

A wooden boat with blue paint on the water under a blue sky with clouds. The boat is in the foreground, and the water is a deep blue. The sky is a lighter blue with some white clouds. The overall scene is serene and peaceful.

THE King's Gold

BY CAROLINE GLADSTONE

*Named after biblical King Solomon,
these islands deliver so much more than treasure.*



It's a rocky ride over to Savo Island, the hunk of land I'd seen earlier from my Honiara hotel balcony.

Although a volcanic island that continues to let off steam, there hasn't been an eruption on Savo since somewhere between 1837 and 1850; no-one really knows. Just 14 kilometres north-west of the main island of Guadalcanal, it is one of the 990-odd that make up the Solomon Islands' archipelago and the easiest to get to.

If you don't mind a few bumps on a day when the wind is up, then the 20-minute trip has lots of diversions – shoals of flying fish leaping out of the water and as we draw closer, little kids paddling along in dug-out canoes.

I'm intrigued by our boatman, who looks like a member of a reggae band – the cool sunglasses, Rasta hairstyle and bright T-shirt fit the bill.

Savo Island is an ideal day-trip from Honiara, the capital. Once clear of the city and its three roundabouts, we're soon whizzing past rural villages with roadside stalls selling hot-grilled chicken and betel nut on the one main island road.

From Vila Beach we jump aboard a 'banana boat' – a red-and-blue painted timber vessel built for about four, and are on our way.

One needs to be on an organised tour to visit Savo Island. Permission is needed to land due to 'kastom' (Pijin for custom), which is the traditional way of doing things and central to village life. As we have the all-clear, two little island girls greet us and present us with leis and coconut drinks.

A few hammocks are strung between palm trees and thatched picnic huts are only metres from the water's edge. While lunch is being rustled up, we head off with guide Emmanuel to look at the village and then watch a sing-sing from outdoor benches, which thankfully are positioned out of the blazing sun. As the name suggests, sing-sings are performances involving simultaneous singing and dancing (and a bit of spear-wielding to frighten the tourists).

Lunch is a delicious spread of salads, sizzling chicken and fried fish, tropical fruits and, of course, coconut. Those who want to walk to the volcano have two options – a three-hour return trek from the beach landing, or a boat ride followed by an easy 40-minute walk.

Instead we board the banana boat and zoom along the island's southern shore to the warm waters where the run-off from the island's hot springs enters the ocean. This natural Jacuzzi is loved by dolphins and is something of a nursery for the young ones who love to frolic in the tepid waters. Within no time our boatman spots them and we give chase; there are at least a couple of dozen and a few venture closer to shoot the bow waves and perform aerial gymnastics.

It is a calmer ride back to the 'mainland', or Guadalcanal Island to be precise, skimming smoothly across Iron Bottom Sound.

These names are etched in history as the locations of some of the bloodiest fighting of World War II. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal (which raged from 7 August, 1942 until 9 February, 1943) and several commemorations are planned. Iron Bottom Sound is aptly named – beneath it lie the wrecks of dozens of warships, Allied and Japanese, including the *HMAS Canberra*, that sunk two days after hostilities began.

Some of the rusting wrecks are visible from the beaches of Guadalcanal, while the nearby Vilu Museum is a must for military enthusiasts for its vast open-air collection of rusting tanks, aircraft parts, GI helmets and hundreds of Coca-Cola bottles.

Opening image: Boy in dug out canoe.

Below: Children jumping into the lagoon against the backdrop of a stunning sunset.

Clockwise from top right: Remote resort, photo by Franco Banfi; Skull Island; and lobster salad dinner at Fatboys Resort, Gizo, Western Province.





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An hour’s flight from Honiara takes us to the Western Province and the country’s second largest town, Gizo. With dozens of islands, including coral cays, sand spits and large sometimes-active volcanic isles, the province is one of the most popular with travellers, be they divers, surfers, WWII buffs and those who just want to laze about in hammocks, sample the excellent Solbrew and dine on fresh lobster.

And this is where the best of the country’s rustic bungalow accommodation is found, just a short boat ride from the two airstrips at Gizo and Munda.

From my balcony at the popular Fatboys Resort, on Mbabanga Island, I can see across Vono Vono Lagoon to Kennedy Island, a tiny forested cay strangely devoid of coconut trees. Once called Plum Pudding Island, but renamed in honour of President John F Kennedy, it has legendary status with war buffs and tourists, particularly Americans. It was to here that the then Lieutenant Kennedy swam in August 1943 after his patrol boat (PT109) was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer. The subsequent heroic tale of survival, which involved Kennedy dragging an injured crewman to safety



to the island, some 5.5 kilometres away, by the man’s life-vest strap clenched between Kennedy’s teeth, has been told over the decades in book and film and is depicted on new information boards on the little island.

Coincidentally, the island is leased by an Australian Kennedy family (no relation) who have other holdings in the region including Fatboys, the Gizo Hotel and a new honeymoon retreat called Golden Cowrie. Day-trippers and cruise ship passengers arrive at Kennedy on organised tours, while anyone with a small boat is free to land.

Another idyllic resort on Mbabanga Island is Sanbis, open to visitors who want a drink or meal in the overwater restaurant



Left: Snorkelling and diving are favourite pursuits.

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which specialises in pizza. Beyond a long jetty is a clutch of little bungalows all with private bathrooms and views over the lagoon.

Just a few kilometres away is Oravae Cottage, set on one of three islets owned by Solomon Islander Patson and his Australian wife Naomi. A former British police officer, Patson bought the trio of islands for nine pounds and six pence back in the 1960s when the country was a British protectorate. Today Oravae Cottage, which has picked up awards for its beach hut ambience, is a three-bungalow complex. Guests have nothing to do but kick back, swim and snorkel (and look out for the occasional dugong which Naomi says swim by), as all meals are prepared by the family and delivered right to the guests’ bungalow.

A highlight of our trip to the Western Province is a swim at Saeraghi Beach on Ghizo Island, self-proclaimed as the best beach in the Solomon Islands. It is hard to argue with the claim (proudly boasted from a canvas sign flapping in the breeze) as the water is a perfect shade of emerald, but the treat is the little kids who join us for a dip and a spot of snorkelling.

A 34-minute flight east of Gizo is Munda, a nondescript township that provides access to a handful of pretty islets where homestays and eco-lodges offer a glimpse of authentic island life. The Tetepare Island Eco Lodge relies purely on solar energy, while at Zipolo Habu Resort on Lola Island there’s a choice of three styles of bungalow depending on how much comfort one wants. The deluxe bungalow provides 24 hours of electricity and all the mod-cons, while semi-deluxe and traditional balconies take the ‘comforts’ down a notch or

two; all have a classic South Seas design and are set on the VonoVono Lagoon. Most itineraries in the Munda region include a visit to Skull Island, where it is essential to be escorted by a tour guide who will conduct a spirit-cleansing ceremony before anyone steps ashore. Stories abound about unlucky travellers who jumped off their boats before the ceremony began and were struck down with stomach illnesses and fever.

With hundreds of human skulls packed into coral shrines and caves, from the remains of the important people – the Big Men – at the very top, to the slaves at the bottom of the pile, it’s no wonder locals want to make peace with the spirits before entering this resting ground.

A week in the Solomon Islands only scratches the surface of this archipelago that stretches for some 28,000 square kilometres between New Guinea and Vanuatu.

One way to see several remote islands in comfort is to take an expedition cruise.

Last year I called at Santa Ana island, way off in the east at the tip of San Cristobel, aboard Silverseas’ ship, *Silver Discoverer*. We were treated to a mock-ferocious welcome as our contingent of just 36 passengers landed on the beach in Zodiacs. A sing-sing and village tour ensued and elder statesman Jacob, a retired customs and immigration officer, entertained us with tales of island life.

There is so much to like about the Sollies, as I come to call the islands after a few days. In 1568 Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana, named them after the Biblical King Solomon who was not only wise but hugely wealthy. Mendana hoped to find the King’s legendary gold mines. He didn’t.

But with so many beautiful beaches, lagoons and coral

Photography by Caroline Gladstone & Kirkland Photography.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Solomon Airlines flies direct from Sydney and Brisbane to Honiara, with connections from Honiara to various cities including Gizo. flysolomons.com

WHERE TO STAY

- Sanbis: sanbisresort.com
- Oravae Cottage: oravaecottage.com
- Fatboys: solomonislandsfatboys.com.au
- The Heritage Park Hotel Honiara: www.heritageparkhotel.com.sb

WHEN TO GO:

From late May until early December although the best time is the dry winter season between June and mid-September. Temperatures range between 26-32°C year-round, and water temperature is a year-round 28-29°C.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau: visitsolomons.com.sb



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Experience a culture, rich with traditional customs, art, dance and the iconic sound of the panpipe music of 'Are Are'.

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

PO Box 5211, Mendana Avenue, Honiara, Solomon Islands

call 677 22442 or email info@sivb.com.sb

www.visitsolomons.com.sb

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