

Pure Solomon simplicity



VonoVonoLagoon©CarolineGladstone

By Caroline Gladstone

SAERAGI Beach is touted as the most beautiful in the Solomon Islands. A hand-made canvas sign flapping from a thatched hut tells me so. It's hard to argue with that as I crunch across the sand to the shoreline and dive beneath the emerald water, although I dare say there are some pretty gorgeous beaches edging this 990-odd island archipelago.

We arrive by boat and are met by owner Silvia, while eight little children watch on, shyly half-hidden behind palm trees. Silvia, who will also rustle up lunch and book you into one of the two cottages if you wish, says we are welcome to swim and laze about.

The water is deliciously cool and it's a cue for the kids to discard their shyness and join us for a swim. We snorkel, hand the masks over to the kids and play all sorts of games

as the little ones chase us about.

Later when I think of all the experiences I have during a week in the Solomons, from eating lobster on the deck of my resort, to chasing dolphins in a boat and watching sunsets so gorgeous they verge on the spiritual, this is my favourite. When we wave goodbye and the kids resume swinging in a hammock, I kick myself for not having brought anything - some pens, books, a few toys or even lollies - but then realise it's perfect just the way it is.

The Solomon Islands are like that - simple, unspoiled and just right.

Saeragi is on the island of Gizo in the Western Province, one of the nine provinces of the Solomon Islands and itself made up of innumerable islands, big and small, along with a couple of airstrips. And while this region is the most visited in the country beyond the capital Honiara and the main island of Guadalcanal, I rarely see more

than a handful of travellers in any given day. Whizzing about on a boat between islands on the glassy Vono Vono lagoon, we see more dolphins than people.

‘The experience takes me back to a simpler time; a time of my youth. When holidays were happy, no frills affairs when a beach, a good meal and mucking about in boats was sheer heaven’

We're staying a Fatboys Resort, on Mbabanga Island, one of the more



established in the region which takes its name from Dickens' 'The Pickwick Papers', where a character Joe the Fatboy liked to eat, drink and fall asleep. The overwater restaurant and bar contains a pool table and hammocks, and a jetty leads to a clutch of bungalows on the shore. From my balcony I have a perfect view of Kennedy Island (named after President Kennedy who heroically swam there in 1943 after his patrol boat was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer) and to the wonderful Kolombaranga Island, shaped like a sleeping woman, behind it.

Life is similarly lazy at Fatboys – there's snorkeling off the jetty, cold beers in the fridge and crayfish on the menu. Boats take surfers to nearby reef breaks, while picnic lunches and sundown drinks are set up on tiny sand spits in the middle of nowhere.

Sanbis Resort, also on Mbabanga Island, is equally soporific with the added

attraction of a wood-fired pizza oven and a day spa offering treats like a lomi-lomi massage. A few clicks down the lagoon is Oravae Cottage where guests can take the entire three bungalows (including a tree house) and sit on the terrace and watch dugongs swim by. These three upmarket establishments, together with a smattering of mum-and-dad clean-and-tidy homestays and a hotel or two in Gizo town (the second largest town after Honiara) is what passes for tourism in the Solomons.

The experience takes me back to a simpler time; a time of my youth. When holidays were happy, no frills affairs when a beach, a good meal and mucking about in boats was sheer heaven.

My short stay is split between the Gizo region and Guadalcanal, the island which not only contains the capital but is etched in history as the location of one of the bloodiest, and decisive, battles of World War II.

From Honiara we drive west to Vilu Beach, from where we take a boat across Iron Bottom Sound to Savo Island. All three locations played a huge part in the Guadalcanal Battle that raged in this otherwise peaceful patch from August 1942 until February 1943. Today Vilu Beach contains an open air museum littered with the relics of the battle - tanks, aircraft parts and even hundreds of Coca Cola bottles, while Iron Bottom Sound is so named for the dozens of sunken battleships that rest beneath its waves, including the HMAS Canberra.

All is peaceful on Savo Island where our half-day tour includes a concert of harmonious singing and a tasty lunch of the freshest pineapple, chicken and lobster. After lunch a few of us climb into hammocks, others have a swim and stroll along the beach. This is the Solomon Islands and the living is easy.

VISITOR INCREASE EXPECTED

THE Solomon Islands is expected to see a nine per cent increase in tourism arrivals in 2016 across all markets compared with the previous year once the final figures are recorded.

Around 25,000 international tourists visit the islands annually, with the majority (or 66 per cent) coming from Australia, followed by the US and New Zealand.

Minister for Culture and Tourism Bartholomew Parapolo told travelBulletin at a recent travel mart in Honiara that he could not over-emphasise the importance of Australia and New Zealand to the development of tourism in the Solomon Islands.

Several delegates at the travel mart, such as Infinity Holidays executive Deborah Francesca, had never visited the country before and were impressed with the beauty of the Gizo region and keen to include a couple of the better known resorts in their forthcoming produce range.

New upmarket B&Bs and self-contained properties have recently opened in the western province including Evis Resort on the island of Nggatirana, which is a designated



15-hectare conservation area, as well as a single suite called the Golden Cowie, designed for honeymooners on a tiny island not far from the well-known Fatboys Resort. Golden Cowie is the latest development by the Kennedy family – two brothers who own various properties in West Province including Fatboys and the Gizo Hotel.

Small resorts, with less than 10 bungalows, and homestays are the backbone of the Solomon Islands' tourism industry. While many may not be in wholesaler brochures most are accessible through the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (SIVB) website.

These small thatched resorts dotted on near-deserted lagoons are the reason why the country is still considered a "best kept secret", Minister Parapolo told wholesalers. SIVB chairman Wilson Ne'e said the Solomons had experiences that other countries could not provide and it was time to move out of the mindset that selling the country was a hard task.

Ne'e said he expected 2017 would also reap a similar nine per cent increase, with many visitors due to take part in the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal commemorative events planned for August.

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Communal, clan and family ties remain strong with the existence of the Wantok system. A key part of the culture, Wantok means people from the same language group who are blood relatives and part of the extended family support and assist one another.

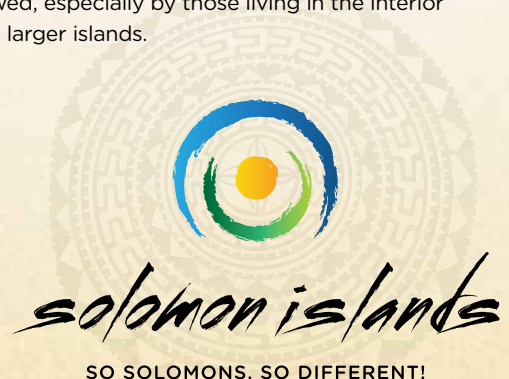
Be mesmerized by the village life which remains much as it has been for centuries. Kastom, the Pidgin term for custom, refers to traditional beliefs and land ownership. Despite the predominance of devout Christians, traditional practices are still being followed, especially by those living in the interior of the country's larger islands.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau Head Office
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www.visitsolomons.com.sb

 Visit Solomon Islands





CRUISING FORWARD

THE appeal of the Solomon Islands as a cruise destination continues to grow with 17 individual ship visits scheduled for 2017, which are expected to bring just over 13,000 visitors to the capital Honiara and a handful of small islands.

This year will also see more luxury cruise ships visiting the archipelago including Crystal Symphony, a mid-size five-star vessel in the Crystal Cruises fleet, and the boutique ship Paul Gauguin, the latter making two separate visits to the islands in May and June.

Last year P&O Cruises made history when its 1,500-passenger Pacific Eden became the largest cruise ship to ever visit Gizo, a region in western province set on the Vono Vono lagoon. It was also the first vessel to dock at the new Honiara wharf, during two 10-night cruises that also visited New Guinea.

This year P&O has upped the ante with three scheduled cruises (all round-trips from Cairns in September and October), bringing a total of 4,500 passengers to the region.

Sister line Princess Cruises will be back in 2017, operating three cruises on the 2,000-passenger vessel Sun Princess, departing from Sydney and Brisbane, and calling at Honiara.

Carnival Australia, owner of P&O and Princess, said a recent economic impact report it commissioned with the Australian Government and the World Bank found that cruise tourism in the Solomon Islands had the potential to grow five-fold from the \$600,000 it currently generated to around \$3.3 million by the end of 2017.

Both these lines have added Solomon Islands ports to their already-established Papua New Guinea itineraries. But while P&O has devised a range of shore excursions in Gizo and Honiara, Princess has not organised shore excursions for its day-long visit to Honiara. Passengers are given information on the port and can make arrangements for tours with local operators at the wharf.

This year will also see more visits by expedition and small luxury vessels as well as more calls at remote islands. Ponant Cruises' 264-passenger ship L'Austral has scheduled two cruises with calls at islands including Mbike (Florida group), Njari (Gizo area) and at Vanikoro in the far-flung Santa Cruz group of islands, where explorer La Perouse was shipwrecked in the late 18th century.

Expedition vessel Caledonian Sky will double its presence in the region with two cruises (in February and September), also visiting remote islands including Santa Ana, Vanikoro and nearby Tikopia.

Five-star ship Silver Discoverer (Silversea Cruises) will operate three cruises in October. The 120-passenger ship will call at Mbike Island, Utupua and Marova Lagoon on seven and 14-night voyages, two of which are already sold out.

Also new is a cruise chartered by World Expeditions on the 50-passenger ship Spirit of Enderby where acclaimed scientist Tim Flannery will lead adventurers on a 14-day voyage in October through the Choiseul, New Georgia and Santa Isabel island groups.

Uncover the secrets of the Solomon Islands

An array of unique experiences exist here, from cultural visits through to marine exploration; dazzling sunsets to romantic getaways - there's something for every style of traveller.

FALL IN LOVE

FOR newlyweds or those just looking for a romantic private island getaway, a stay at the Tavanipupu Island Resort is a paradise just waiting to be uncovered.

Situated in Marau Sound, Tavanipupu Resort is built on the site of a former coconut plantation and is surrounded by a crystal lagoon and vivid tropical foliage.

The private retreat is a 25-minute plane ride away from capital Honiara and features just 10 bungalows, meaning it remains quiet and serene throughout the year.

CLIMB A SEMI EXTINCT VOLCANO

FOR active travellers, a climb up to Kolombangara - an almost perfect cone shaped volcano - comes highly recommended.

Located in the western province, the two-day trek to the summit consists of explorations of the rainforest, birdwatching, river walking, swimming and rugged cloud-forest walks.

The 1,770-metre hike to the summit finishes at the awe-inspiring crater rim, giving walkers the chance to take in the picturesque views.

EMBARK ON A KAYAKING ADVENTURE

GET back to nature and enjoy a calming paddle through crystalline waters at Marovo Lagoon.

This picturesque spot is surrounded by endless beaches and forests, while the still waters make for the perfect location to observe sealife such as turtles, dolphins and rays in their natural habitat.

As the waters are so clear here, many say the experience of kayaking at Marovo is akin to looking straight through a glass bottom boat.

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