a level of flexibility. More often than not, flight schedules will mean you will



need to overnight in Honiara before connecting to the outer islands. A quick overnight stop in town and then I was off to island hop my way around the Solomons.

I flew to Nusa Tupe Airstrip via a Dash 8-102 with a bumpy landing on a grass runway after flying in low over a patchwork of azures created by the reef below. From here, luggage was thrown on the front of a local banana boat and I set off to Fatboys Resort, located on Babanga Island in Western Province.

BECOMING A FATBOY

If you have read the book "The Pickwick Papers" by Charles Dickens, then you will know all about the "Fat Boy" and can understand where Fatboys Resort got its name. Derived from the character "Joe" in the



book, "fat boy" consumes great quantities of food and constantly falls asleep in any situation at any time of the day. The Fatboys life revolves around drinking, eating, sleeping and making every conceivable effort to avoid work.

That is the very essence of the Fatboys Resort, located on Babanga Island about 10 minutes boat ride from the airport and 15 minutes from Gizo, the provincial capital of the Western Solomons.

Arriving at Fatboys, my breath was taken, and I tried grabbing it between gulps of sweet salty air. If Swiss Family Robinson was set over the water and not in the tree tops, this would be the place for it. A restaurant and bar come social meeting place mixed with ocean zen area sits 100m out over the water and connected to the island by one funky jetty.

My days at Fatboys were spent seeking adventures. The first was to get under the ocean surface and explore the underwater wonders. Being an avid diver, I was told of the amazing diving in the Solomons. Not only the stunning coral reefs but the war history from WWII and the wrecks that were left as a reminder of the war in the Pacific. It was back on the banana boat to scoot off to the first dive site.

DIVING INTO GIZO

Toa Maru is one of the South Pacific's most popular dive sites of WWII shipwrecks. This reasonably intact Japanese transport ship of some 140m (450') length is lying on its starboard side. It was run aground after suffering damage from an American attack. Dive throughs, amazing marine life and the eerie feeling of a watery grave just

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captivated me. I was hooked. I did a few more dives of the area and I was not disappointed.

Not one to sit around and relax, although that is so easy to do in the Solomon Islands, I was off on more adventures. After talking one of the staff at Fatboys into taking me out to a well-known dive site, it was back in bikini, because no wetsuits are required in the warm waters, and into the boat.

We were off to Hellcat. In just 9m of water, there was no need for diving, as I am told if you are a strong swimmer with good lungs, you can snorkel it. Hellcat is a US Fighter Jet, fully intact on the ocean floor. It was amazing.

From underwater exploration, I went ashore, to explore Kennedy Island. Walking around the island, I was transported back to when US President Kennedy was shipwrecked nearby and swam ashore to this very island. The war history in the Solomon Islands is captivating, and I can't help but imagine what it must have been like hiding out on this island, with the fear of Japanese attacks at any moment.



HOW TO GET THERE

Solomon Airlines provide flights between Australia, Fiji, Vanuatu and Honiara as well as to destinations throughout the Solomon Islands. They operate four times a week return. Domestic connection are available from major cities within Australia and also domestically once in the Solomon Islands.

WHERE TO STAY

In Honiara: Coral Sea Resort & Casino

Near Gizo: Fatboys Resort

For Luxury: Tavanipupu Private Islands Resort



Before leaving the area, I stopped in to Gizo town for a wander around. Situated on Ghizo Island, Gizo is the capital of the Western Province and is the second largest town in the country. Sprawled along the waterfront with its steep hills behind, the town is not devoid of appeal. The famous Gizo Hotel greeted me as I stepped off the dock. It sits perched at the top of the main street, with views out to the bustling market on the waterfront and nearby islands. A visit to Gizo was certainly worth the 10-minute boat ride from Fatboys.

WHERE THE FISH PASS THROUGH

Leaving Fatboys with a heavy heart, I moved on to Tavanipupu, via two small plane rides, grass runway landings and another banana boat ride. Known as a place where the 'fish pass through', Tavanipupu was completely different. It was here that the Royals, Prince William and Princess Kate stayed when they visited the Solomon Islands.

Everything here was pristine, manicured lawns scattered with palm trees. Unbelievable sunsets washed the shores. The air was different here. It wasn't as adventurous, but more a gentle relaxing breeze that caressed your face and forced you to unwind.

Meaning 'a place where the fish pass through', Tavanipupu is a five-star Private Island Resort located in Marau Sound, Solomon Islands. There are only a limited number of bungalows at Tavanipupu which keeps the place secluded and private. Each spacey bungalow overlooks the water, with king-size beds protected by a mosquito net and fan cooled rooms.

The bungalows are well vented, and their high roofs built with traditional materials keeps them cool night and day. Their newest self-catering bungalow includes a deck built over the crystalline waters of the Coral Sea, complete with a kitchen and separate bedroom and bathroom. The Royal Bungalow Suite features a king bed, expansive bathroom, private outdoor deck with shower, and sublime ocean and beach front view.

Days here were spent learning more about the culture and way of life in the Solomons. I paddled around in a handmade local canoe, learnt how to weave baskets and fans from palm fronds and managed to husk and crack into my own coconut.

The island is within close proximity to its neighbouring islands, so I jumped on a banana boat to a nearby deserted island. It felt as if I could have been the only person to step foot ashore. The pristine white sand beach led out to crystal clear waters and reef just begging to be snorkelled. I thought "this is what paradise feels like."

That is what captures you in the Solomon Islands. The feeling of paradise, beyond the average pacific paradise. It is as refreshing as the waters you dive in. It is as adventurous as those places dreamt up in books. It is as captivating as the stories of the war history.

It is so Solomons, so different.

FOR MORE ON THE SOLOMON ISLANDS VISIT
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Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific, an archipelago comprising of a vast group of 992 breathtaking tropical islands. Feel the spirit of adventure and enjoy your own special piece of paradise - dive, surf, hike, kayak or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

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