



Hooked on the Solomons ... (from left) a big reward on the end of a fishing line; Fatboys Resort; the paramount chief at Ugele village; Gizo market; motoring across the waters of Papatara Lagoon.

# JFK's castaway island

*John Borthwick* visits the place in the Solomon Islands where the US president sought shelter after the Japanese sank his patrol boat.

In a lifetime of lunches, this one, on a sunny deck overlooking broad Gizo Lagoon, surely must be among my very best. The dish is crayfish fresh from the reef, grilled and lightly spiked with garlic, and chased with a cold local beer.

Between grunts of pleasure, I look across the shimmering waters to a tiny island not far from this gloriously, curiously named resort, Fatboys. "The island used to be called Plum Pudding but now it's Kennedy Island," says Mano, Fatboys' slender manager.

"As in Jack Kennedy?" I ask. Yes. This is the place where John F Kennedy, US Navy lieutenant and 35th US president-to-be, swam ashore with his crew after their patrol boat was sliced in two by the Japanese destroyer, *Amagiri*, on the night of August 2, 1943.

The island isn't much more than 100 metres long. If the warship had not run over PT-109 as

though it were no more than a speed-bump, history might never have paid any attention to this dot amid Gizo's grand waterway.

Kennedy Island is just 15 minutes by speedboat from Ghizo town (yes, same pronunciation but different spelling), the provincial capital of Solomon Islands' Western Province. In 1943, unlike today, this was not tourist-friendly territory. After reaching the island, 26-year-old Kennedy and his crew had to make further marathon swims to find a larger island, Olasana, where they could hide from the Japanese.

We scoot out to Kennedy Island in the Fatboys' runabout. It is a shady and cool but otherwise unremarkable place, where its lone resident, a giant Solomon Islander, is mending his fishing nets.

We travel on, to a nearby sandbar for sundowner drinks – one is never far from a

cold beer in these good islands – where we contemplate the American castaways' fate.

Sympathetic islanders helped them get a message back to their patrol boat base. According to legend, it was carved on a coconut husk. Over another beer, and under a flamboyant sunset sky, we speculate about the type of SOS that JFK might have penned. Was it a Warren Zevon-like memo to Dad: "Send lawyers, guns and money"? Or, Jack being a lad and a Kennedy, too, was it more like, "Marooned on desert isle. Urgent. Send dancing girls."?

Ghizo is a one-hour flight northwest from the Solomons' capital Honiara. En route, you look down on lagoons tinted with hypnotic inks, their turquoise shallows bleeding to unnameable blue depths. The plane lands on an airfield that was first carved out of the coral and jungle some 70 years ago during savage,

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island-by-island battles between the Allies and Nippon.

Ghizo, the third-largest town in the Solomons, is still reminiscent of those days, with its waterfront main street lined with Chinese provision stores, warehouses, a truly ancient Quonset hut and open-air markets. Ghizo's rambunctious watering holes, including the PT-109 Bar and the Gizo Hotel, could have come straight from the set of the old Pacific War television series, *McHale's Navy*.

Gizo Lagoon and its neighbour, Vonavona, are sprawling expanses of islands and inlets, villages, reefs, wartime wrecks (great for diving) and the occasional resort. A tanned bloke meets me at the pier with a runabout, and an hour of lagoon time later ▶



PICTURES: JOHN BORTHWICK





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A dot in the Pacific ... Kennedy Island where JFK sought refuge (left); a cairn at Skull Island provides a stark reminder of headhunters and cannibals.

I step on to the jetty of the lovely Hapolo Zipu Resort on Lola Island. The walls of my bungalow are woven, and the roof is sturdily thatched palm, but there is also electricity, a good chef and even WiFi.

Next day, we head to tiny Skull Island that is alive, so to speak, with memories of headhunters and cannibals. The jungle shades a large coral cairn that's studded with a dozen human skulls, of honoured ancestral chiefs and their less fortunate former enemies. (Early European missionaries who managed to evade the traditional, terminal send-off dispensed here to most outsiders – including missionaries – eventually converted these islands to Christianity, which remains the predominant faith today.)

It's much more peaceful at Ugehe village on Rendova Island, where they've been expecting us. Its folk have mounted an extraordinary cultural display. The paramount chief, dressed in warrior garb, acts out a confrontational, "friend-or-foe?" greeting and then, as we walk through the long village, the women, men and youngsters of Ugehe demonstrate in an impeccably coordinated sequence the way they cook, weave palm-frond structures, dance, make toys, carve bowls and play music on a giant panpipe "organ". In all, it's a spectacular progressive feast of authentic, Solomons' *kastom* life.

The first European explorer in the Solomons was Spaniard Álvaro de Mendaña, who landed on Guadalcanal Island in 1568. Fable

has it that a local chief handed him a golden egg. The Spaniards thought that this was the legendary King Solomon's mine. Their gold fever, however, cooled rapidly when they found almost no more of the stuff. The would-be conquistadors soon sailed off, leaving little to mark their visit but the islands' enduring, biblical name.

As probably the most overlooked, or under-sung, major archipelago in the Pacific, "the Sollys" are Melanesia with a real difference. For the visitor, discovering them is akin to finding a brilliant new beach right at your backdoor – one that was always there. ■

 **Air Niugini flies from Port Moresby to Honiara three times a week. See [airniugini.com.pg](http://airniugini.com.pg).**



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Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau: [visitsolomons.com.sb](http://visitsolomons.com.sb). Fatboys Resort: [fatboys@solomon.com.sb](mailto:fatboys@solomon.com.sb). Zipolo Habu Resort: [zipolo@solomon.com.sb](mailto:zipolo@solomon.com.sb).

**IN GIZO** Dive Gizo can arrange diving, fishing and tours to World War 2 sites. See [divegizo.com](http://divegizo.com).

**WHEN TO GO** May until early December; the best time is "winter", June to mid-September.

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