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Village Kids, Sasavele © Klaus Obermeyer



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Solomon Islands Dive Festival

Islandtime senior writer Scott Lee visits the Solomon Islands to experience the second annual Solomon Islands Dive Festival.





As an avid diver with years of experience diving in the tropics Scott was amazed at the plethora of adventures available in the relatively unexplored, untouched paradise.

Organised to showcase the magnificent diving opportunities available in the Solomons western province, the festival included three days at Gizo, two days on the live-aboard dive boat *Taka*, and a couple of days at Munda.

Festival attendees had the opportunity to experience some of the top diving sites available and learn the history and culture of these magic islands.

While the Solomons are famous for the Second World War ship and plane wreck dives, the pristine reefs and abundance of sea life make this a very attractive diving destination – and we got to experience a bit of everything during our week.

Another benefit of spending a week at the festival with a group of passionate diving enthusiasts is the shared knowledge we were exposed to. Nightly discussions on diving techniques, safety and fish identification were very informative, as were the stories of worldwide diving opportunities experienced by the festival participants and diving crew. Passionate people sharing their chosen interest are a joy to be around and a week of total immersion (sorry about the pun) with a group of enthusiasts is motivational, as well as fun.

Gizo

Gizo is your typical South Pacific waterfront township. A cluster of rustic commercial buildings line the waterfront street, complimented by the wooden shacks selling fruit, vegetables and fish on the seawall. Children swam and played in the harbour as local water taxis full of passengers, with little free board came and went. Groups of brightly coloured long boats clung to every protrusion from the sea wall and rusty interisland freighters waited their turn to load and unload on the wharf. It was a busy scene but nobody seemed to be in a particular

hurry and the numerous stray dogs only moved to reposition themselves in the shade. Our hotel, the Gizo Hotel, was directly opposite the seawall offering an excellent vantage point to watch the comings and goings. A comfortable three-star property, the Gizo Hotel has a large restaurant built in the traditional style overlooking the action. Complete with swimming pool and private outdoor seating area it's the ideal base when staying in Gizo.

Dive Gizo

Danny and Kerrie started Dive Gizo in 1985 so they have had plenty of time to suss out the best dives and there is certainly plenty to see. They offer over 20 shipwreck, plane wreck and sensational reef dives within 20 minutes boat travel from their base on Gizo waterfront. They are famous for the number of diving sites they offer and the sheer diversity of the diving opportunities.

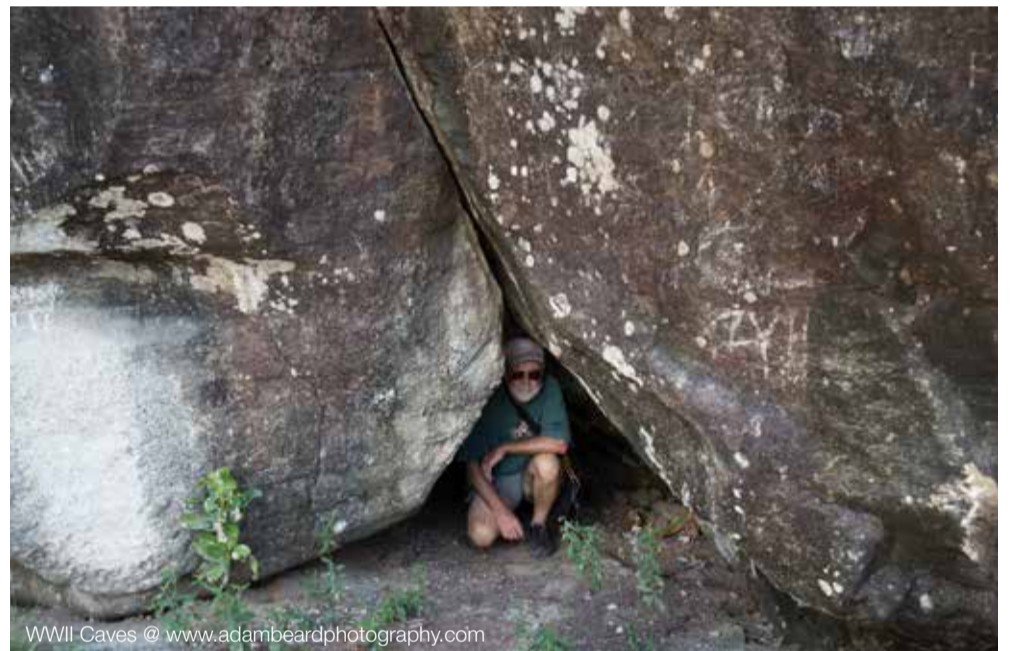
Our first two dives were on the Japanese cargo ship *Toa Maru*, sunk during the ferocious battle for the Solomons during the Second World War. It is a relatively intact 140 metre long wreck which lies between seven and 40 metres deep so there is plenty to see. Typical of the Second World War wrecks it was fun to explore and very accessible. The earthquake and tsunami in 2008 caused the ship's bridge to collapse and that, combined with large holes cut in the hull by salvage operators in the '70s means the lower decks and cargo holds are easily penetrated, with no sense of claustrophobia.

Sake bottles, ammunition and cooking utensils litter the wreck and the surrounding sea floor, and the wreck itself is covered with healthy new coral.

After a sumptuous beach barbeque and a rest on Dive Gizo's private island, Njari, we dived Grand Central Station, just 20 metres off shore. Named for its abundance of fish life, Grand



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Central Station is at the north-western tip of Gizo where the ocean currents meet. It's famous for its prolific fish life – 279 species - it lived up to its name.

On our second day at Gizo we dived the Naru passage and Kennedy Island wall. Both are spectacular dives with very healthy reef systems and an abundance of sea life. Kennedy Island is famous as the island JFK (future president of the USA) hid on while avoiding Japanese capture during the war. It's changed since JFK's day and now boasts a funky open air bar and out door restaurant complete with tame parrot.

Developed for the cruise market, this little gem is set to be a must visit destination.

One To Watch - Njari

Dive Gizo will be developing their private island over the coming year to offer overnight "glamping" style accommodation for couples or small groups. There will be only one or two staff on the island to look after guests so it's pretty much like having an island to yourselves. There are several diving sites surrounding the island so Dive Gizo will be offering diving packages for guests. There is excellent swimming and snorkelling off the beach and all food will be provided. Dive Gizo's private island Njari (pronounced Jarree) should be open in December 2018.

Taka

The Taka is a custom-built live-aboard diving boat accommodating up to 30 guests and 12 crew. With a huge dining and lounge area with large television, dedicated camera area, movie and book library and air-conditioned main saloon, it's got everything you'd expect on an up-market live-aboard. There is a sizeable top deck with hammocks and an expansive outdoor covered seating area. A spacious dive deck, hot showers, toilets, rinse bins, air and nitrox and a water level diving platform make it ideal for diving. The *Taka* is built for stable long range trips allowing them to dive the most remote regions in the Solomons.

Itineraries range from two days to their 10-day signature trip. The crew have just spent three months exploring the outer most islands of the Solomons, discovering many unknown dive sites and wrecks along the way. Longer trips include the Russell Islands, Mborokua (Mary Island) and Marovo Lagoon, the world's finest double barrier lagoon and a protected World heritage site. This area is known for some of the world's most diverse and healthy reefs and WW2 wrecks.



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Dive Munda

Dive Munda is based at Agnes Gateway Hotel on the waterfront at Munda Village. Accommodation ranges from comfortable budget rooms to private bungalows and there is a lively bar and seafood restaurant from which to watch the famous Munda sunsets.

Our first dive at Munda was on a Second World War American Wildcat fighter plane. It was lying on its back in 12 metres of water where it had been since 1943. The aluminium skin and framework were slowly corroding away and corals, anenomes and weed were gradually taking over. Brightly coloured fish darted in and out of the large bullet holes in the fuselage, and schools of golden trevally circled us warily.

We lunched at a private house on the waterfront on a remote island then slipped into the water for our second dive just 20 metres from our lunch spot.

The *Kasi Maru* was another Japanese freighter sunk in the battle for the Solomons. Much of the infrastructure has collapsed giving easy access to much of the wreck, but our divemaster warned us not to penetrate too deeply into the hull as it is becoming unstable. We did, however, enjoy the photographic opportunities on offer as we stuck our heads through portholes and peered through the gloom of the wreck to divers silhouetted in the light from the other side.

That night as part of the festival celebrations we enjoyed a seafood smorgasboard including more crayfish than we could eat.

On our second day in Munda we dived two of their signature sites – Bob's Breakfast (names after Bob's unfortunate mishap after drinking the night before), and Hapi Reef. Both were excellent dives with abundant pelagic fishlife, and the photographers were particularly happy to see three large manta rays at close quarters.

The Last Frontier

Well, not quite, but tourism in the Solomons is still in its infancy. By way of comparison, Fiji attracts nearly 800,000 visitors per year, whereas the Solomons only receive 23,000.

If you have clients who want to get off the beaten track and experience pristine nature while not giving up too many creature comforts, get them to take a look at the Solomons. It's one of those destinations that you want to keep going back to time and again to explore even more remote places.

Final dates for the third Solomon Island Dive Festival will be announced shortly by the SIVB. It will be in October 2018. 



SIDE Master Liveboards Partnership

Solomon Island Dive Expeditions (SIDE) have just announced a partnership with the Master Liveboards Network to expand their operation throughout the Solomon Islands and into Papua New Guinea. Diving enthusiasts will be aware of the custom built *Taka* which has been operating liveaboard cruises in the Solomons since 2013. From January 2018 the *Taka* will begin operations as *The Solomons PNG Master* and a number of new itineraries will be introduced including, exploratory trips in the northern Solomons and Papua New Guinea.

Solomon Islands Discovery Cruise

Master Liveboards have also announced a new Solomon Islands Discovery Cruise which is especially designed to showcase all the amazing adventures available in the Solomons in addition to the diving. With eight days and seven nights aboard the *Taka* the itinerary includes up to two dives or snorkelling trips per day and includes Discover Scuba Diving for those who haven't dived before. It also includes paddleboarding, wildlife tours, historic Second World War tours, cultural visits to schools and villages and much more. These trips would seem ideal for the New Zealand market and would be ideal to combine with a stay at Gizo or Munda for those with plenty of time.

Bookings

Master Liveboards recommend that New Zealand agents work with their local wholesaler, Travel and Co.



Dive Munda Staff © Klaus Obermeyer



Dive Munda Night Dive © Klaus Obermeyer



Beautiful Dive Munda Night Dive © Klaus Obermeyer

Seek the unexplored



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SO SOLOMONS, SO DIFFERENT!