

An aerial photograph of a tropical island in the Solomon Islands. The island is a narrow strip of land with a white sand beach and lush green vegetation. The surrounding water is a vibrant turquoise color, showing the shallow reef flat and the deeper blue of the open ocean. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall scene is idyllic and beautiful.

In search of Solomon's gold

IT'S THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF
THE GLITTERING SOUTH PACIFIC
ISLANDS. WE GO ON A MISSION TO
UNCOVER THE SOLOMON ISLANDS'
BOUNTY OF BEAUTY

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There's a quick flick of a silvery tail, a spray as slick scales defeat me, then all of a sudden my hands find grip and I'm holding a gleaming, rainbow-hued parrotfish aloft.

It's a curious feeling catching fish with just your bare hands. No rod, no net, nothing but the sun beating down, burning perfect swimsuit lines onto my back as an unwanted souvenir, as it later turns out. I pick my way through a stupefied, lazily drifting school of fish and place my quarry in a waiting dugout canoe.

For fishermen in the Solomon Islands, this is a tradition that dates back generations. I've spent the best part of two hours off the island of Mbikiki watching them encircle complacent fish with a thick green vine the length of a school oval. The men are sombre despite the idyllic conditions. Koarau, as it's known in the local language, occurs only during special occasions such as a death or homecoming in the village.

Slowly, painstakingly, the circle of men tightens. A green powder made of dried vines, sand, and in my imagination, another mystical ingredient, is flung into the water. Minutes pass and then it's as if last drinks have been called as hundreds of fish begin to drunkenly weave their way up to the surface, primed for plucking from the crystal clear water.

This is the moment that makes me think that of the often polished and preened South Pacific family, the Solomon Islands may well be the shy little sister, quietly coming of age.

Slightly bashful but growing increasingly confident in her beauty and charm, this collection of 992 tropical islands lies just a hop, skip and three-hour jump from Brisbane, yet a million miles away from hordes of camera-toting tourists.

Ask travellers if they know the Solomon Islands and you might be met with a shake of the head. But that's sure to change as the colour, culture and remembrance of an embattled past sets it apart from its flashier island siblings.

From the bustling capital of Honiara to the sparkling Western province renowned for stellar fishing and world-class dive spots, one thing that binds the country is the sense of history that hangs in the air.

Even for non-history buffs, trying to comprehend the Japanese invasion of Guadalcanal in 1942 and the subsequent six-month liberation battle by combined Australian and American forces in such picturesque surrounds strikes a chord.

Then there's the made-for-Hollywood wartime heroics of a pre-Presidential John F. Kennedy after his cruiser PT 109 was sunk by a Japanese destroyer in 1943. Towing a crewmate, using his teeth no less, to a deserted island, Kennedy and his men were saved after a few days. Their rescue beacon? A SOS inscribed coconut husk, which Kennedy later used as a paperweight in the Oval Office.

With stories such as these, it's easy to see how memories of the past have infiltrated their way into every aspect of island life. Driving past the manicured greens of the 18-hole Honiara Golf Course, the mind boggles imagining its previous incarnation as the Fighter 2 airstrip, blaring with noise and fumes from US fighter planes.

A short way out of Honiara, decaying air and sea relics rest quietly at the Vilu War Museum. Its lush garden, carpeted with bright green clover and serenely shaded by cacao trees, creates a military nursing home of sorts. Here, an elderly Grumman F4F Wildcat, its joints rusty with age, sits alongside a battered P400 Cobra, while bright pink ginger plants cheerily sprout from holes in a derelict Japanese submarine piece.

But you shouldn't imagine the Solomons as a place only steeped in the history of others.

A charming mix of old and new sees many modern houses keep a traditional outdoor kitchen even today, because some things simply taste better cooked over hot stones, the locals will tell you. Unsurprisingly, food on the islands is delicious. Fresh, meaty, seafood is expertly prepared, and these people are serious starch lovers. No meal is complete without white sweet potato or cassava. Bananas are a staple, which is lucky, considering there are a whopping 118 varieties on the island.

Traditional shell and feather money is still in use. Our guide, Stella, excitedly tells of her nephew cobbling together a dowry for his beloved – the princely sum of \$25,000 Solomon dollars (\$4350), along with 25 strings of shell money, and



10 cartons each of noodles, rice and canned tuna.

The old ways still command respect, and Skull Island, located in Munda, near the mouth of the Vona Vona lagoon is no exception. Home to eerily grinning skulls of Roviana chiefs and telling tales of brutal headhunting days past, I'd been warned of the island's powers. Dare to set foot before a local has gone ahead and cleared the way and a terrible fate – if the most recent occasion is to be believed, a gut-churning, vomit-inducing illness – will befall you. Needless to say, I sit patiently in the boat until given the all clear.

For those seeking their thrills in other ways, the Solomons' warm waters are the perfect playground. Not far from Skull Island, World War II wrecks such as the Kashi Maru, a Japanese freighter, as well as numerous sunken bombers and fighters make for excellent diving. Reef sharks, hammerheads, dolphins, rays, lobsters and turtles also patrol the waters while Mushroom Island is perched on an extinct volcano and home to even more big fish action.

If eating lobster is more your sport – an exercise I gloriously and gluttonously excel at by

Where to stay



HONIARA

Located on the site of the former Governor General's residence and boasting five acres of beachfront gardens, the Heritage Park Hotel (heritageparkhotel.com.sb) combines island charm with all the luxuries. A favourite for visiting dignitaries, including Prince William and Kate who stayed during their 2012 South Pacific tour.

Also consider: King Solomon Hotel (kingsolomonhotel.info), Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel (kitanomendana.com/en) and the Pacific Casino Hotel (pacificcasinohotel.com).



MUNDA

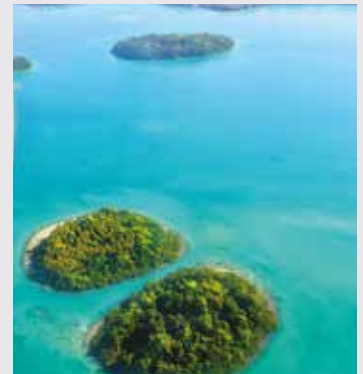
Get off the beaten track while only a five-minute walk from Munda airport at the Agnes Gateway Hotel (agneshotelsolomon.com). Rustic, revitalising and perched on the edge of the picturesque Roviana Lagoon, it's smiling Solomon Island hospitality at its best with this family-owned lodge.



GIZO

An eight-minute boat ride from Gizo is all it takes to reach the sparkling waters of Mbabanga Island, home to Fatboys (solomonislandsfatboys.com.au). Stroll along the 100 metre private jetty to Fatboys bar and restaurant, the perfect spot to enjoy a cold beer or jump in the water for a snorkel.

Also consider: Sanbis (sanbisresort.com), Gizo Hotel (gizohotel.com/home.html) and Oravae Cottages (oravaecottage.com)



CRUISE

The Solomon Islands will welcome eight cruise visits in 2016, a 100% increase on its 2015 schedule result. Visiting vessels include Princess Cruises Lines' Sea Princess and Dawn Princess, Noble Caledonia's Caledonia Sky, Silverseas Cruises' Silver Discoverer, P&O's Pacific Eden and Seabourn Cruise Lines' Seabourn Odyssey.



eating crayfish for breakfast, lunch and dinner on one occasion – it’s hard to look past Fatboys resort, a short boat ride from Gizo.

So called for Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* character Joe the Fat Boy who gorges with gusto and slumps into an easy slumber whenever he so chooses, guests are much encouraged to do the same.

By day, hammocks call a lazy siren song from sunny wooden decks. Hours are spent snorkelling through the teeming tropical fish that swirl and sway beneath the jetty, affectionately known as the Fatboys aquarium.

Come afternoon, I ask the staff nicely and it’s a short, speedy boat ride out to one of the impossibly secluded sandbars nearby for a sundowner, or as they’re so endearingly known here, a wine down.

The only footprints in the sand are my own, and as I settle comfortably into my deckchair, it’s a pinch-me moment as I realise I have nothing but a glass of wine and a spectacular view for company.

As I recline, watching the warm yellow light fade into the horizon, it’s clear I have found the Solomons gold.

Getting there

Solomon Airlines operates its Airbus A320 service from Brisbane to the nation’s capital Honiara four times weekly. Services departing Sydney run seasonally.

There is also an extensive domestic network operated by Dash 8 – 102’s between Honiara and Seghe, Munda, Gizo, Kira Kira and Santa Cruz, while Twin Otters and Islanders fly to all other ports.

From July 1, Solomon Airlines will operate a codeshare four times a week with Air Niugini and Air Vanuatu between Port Moresby and Honiara, and a weekly return service between Honiara and Port Vila.



Selling the Solomons

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