

Wrecks & reefs...



Bones of the Kinugawa Maru

...The Solomon Islands

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Part 1: Guadalcanal

When you head away for a dive trip to a place with more than 900 islands bathed in clear tropical waters renowned for shipwrecks and volcanoes you know you're in for some great diving!



B17 propeller blades stand as grave markers to fallen planes

I had long wanted to visit the Solomon Islands since it is close to the equator and has some of the highest marine biodiversity in the world. The warm waters of the archipelago provide spawning grounds and migratory routes for over 1000 fish species, as well as homes for dolphins, dugongs, sharks, rays, crocodiles and six of the world's seven species of marine turtle.

These would be attractions enough but the islands also have a rich and fascinating history, and a huge concentration of WWII shipwrecks and plane wrecks. Some of the most intense fighting of the war occurred here between 1942 and 1945; over 70 years later there are many reminders of the battles fought, above and below water.



A battered fighter at the Vilu outdoor War museum

My diving began with *Tulagi Dive*, a great little dive shop in Honiara on the main island of Guadalcanal and run by Australian ex-pat Troy who has been diving here for over 30 years. Troy has a wealth of knowledge to share about WWII history and some fascinating back stories to tell about many of the wrecks in Iron Bottom Sound, the nickname for the 50+ ships sunk there during the war. As the Sound is 600m deep many of the wrecks are well beyond diver depth but of the 10 or so that are within reach, a handful can be done as shore dives within an hour or so from Honiara.

Here's four of these wreck dives accessible from the shore, preceded by an interesting drive on the back of a small truck weaving through potholes and picturesque villages to the north end of island ...all part of the rich experience!

stern. The wreck is largely intact but well-encrusted with hard and soft corals, sea whips and colourful fans. Some easy penetrations are available nearer the stern, and inside the engine is still visible along with the crankshaft and

...The interesting back story to this wreck is its Kiwi connections as she was detected off Guadacanal by two New Zealand ships, RNZN Kiwi and Moa, which dropped depth charges that drove it to the surface...

The Hirokawa Maru

This large wreck lies at an angle down the reef from only 3m at the bow to around 56m deep at the

gearbox. Though there wasn't a lot of fish life on this wreck it is nonetheless a fascinating dive.

The Kinugawa Maru

This large Japanese transport ship is not far from the *Hirokawa Maru* which was deliberately beached to unload troops and supplies after coming under attack by US forces.

You can see the engine block protruding out of the water from the beach, but the stern of the vessel lies in 56m. The wreck is also well covered in soft corals and anemones, but there are still a few places where you can get inside though care is needed not to stir up the silt.

The highlight of this wreck for me though was the cathedral-like engine room at 8m, which is tiger-



A rusted Japanese field gun at the Vilu outdoor war museum



The cathedral-like engine room of the Kinugawa Maru

striped with shafts of light and shadow.

The I-1 Submarine

The I-1 sub is a bit further up the island off Vasale, and lies just off the reef at a depth of 3-28m. It is barely recognizable as a submarine now having been rammed, blasted and partially salvaged but its still a great dive with lots of life on it.

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Kiwi and Moa, which dropped depth charges that drove it to the surface.

After a battle at close quarters the RNZN Kiwi eventually rammed the sub, damaging her conning tower and hull and forcing her onto a nearby reef. The Japanese crew set destruction charges but failed to destroy her completely and in the following weeks codebooks were retrieved from the wreckage crucial to US intelligence.

The B17 bomber, 'Bessy the Jap Basher'

This was probably my favourite dive out of Honiara as I always like seeing planes underwater though hope I never get to ride one in! This B17 still has lots of recognizable features. Lying in only 4-18m depth and about 70m offshore its covered in colourful soft corals with good fish life all around. There's still a wing attached and a prop remaining as well as three machine guns now encrusted in purple sponge.

Honiara

With a 'surface interval day' to spend around Honiara before flying on to Gizo we took the opportunity to visit the Vilu outdoor war museum, an amazing collection of war relics from Japanese field guns to bomber and fighter planes. Being able to walk around and run a hand

Beautiful soft corals adorn many of the Solomon's WWII wrecks



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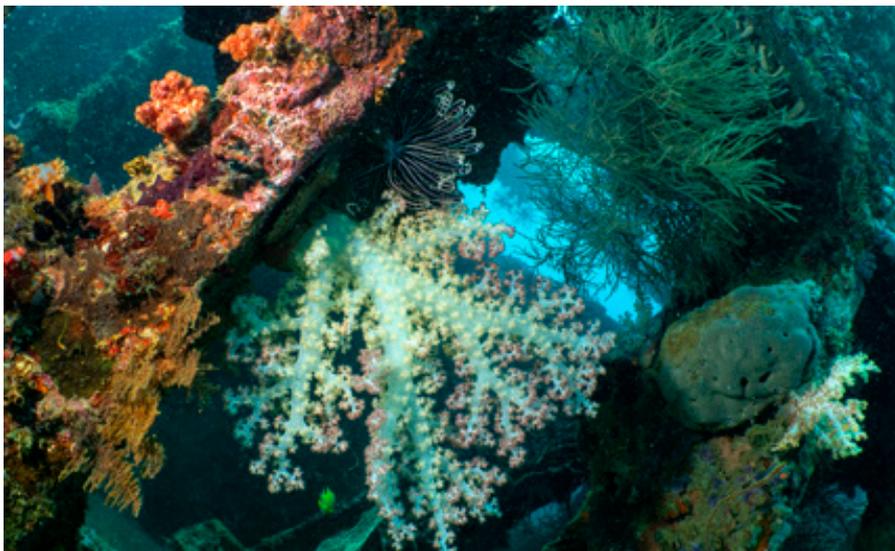
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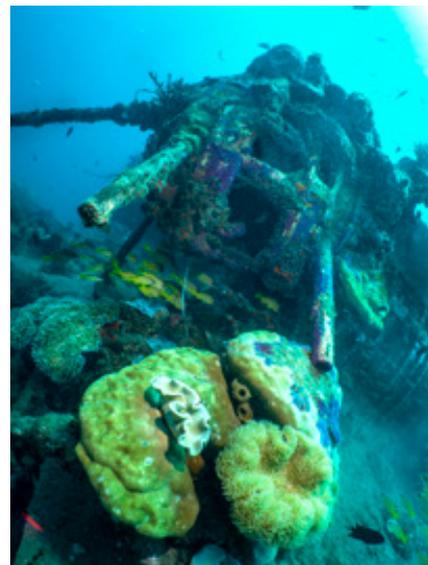
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Soft corals disguise the harsh lines of the Hirokawa Maru

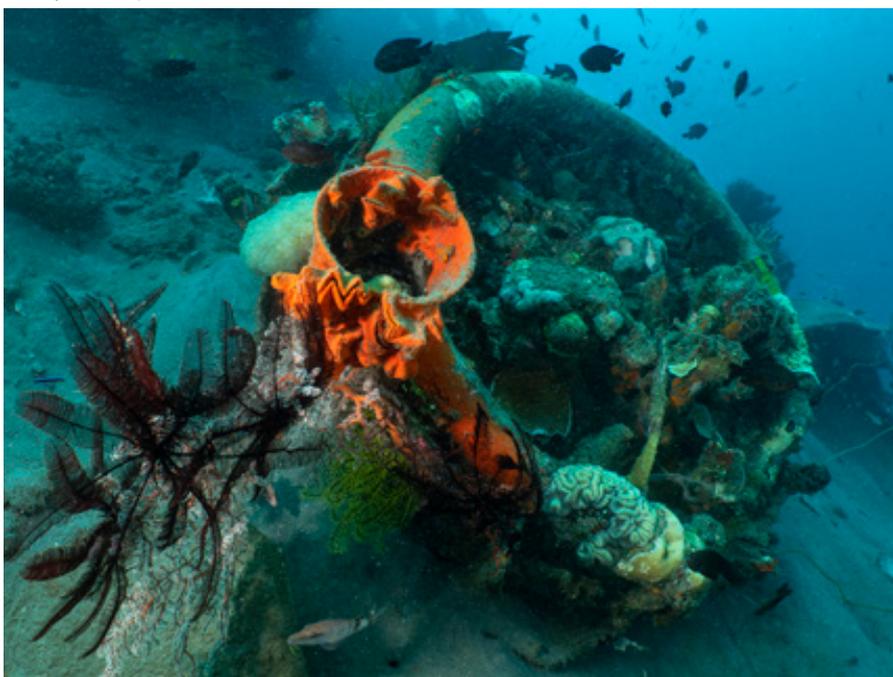


Looking down the barrels of the B17 bomber's machine-guns



Red whip corals on the hull of the I-1 submarine

Encrusting life providing a splash of colour to one of the engines of 'Bessy the Gap Basher', a B17 Bomber



along the gun barrels, and feel the bullet holes in a plane's wing, brought home the reality of war far more than words can.

Honiara itself is an fascinating juxtaposition of modern and traditional life and definitely worth exploring – from the bustle and colour of the daily market to the surrounding sights such as the US and Japanese war memorials.

While the climate in the Solomons is hot and humid, the accommodation on offer in Honiara is to a very high standard. The main hotels all have comfortable air-conditioned rooms and pools to cool you down at the end of the day, an essential if you feel the heat as much as me!



Next issue: Adventures waiting at Gizo and Munda!

INFO-SNIPPET

Getting there: Solomon Airlines fly out of Brisbane to the capital Honiara with an A320 and service domestic connections to all the main islands with a 36-seat Dash-8 and two 16-seater Twin Otters. It really is a friendly airline. Best of all they offer an additional bag allowance for divers!

NB: Early next year they will also be flying direct from Brisbane to Munda which has some of the best diving!