



Simply SOLOMONS

By Kris Madden

S NUGGLED between Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, and less than a three hour flight from Australia, the 992 islands of the Solomon Islands are one of the last frontiers of adventure travel.

From the moment you arrive in the capital, Honiara, you feel like you've stepped back in time. It's all here; shark-callers and crocodile worshippers, WWII history, world-class diving and snorkelling, diverse cultures, and ancient customs that are still remarkably alive.

In this land of contrasts with scenery reminiscent of a David Attenborough documentary, you'll find jungle-clad peaks, steaming volcanoes, crashing waterfalls, mist-enshrouded rainforests, crystal clear lagoons, and brilliant coral reefs. Every Pacific race is present in this South Pacific melting-pot, from blue-black Papuans to chocolate-coloured

blond Melanesians, bronze-skinned Micronesians, and fair-complexioned Polynesians, many still living much as their ancestors did centuries ago.

Our adventure begins on Guadalcanal Island, the gateway to the Solomons and the site of some of WWII's longest and bloodiest battles. Led by our knowledgeable guide, Michael Ramosaea, we're taken on a tour to a small outdoor museum. WWII remnants such as Japanese war planes and rusting artillery provide an insight into the tragic battles that took place here. The nearby sea floors are littered with warships from both the Japanese and US forces, preserved in time and sea salt, and now offering some of the best wreck diving in the world.

But to really experience "The Solly's" as it's affectionately known, you need to venture out to one of its many islands, inhabited or otherwise. Gizo, a one hour flight from Honiara, is a good jumping-off

point to visit some of the sun-soaked islands in the region.

Fatboys Resort, run by the efficient (and handsome) Manu, is one of those special places, complete with open-air bungalows and a restaurant that juts out over the water so you can snorkel straight off the deck, or watch the friendly black-tipped reef sharks that mill around below. Fresh crayfish plucked straight from the ocean graces the menu each day.

From Fatboys, we take a short walk through the jungle to the delightful Babanga Village for a peek into traditional island life. This is one of the most original village experiences you can imagine. There is a basic but charming homestay here where guests can experience true village life while still having their own privacy and a few modern amenities like flushing toilets and hot showers.

We're a boat ride away from Kennedy Island, notable for its role in the story of

NEED TO KNOW

- The Solomon Islands are made up of 992 islands, the six main ones being Choiseul, Isabel, Malaita, New Georgia, Guadalcanal and Makira. Honiara International Airport on Guadalcanal Island is the main gateway.
- Airlines flying to Honiara include the national carrier, Solomon Airlines, in addition to Virgin Australia, Air Niugini and Fiji Airways. Australian citizens do not require a visa.
- Solomon Airlines offers around 600 scheduled flights a month linking 31 airstrips in the Solomons. Island-hopping routes such as Honiara-Gizo-Munda-Seghe-Honiara and Honiara-Bellona-Rennell-Honiara allow several islands to be visited without backtracking. Domestic flights can be heavily booked, so advance bookings are recommended.
- The Solomons are ideal for adventurous travellers seeking authentic experiences, history and culture, and world-class diving. The WWII relics of Guadalcanal, scuba diving in the Western Solomons, and traditional village life on the other islands are just some of the highlights.
- The people of the Solomons are made up of Oceania's three main cultural groups; Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian.
- If your clients can't live without internet, infinity pools and their hairdryer for a week, then the Solomons may not be right for them. However it is the perfect place to escape the pressures of the modern world.
- Don't expect five-star resorts. The main style of tourist accommodation across the islands is grass-roofed bungalows, some with an over water restaurant/bar.
- Visitors mostly dine as the locals do – on fish caught that morning, grilled or cooked in coconut milk and lime.
- The Solomon Islands have a warm, tropical climate – the average day time temperature ranges from 25-30 degrees Celsius. The wet season is from November to April. April to November is the best time to visit.

Queensland-based **Go Tours Travel** is one of the largest Solomon Islands operators that offers a large range of product and also specialises in surf tours. Their website is a great source of information with a large range of wholesale accommodation.

■ www.gotours.com.au

Allways Dive Expeditions is a major dive operator but also caters for non-diving partners.

■ www.allwaysdive.com.au

The **Dive Adventures** website contains general information about the Solomon Islands and information about scuba diving.

■ www.diveadventures.com.au



PT-109 when former US President John Kennedy (then a lieutenant) swam for his life after his craft was rammed by a Japanese destroyer.

From Gizo, it's a 15-minute flight with Solomon Airlines to Munda, originally the centre of the head-hunting Roviana people.

Mysterious Skull Island is a must-visit, complete with the skulls of past warrior and chiefs; as is "Barney" Paulsen's mini-museum, displaying relics such as hand grenades, ammunition, helmets, and dog tags left by the US and Japanese in the jungle. His collection is known as the Peter Joseph WWII Museum – named after Peter Joseph Palatini, the American soldier whose dog tag he first found.

We wander around traditional markets selling fresh produce and the ubiquitous betel nut, which almost everyone chews. The mildly sedative fruit is the Solomon Islands' version of kava. The handicrafts here are authentic

and untainted by mass commercialism. Finely carved wooden objects exhibit exceptional workmanship and the woven baskets and trays are of very high quality. Another excellent purchase is the shell money of Malaita, made into beautiful necklaces.

Little has changed in the Solomon Islands since WWII, and that's just one of the reasons it's such a breathtakingly fresh destination. It's aeons from any place in the South Pacific I've ever experienced, and therein lies its charm.

Don't expect white-sand beaches, ritzy resorts and wild nightlife here – the Solomon Islands is not your average beach-holiday destination. With just a smattering of traditional guesthouses and comfortable eco-resorts, it's tailor-made for ecotourism and those seeking an authentic experience, off the beaten track. But the best part is that with no crowds, you'll feel like you have the whole place to yourself.





THE Solomon Islands will be more accessible for Australians with the launch of Solomon Airlines' new direct Sydney to Honiara return service from 2 June 2015 (subject to government approval).

Scheduled to operate ex-Honiara on Mondays and ex-Sydney on Tuesdays, the carrier will use its flagship Airbus A320 on the new route which has been specifically timed to offer seamless flight linkage between several Australian cities.

The carrier's Airbus A320 is configured to 16 executive business class seats and 120 economy class seats, and offers a full in flight service including meals, beverages and entertainment.

The new direct route will complement Solomon Airlines' current four times weekly services from Brisbane, as well as flights to and from Fiji and Vanuatu. Solomon Airlines, which celebrated 52 years of service last October, also operates an extensive domestic network around the Solomon Islands between the nation's capital of Honiara, Seghe, Munda, Gizo, Kira and Santa Cruz.

Open to all passengers, the airline's 'Belama Club' membership offers several incentives ranging from priority check-in and express clearance to additional baggage allowances, preferential seating and exclusive access to the 'Belama Club Lounge' in Honiara International Airport.

Ponant's 14-night Indonesia, Papua and the Solomon Islands cruise on board the luxury *Le Soleal* departs Manado on 25 November 2015, exploring some rarely visited locations across northern PNG and the Solomon Islands, finishing in Guadalcanal. Prices start from \$6,520 pp twin share for a deluxe stateroom.

Wild Earth Travel has an expedition cruise aboard the *Spirit of Enderby* following the path traditionally known in birding circles as the Western Pacific Odyssey or WPO. It's considered one of the must-do expeditions for any birdwatcher. Prices start from US\$6300 per person (shared facilities) with one departure on 6 April 2015.

Princess Cruises has six itineraries visiting the Solomon Islands in 2015 on board *Sun Princess* and *Dawn Princess*. The 13-day round trip departing 14 April 2015 from Sydney to PNG and the Solomon Islands starts from \$1,699 pp for an interior stateroom.

Silversea has a 16-night cruise from Palau to Fiji aboard the luxury *Silver Discoverer* departing 28 Sep 2015. Visiting Gizo, Kennedy Island and Marovo Lagoon, prices start from \$17,250 pp twin share.

Q&A

Queensland-based Go Tours Travel is one of the largest operators in the Solomon Islands. *travelBulletin's* Kris Madden asked manager Nick Blanche for his top tips on selling the destination to clients.



What distinguishes the Solomon Islands from other South Pacific destinations?

The Solomons' traditional customs and beliefs have not been tainted by the modern world. The fishing is world class and the waves are completely uncrowded – just what surfers live for. That is in addition to healthy and colourful coral reefs with plentiful marine life and WWII shipwrecks to be explored. With 992 islands, cars are obsolete, old fashioned handwritten letters are delivered in person, and time is measured by the tides and moon.

How can agents improve their Solomon Islands product knowledge?

Our website www.gotours.com.au is a great source of information and we have the largest range of wholesale accommodation for the Solomon Islands.

What are your top tips for agents wanting to sell the Solomon Islands?

Find out exactly what activities your client is looking for. Fishing, surfing, diving, rainforests and wildlife treks, village life, WWII history or a romantic getaway are just some activities to consider. Secondly, their preferred style of accommodation is important as there is a huge difference from village stays to resorts. Length of stay is another consideration, as a multi destination visit can deliver a completely different experience.

Which destinations or lodgings in the Solomon Islands are best suited for families, couples and adventure seekers?

Papatura Island Retreat in Santa Isabel is a good choice for all travellers. Uepi Island Resort, Fatboys, Wilderness Lodge, and Oravae Cottage are great for

couples looking for a romantic getaway or adventurous families who don't need a TV for amusement. For adventure, a village stay such as Kmaga Village on the Eastern coast of Santa Isabel displays true Solomon Islands hospitality in a typical village environment. The Arnavon Islands are a unique option where travellers can assist rangers with their nightly monitoring of turtle egg laying. Mavo Lodge on Ramata Island is ideal for families, couples and eco adventure travellers.

Can agents join families with your company?

We are running a famil in conjunction with the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau later this year. Contact us for more information if you want to see for yourself what the Solomon Islands are all about.

■ www.gotours.com.au

SLOWLY, SLOWLY FOR SIVB

RECEIVING less than 25,000 visitors a year, including approximately 11,000 Australians, the Solomon Islands remains pristine in almost every respect – and the local visitors bureau plans to keep it that way.

Josefa Tuamoto, chief executive of Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (SIVB) and former chief executive of Tourism Fiji, says Australia currently takes the podium as the country's largest source of visitor arrivals, followed by Papua New Guinea, the United States and New Zealand.

"A key component of our overall blueprint for the future of Solomon Islands tourism is to see the tourism sector become the prime source of our country's foreign exchange earnings within the next 10 years. One of our key objectives is to broaden the Solomon Islands' appeal to attract a more diverse range of visitors," says Tuamoto.

While the destination is renowned as a magnet for scuba divers, surfers, backpackers and World War II veterans, Tuamoto's plans involve positioning the Solomon Islands as a "multi-faceted" destination that appeals to a wide demographic of travellers including families, weddings and honeymoons, culture seekers, and the seniors market.

However, he says that the Solomon Islands "doesn't do big numbers", instead focusing on its strengths as a cultural destination that appeals to a diverse clientele.

SIVB is targeting a total of just 32,000 visitors per annum over the next five years.

"We don't want to be like Fiji or Samoa," he says. "Any tourism growth must be sustainable and benefit both the community and visitors. Introducing the type of responsible tourism product that conserves our pristine environment while helping to improve the welfare of the local people is very much the way forward for us."

Nick Blanch of Queensland-based wholesaler Go Tours Travel, says proximity is what distinguishes "The Sollys" from other South Pacific destinations, and while it's close to Brisbane, it is still remote and isolated.

"As a multi-island destination, clients can have completely different experiences such as helping rangers with turtle hatchlings, visiting rarely seen villages, trekking through ancient rainforest, diving WWII wrecks, or just lazing in a hammock. A few hours' flying and you're at a private island retreat or laughing with local villagers forgotten by time," he says.

BATTLEFIELD TOURS OF GUADALCANAL



WWII remnants provide an insight into the tragic battles that took place here.

WHILE there is much excitement about the 100 year anniversary of Gallipoli, it pays to remember that 2015 is also the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.

On 7 August 1942, allied forces landed on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, the first step in a battle that was to become the turning point in the Pacific War. Guadalcanal offers more war sites and relics than any other island in the Pacific.

Mat McLachlan Battlefield Tours is offering the chance to walk in the footsteps of the marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought in this iconic WWII campaign, and to commemorate the anniversary of the battle.

The tour, led by McLachlan himself, visits the key sites on Guadalcanal and its neighbouring islands, exploring famous battlefields such as Alligator Creek, Bloody Ridge, Henderson Airfield, the Gifu, Mt Austen, Tulagi, and the Matanikau River.

McLachlan is one of Australia's leading war historians and battlefield guides, and has spent more than a decade following in the footsteps of Australian troops on battlefields around the world. He is an expert on the battles of Guadalcanal.

Highlights include travel to the moving anniversary commemorations on 9 August which trace the footsteps of Australian troops, including a memorial service for the *HMAS Canberra* on the anniversary of her sinking.

Prices for the five-day tour which departs 5 August 2015 start from \$2197 per person and include four nights of first-class accommodation, all excursions and sightseeing, anniversary commemorations at the US Memorial and HMAS Canberra Memorial, daily breakfast and transfers.

■ www.battlefields.com.au