

Destination
→ Solomon Islands

Welcome to Skull Island

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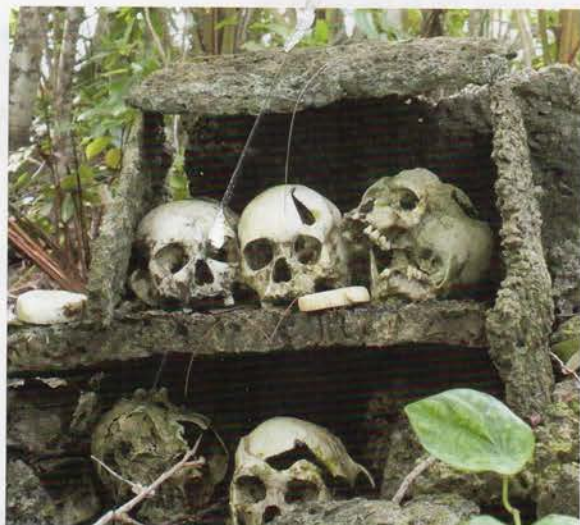


Traditional house in Babanga village

Today we're going to Skull Island," said my host. Frankly, it didn't mean anything and I wondered if, like Fiji's Heart Island, it was named for its shape. I didn't ask, which saved me making an ass of myself for the tiny islet, in the Solomon Islands' Western Province, is actually named for the presence of human skulls, a legacy of headhunting days gone by.

A symbolic form of warfare that probably dates back thousands of years and continued until the British stamped it out early in the 20th century, the severed heads were the gruesome sign of a chief's power. Apparently the more he had, the more his ancestors supported him and some believed the dead would be his slaves in the afterlife.

Raiding parties went out in war canoes (tomako), beautifully decorated with carved figureheads inlaid with mother of pearl. The job of these fearsome-looking creatures was to keep an eye out for danger and to discourage the sea spirit (kesoko) from sinking the canoe.



Skull Island's heads and shell money

Before stepping on to Skull Island, our hosts have to ask the permission of spirits represented by three upright stones. Once ashore, I'm somewhat spooked by skulls on an altar-like structure, as they still bear the marks of the weapons that brought them down. Shell money (bakiha) and a shell trumpet adorn the altar, while alongside are the graves of two of the last head-hunting chiefs.

Their names mean nothing to me but I have heard of the feared Ingova, a paramount chief of the 19th century. His fortress, opposite the tourist town of Munda and 600m above the Roviana Lagoon, was surrounded by 3m coral walls. Unfortunately, about 20 years ago, a group of misguided Christians destroyed the most important of Ingova's 13 shrines and threw away the skulls. According to tradition, those actions would have brought them extremely bad luck but there's no record of whether they came to their deserved sticky end.

Headhunting is just one aspect of the culture of the region but tends to get the most attention in the Western Province, although shell money is up there too.

Disks of giant white clam shell (tridacna) were ground by hand into bracelet-like bakiha, which were used to buy top-end items like brides, pigs and canoes. Smaller rings were threaded on strings called tafuliae. Again, the more a chief had, the greater his mana.

These days, you're likely to see shell money as jewellery, worn on a string around the neck, especially by young men. What you won't spot, except on a visit to the small museum in Honiara – or to Otago Museum in Dunedin – are the coils of red feather money unique to Santa Cruz group, the most easterly of the country's 942 islands.



A woman with a completed and partly made pandanus fan

Just like Kiwi currency, feather money had different values. Graded by quality, there were 10 denominations, each considered to be worth twice as much as the one below. It took 300-600 cardinal honey-eaters to make a coil, so it's no wonder the tiny birds are now rare for although they were released after plucking, they often died of shock. The cold wouldn't have got to the poor little blighters, as the Solomon Islands are tropical with an average daytime temperature of 28°C year-round.



A rope maker demonstrates her skill



The eel trap style is centuries old but plastic is now used to make it



Fire starting demonstration at Lumatapopoho



Blonde hair is caused by a gene unique to the region

Because the country's 942 islands are linked only by air or sea, it seems little has changed since the first migrants came from Melanesia, probably Papua New Guinea, some 30,000 years ago.

Back in the Western Province, where tourism is centred on diving amongst World War 2 wrecks, touring battle sites and fishing, I visit Babanga village. It's a short walk through the jungle from the highly regarded Fatboys Resort on Mbabanga Island, a 10-minute boat ride from the regional capital, Gizo.

At first glance, village life continues much as always: dugout canoes lie on the shore, women weave fans, baskets and eel traps; penned pigs are being fattened for a feast and chooks – introduced in the 16th century by the first Europeans – scratch around the traditional palm-frond huts.

A closer look shows it's not all as it was: some faces reflect the more recent migrants from Micronesia to the north and Polynesia to the east; the eel trap is woven

from plastic strips ("They last longer now," I'm told); there is a school and a church; a man wearing a sweatshirt with a kangaroo motif oversees children washing dishes in a plastic bowl; and two new buildings have been erected to tap into the tourism market.

More traditional in approach is the Lumatapopoho cultural village, at Kakabona on the outskirts of Honiara. Here, under the direction of head man Primpo Pukukesa, visitors are welcomed by bare-breasted women and children in tapa-cloth loincloths. Some youngsters are startlingly blonde, thanks to a single gene unique to the region, not the amorous activities of Europeans.

Primpo's assistant demonstrates how to weave a house wall, tapa making, fire-lighting using two sticks and the right technique for chewing betel nut, while his wife cooks sample dishes over hot stones.

In my Girl Guide days, I was a flop at fire lighting, even with a box of matches to hand, pounding bark to make tapa seems incredibly hard work and I can't imagine what my dentist would say if I fronted up with the red teeth and gums of the habitual betel chewer, so I forgo these pleasures in favour of a timid taste of wild lettuce cooked in a bamboo tube. ■■



facts:

Getting there: There are no direct flights from New Zealand. Kiwis travelling to the Solomons first need to go to Brisbane and depart to Honiara from there. Solomon Airlines flies from Brisbane to Honiara. Fares start at \$NZ417, including taxes (one way). Kiwis get a visitor's permit on arrival for up to 90 days. Solomon Airlines also fly from Honiara in the Central Province to Gizo in the Western Province. Fares start at \$NZ292, including taxes (one way).

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