



THE SURPRISING SOLOMONS

FOR AUSTRALIANS, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS ARE STILL LARGELY UNDISCOVERED, BUT THAT'S SLOWLY CHANGING AS GROWING NUMBERS OF PLUCKY TRAVELLERS HEAD OFF IN SEARCH OF SOMETHING NEW. AND THAT'S PRECISELY WHAT TRAVEL WEEKLY'S ROVING SCRIBE WAS AFTER ON HER MAIDEN JOURNEY TO THE PACIFIC DESTINATION

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There are so many ways to approach a place you've never visited before. At one end of the spectrum, people do weeks of research and make detailed plans about everything they'll see and do. At the other end of the spectrum is where I began my recent trip to what I now call "the unexpected Solomon Islands".

After a two hour and 45-minute direct flight from Brisbane (serviced by both Virgin and Solomon Airlines), I was delighted to feel the tropical warmth instead of the cold Sydney winter I'd left behind.

The 40-minute drive from the airport to the city's Heritage Park Hotel is characterised by a bit of traffic and a few potholes, however both problems will be fixed when the Kukum Highway roadworks are completed – hopefully next year. And that's the sum total of all the negative things I have to say about my Solomon Islands visit.



Munda International Airport – coming soon

Works are well underway for Solomon Airlines to run direct services from Brisbane to Munda in the Western Province, bringing a range of benefits to the people and the government of the Solomon Islands, including increased passenger movements, increased tourism to Western Province, improved safety for larger aircraft, opportunities to expand services in Munda Airport to international flights, increased aviation freight and further government revenue from the aviation sector

Funding to cover the civil works was estimated at SBD\$62 million (\$10.7 million). The New Zealand government has contributed \$8.2 million towards the project, which now just needs a new terminal to manage customs and immigration to be completed before flights can start.

WORLD WAR II

Location, as we all know, is everything. It was everything to both the Japanese and the Allies in the World War II Pacific campaign, making the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942 pivotal in the eventual Allied victory, as I learned on my Travel Solomons' Battlefield Tour. I'm no war history buff, but spending my first morning learning about the impact the war had on the this mountainous Melanesian island nation gave me a sense of the resilience and optimism of its people and the scale of the loss of 28,000 lives during the battle, the great majority of who were Japanese.

Our tour van climbed to the top of steep hills (named by the Americans by number and the Japanese by animals), starting at the Guadalcanal American Monument from

where we saw major battlefield sites like Bloody Ridge, Savo Island and Henderson.

We drove past the nine-hole golf course, which the locals call "Fighter Two", because it is built over an old airstrip of the same name, and visited the Memorial Gardens next to the airport where kerala trees grow tall and straight to commemorate US marines who died in the war. We also visited the impressive, sombre and very well-maintained Japanese memorial.

A drive to the western part of Guadalcanal took us to the outdoor and somewhat surreal Vilu War Museum. Here, the rusted wreckages of planes, cannons, guns and bombs that were left behind are displayed in lush gardens. Indeed, some of the displays are becoming a part of the gardens as tropical vines take over.

CULTURE

The Solomon Islands is a melting pot in the Pacific, home to people of Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian backgrounds. The cultural highlight of my time there was a visit to the relatively new Ginger Beach Resort on the northwest shore of Guadalcanal, where our group was welcomed by a band of traditionally-dressed and decorated pan pipers from the island of Malaita in the country's east.

Gifted a betel nut on arrival, we marvelled watching local women weave mats and bowls from coconut palm fronds. Nearby, a man demonstrated the art of making thatched roofing using sago leaves wrapped over a bamboo pole and held in place by a needle-like piece of coconut palm. This traditional roofing

lasts for about 10 years through torrential rains and cyclonic winds.

Girls wearing banana-leaf tops and grass skirts deftly removed the hot stones of the ground ovens (motu) using bamboo tongs. They'd cooked fish wrapped in banana leaves, purple kumera, cassava, bananas and sago with coconut milk for us, served, as you'd expect, on a banana leaf. A performance by the energetic and melodic pan pipers followed by a dozen singing female dancers in grass skirts entertained us while we ate.

THE WATER – AND WHAT LIES BENEATH

Surrounding the 992 islands that make up the Solomon Islands are the warm, pristine waters of the Solomon Sea.



From its indigo blue depths in the channels to an almost bright mint green in the coral shallows, the colours and clarity of the water wore out my vocabulary of superlatives. It was unsurprising to hear that Canon chose the Solomon Islands to film the launch of its latest underwater camera, or that divers come from around the world to experience the full range of diving action; from endless technicolour reefs, to macro diving for photographers, pelagic dives with sharks and manta rays and, of course, technical and wreck diving around World War II Allied and Japanese ships and planes. Indeed, the waters off Honiara are colloquially referred to as IBS – Iron Bottom Sound – by the locals, because of the 40-plus ships and many planes that lie in that watery graveyard.

After flying an hour on Solomon Airlines to Munda, in Western Province, my aquatic Solomons adventure began. Walking just 200 metres to the Agnes Gateway Hotel, we checked in and ate at the open-air restaurant by the

water. This property is undergoing a timely upgrade, so I'd recommend visitors stay in the nearby bright, basic, clean and recently-renovated Qua Roviana and dine at Agnes Gateway when in Munda.

We spent much of the next day zooming across deep lagoons, past tiny and larger inhabited and uninhabited tropical islands, traversing complex coral reefs with ease, thanks to the deeply-ingrained nautical skills of Billy, our local seafaring guide.

We dropped in to meet the owners of Zipolo Habu Resort, reputed to own the best sport fishing boat in the Solomon Islands. Zipolo Habu means "good luck fishing". Among the property's famous tales is Andrew Ettinghausen's success during his *Escape With ET* visit last year, when he landed a 72kg yellowfin tuna.

Next stop was a visit to tiny Skull Island, named for its unusual contents of headhunters' skulls, not its shape. We remained in the boat while Billy called out to the spirits of dead warrior chiefs on the island,

Weddings at Ginger Beach

Weddings are a specialty at Ginger Beach Resort in western Guadalcanal, which currently has accommodation for nine people in three well-appointed individual bungalows. Plans are in the works for a Christian chapel to be built in the grounds, along with six more bungalows near the water's edge.

The resort is also popular for local weddings. The largest wedding they've hosted was for 5000 people and the locals bring their own food with Ginger Beach providing the traditional hot stone ovens for self-catering. Civil weddings are officiated in Honiara and a celebrant can be used (after the official paperwork has been done) in ceremonies on the beach. Until the law of the land is amended (and that's been agreed, but not written into law yet), foreigners can only have civil weddings, hence Ginger Beach's wedding chapel plans.

Staying healthy

When visiting most Pacific Islands, make sure your typhoid and Hepatitis A immunisations are up-to-date. It's also wise to take anti-malarial medication before, during and after your trip, according to your doctor's prescription. Locals might protect themselves from malaria by eating the pounded leaves of young papaya plants, but *Travel Weekly* recommends following suggestions on smartraveller.com.au. Sunscreen and anti-mosquito creams and lotions are a must. Travel insurance is also very sensible.



asking them permission to step ashore. Aside from being respectful to local sensibilities, I always like to obey the rules of these unscientific customs, rather than get afflicted with sudden gastro like the last white guy who pooh-pooed (excuse the pun) the tradition and stepped out of the boat early. Prevention is always better than a cure.

On the way to lunch on Hopei Island, near Munda, I saw the unmistakable arch of a dolphin's back and fin about 20 metres from our boat. Then over a hundred other spinner dolphins took ten minutes out of their busy schedule to put on a playful display for this grateful tourist. Back on land, we took in a short trip to the Peter Joseph World War II museum, filled with a vast array of war memorabilia, from dog tags to helmets, water canteens, bullets, knives, buttons, hand grenades, guns, cannons and even 1942 Coke bottles, all left behind. We rounded out the day by taking in a spectacular sunset over Vonavona lagoon, drinks in hand.

Our final day was spent at Fatboys, a famous and well-appointed resort in Gizo, capital of the Western Province, featuring two honeymoon bungalows, four standard ones, a beach house and a bar and restaurant that jut out over dazzling coral reefs and azure waters teeming with a tropical fish.

I slipped into the water to discover a snorkelling paradise; a rainbow of tropical fish, large clams, anemones, coral outcrops that seem endless, starfish, urchins and crabs. After a lunch of grilled lobster tails, we motored over to tiny Kennedy Island where John Fitzgerald Kennedy and 12 men landed after their boat was sunk in the war. JFK's actions during that action made him a solid gold war hero.

As my plane took off the next day, bound for Sydney's winter, I realised that the Solomon Islands had not been crossed off my bucket list. Instead, I wanted to return some time to have more unexpected experiences in these "Hapi Isles".

Solomon Islands Cultural Events

August 7 76th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal

August 13 to 15 Shell Money Festival, Langalanga Lagoon, Malaita Province

September 20 to 28 Roviana Lagoon Festival, Munda, Western Province

October 2 to 6 Solomon Islands Dive Festival, Guadalcanal and Central Province

October 31 to November 1 The Great Western Fishing Tournament, Vona Lagoon, Western Province

Solomon Islands Wholesalers

Traditional:

- Above Below Beyond
- Allways Dive Expeditions
- Dive Adventures
- Diversion Dive Travel
- Fishing Getaways
- Go Tours
- Hideaway Holidays
- Omniche Holidays
- Relaxaway Holidays
- Solomon Island Holidays

Online Travel Agencies:

- Agoda
- Booking.com
- Expedia
- Ignite Holidays