

It's Island Time

A place to steal your heart, immerse you in island culture and to see unspoilt natural wonders, the Solomon Islands is a must for your bucket-list writes *Dan Morris*.





MMeet the hidden paradise of the South Pacific, an archipelago of 992 unspoilt tropical islands. Feel the freedom of adventure above and below the sea and take in the WWII history of the Battle of Guadalcanal or simply embrace yourself in the culture and get infected by the Solomon Islands smile

Also known as 'the hapi isles', once you have visited the Solomon Islands you will see why. The locals, although shy at first, quickly open up and are warm and friendly. Communication is made easy with most locals speaking English. The locals speak mainly in Pidgin among themselves. It's fun to try to learn Pidgin as it's easy to follow as it's like a shortened version of English.

A 3 hour direct flight from Brisbane will land you in the capital Honiara and opens up opportunities to explore the biggest city within the Solomon Islands. I chose The Heritage Park Hotel to base myself for my time in Honiara. It boasts everything you would expect in a world class hotel.

Whilst in Honiara be sure to explore the Honiara Central Market. Watch fresh fish straight off the trawlers and bustling locals shopping for supplies. Visit the US War Memorial and pay respect to the lives lost in the bloody battle of Guadalcanal in which up to 30,000 lives were lost in the 6-month ordeal. With so many ships and planes lost during this battle, they renamed the stretch of water off Honiara to Iron Bottom Sound formally Savo Sound.

Honiara is slowly moving forward with some high end restaurants, and the brand-new Coral Sea Resort & Casino has raised the bar in terms of quality and service in Honiara. For a special treat check out the brand-new Jing Spa & Beauty which consists of two levels of pure indulgence.

Once fed and pampered in Honiara, it's time to hit the other islands. First stop Munda.

MAGICAL MUNDA

For me this is where the real Solomon Islands magic starts.

A short flight from Honiara will allow you to explore the western province of the Solomon Islands. In the small town of Munda owning a boat gives you similar status of a King as everything in Munda happens via the ocean.

Apart from home stays the only real accommodation option is Agnes Gateway Lodge in which the attached Dive Munda offers everything from Scuba diving, snorkeling, day trips, fishing trips and even surf breaks for you to enjoy.

Two land based must do activities while in Munda is to find the Peter Joseph WWII Museum. This museum, or should I say Barney Poulson's shed, came about while exploring the hills behind his home. Barney found a dog tag belonging to US navy personnel Peter Joseph Palatini. Since that day Barney has been salvaging mementos left over from WWII. Along with the local community Barney has thousands of items all found within a kilometre of his home and has everything from Tommy guns to grenades and has since been in touch with Peter Joseph Palatini's family and would you believe it, he is still alive and is in the process of being reunited with his dog tag some 75 years later. Also, keep an eye out for Alfie, a colourful character who found a WWII Jeep rusting out in the jungle. With a little bit of love Alfie has restored the Jeep to working order and I was lucky enough to take a ride.

Whether it's world class diving you're after on some of the best WWII wrecks in the clearest waters in the world or trolling for kingfish off the

back of the boat, the real magic happens when you get in the water. I've fond memories of a pod of dolphins playing in the waves made by the boat on our way to explore nearby local villages.

GLORIOUS GIZO

With the ocean as our highway, we putted our way through inner lagoons and between islands to glorious Gizo - well almost, we landed at Fatboys Resort on Mbabanga Island a ten-minute boat ride from the township of Gizo, the second biggest city in the Solomon Islands. Fatboys was our home while in Gizo and what a fantastic setup they have. Owned by an Australian family and run by the locals you will not be disappointed. The name 'Fatboys' is derived from the character 'Joe the Fatboy' in the book "The Pickwick Papers" by Charles Dickens. Young Joe is a cheeky, lazy young man with an insatiable appetite for food, sleep and doing as little work as possible. Fatboys offers this with ocean front bungalows and a bar set out 100m over the water - but there is too much to do to be like young Joe!

KENNEDY ISLAND

The Solomons is rich in WWII history and one of the most celebrated landmarks is Kennedy Island. Located directly opposite Fatboys Resort and named after the former President of the United States, for the exploits of a then 26-year-old JFK, Lieutenant and Commander of the American patrol torpedo boat PT109. It was sunk after being run down by a Japanese destroyer Amagiri in August 1943. Two died and eleven survived as they swam and drifted for more than four hours to Plum Pudding Island now known as Kennedy Island. The only problem, there were no coconuts on the island and being a strong swimmer JFK set off to find an

island with coconuts. He finally found his coconuts on Olasana Island 4 km away. He swam back, grabbed his crew and they all swam back to Olasana. The explosion of PT109 was spotted by an Australian Coastwatcher who sent two locals out in a canoe to search for survivors. With the waters occupied by more than 10,000 Japanese troops, the locals were easily mistaken for passing fisherman. At first the locals spotted the survivors of PT109 and mistook them for Japanese but with some shouting and convincing from Kennedy they came ashore.

Coconuts are the lifeblood of the Solomon Islands and they sure saved JFK and his crew in more ways than one. Eleven survivors could not fit in a dugout canoe so JFK had the locals deliver the following message he scribed into a coconut back to headquarters.

NAURO ISL

COMMANDER... NATIVE KNOWS
POS'IT...

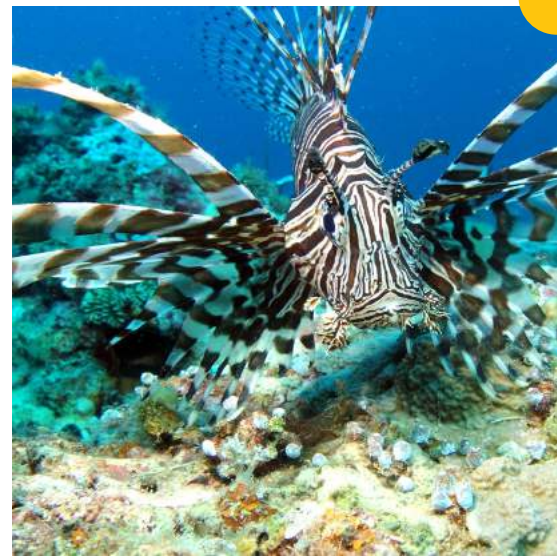
HE CAN PILOT... 11 ALIVE

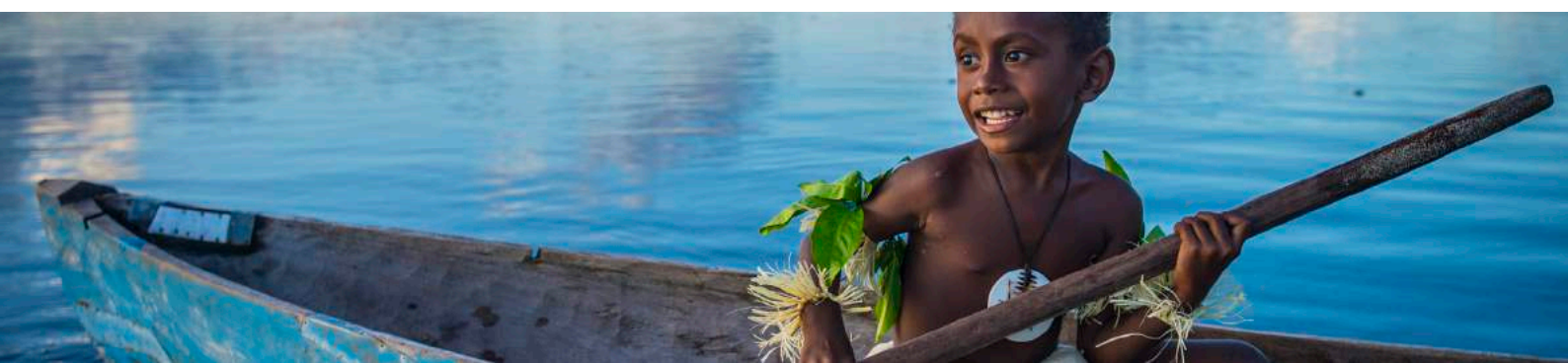
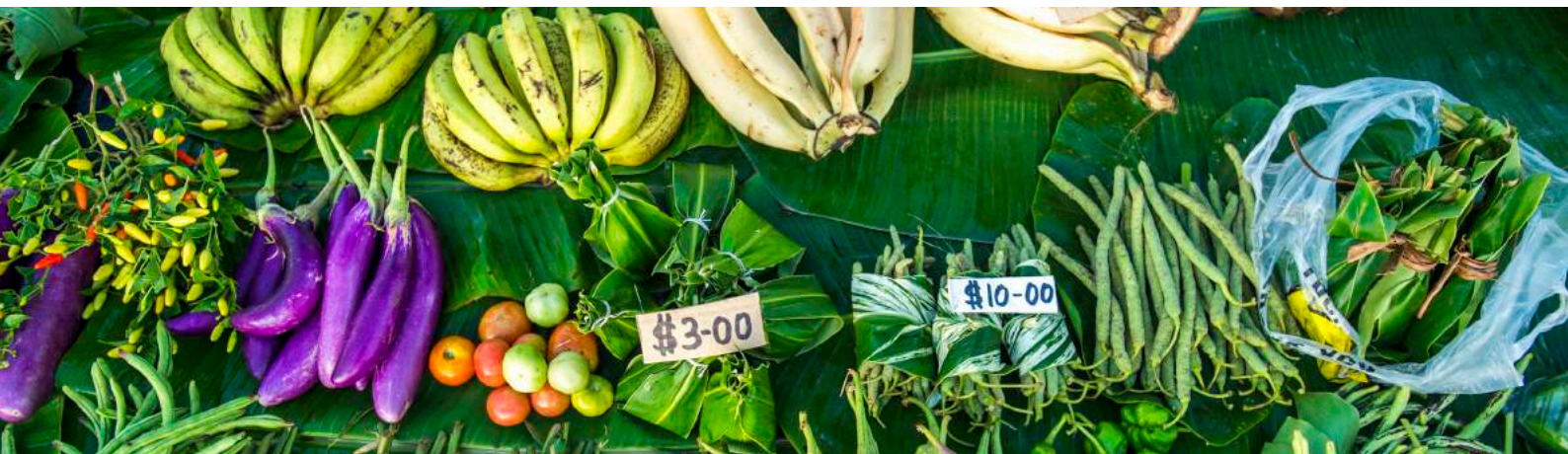
NEED SMALL BOAT... KENNEDY

The natives paddled 65 Kilometers to relay the message inscribed on the coconut and a successful rescue was conducted. JFK later had that coconut returned to him and it was used as a paperweight in the white house. It's now on display at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts.

SERIOUS SCUBA

The Solomon Islands boast some of the most exciting and distinctive diving and snorkeling sites in the world. Professional scuba operations such as Dive Munda and Sandbis Dive run day-trips and extended tours showcasing the coral gardens, wall diving, drift diving and numerous WWII wrecks. Once you get under the water a whole new world awaits with visibility extending





for an eternity.

If you Scuba dive don't leave Gizo without diving the Japanese transport ship - the Toa Maru. Over 140 meters in length with a dive depth of 7m to 37m you will see everything from the fantastic sea life to Sake bottles to a motorbike and even a tank.

For amazing colourful sea fans, manta rays, sharks and countless fish head to Joe's wall. The amount of sea life under the water is incredible and it's a surreal feeling diving the Nauru wall as it's the same passage of water JFK and his crew would have swam across some 75 years earlier. If you don't Scuba dive and you're not afraid to get in the water, snorkeling can be just as rewarding and a short boat ride from Fatboys will allow you to explore an American Hellcat Fighter Plane. The plane is still intact and

sits on a sandbar at only 9 meters underwater and is great viewing for both snorkelers and divers.

ISLAND FOOD

If you enjoy authentic cultural food then the Solomon Islands does not disappoint. Your taste buds will explode, as did mine, with the freshest of crayfish, bush cabbage with coconut milk, sweet potato and bananas cooked on hot stones using banana leaves for plates and the best utensils ever - your hands.

ISLAND TIME

The 'hapi isles' offer a little piece of magic for anyone who loves the ocean and the relaxed chilled out vibes of the Solomon Islands where no one has the time because no one wants the day to end. As the sunsets over the Pacific Ocean, join the locals for some Kava try Betel Nut, which I wouldn't highly

recommend as it leaves a foul taste in your mouth while staining your whole mouth in a rich red colour, however, if you can push past the taste, it gives your body a euphoric feeling that can relax you even more than the fresh air and culture does - if that's even possible.

It's a place that captivated my heart, my love for the ocean, the kind warm people who focus on life rather than money and I can't wait to explore the 'hapi isles' even more and I only have 980 islands left to see.

Tagio tumas (thank you very much)

Photo credit: David Kirkland, Linda Coleman & Dan Morris

ABOUT /

Dan Morris

Daniel Morris is a writer, marketer, avid traveller and dreams about 1 question. Where to next?

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