



David Kirkind



THE SECRETS OF THE SOLOMONS

The Solomon Islands are a slice of paradise largely unknown by the crowds who flock to other South Pacific destinations. LEE MYLNE unlocks some of the secrets of these beautiful islands.

FROM the air, the Solomon Islands are a scattering of emerald jewels in a turquoise sea. There are more than 900 of them, gleaming below in that impossible blue...making getting a window seat a priority. This is a sight not to be missed.

Travelling to and within the Solomon Islands – less than three hours flying time from Brisbane – is part of what makes a visit to this island nation so different.

Travel light, if you can, because much of your time getting around will be on small planes or even smaller boats. From the capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, experiencing “the Sollies” is all about getting to other islands and discovering their differences.

It's worth spending at least a couple of days in Honiara, either at the beginning or end of your trip, to get a perspective on the history of the Solomons. During World War II, this peaceful archipelago was the scene of some of the most fierce battles in the Pacific, on land and sea, and in the air.

Iron Bottom Sound, the waters off Honiara, is named for the 42 wrecks that lie there,

aircraft and ships that sank to a watery grave during and after the war. Many relics of war can be seen on guided tours that are well worth taking.

We headed to the Solomon Islands Peace Park Memorial and Guadalcanal American Memorial, on the hill above Honiara, which pays tribute to the Allied Forces soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought seven major naval battles against the Japanese, between August 1942 and February 1943.

Bringing some of the reality of this past home is the Vilu War Museum, an open-air display of a vast collection of aircraft, cannons and other war relics, set in beautiful tropical gardens.

While battlefield tours are a drawback for some, the main attractions of the Solomons are the simple pleasures of island life.

It's easy to fall instantly in love with this place when you arrive at Fatboys Resort on Gizo island. Reception is in a grass-roofed overwater pavilion, where fishing boats pull up in the morning to deliver the night's catch – and if you want lobster for breakfast, lunch or dinner (or all three), you'll never find anywhere that it's fresher!

A long jetty leads to the scattered bungalows, and it's worth getting up early for spectacular sunrises. Two more bungalows are under construction, but it's never going to be crowded here, with only about 20 guests catered for. Hang in a hammock on your private verandah, relax in the bar looking out towards the extinct volcano Kolombangra or snorkel with tropical fish and reef sharks in the clear waters around the jetty.

Kayaks and small inflatable boats are available for guests to rent, and it's worth taking one to head across the lagoon to Kennedy Island. Take a picnic or the makings of a barbecue lunch and explore this tiny tranquil island that is named for the former American president. During World War II, as a naval lieutenant, Jack Kennedy earned hero status for his actions in saving his crew after his patrol boat was run down by a Japanese destroyer. They came ashore on this uninhabited island, which you can walk around in about 15 minutes.

Among the best experiences you can have in the Solomon Islands is a village visit, which can be arranged through your accommodation. We took a short boat trip



from Fatboys to attend Sunday service at the tiny Church of Zion at Babanga and were welcomed warmly. Homestays in self-contained bungalows are also available at this village.

On Rendova Island, Titiru Eco Lodge runs walking tours to the nearby Ugele Village, where lifestyle traditions – weaving, toy making, carving, cooking, music and other traditional practices – are demonstrated. You might even get involved in the dancing!

At Munda, there are more war relics at Barney Paulsen's backyard Peter Joseph World War II Museum. These are smaller and more personal, including a heartbreakingly large collection of dogtags (the museum takes its name from the soldier whose name was on the first dogtag Paulsen found in the bush surrounding his home). He's still finding them...water bottles, uniform buttons, grenades, cutlery, cigarette holders and more...and tracking down as best he can the families of those they belonged to.

From Munda or Lola Island, where Joe Entriakin from Zipolo Habu Resort runs fishing tours, take a trip to Skull Island for a look even further back into the history of the

Solomons. Here lie the remains of the tribal chiefs and warriors, visible to the elements, surrounded by jungle.

Simple pleasures are the key to visiting the Solomons. Snorkelling or diving, kayaking, hiking, and learning about the traditional life of the largely Melanesian population will soon have you in relaxed mode.

Internet access – even in Honiara – is mostly slow and patchy, so this is an ideal destination for a “digital detox”.

Don't expect five-star luxury; comfortable, clean bungalows built in traditional style or motel-style accommodation is the norm, with the emphasis on good, fresh food and outdoor pursuits.

Honiara's best hotel is the Heritage Park Hotel, with all the trappings of city hotels including a pool, restaurant, business centre and souvenir shop.

If you want to name-drop, head to Tavanipupu Private Island Resort, where William and Kate – the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge – stayed during their

Solomon Islands visit in 2012. It's really the only luxury resort in the Solomons and takes a maximum of 18 guests (or you can book the whole place out for greater privacy).

Discovering the secrets of the Solomons – and maybe learning a few words of Pidgin along the way – is a richly rewarding travel experience. It might well be one of those places that you want to keep a secret!

EDITOR'S CRUISE PICK

P&O CRUISES – SOLOMON SEA ISLANDS

Experience a taste of the Solomons with P&O Cruises, on their Solomon Seas Islands 10 night cruise. Departing from Cairns, the voyage explores both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Check out some of the best diving in Gizo, with its crystal clear water and coral. In Honiara there is enough to keep everyone entertained with shopping, nature and history galore. Experience traditional way of life at Kakabona Cultural village. There are two departures this year on *Pacific Eden* – 24 Sep and 25 Oct, from \$899 per person in a interior room quad share.

TOURISM LOOKING UP FOR SOLOMONS

THE welcome mat is out for Australian travel agents wanting to visit the Solomon Islands.

Twenty agents explored the islands last year, gaining valuable confidence about selling its charms to their clients.

Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau (SIVB) chief executive Josefa 'Jo' Tuamoto said this "exercise in confidence-building" was a key part of the strategy to boost visitor numbers and the tourism industry generally.

"Tourism is a priority for the wellbeing of the country and a key component of the Solomon Islands government's economic blueprint for the future," he said.

"While 2013 proved a good year for us, the April 2014 floods and the lingering ASA (Air Services Agreement) dispute between Fiji Airways and Solomon Airlines had impact on our international visitation numbers last year."

About 25,000 visitors arrive in the Solomons each year, with Australians accounting for between 10,000 and 13,000 – a number expected to grow with the introduction of new direct Solomon Airlines flights from Sydney.

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Josefa Tuamoto, chief executive
Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau

Other top markets are New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and the United States. The average length of stay for visitors is 15 days.

Tuamoto said the decline in visitor numbers was arrested in 2015 with spectacular results in April (15.5% increase), May (14.9% increase), June (9.3% increase) and September (28% increase).

He said while one of the key objectives already in place was to broaden the Solomon Islands' appeal to attract a more diverse range of international visitors, there were also challenges to be met.

Divers, surfers, backpackers and World War II veterans and historical groups already flock here, but SIVB plans to position the Solomon Islands as a multi-faceted destination with wide appeal.

"While currently we may only be a small destination on the world tourism map, we know that delivering the right type of product and catering to the right kind of traveller will play a major part in our aspirations," said Tuamoto.

And although more hotel rooms – at least 150 to 200 in Honiara, he says – are needed,

there's also a realisation that "small is beautiful", with eco lodges and boutique resorts such as Titiru Eco Lodge on Rendova Island in the Western Province providing the blueprint for future expansion on the smaller islands.

"Introducing this 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," he said, adding that eco-tourism was a recognised drawcard for an increasing number of environmentally-aware travellers.

However, the five major resorts in Honiara were usually at 70 to 80% occupancy, and more room stock and attracting an international hotel brand would be key to moving forward, he said.

The Solomon Islands' tourism industry may still be in its infancy, but its "last frontier" tag is unlikely to last for long, with major development expected over the next 10 to 15 years. For many travellers, that's a huge incentive to "get there before it changes".



Solomon Islands Markets, Rob Maccoll



So Solomons, So Different!



Explore the hidden paradise of the South Pacific, an archipelago comprising a vast group of 992 breathtaking tropical islands. Feel the spirit of adventure and enjoy your own special piece of paradise - dive, fish, surf, hike, kayak or simply relax and discover a culture with a welcoming smile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
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solomon islands

SO SOLOMONS, SO DIFFERENT!



Passengers on a zodiac from Noble Caledonia's *Caledonia Sky*

SOLOMON ISLANDS CRUISE STRATEGY BEARS FRUIT

BUILDING on its potential as an exciting new destination for the international cruise market, the Solomon Islands will welcome eight cruise visits in 2016, a 100 per cent increase on its 2015 cruise schedule.

Vessels visiting Honiara and cruising within the 992-island archipelago this year 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*.

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau chief executive Josefa Tuamoto attributed the increase to the efforts of the national tourist office along with government and local private sector support to turn what he described as

a "huge potential into a reality".

Tuamoto also pointed toward a recent visit to Sydney by outgoing Ministry of Culture & Tourism permanent secretary, John Wasi and representatives from the Department of Tourism, the SIVB and the Solomon Islands Port Authority, which he said had played a major role in the outcome.

In Sydney the Solomon Islands delegation met with several key cruise industry players, specialist wholesaler and retailer representatives and media as part of a concerted effort to turn the spotlight on the Solomon Islands' potential as a cruise destination.

"Tourism is fast emerging as a major driver for the country's GDP, and the

government has embarked on a very vigorous process to seize on the opportunity tourism presents," said Tuamoto.

"We were determined to turn this potential into a hard reality and that is exactly what we are seeing in 2016."

That upward trend is likely to continue in 2017, with Paul Gauguin Cruises, operator of the highest-rated and longest continually sailing luxury cruise ship in the South Pacific, *Paul Gauguin*, announcing the Solomon Islands will be part of its program next year.

Its 16-night Fiji to Bali voyage, departing April 29, 2017 from Lautoka, Fiji, will include the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomons on its itinerary (as well as on the return trip, departing Bali on June 7, 2017).

New Solomon Airlines schedules

NEW flight schedules operational from April 25 have been structured to allow passengers departing on Solomon Airlines' international services from Australia same day connectivity to the carrier's domestic network.

As part of the new timings, passengers flying on the airline's BNE and SYD flights to Honiara have ample time to connect with domestic services.

The same applies to passengers departing from domestic ports within the Solomon Islands, who now can connect directly to Brisbane and Sydney services departing from Honiara.

While Solomon Airlines' domestic services do not link with the Wednesday service ex-Honiara to Brisbane, the return service ex-Brisbane departing at 1015 and arriving in Honiara at 1430 does allow for connection into all Solomon Airlines domestic ports.

The new schedules dovetail with the return of Solomon Airlines' flagship Airbus A320, which will return to full service on April 25, following standard Airbus biannual maintenance in Singapore.



LIVEBOARD FOR DIVE ADVENTURES

DIVERS heading to the Solomon Islands have a new option, with Dive Adventures' recent acquisition of *Taka*, a 30 metre custom-designed dive liveboard.

Previously operating on the Great Barrier Reef, *Taka* has been relocated to the Solomon Islands, and offers two-, three-, seven- and 10-night charters, for a maximum of 30 guests in 13 cabins.

Taka sails around the Florida Islands, Russell Islands, Mary Island and the Western Province's Marovo Lagoon (the latter on 10-night charters only).

Rates include on-board accommodation, all meals and snacks, unlimited diving and return airport transfers in Honiara on embarkation/disembarkation day.

This is the second luxury liveboard dive

operation in the Solomon Islands. *M.V. Bilikiki*, which has been cruising and diving the Solomons since 1989, is the other option. *Bilikiki* accommodates up to 20 guests in 10 cabins and offers 7-, 10-, 11- and 14-night trips with the same inclusions.

Dive Adventures also offers diving and snorkelling packages around Honiara and Guadalcanal island, and from Munda and Gizo in the Western Province.

Dive Adventures' Mandy Whiteman says the combination of activities offered makes the Solomon Islands a memorable destination.

"Divers and snorkellers will be enthralled by the colourful coral reefs and plentiful marine life. There are also WWII shipwrecks, history and culture to be explored and experienced in a unique frontier setting," she said.



Diagonal banded sweetlips, Nazir Amin

Q&A

Australians account for nearly half of all international visitors to the Solomon Islands. Omniche Holidays product coordinator for the Solomon Islands, Kristie Hill explains what makes this South Pacific archipelago such a special destination.



What makes the Solomon Islands different to other South Pacific destinations?

The untouched nature of the islands – it has a rich culture, a diverse history, natural beauty, and when you experience it for yourself it's almost as if you're the first ones to ever see it – it really is one of the richest experiences you can have in the South Pacific.

What are your top tips for selling the Solomon Islands?

Qualify your clients – work out why they have chosen the Solomons, where they have travelled before and what experiences they are hoping for. This will make it a lot easier to narrow down where they should stay. And call your wholesale partner for access to wholesale fares and a wealth of information on the destination!

How can travel agents improve their Solomon Islands product knowledge?

Take the time to familiarise yourself with the different areas in the Solomon Islands utilising the www.visitsolomons.com.sb website. You can also have a look at our new Omniche Holidays website which has destination information and product listings, plus we have a brochure with a

four-page spread on the Solomons, or call us if you have any questions! We're here to help!

Which destinations or resorts in the Solomons are best suited to couples and honeymooners, families, adventure travellers?

For couples, Seghe. Uepi Island Resort is a great option for those who just want to get away and explore at their own pace, set on a private island covered in rainforest and fringed by beaches and reef. The activities on offer here are incredible, and it's a great place to learn to dive if you haven't tried it before. It's cost effective too as all meals are included in your stay here. For honeymooners, Marau Sound. Tavanipupu is the highest quality resort in the Solomons and is set on a 13 hectare island that used to be a coconut plantation. There are only a small number of bungalows, and none of them have telephones or televisions. It's a place you can disconnect from technology, really connect with each other, all in beautiful surroundings. For families, Gizo. Fatboys Resort in particular is quite a popular place to stay as it offers family bungalow accommodation that can sleep up to five. There are pristine beaches to relax

on, islands for hiking, World War II wrecks and abundant marine life to dive with, reef breaks to surf just 20 minutes from the resort, and a great overwater restaurant. For adventure travellers, Munda. Zipolo Habu is a great place to base yourself while you explore WWII history, Skull Island, rainforests, go snorkelling, surfing, or fishing – there is something for all adventure lovers!

What experiences do you recommend as a 'must' in the Solomons?

I would say that exploring the history of the Solomon Islands, particularly it's significance within WWII, is a must do – you can do this on land or underwater with a number of wrecks just a short snorkelling distance offshore. And seeing the gorgeous Marovo Lagoon with your own eyes – the water there is paradise!

Are there any challenges to selling the Solomon Islands?

The speed of communication can make things difficult sometimes, but we've got some great relationships in place so if there are any delays we can call right away.