





SOLOMON ISLANDS

South Pacific's forgotten gem

By Scott Lee

Always the first to put his hand up for an adventure, *Islandtime* writer Scott Lee visited the Solomon Islands to see the tremendous strides the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau is taking, with government support, to develop and showcase their islands to the world.



Attracting about 25,000 visitors per year - which to put in perspective is a busy week for Fiji - the Solomon Islands is a destination with everything offered by other South Pacific Islands, minus the crowds.

Raw, authentic and very affordable, this is an ideal place for adventurous travellers who like escaping the buffet and air-conditioned rooms for some mud between their toes. Here special interest travellers such as fishermen, divers, bird watchers, nature lovers, surfers and keen hikers will be rewarded.

Accommodation options vary from international style hotels (Honiara only) to boutique resorts, eco lodges and village stays. There are even places who offer grass huts on a beach and beside a lagoon with no other tourists in sight.

If you have clients wanting to get off the beaten track, experience a new culture and have better travel stories than their friends, look to the Solomon Islands.

WWII Tourism

The Solomon Islands endured six months of some of the second world war's most vicious battles. The Islands were in the centre of strategic supply lines for the allies and became a staging point for future Japanese expansion into the South Pacific.

Fascinated by how these beautiful islands became entangled in war, I came prepared, reading Robert Leckies' 'A Helmet for My Pillow' and watching 'The Thin Red Line' featuring Sean Penn and several documentaries on the Guadalcanal.

Loaded with information and questions, I was excited to join the Guadalcanal Battlefield and Cultural Tour in Honiara. First, we visited the monument commemorating the Solomon Islands Scouts and Coastwatchers. Our guide related stories demonstrating the incredible bravery of these Islanders, who risked their lives to be the ears and eyes of the allies.

Next stop was the Vilu War Museum, although 'museum' is a misnomer as it was in fact a clearing in the jungle, where many war relics have been collected. There is a couple of 75mm field guns captured from the Japanese and an assortment of aircraft including Corsairs, Wildcats, P38s and a Japanese Betty Bomber, all bearing the wounds of battle or an abrupt return to earth. It is also home to plaques commemorating the service of Americans, Australians and New Zealanders who fought there.

We finished the day back in Honiara, at a place called Hill 73 or Galloping Horse Ridge, a monument to the 15,000 American and allied troops who lost their lives there.

Overwhelmed by knowledge of the hardship, suffering and sacrifice these young men made, I stood alone in the pouring rain weeping.

Lest we forget.



Lumitapopoho Traditional Village

Included in the Guadalcanal Battlefield and Cultural Tour is a visit to Lumitapopoho Traditional Village. Part of the 'Moro' movement, which endorses a return to traditional culture, the village is a showcase of old-style living and custom.

Ramon, the village chief and our guide for the afternoon has declared that the village will follow Moro, and everyday life reflects just that. While villagers wear contemporary clothes to town and school, essentially they don grass skirts with women naked above the waist.

We are welcomed to the village with the customary betal nut ceremony. About the size of an egg, the betal nut flesh is chewed then mixed in the mouth with ground up coral. The lime from the coral reacts with the betal nut, which immediately turns red and makes the recipient look like they've been punched in the mouth. But, far from causing pain, the effect is a mild intoxication; similar I'm told to the effects of cannabis.

So, with a permanent smile baring his red teeth, Raymond proudly escorted us through his village. His wife and children prepared the evening meal, using vegetables collected by his son and nephews; his brother and another nephew worked on a new bure to showcase their crafts to cruise ship visitors, and his sister washed what few clothes they owned in a stream that runs through the village, while children played in the clear water. It was a fascinating look at village life as it would have been 1000 years ago.

Tavanipupu Private Island Resort

Situated in Marua Sound, a 30-minute flight eastward from Honiara, Tavanipupu is considered the Solomon's most luxurious resort. A major refurbishment, completed this year, has left the resort in pristine condition. New bungalows, jetties and manicured lawns compliment beautiful natural surrounds, exuding opulence and understated luxury.

The resort is famous for hosting the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (Wills and Kate) during their trip to the Solomons.

For the active visitor there is so much to do, including fishing and diving, boat trips to deserted islands, village visits and bike tours. Kayaks and stand-up paddleboards are available at the main beach and you can even test your skill in one of the native dugout canoes.

All that exercise needs fuel and the resort prides itself on local seafood. Lobster, prawns, mud crab and fish are all accompanied by fresh vegetable from the resort gardens. Tavanipupu is an excellent choice for a romantic getaway or honeymoon and with rooms priced from AUD\$250 and a full meal plan for AUD\$150 pp, Tavanipupu is also good value.

Fifty Shades of Blue

The one-hour flight west from Honiara to the Nusa Tupe Airstrip near Gizo has got to be one of the most picturesque in the South Pacific. With rainforest cascading from volcanic mountains, crystal clear water and pristine lagoons there is very little evidence of human inhabitation. Untouched, raw and authentic – it is all there for the exploring.

Hundreds of islands, sandbanks, atolls and reefs stretch as far as the eye can see in the kaleidoscope of blue hues. "Fifty shades of blues" said my travelling companion. "Travel porn," I countered. What a stunning country.

Fatboys

Fatboys is my kind of resort. Anywhere with a hammock in the bar has to be pretty cool right? After a 10-minute boat trip from Nusa Tupe Airstrip, it's immediately evident that this is a special place. The main bure is built over the water and accommodates the reception area, office, kitchen, restaurant, a horseshoe bar and seating area. Constructed from local hardwoods with a traditional thatch style roof, Fatboys is one of those gems found in the tropics that screams (or should I say whispers) "relax".

A quiver of surfboards slung under the roof, a stack of fishing rods in the corner and a deck piled high with windsurfers, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards hint at things to do, once you're 'tired' of all that relaxing. The private quarters are a collection of beachfront and hilltop bures, all with ceiling fans, mosquito nets and verandas. The area immediately surrounding the overwater bure is a marine reserve with excellent snorkelling. Reef fish have taken up residence in the corals under the building and bait fish school around the piles, all in aqua blue water. There is even a couple of harmless resident reef sharks.

Dive Gizo

Gizo, a fifteen-minute boat trip from Fatboys, is the third largest town in the Solomon's with a population of 5000. It is a typical South Pacific township with a waterfront road and a hotchpotch collection of houses, shacks and commercial buildings. There's a colourful open-air marketplace, the Gizo Explorer Hotel, a rustic wharf with a collection of fishing boats in various states of repair and of all things, a solar powered ATM. At the far end of town, in an area known as Chinatown, you will find Dive Gizo's headquarters. Started in 1985 by Danny and Kerrie Kennedy, Dive Gizo is recognised as one of the top dive operators in the Solomon's and is the only PADI dive facility in Gizo.



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With about 20 recognised dive sites including a couple of shipwrecks and several WWII planes it is easy to see why Gizo has managed to develop a worldwide reputation as a must-visit diving destination. Water temperatures are about 28 degrees Celsius year round, visibility is 30 to 50 metres and there are more than 279 varieties of fish.

It would be very easy to spend a week or more diving the Gizo area where according to Danny, diversity is key. “Keep it interesting,” he says.

The fact that they serve the nicest beach lunch in the Solomon’s is just a bonus.

Tahitu Village

Approaching the wharf we could see movement in the mangroves and behind the huts leading to our landing spot. Without warning several ‘warriors’ charged our landing party, taking us by surprise. Painted with mud and lime and wearing only loincloths, they banged their shields with their clubs and waved their spears threateningly above their heads. The leading warrior zeroed in on me and advanced down the wharf with bulging eyes. He let go a fearsome war cry and the other warriors closed around him in support. Not wanting to antagonise him, I lowered my camera and tried to look stern – not threatening, not dismissive – my smile had long vanished. The warrior lowered his club, winked, smiled and said “right you can come in now” and burst into laughter. The next time I saw Job (his name) he was sitting cross-legged working on an intricate carving of a bird. Surrounded by wood chips and giggling children, he was a far cry from the fearsome warrior that had greeted us minutes earlier.

As part of their product development strategy the SIVB has encouraged villagers in several locations to develop a showcase of their culture and contemporary living. We mixed with the villagers, as a meal was prepared on an open fire and talked with the carvers and weavers at work. After a tasty vegetarian meal we headed back to Fatboys, escorted part of the way by a school of about 200 porpoises. The SIVB think of everything!

The New Boy on the Block

“The Solomon Islands are open for business” is the message coming loud and clear from the Solomon Islands government. In June this year they launched a national tourism development strategy, recruiting highly respected marketing expert and former CEO of Tourism Fiji, Jo Tuamoto to head the national tourist office. They revamped Solomon Airlines and initiated a famils programme for travel wholesalers, agents and media and embarked on a product development drive to enhance and encourage new tourism ventures.

The Solomon Islands government has realised that the traditional economic drivers of fishing, mining and forestry are sunset industries and identified tourism as the next gold. Solomon’s Gold, so to speak.

Solomon Airlines

Solomon Airlines fly direct to Honiara from Sydney and Brisbane several times a week and there is a rumour of direct flights from Auckland in the future. Alternatively clients can incorporate round trip flights from Vanuatu or Fiji and add two or more destinations to their trip. Once in the Solomon’s, Solomon Airlines have a fleet of Dash 8s, Twin Otters and Britten Norman Islanders to get to the outlying islands.

Like most South Pacific destinations the real adventure begins after a small plane flight to a grassy strip, followed by a boat ride.

Sydney Overnight

Returning to Sydney on the direct flight from Honiara, I decided to stay overnight at the Mercure Sydney International Airport. As the name would suggest it is only a five minute drive from the airport with a hotel shuttle service that runs every 30 minutes (AU\$6.00 one way). Not wanting to waste any time in Sydney I was up early the next morning, and after a huge breakfast joined the commuters on the morning ride to downtown Sydney.

The Wolli Creek Rail Station is a 10 minute walk across Wolli Park and from there I took a 15 minute ride to Circular Quay, and my favourite area in Sydney – The Rocks.

There, workers were packing up after the previous night’s Vivid Lights show and I stopped for coffee with the volunteers. Vivid is Sydney’s annual extravaganza, which runs during the last week of May and first week of June. They call it a collision of art, music and technology and from all accounts it was spectacular with light sculptures and music in what is billed as the world’s largest outdoor art gallery – and it’s free! I’ve already booked my accommodation for next year.

I’m not much of a shopper but I did find a boutique menswear store called ‘Joe Bananas’ that I reckon redefines casual. As an Islandtime writer I couldn’t go past the Hawaiian shirts!

Following an incredible lunch at Sake Japanese Restaurant at The Rocks, I retraced my steps back to the Mercure and out to the airport for my 4pm flight. **IT**

With thanks:

Scott travelled to the Solomon Islands with the assistance of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau, Solomon Airlines and the businesses mentioned.

More info:

Fish, Dive and Snow and Pack ya Bags both offer wholesale packages and travel agents are welcome to contact the SIVB New Zealand Representative at Solomons@tropicsmarketing.com.au



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