

MY WEDDING

THE ART OF CELEBRATION

A pair of hands, one from the left and one from the right, are shown holding a large, glossy red heart. The hands are positioned with the fingers slightly curled around the heart, and the palms facing upwards. The heart is the central focus, with text printed on it.

**CELEBRATING
50
ISSUES**

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BUMPER ISSUE - 332 PAGES!

VALENTINES

ROMANCE YOURSELF IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS



PART 1 - HONIARA TO WESTERN PROVINCE

by Jo Holley - Celebrant, MC, Adventurer & Socialite

It sounds ridiculous I know. Who would go to such a stunning island destination alone? Romance yourself - how do you even do that? What is Romance? Well friends, the time for Romancing Yourself is now!

When I got the call to go to the Solomon Islands to explore everything romantic about the destination, a thought dawned upon me – hang on a moment, I'm missing a key element that I'll need in order to explore "island romance" properly - I'm missing a man!

I even asked my editor Gayle "is the man included?" When I told friends that I was going to check out the romantic offerings that the Solomon's offered, they laughed and said, "so who's the guy you are taking, or are you going to find one there?"

It did make me think. If I want to really experience romance properly in one of the world's most best kept secrets, I'd better quickly switch up my 'single life at 35 game' and get looking.

I didn't look far. Actually, I didn't look at all. I travel the world constantly and I do romantic things all the time. Anything can be looked at through a romantic lens; any adventure could be romantic. I didn't need a guy. I just needed to be open to romance for once, change my thinking and put my romance radar on.

So, with this in mind I set out on my solo journey. My quest – to find romance in whatever it was I did. Wish me luck!

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Nat

DAY ONE

East of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands are your new piece of pristine paradise. Less known and off the beaten track compared to other Island destinations, this makes the Solomon Islands all the more enticing for the intrepid traveller.

From New Zealand you simply fly to Brisbane and 3 hours later you'll be landing in the capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal. When you land, it feels like you are worlds away, where life is simpler and smiles are bigger.

The infectious smiles that greeted me, automatically made me feel warmly welcomed. Holding a sign with my name and a floral garland was my host Stella. "Welkam to the Hapi Islands" - her greeting was in phonetic Pijin, one of the 70 or so languages.

That's a good start to exploring romance, I have the sign and I just got 'leid'!

Stella was friendly, warm, inviting, hilarious and keen to share her wealth of knowledge of her home and culture; we hit it off straight away.

"Alright Jo, you are here to see all the romance the Solomons has, there's a lot of love here and many romantic excursions. So, have you got a boyfriend?". Stella asked. "Aahh nope, no boyfriend, know anyone?"

As we passed the local market, we hit the island's only traffic jam. Being the spontaneous explorer I am, I jumped out of the van and went over for a quick nosey. I found out the fresh produce was all grown in the locals' backyards.

With my "romance lens" in action I thought, now that's something you could do to be all romantic - take a stroll to the produce markets, indulge in whatever takes your fancy and learn about how the locals grow their goods. You'd be a cheap date, learn something, get fed and get your exercise in, too.

My first stop was the architecturally designed The Coral Sea Resort and Casino, Honiara which is located on the water's edge, just 20-minutes from the airport. This is where I would stay before heading out to the outer islands. I was greeted by a statue with a very large... physique ... a refreshing coconut drink and a glamorous red carpet. Perfect, I thought, "they've rolled out the red carpet". I was romancing myself, so I plodded down it with my coconut in tow, only to find out it had been rolled out for a private function. Oh well, as the motto says: 'You Only Live Once', so make the most of every opportunity!

I was staying in the gorgeous, sophisticated and very spacious Dolphin luxury waterfront villa. When I opened the door, my bags were already in my room. Now, I'm one of those people that like to look at everything - a mega observer - you know, really scout the place out, right down to what products are in the bathroom.

There were cooking facilities, even a freezer so with the produce market just down the road I could cook up my own food whenever I wanted. There was free Wi-Fi, 24 hour room service and, what caught my attention straight away, was my very own jacuzzi with views of the ocean. That's where I'd head later, but first I wanted to inspect my surroundings.

There was a grand marquee set up for an event catering to over 250 people. I wandered on in, checking out the table settings, the stage, the sound equipment and furniture. The location, set-up, and sea views were awesome, with the marquee opening onto the sea front. This would be a great facility to host a wedding with everything right at your fingertips.

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As the sun set, I took a walk along the boardwalk and found a table at the perfect place to dine overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Florida Islands -The Boardwalk restaurant. Within moments, I was enjoying a Malaysian pizza and lamb curry with roti. But I could see there was action going on in the outdoor kitchen, and it involved seafood ... so, as an avid diver and kaimoana (seafood) connoisseur, I was over there quick smart.

"I'm the famous Frank the roti king, and that's Sharon, the roti queen," Frank said with a cheeky grin. On Wednesdays they serve their 'Shell Out' menu with the chef's special seafood medley platters with Singapore chilly crab sauce. People come from all over just for that, and tonight the guests at the event were about to be treated.



As Frank, Sharon and the team prepared the meals for the event, I hung around, more like hovered around like a bee at a honeypot waiting for my chance to try the chefs special. I chatted about the romance tour I was on, local history, culture, their lives in the Solomon Islands. Frank had me in hysterics as he told me joke after joke ... a true comedian, he needs his own show!

I learnt that Iron Bottom Sound lay directly out in front of the boardwalk and was where many ships were sunk during the war, and you can now find amazing dive spots. Frank explained "70 years ago, Jo, it was boom, bang, bang out everywhere, but the only thing that's making a lot of noise now is me," as he banged on his wok. "Now, you say you're here for romance, Jo. Well, if you want a romantic meal, you better get one of these before they all 'shell out'".

What a hoot! I could have stayed and chatted all night, but I had an early start in the morning and the spa was calling my name, so I said my goodnights.

DAY TWO

Whenever I am in the islands, I have to catch the sunrise and this morning, as I wandered out along the boardwalk, even in the drizzle it was breathtakingly beautiful. The sound of the waves lapping up against the boardwalk, the birds chirping, the warmth beaming onto my skin ... I sat alone, enjoyed the moment, taking in my surroundings, feeling an abundance of gratitude for where I was and sat in meditation while the sun rose. My mantra for today to romance myself.

There's no better feeling than switching off and relaxing, wondering what day it is and what the time is. Take off your watch - you won't need it here - like many other islands, your schedule will run to Island Time. The place is stress free, moves at a leisurely pace, there's no rush. If you haven't experienced that before, prepare yourself - a pick up may be scheduled for 7am and they may come at 7.30am, but always be ready just in case, and know that they are coming ... just not right now.

I arrived at the airport late, but with plenty of time to spare for my flight to Gizo in the Western Province. Check in was a breeze - fast, no lines and they weighed not only my bags but I, too, had to get on the scales. Boy, was I glad I had just started my trip!



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On the way to the airport, Andrew shared local stories. He told me how gold was found in the Mataneko river by Spanish navigator, Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira; how the town was buzzing when the royals visited and how everyone has a different story claiming the conception of Prince George. He showed me the school named after George VI and pointed out where the good spots to party were. "Hey, Jo, you might find a man there and have a romantic dance," he laughed.

It's not often you get on a plane and just park up in whatever seat takes your fancy, but that's how it's done in the Solomon Islands. Get a window seat and don't doze off because you will not want to miss the unspoilt paradise views of untouched nature, and the striking azure palette of the ocean from take off to landing during the full hour and a half flight. Don't be alarmed if a bug crawls up your leg. A few of the local insects are keen travellers and like to take the flight, also!

Travelling with us were two beautiful locally made wedding cakes. Tomorrow the first wedding on Mbatusimbo Island, Western Province was taking place and somehow, after eyeing them up and joking with Stella "will they make it" while eating everything in sight, including the plane cookies in the seat pocket, I was tasked with looking after one of them. Rest assured it made it ...just.

I landed at Nusatupe airport, greeted by the handsome and charismatic manager of Fatboys, Manoj and, within moments, our bags were up on shoulders and down to the boat. That's one thing about the Solomon Islands - you are always made to feel like you don't have to do anything, that you are really welcome, like family, and you are always laughing at the many hilarious stories the locals have to tell.

Mbabanga Island is a short 10-minute boat trip from Fatboys resort. I know, I thought exactly the same thing – that's such a strange name for a luxury island resort, but it all makes sense once you've stayed there. Manoj told me the resort was called Fatboys because of a book called "The Pickwick Papers" by Charles Dickens. I hadn't read this book, but he said "well, there's a boy Joe who is always eating heaps and drinking and always falls asleep wherever he is. That will be you, too, Jo - no work, eat all you want, have sundowners, sleep anytime and relax – you'll be like him, too, once you stay at Fatboys".

And on that note Fatboys came into sight. There's something to be said about arriving to your home away from home by boat; it's such a thrilling and, yes, romantic experience. The restaurant and bar area is set over a peaceful turquoise lagoon, 100m out in the bay, and it's the heart of the resort and the hive of all activity (and in-activity, for that matter) ... from boardgames, pool, reading, water activities, socialising, dining, entertaining to simply relaxing. You'll find it all here.

I was greeted with a fresh lime water and, yes, I got lei'd again before being shown to my huge overwater bungalow with high pitched thatched ceilings and natural hardwood flooring, all made from natural resources from around the island, complete with a large deck, hammock and outdoor furniture.



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When showering, it feels like you are outside in nature. It's authentic old school, with a few modcons thrown in. To open your front windows, you simply pull a string and the woven "leave blinds" roll up. There's no locking these blinds, so you can leave them open all day. You'll find the air flows through the villa, and the fan keeps the room nice and cool. What I loved most was that you can take in the picturesque views of Kolombangara, Kennedy Island and spy the abundance of tropical fish living here from anywhere in the room.



Being taken on an adventure or planning an adventure is something I find really romantic and, with the rain outside, I thought what better way to spend the day than exploring what's below the surface of the Solomon Islands' crystal clear waters.

The Solomon Islands are a world class diver's dream. Imagine uncrowded dive sites, a varied and irresistible menu of underwater treasures, WWII ships and aircrafts littered across the ocean floor – war relics now home to an abundance of marine life and fluorescent coral nestled amongst them. In these luscious reefs, the marine biodiversity is exceptional and healthy, and the best thing is that the water is warm!

I'm an avid diver, so I was super excited to check out the underworld. Manoj dropped my new buddy Kate and I off to Sanbis Resort who cater to all levels of diving skills and experience. Here we met our dive instructor, Steve, a young good looking, long blonde haired guy with the eyes to match the azure waters; originally from Amsterdam, now living the sweet life in the Solomons. He caught our attention alright. Maybe I will spark up a romance here! "I've instructed all over the world, but what you'll see down here, ladies, is just phenomenal," he said. Little did he know we were loving what we saw above the water!

Our first dive location was the WWII wreck Toa Maru, a 6700 ton, 140m Japanese freighter lying on her starboard side a mere 15-minutes north of Gizo that ran aground Jan 1943. Steve gave us information about the dive site. "Right, ladies, the dive starts at an easy 7m at her bow and slants to 37m at her stern. There's still a massive blast hole where they shot the wreck, a few swim throughs, sake bottles, a motorbike and heaps more, so it's a really cool wreck to dive".

In we went and ... wow ... were we blown away by what we saw! The wreck was ginormous. Every exposed surface had been colonised by coral of every kind, complete with reef fish and nudibranchs. It's definitely a spot you could dive over and over and always discover something new.

Back on the boat, the wind and rain came bucketing down, but that didn't phase us - we were already wet, it wasn't cold and it was all part of the adventure. In fact, it proved to be the funniest part of our trip and probably the most entertaining thing Steve had seen. As we moved to our next dive spot, getting nailed by sea spray and rain, Kate and I decided to ride along wearing our scuba masks. I can now cross Steve off my romance list - we looked absolutely ridiculous! "Well, I've never seen that before," he laughed. That's what happens when you get an Auzzie and a Kiwi onboard. Loads of laughs and that "she'll be right", "can do" attitude.

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The next dive spot was One Tree Reef, one of the most beautiful reefs in the Gizo area where, like us, you'll see numerous hard and soft corals, reef fish galore and large gorgonian sea fans like you've never seen before.

After a hot cuppa we said our "Tank iu tumas" to Steve for the romantic affair with the underwater world, and were on our way back to Fatboys. Diving always relaxes me, so I retreated to my overwater villa for a blissful nap and drifted off to the sound of the waves lapping up against the rocks. An afternoon nap! Now that's how to Romance Yourself!

With no idea of what the time was, but feeling it was about time to eat, I wandered down to the entertainment hub to find Kate and local Ashley playing pool, other holiday makers playing board games, some reading and others having a couple of cold ones at the bar. I relaxed in one of the hammocks, taking in the breathtaking views, listening to the chilled music and sharing stories with the new friends I had made.

"Jo, your dinner is ready" Ashley said. Credit to the chefs - the meals here are absolutely delicious. It's fresh off the boat. Literally, the catch is from sea to table, and tonight I indulged in the calamari.

After dinner in true island style we had a jam on the guitar and Ashley showed us his singing talents. We played a round of "never have I ever" with another new friend, Emily, before I retired back to my villa to drift away.

New experiences, new friends, romantic adventures and Steve's blue eyes – I could get very used to this.

DAY THREE

As I slept, a P&O cruise ship cruised in carrying two very special people - Priscilla Collins and Jerrard Atkins from Australia, who were about to be the first couple to tie the knot on one of Solomon Islands most stunning islands, Mbatusimbo in the western province, and I was invited, well kind of ... I was the official cake protector.

So off to Gizo I went, finding that the locals had set the entire waterfront area up as a local market for the passengers to take home a local souvenir, experience local culture and learn more about the Solomon Islands. Locals from other islands also arrived in their boats and paddled their dugout canoes, leaving the market with bags full of fresh produce.

Stefan, a local carver, showed me his amazing intricate crafts and introduced me to shell money. Used as currency to trade with other tribes, for bridal gifts, and given in traditional ceremonies, 'shell money' has been made by hand for generations and for the 2000 Langalanga people of the central west coast of Malaita Island, shell money is still a fundamental part of their culture.

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I then got chatting to Randy from PlasticWise Gizo. He, along with 45 women, in an effort to clean up the environment so it's here for future generations, as been recycling used plastic and making handbags, head pieces and all sorts of wears. It was wonderful to see locals taking initiative to clean up and preserve their homelands.

"Come on, Jo, stop chatting, the official paperwork is done, we have a wedding to get to," Stella called. So, I rounded up my chats, packed up all my new goodies and, like a true wedding crasher, jumped on the boat with the wedding photographer and followed the groom's party as they embarked on their wedding journey to Mbatusimbo Island.

Arriving at this jaw dropping destination truly takes your breath away. I felt a rush of excitement pour over me thinking about the groom and bride arriving here for the first time, and seeing just how perfect the setting was. I'm a celebrant and when the couple see each other for the first time is my favourite part of the ceremony.

Just imagine touring the islands in a cruise ship, jumping aboard your own boat and being transported over gentle, idyllic transparant waters offering a window like view of the bottom, to your very own private, remote, unspoilt island. Soft white sand, trees and just one man-made structure to hold the reception. And knowing you were about to be the first people to ever get married here. Romance was in the air!

The set up by Stella (might I add that this was her first-ever wedding setting) was absolutely beautiful. It looked like something out of a romance movie. Bamboo sticks dressed with fresh flowers lined the aisle, flower petals adorned the sand, wooden chairs were decorated in dark gold and while silks, and a stunning archway with centrepiece stood framing the perfect backdrop.

Within moments the bridal party arrived on a local tomoko, a traditional war canoe, and a conch sounded. Seemingly out of nowhere, warriors painted in white and clad in traditional battleware emerged from the bush and rushed the tomako, armed with spears, axes and carrying wooden carved shields. They chanted loudly, performing the customary challenge to welcome the bride and her bridesmaids and to carry her to her groom-to-be.

The ceremony, performed by a local priest, was so special and exactly what the couple had dreamed of. They commented: "We just said ... Stella, we'll leave it with you and we will be there ... and we are just estatic with how it all turned out and how stunning the set up is. It's perfect; just what we wanted."

I didn't want to crash the reception as well (really I did - I wanted to try the cake I had so carefully looked after) - so I thought it was best to head back to Fatboys to enjoy some paddle boarding, and I timed it right. As I was paddling back in, a boat of local divers turned up with two chilly bins of crays. One went straight in to be prepared for my lunch, panfried in lime juice and matched with a local sol brew and, boy oh boy, did I have a lunch to talk about!

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As I cleaned every last morsel from my plate, I looked up and from out of the sea popped friends Tam and Jo from New Zealand. They were on the cruiseship and on their own romantic getaway. They raved about Fatboys and absolutely loved the adventure, snorkeling and sunshine. "To be able to have lunch, chill out then walk straight off the deck from this restaurant into the water and snorkel right here is just epic". And that's exactly what I did next.

If you want a glimpse of the magnitude of beauty that lies beneath the water's surface, throw on your snorkeling gear. Snorkeling is great all year round with water temperatures roughly around 26 degrees. Excellent visibility and extremely healthy corals ensure you'll see angelfish, parrotfish, surgeonfish and a whole lot more. At night around Fatboys you can even feed their pet reef sharks.

And if that's not your idea of a good time, also within a stone's throw of Fatboys are so many activities from fishing, excursions to the likes of Skull Island, surf trips, polycraft boats, kayaks, you can visit the local village or check out some of the historical sites.

One I was very keen to check out was the Grumman F6F Hellcat shot down during WW11. So, just like that, we were in the boat and off to a spot in the ocean where you would never know that beneath you sat an intact carrier-based fighter aircraft, upright and in just 9m of clear water. Sitting so shallow makes it the perfect free dive. It was so amazing to explore - bullet holes can be seen in the tail and, as I did, you can sit in the cockpit and pretend you are the pilot.

On the way back to Fatboys, we stopped into what used to be called Plum Pudding Island, now known as Kennedy Island. The small island where John F Kennedy, US Navy lieutenant and President-to-be, and his men initially swam to after a Japanese destroyer rammed his boat, tossing crew overboard. The survivors swam three-and-a-half miles to Plum Pudding, JFK towing a crewmate using the strap of his lifejacket clinched between his teeth, and days later relocated to Olasana Island.

I walked around investigating all the weaponry remaining, imagining what it would have been like for JFK and his men during the war, squatting here, living off coconuts, hiding out from the Japanese. It was so intriguing.

Later that day, we were chilled at the bar, chatting about this historical place over a sundowner. Next minute, the manager of Gizo Hotel, Greg, turned up playing his ukelele and singing away to his team. It was perfect; like we were being serenaded from the waters edge. As he drove off, he yelled out cheekily:

"Hey, Jo, you got a boyfriend?"

"No," I yelled back.

"Oh, there's lots of men here, I know someone ... me," he joked as he cracked himself up and drove off, singing away. The jokes are always flowing in the Solomon Islands.

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On the menu tonight was crayfish cakes and fresh yellow eyed tuna in a cream cheese sauce with mashed potato and vegies, followed by fruit salad and ice cream. I tell you, I could eat here everyday - the chef always delivers!

I went to bed absolutely fulfilled, with a whole new bank of knowledge, a full tummy, a big smile ... and, apparently, a new boyfriend.

DAY FOUR

It was my last morning in the Western Province, and I wasn't about to miss the sunrise that all the staff had been boasting about.

I opened my blinds and lay in bed watching, thinking of how romantic this moment was; how pleasant it was after my expeditions to just chill, and about how hard it will be to leave this place.

But I had more to scope out with my romantic lens ... and more potential boyfriends to meet. My next stop was the remote private island resort of Tavanipupu - "a place where the fish pass through" in Guadalcanal Province, renown as a romantic getaway escape.

Who knows what will happen next. Stay tuned for Part 2.



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Jo visited The Solomon Islands with the assistance of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau
www.visitsolomons.com.sb

She flew Brisbane-Honiara return, as well inter Island with Solomon Air
www.flysolomons.com

Accommodation in Part 1:
The Coral Sea Resort and Casino, Honiara
www.coral-sea-resort.com

Fatboys Resort
www.solomonislandsfatboys.com.au

Dive trip supplied by Sanbis Resort
www.sanbisresort.com



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