



Fatboys Resort

Solomon ISLANDS

His introduction to the 'hands-on, not hands free' treasures of the Solomon Islands has made **BARRY STONE** grateful - for the existence of this unspoiled Pacific paradise, and for the opportunity the Solomons provides to parents and kids alike to experience a wholesome and natural, 'off the grid' holiday adventure together.

"Who is this Baby Ruth? And what does she do?"

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, 1921

When the great English playwright posed that question about legendary US baseball player, Babe Ruth, he did more than display his ignorance of America's 'Sultan of Swat'. He showed how anyone can live in ignorance of things that are, by any standard, phenomenal. So don't feel bad if you can't place the Solomon Islands on a map to save your life. Rather just be grateful there's still a jewel like this left in the world so untamed and so replete with ironies: a place that has to be looked for, yet has always been there; a place that mixes 'PNG Wild' with 'Fiji Familiar'; a place that's Wi-Fi connected, yet remains refreshingly 'off the grid'.

If you've visited all the usual South Pacific destinations, chances are you've still missed this 1,500km wide archipelago of 900 plus, mostly uninhabited, islands. And you need to do something about that! Why choose a Pacific holiday just because the children fly free,

or stay free, or eat free, or because there's a ubiquitous Kids Club to take them off your hands? In the Solomons it's hands-on, not hands free. Especially the fishing . . .

OK, imagine this: you're in waist-deep, 29 °C water, 200m off the beach of some perfect, nameless island. Around you stand thirty or so Solomon Islanders, waiting for a tiny boat to reach you, that's chugging along, almost capsizing under the weight of a heavily plaited, leafy jungle vine that's been cut from the island's interior and stacked in its stern.

The boat arrives, a man begins unloading the vine and we all join in dragging its considerable weight through the water, eventually bringing it around on itself to create a leafy, floating circle of green about 100m across. Then, with all of us 'on our marks', around its heaving circumference, we begin slowly reducing its diameter. Imperceptibly to us, but more importantly to the fish, the circle

starts shrinking. The whole process took hours. And there wasn't a single moment when it wasn't exhilarating.

I ducked down, peered through the tangle of leaves, and saw an astonishing sight - trout and parrot fish and barracuda and all manner of marine life circling about, maybe 900 someone said, none of them willing to chance the gauntlet of the vine and swim to freedom. Finally, with the vine maybe 12-15m across, a 'magic powder' - the precise composition of which has eluded me - is tossed into the water. "What will that do?" I ask. "It knocks them out", someone says. Knocks them out? Are you kidding?? And then it happened - hundreds of fish float to the surface, suffocating, flipping themselves into the air. So we scooped them up and tossed them into dugout canoes; a week's worth of fish for dozens of local families.

The capital, Honiara, on the main island of Guadalcanal is the gateway to all this, and the scene of the very first World War II Allied land offensive against the Japanese. There is a bevy of unique attractions here,

Langa Langa Lagoon on the west coast of Malaita Island © iStock



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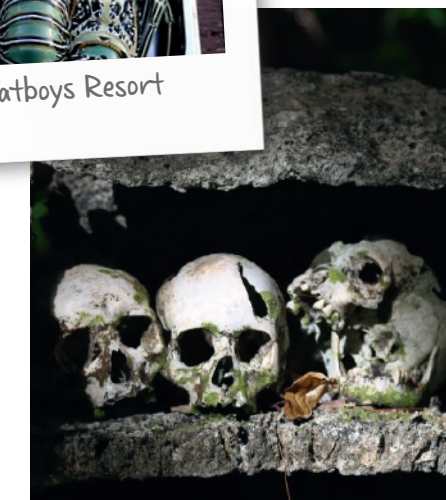
Above from left:
Catch of the day
Boys on a pier at Munda
A traditional welcome in a village that once practised headhunting



Dinner at Fatboys Resort



Why I'll Go Back:
To hike the primitive trails of Tetepare Island!
visitsolomons.com.sb



Skull Island

including an American Grumman F4F Wildcat carrier-based fighter aircraft with wings that *still fold back* at the Vilu War Museum. Off the beaches, sunken wrecks of dozens of US planes and warships lie on aptly named Ironbottom Sound while, elsewhere, fig trees grow through the rusting hulks of US landing craft.

Almost all of the Solomon's eco-lodges and guesthouses, however, are off Guadalcanal in its outlying provinces such as here, in Western Province, just over an hour's flying time away. And twenty minutes further by boat is Mbabanga Island, home to one of the most laid-back retreats you'll ever see - Fatboys.

Fatboys got under my skin because it achieves, naturally, what properties around the globe spend truckloads artificially creating: utter contentment. Its over-the-water bar/restaurant/idyllic haven is connected to spacious beachfront bungalows by a narrow, beautifully-weathered 75 metre-long pier. Walking it is like crossing a bridge between Middle Earth and Asgard. Giant clams, the largest I've ever seen, sit on the rippled, sandy bottom beneath it, and

almost outnumber the guests. There's a pool table and library, and crayfish delivered daily by locals, to be picked over by the resort's chef.

Travel is still an adventure in the Solomons. There are banana boats, grass airstrips, and a place called Skull Island. And there are mangroves and estuaries and lagoons and creeks everywhere. I've never seen a country so defined by water.

Yet there is so much I didn't see. Like Marovo Lagoon, the world's longest saltwater lagoon, and the 120 sq km Tetepare Island, the largest uninhabited tropical island *in the entire Southern Hemisphere*, with hornbills and pygmy parrots in its trees and dolphins and dugongs in its reef-fringed waters. Reached via banana boat from Munda, the largest settlement on Western Province's New Georgia Island, Tetepare's rainforest-draped mountains looked from a distance to be some Arthur Conan Doyle-like *Lost World*. Staring at it on the way to somewhere else was like dangling a carrot in front of a horse. There's no electricity there, no hot water or flush toilets either, and you sleep in traditional "leaf houses" - a perfect place for

screen-addicted children, and adventure-starved parents.

At Fatboys my most favourite spot was my verandah hammock. Each night I'd look across the waters of Blackett Strait to tiny, uninhabited, Kennedy Island, named for US President John F Kennedy, who swam there in August 1943, after his patrol torpedo boat was rammed, in the night, by a Japanese destroyer. So much conflict, and now so quiet. More irony.

On my last night I sprayed on another cloud of mosquito repellant, pushed hard against my verandah post which I estimated would give me 5 to 7 minutes of gentle swaying, buried my head in the pillow I had taken from my four poster bed, and stared at Kennedy Island, its silhouette rising out of a moonlit sea, an ocean of ethereal blues and silvery, gossamer tints.

I don't remember anything after that.

More info

Solomon Airlines flies to Honiara four times a week from Brisbane and seasonally ex Sydney, from November to 31 January.
flightsolomons.com

Where to stay

In Honiara, stay at the Heritage Park Hotel
heritageparkhotel.com.sb

In Munda, stay at the delightful Agnes Gateway Hotel
agneshotelsolomon.com

On Mbabanga Island, stay at Fatboys
solomonislandsfatboys.com.au
visitsolomons.com.sb