

# 6 days in the SOLOMONS

Gary Wade

## Day 1

The Solomon Islands is an exotic wonderland of varied landscapes, rich in cultural and biological diversity. Untouched by 20th century development and tourism, the Solomon Islands offer visitors a feast of unique experiences and adventures. The Solomon Islands are considered the eco-tourism destination of the South Pacific.

Located 1860 kilometres to the North-East of Australia, shaped by earthquakes and volcanic activity thousands of years ago, the Solomon Islands consist of 922 islands, most of these are uninhabited.

The estimated population of 560,000 are predominately Melanesian, while some outer islands are home to Polynesians and Micronesians. The local people appear shy but are very friendly. Most live a subsistent village lifestyle retaining many traditional and ancient customs.

The flight from Brisbane to Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, is less than 3 hours. If you choose to fly with Solomon Airlines you can expect very comfortable seating with extra leg room and the cabin crew are very friendly and helpful. The meal served up was quite good and tea and coffee and drinks are all complimentary.

I receive a very warm welcome in Honiara as we are met by our host from Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau, the beautiful and ever smiling, Stella. We check in at our hotel and get ready for an afternoon tour of Honiara's WW2 history. There was fierce fighting here between Japanese Imperial forces and Allied forces with many thousands of lives lost. There is a very humbling war monument on top of the hill that overlooks the city, Skyline Ridge, that bears testament to the major battles fought, and honours the thousands of soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice for their countries. Henderson Airfield and its surrounds were one of the key focal points of attention during

the war, and after coming under the US led allied forces control, became a key launching pad for attacks further afield.

Many of the sites remain untouched and you can even find artefacts scattered in many battlefield locations. Locals, whilst working in their gardens and village grounds, still find human remains from this bloody past.

Naval battles took place in the area and a number of warships were sunk in the waters off the coast, hence the name Iron Bottom Sound. Many of the wrecks have become popular dive sites.

## Day 2 GIZO and Fatboys Resort

This morning we are back on board Solomon Airlines for the short flight out to Gizo, the capital of the western province. The view of the islands and lagoons from the smaller DSCH8 plane is breathtakingly beautiful, and I imagine myself snorkelling the reefs that surround coconut treed islands, and surfing the lefts and rights that peel off some of the outer reefs. We touch-down on a tiny island in the middle of a lagoon that is pretty much all runway, with just a very small building as the terminal. There is a small jetty at the rear of the airport where an 8 seater boat with a large outboard motor, and bearing the Fatboys Resort logo painted on the side, is waiting for us. This will be our main mode of transport for the next few days, as we will be doing some serious island hopping. We get our luggage on board and soon we are speeding across the lagoon towards Fatboys Resort.

Fatboys Resort is made up of a small number of island-style accommodation huts that sit cosily on the island of Mbabanga, with the centrepiece of the resort being the restaurant and bar that sits on top of a platform right on top of the lagoon, 100 metres off the island. A long jetty links the restaurant / bar to the huts on the island. It appears to be built from bamboo, with thatched roof and open walls allowing

the majestic panorama of the land and seascape in from all sides.

This is the main hub of the resort, the most relaxing of settings, which is surrounded by the calm blue waters of the South Pacific and teeming with fish. Look out across the water from your comfy chair and you will see a giant but extinct volcano in the distance, so high the top of the mountain is covered in cloud. Focus in closer and you see Kennedy Island, a tiny little island steeped in amazing ww2 history, as this is where JFK was rescued after his patrol boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. We drop our luggage off at our cabins on the mainland and return to the wharf where we jump back on board the Fatboys boat and head off to Gizo, a township where there is a market, several pubs, a hospital, and police station.

Gizo town is a frontier town. The streets are dusty and lined with buildings that have western style front porches. There are many small businesses such as restaurants, marine supplies and grocery stores. We take a stroll through the market where colourful locals display an array of fresh fish, tropical fruit, vegies and beetle nut, heaps and heaps of beetle nut! Every smile from a local bears witness to the chewing of the stuff! We take a brief look at the new hospital built by aid money donated by Japan and learn that the previous hospital was badly damaged by the 2007 tsunami.

Back at Fatboys our lunch is being prepared, so were back in the boat and speeding off to Mbabanga Island. Reef fish, crayfish salad and an assortment of tropical fruits awaits our return at the resort. After lunch we head back to our huts where we are treated to a 45 minute massage. What a way to smooth out the bumps from the boat ride! Im starting to think this is paradise.

Later that afternoon I head back to the bar for a couple of cold ales, namely Solbrew, the locally made beer and gaze out at the tranquil waters where three or four black-tipped reef sharks are cruising, stalking the huge school of bait fish that congregate under and around the resort. In the twilight of this magical day, a fisherman paddles his dugout canoe, gliding effortlessly across the calm waters of the lagoon. This could possibly be the most serene place I have ever been.

## Day 3 Mbabanga Island Village

We are greeted by a beautiful sunny morning, the air is calm and the water

reflects the sky like a mirror. It's a beautiful day and after another delightful breakfast at Fatboys we trek through the jungle to the other side of the island. It's a small island and after 15 minutes we can see the lagoon waters behind a curtain of coconut palms. Nestled among the coconut palms is a small thatched hut, Stella our guide explains that we are about to meet the family who lives there. We are invited in to the hut which is not much bigger than your average back yard shed and yet is shelter to mum, dad and 4 children. They have a fire place and a raised bamboo floor that is their living room and sleeping room. They lie on woven mats as their equivalent of a mattress. However humble their home and belongings, they possess the most priceless of views. A tranquil and turquoise lagoon from the front side of the hut and the pristine jungle from the back. The front yard has a scattering of giant clam shells that are now planters for some beautiful bush flowers, and three or four chickens scratch around in the dirt for beetles and other delicacies. This family is part of the larger community of Mbabanga, a village of approximately 100 or so villagers. This is a typical scene in the outer islands, progress and modernisation is slowly creeping up on the Solomon Islands, however there are many islanders still living as they have done for centuries. Living off the land and sea, using what nature provides to survive. They seemingly have very little in material possessions and yet they seem very happy. The children particularly play energetically and are having great fun. This was truly an amazing experience.

After returning to Fatboys we are advised to grab our towels and swimmers and meet at the jetty. Once again we are jumping on board the resort's boat which has been loaded with two eskys and a couple of fishing rods. The rods are rigged with plastic lures that are as big as the fish that I am used to catching! The excitement builds and we are soon shooting across the lagoon to our next idyllic location, for some snorkelling and apparently some serious fishing. The snorkelling here in the Solomons is spectacular! The water is warm and blue and the reef is colourful, just perfect. The fishing isn't bad either. Panda our boat captain points to the fishing rods, which means it's time

to wet a line. Panda slows the boat and we let the lures drop into the water, letting out about 30 metres or so of line out. We trawl along the edge of a reef for about 30 minutes or so, until Mike screams "I'm on". Panda jumps straight into action grabbing the gaff hook ready to land whatever is on the end of Mike's line. Mike reels furiously, he cannot contain his excitement "it feels like a pretty decent fish" after a few minutes of furious reeling we can see a silvery flash as the fish gets closer to the boat. When the fish is within gaffing range Panda sinks the gaff in and hauls it onboard.

There is much jubilation as Mike

holds his trophy aloft. It is a fine specimen of Spanish Mackerel - about 3 kilos big. Fishing is hungry work, so we head back to our beachside camp where some local villagers are preparing a traditional lunch over hot stones. Lunch is whole reef fish, served with a bowl of lime juice and chili for dipping, baked banana and taro. It is absolutely delicious.

After our tasty lunch it's back into the boat and across the lagoon to explore Kennedy Island. This is the place where JFK was rescued during ww2. He was captain of a patrol boat which was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer in the middle of the night. Kennedy and







his men swam to this tiny island and took refuge, eventually getting a message to his rescuers via inscription on a coconut.

This has been an awesome day, and we finish it off back at Fatboys with another delightful meal and beverages.

## Day 4

We say goodbye to the friendly staff of Fatboys resort. We boat it back to the airport then it's off to the island of Munda, about a 15 minute flight away. Munda is a popular base for scuba divers, as there are a number of sunken ww2 wrecks that make for great dive sites. Munda is steeped in WW2 history and after checking in to Agnes Resort we check out one of the local's collection of WW2 relics. Barney is a passionate character, about 50 years old who has collected war relics for the past 20 years. His shed is full of rusting machine guns, helmets, bullets, hand grenades, bayonets and all the other things that both American and Japanese soldiers would have carried with them during ww2. Barney tells us that there is probably hundreds if not thousands of dead soldiers buried on the island. It is a sobering thought to think of all the young lives lost during the battles here. Barney opens a padlocked chest to show us the collection of dog-tags, showing names and addresses of the American soldiers who fought and died here. I hope that these dog-tags can be reconciled to the relatives of these men somehow.

**Day 5 Skull Island and the water calming shell.** The skies are grey this morning and the wind is blowing pretty hard. It's going to be a wet and bumpy boat ride out to Zipolu Habu, our next resort, about a 40 minute boat ride

from Munda. As expected the waves whipped up by the wind make for an uncomfortable trip. We make it in one piece however, and the skies start to brighten up somewhat. Zipolu Habu is a cute little resort, built in the thatched hut style so common in the Solomon Islands. It is a great home base for game fishermen and hard core surfers taking advantage of the world class uncrowded breaks within short boat ride. After dropping our gear off in our huts we jump back in the boat and head out to Skull Island, which is a tiny outcrop of land covered in coconut palms, no bigger than a house block. We have a local guide with us who must "clear the air" before we step onto the island, otherwise we would be rendered ill. Once the air has been cleared we all step off the boat and clamber across the few metres of reef onto the island. We follow the local guide to the middle of the island where we find a shrine-like pile of rocks with clusters of skulls carefully placed. These are skulls of chiefs from past generations, and also past victims of cannibalism. Many of the skulls show evidence of blunt force trauma, heads clubbed with violent force no doubt. It is an eerie place and about to become even more so. On the way back to the boat our guide shows us a large clam shell, as big as the lid on a garbage bin and filled with water. We are advised this is the "calming shell" a device only to be used by the village medicine man. He would use his magic to help calm the ocean for the trip back to their village after visiting the skulls. Gillian mockingly casts a spell over the shell for the waters

**DIVING:** Hundreds of ships and aircraft litter the ocean floor, providing divers with a wide range of wrecks for scuba divers to explore. These machines and war relics now form spectacular, artificial reefs which attract masses of fish and an incredible variety of coral life. (Note: All dive wrecks in the Solomons are National Heritage and the pilfering of these wrecks is not permitted.) **SURFING:** Surfing the Solomons you will enjoy uncrowded surf perfection in a pristine natural and cultural environment. Local guides are available in most locations.

to calm. The gods didn't appreciate this.

On the trip back a storm hits. Our visibility is down to about 5 metres, this is what is known as a white out. Our driver can't see where he is going but he instinctively guides us back to the safety of Zipolu Habu after a tense and wild thirty minutes boat ride that seemed like hours.

## Day 6

Last night the wind howled through my hut so loud I thought the roof would blow off. It didn't, and by breakfast time the weather had settled in time for our boat ride back to Munda and then a flight back to Honiara. Today is our last full day in the Solomon Islands and Stella promises us one last special treat. As we drive from the airport back through the main township of Honiara I am observing the colourful peoples of Honiara, dressed in semi western style t shirts and shorts, some with footwear, some barefoot. Modernisation is slowly creeping up on the peoples of Solomon Islands, and my mind is cast back to the villagers at Mbabanga, living their clean simple existence, and how they seem quite happy.

Our last special treat is a visit with a family that is hanging on to the subsistence lifestyle. As we step off the minibus we are greeted by a strong villager wearing only a bark loin cloth. He welcomes us and leads us to an open yard surrounded by traditional thatched huts and we are formally welcomed by members of the man's family: wife, brother, nephew, daughters and sons, minimally but traditionally dressed. The men wear nothing but bark loin cloths, the ladies grass skirts. One of the men shows us how they prepare the beetle nut, saying that the "high" is just a "side benefit" of this popular tradition. The main hut is where the cooking takes place, and we given a 'cooking class' Solomon Island style. They cleverly stuff cabbage into a bamboo pole and close off the ends which turns it into a steam cooker. Out the back the men show us how they make fire from rubbing sticks together, beat bark into clothing using a club against a stone, and how they weave palm leaves to hold their stick huts together. These are skills that are slowly dying out as modernisation creeps up on the Islanders. This was life lived how it used to be.

These memories will live with me forever.



# So Solomons, So Different!

Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific archipelago, comprising of a vast group of 922 breathtaking tropical islands.

Experience a culture, rich with traditional customs, art, dance and the iconic sound of the panpipe music of 'Are Are'.

Catch a glimpse of the fierceness of World War II battles and be touched by the bravery of soldiers by visiting historic war sites in and outside Honiara, on land and underwater.

Explore Honiara's cosmopolitan and colourful food market in downtown Honiara, a vibrant and lively melting pot of the Solomons!

Be mesmerized by the natural beauty of our many wildlife and marine parks including Marovo lagoon in the Western Province, the largest saltwater lagoon in the world and home to an array of teeming marine life.

Feel the spirit of adventure and enjoy a special piece of paradise or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile welcoming smile.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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