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Tested: Surfing The Solomon Islands

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With only 23,000 visitors a year, the Solomon Islands is definitely a travel spot off the beaten track, and one where you can find a lot of potential for great waves amongst its hundreds of surfable islands. Doug Lees managed to find waves, feed on fresh fish and even sneak in a few cold beers.



The flight from Brisbane to Honiara is only three hours, but walking out of the airport terminal you are immediately aware you are somewhere different. The locals greet you with big grins stained red with betel juice and the outside food court is a row of street vendors selling local produce beside the road. The betel nut stand is where all of the activity is centred and looks like a Solomon Island version of a coffee shop, with a bunch of local men gathered around the stand discussing the important news of the day. The fish stand stallholder has a giant fish head cooking in the centre of her BBQ and nearby cigarettes are being sold individually.

The walk from the international to domestic terminal is short, and it's here we are booked on a local flight. Each passenger is individually weighed, then again with their luggage, as the planes are small and



decided which passengers had to go, but the two local boys removed seemed to be in good spirits when they were told to come back tomorrow.

As I wait to board the plane, there is a large group of people outside the waiting area watching the plane be unloaded from its previous journey. The group is around 25 to 30 elderly villagers who as a group are very solemn, and all anxiously watch every bag removed from the plane. They are clearly waiting for something or someone of importance. Then I see a small coffin being removed and placed on a baggage trolley. In the background I hear a wail from a woman. I'm not sure where to look while this immensely personal event plays out in front of me as I wait to board the plane. I bow my head and look away. At the same time, my surfboard is being loaded onto the flight, which I am being told has to leave now for it to be able to land whilst there is still daylight. Time to go.



An arrival to remember

It's quite an adventure to fly into Suavanao Airport and land on the small grass airstrip cut out of the surrounding jungle. Barefoot baggage handlers unload our surfboards and gear as local people surround the plane, looking for boxes of produce or supplies that the village had been waiting for. Children play and two dogs race each other along the grass. It clearly is a fun activity to be a part of for the afternoon. The water is less than 20 metres from the plane. I waded out and jump inside a boat which takes us from the main island of Santa Isabel to the small island of Papatara Faa Island, where the resort Papatara sits.

Papatara is a small surf and fishing resort built and run by Australians Peter and Margie Blanche. The resort sits on a beautiful sandy beach facing the main island of Santa Isabel, and is protected from the ocean winds. On the seaward side of the island sits several good surf breaks including Anchovies, PT's, and Kumma's. There are several more breaks around the reef directly outside Papatara, and each one will have its day depending on winds, swell direction and tides.



paradise. The Blanchets are a fascinating couple and worthy of the night here just to meet them. Each night they share their stories around the bar on the history of the area and the adventures of living here.

The accommodation is made up of timber bungalows that all look onto the beach, connected by a timber path to the main bar and dining hut. After breakfast, one of the local boatmen would take us in a speedboat to check the conditions and look for surf. All the main breaks are within an easy ten-minute boat drive from Papatutura.



Any waves?

The main wave we surfed each day was Anchovies, a right-hand reef break very close to Papatutura. We only surfed Anchovies on a small swell, so it was a mix of shifting peaks along the reef, but you could see where an end barrel section would be very interesting with a little more swell. The photos I have seen shows Anchovies as a world class wave, so there's hope yet. The other spot we surfed was PT's, another right-hander with an easy take-off and mellow down-the-line section.

Driving the boat along the reef each day, you could see plenty of options for waves all along this stretch of coast. Our boat driver pointed out spots in the reef where he has surfed before. Swell forecasts are still a very new information tool in this part of the world, so it's more a matter of go and have a look to see where to best waves will be each day.



Fresh fish and Fat Boys

Flying north-west of Honiara to the town of Gizo we arrive at the gateway for surfing the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. Gizo is one of the larger towns in the Solomon Islands with a wealth of great diving and fishing locations nearby. Gizo also has easy access to two of the best waves in the region, Paelonghi – a fast and hollow right-hander – and Titiana’s, a long and mellow left. Both waves break on reefs sitting just off local villages and can be reached by paddling from the beach.

It’s a short boat ride from Gizo to our accommodation at Fat Boys Resort, a small boutique resort on the nearby island of Babanga. Fat Boys comprises five bungalows that sit on the water’s edge with spectacular views over the ocean. In front of the bungalows, a long wooden jetty leads out to the bar and restaurant. It’s here that we spend each morning planning our surf trips and each evening telling the adventures of the day. A local village on the island near the resort provides a daily supply of fresh fish and crayfish.

Fat Boys has a great set-up for any traveller. The bar, restaurant and jetty sit above a beautiful water world of tropical fish, coral and cruising reef sharks and the view across to the neighbouring islands is spectacular. Less than five minutes from Fat Boys is Kennedy Island, the island where US President John F Kennedy was stranded after a Japanese attack during World War II.



The local touch

There is a small local surfing population that regularly surf the nearby breaks in Gizo. They are friendly and happy to share a wave with other surfers, and their surfboards are normally discarded equipment from travelling surfers. On the boat ride up the coast you will often also see children from the local villages playing and surfing the shore breaks closer to town on small pieces of timber or whatever materials they can find.

Jeremy and Shemiah Baea, talented local surfers and guides, live on one of the smaller islands outside Gizo. By small, I mean their house is virtually the only house on the island. The daily commute into town or to go surfing is by boat, and with such a vast amount of time each day on the water they have an intimate knowledge of the surf in this region.

During my stay there was very little swell on offer, so I did not get to surf these waves on great days, however, when I did surf Paelonghi you could clearly see the potential. Paelonghi is a fast right hander that wraps around the reef, providing a couple of nice little barrel sections. Looking at photos from previous trips, it looks like a wave definitely worth going back for. You just need to be lucky enough to be there with the right swell.

For the final night of our stay, our host Mike organised farewell sunset drinks on a small nearby island. We packed the boat with an Eski of SolBrew, and headed out to a small strip of sand in the middle of bay to watch the sun set. It was a surreal moment as our group of four drank beers, sat on deck chairs and watched the sun set and the island sink with the incoming tide. I walked along the water's edge knee deep and a small reef shark swam by me like a domestic cat back home looking for a food scrap or easy meal. I'm so relaxed that I just watched the shark swim by me before walking back to the sand. The sun set and the sky was awash with stars. There was total darkness on the island and the only lights were from the villages across the bay. Time to head home in the boat. Just another day in the Solomon Islands.



Why Go?

If you are looking for a new surfing destination without anyone else in the line-up then the Solomon Islands could be the place for your next surf trip. With a flight time from Brisbane under 3 x hours it's a fast flight to a truly remote and untouched part of the Pacific with beautiful warm water and friendly locals.

What you'll tell your mates

You will feel like you have just visited one of the most isolated places in the Pacific. A place where local villages still function as they have traditionally for hundreds of years and a trip well off the normal tourist routes.

Lowlights

Malaria can be a problem in this part of the world, so you will need to make sure that you take anti malaria pills for the duration of the trip.

When To Go

The best season for waves is between November and April.

Don't Forget To Pack...

Plenty of sunscreen, as it gets very hot over there.

Make Sure You...

If you are a diver, make sure you allow yourself some time to check out the many dive locations featuring sunken battleships along the islands. Also make sure you brush up on your World War 2 history as Guadalcanal was home to some of the biggest and most important battles for control of the Pacific in 1942 between the Japanese and American forces. The movie "The Thin Red Line" was based on the battle for the airport in Honiara, and this will be the airport in which you land.

What Exactly Is It?

The Solomon Islands is a group of islands that sit just to the north-east of Australia and just to the east of Papua New Guinea. The island chain consists of six large islands and over 900 smaller islands, with both the northern and western sides of the coastline open to swell. Travelling between each island is either by boat or light aircraft. Flying is the fastest way to get around. There is a mix of both grass and concrete airstrips on all the major islands. While English is the official language of the Solomon Islands, there are 70 local languages spoken throughout the different islands and only a small proportion of the islanders speak English. The major spoken language is Pijin.



Australians Peter and Margie Blanche who own, built and run small surf and fishing resort Papatara.

The writer would like to thank *Solomon Airlines, Papatara, Fatboys Resort, and the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau* for making this trip and feature possible.

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Arthur Lloyd • 3 days ago

Well written and informative article. I would like to travel there and stay for a week in our winter time. I do not surf these days just a bit of body surfing when I get the chance. I have an interest in military history and as stated in the article 1 of the most important battles of ww2 was fought by American and Japanese forces at Guadalcanal especially around Henderson Air Field Think



lyle → Arthur Lloyd • 3 days ago

Go to Gizo

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Nick → Arthur Lloyd • 3 days ago

Contact go tours travel, they are the Solomons travel experts and will look after you.

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Lizzie Me → Arthur Lloyd • 2 days ago

There's a great little military museum in Munda.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



lyle • 3 days ago

Surfed there in the early 80's when most locals had never seen a surfboard before.

Some classic waves to be had.

Great experience, great people

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Woof41 • 3 days ago

Is the area sharky? Man eater pack sharks like reunion at all?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Doug Lees → Woof41 • 2 days ago

Good question. I did not find the Solomon's Islands a sharky area. No one there seemed to be really concerned about sharks for diving or surfing.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Lizzie Me → Doug Lees • 2 days ago

Crocs though!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Woof41 → Lizzie Me • 2 days ago

Really? I'm Not going to google it Lizzie.

Have you been in that area.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Lizzie Me → Woof41 • 2 days ago

Yeah, lived there for two years. It's really only around the Western Province you need to think about them, but it is a good idea to ask the locals what the go is before you paddle out... If you're not vego, you can sometimes find them on the menu at the Gizo hotel :-)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Woof41 → Lizzie Me • 2 days ago

OK now I'm Googling! Seems as though the crocs are seriously a



Lighting, shark or the crocodile.?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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