

An aerial photograph of a coral reef system. The water transitions from a deep, dark blue in the foreground to a lighter, turquoise blue over the reef, and finally to a pale, sandy beige where the reef meets the shore. A small, white sailboat with a blue stripe is visible on the dark blue water to the left of the main title.

# LOST WORLD

A journey through the Solomon Islands delivers  
untamed landscapes, cultural exchanges,  
historical shipwrecks and waters teeming  
with stunning marine life.

Words LAURA WATERS







**F**ROM THE MOMENT you step foot on the Solomon Islands, it feels as if you've landed at a wild frontier. The steamy equatorial nation — with almost 1000 islands across a relatively small patch of the South Pacific — is home to active volcanoes, giant crocodiles and turtles that glow in the dark. Emerald forests tumble into water with the clarity and colour of a cut sapphire, while sacred burial mounds hidden in thick jungle bear the skulls of a headhunting past.

As a global concern, overtourism is something that rears its head regularly, but there are no such problems here. Walk the streets of capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, or go to Gizo, one of the nation's other most-populated areas, and you'll be hard-pressed to spot any other tourists — yet it's only a three-hour flight from Brisbane. Statistics reveal more than 25,000 people visit annually, mostly to relax on remote islands, scuba dive the pristine reefs or take advantage of crowd-free surf breaks.

With limited transportation and infrastructure options, exploring beyond the resorts scattered across the islands largely involves the enlistment of a private guide. But as interest in unique travel experiences increases, operators are stepping up to meet the demand.

One such enterprise is Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises, which offers small-group excursions that solve any accessibility issues while opening up the opportunity for meaningful connections with the country and its people. Owner-

operator Belinda Botha explains: "The Solomon Islands are unique and unspoilt. There are very few places left on the planet like it. Cruising allows us to showcase the best of what the islands offer." And there is plenty to see, do and experience.

Aboard the 30-metre MV *Taka* (a custom-built dive boat), the company's itineraries explore both the Western and Central Provinces, each offering a blend of culture, history and wild natural beauty. But it is the dazzling good looks that really grab you. Green volcanic mountains mingle with low-lying coral atolls fringed by white sand. Sunsets are often dramatic, creating bubblegum pink and orange skies cut by towering tropical clouds. Beneath the ocean's surface, the kaleidoscope of colour continues across pristine coral reefs that buzz with marine life, offering a paradise for snorkellers and scuba divers. If you're not already certified, an introductory dive is included with the cruise to help whet your appetite.

Anywhere is a prime place to submerge yourself in the Solomons, however a night snorkel at Mane Island, north-west of Honiara, is nothing short of magical, providing an opportunity to witness coral biofluorescence. With a yellow mask lens and blue light torch in hand, the darkened reef is

transformed into one of strangely glowing pinnacles and mounds, almost as though someone had randomly daubed it with luminous green paint. It was here, just three years ago, that marine biologist David Gruber discovered that the local population of hawksbill sea turtles possessed the ability to fluoresce, in turn becoming the first reptile known to science exhibiting biofluorescence.

#### LOCAL CUSTOMS

Life in this slice of paradise revolves around the water, which stays a balmy 27–31°C all year round. The islanders travel on it, play in it and pull their food from it. About three quarters of the population lives off the water

and land, growing fruit and vegies to complement their catch. The presence of our ship often draws a flotilla of dugout canoes helmed by locals selling produce — papaya, melons and bundles of leafy greens. Solomons Pijin is spoken by the majority of the population, but English is the nation's official language, so the impromptu floating markets are prime opportunities for exciting cultural exchange. It's from unplanned encounters such as these that great travel memories are made.

With only 26 passengers and 12 local crew, life on the MV *Taka* has the informal vibe of hanging out with a group of friends. On one island stop-off, the crew demonstrates machete skills learned young, quickly whipping up a few tables and ready-to-drink coconuts hacked from the forest in preparation for a sunset barbecue on a powder-white beach. Dive instructor Sunga proves to be the go-to man for learning exactly how to weave flexible green palm fronds into 'dinner plates'. ➤

#### OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

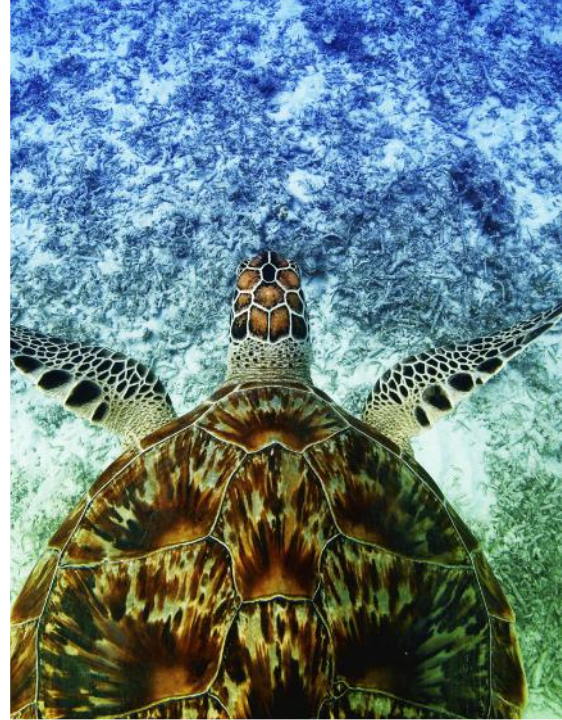
**LEFT** Locals sell produce in their canoes; hawksbill sea turtles are the only reptiles that can reflect light as fluorescent colours; natives in Honiara make a traditional palm basket; children from the remote village of Sasavele; stunning coral and sea life. **OPENER** Brilliant blue water surrounds the Solomon Islands.

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#### DETAILS

**Agnes Gateway Hotel** [www.agnes-hotelsolomon.com](http://www.agnes-hotelsolomon.com). **Dive Gizo** [www.divegizo.com](http://www.divegizo.com). **Dive Munda** [www.mundadive.com](http://www.mundadive.com). **Oravae Cottage** [www.oravaecottage.com](http://www.oravaecottage.com). **Papatura** [www.papatura.com](http://www.papatura.com). **Sanbis Resort** [www.sanbis-resort.com](http://www.sanbis-resort.com). **Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises** [www.sidcruises.com.au](http://www.sidcruises.com.au). **Uepi Island Resort** [www.uepi.com](http://www.uepi.com).







A full-page background image showing a diver in a blue ocean, exploring a large shipwreck. The diver is on the left, and the ship's structure, including a mast and debris, extends diagonally across the frame towards the bottom right.

The Solomon Islands has plenty of shallow-water wrecks for divers to explore.

## AS WE SAIL THE LAST LEG OF OUR CRUISE, BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS APPEAR TO RIDE THE BOW WAVE.

### EXPLORING THE ISLES


There are plenty of great experiences to be had, on land and in water, mostly in the main tourism hub of the Western Province. In Gizo, climb Kolombangara volcano or scuba-dive the reefs and wrecks such as the Japanese freighter *Toa Maru* or a US Hellcat fighter plane. Munda has superb diving and is the gateway for Skull Island, where you'll peer into a history of headhunting. For surfers, Santa Isabel and Gizo provide access to top breaks. Uepi Island Resort is the ultimate escape with a lovely lagoon.

Stopping off at Roderick Bay in the Central Province, we learn of *kastom* practices — a Pijin term for traditional beliefs and ways — and are treated to local women performing a welcoming song and dance in grass skirts and headbands made using seashells and dolphin teeth. The nearby village, accessed through rainforest, is home to about 400 people and offers a glimpse of how the vast majority of Solomon Islanders live. Thatched bamboo huts are linked by tidily kept trails lined with a few potted flowers, and there's a school and a church.

Just offshore, lying stricken in Roderick Bay is the dramatic wreck of cruise ship *MS World Discoverer*, which was beached in 2000 and now sprouts trees and vines across its decks. The ship has become a local kids' playground and is a focal point for visitors. Though more recent than most, the wreck is just one of many scattered about the sea floor of the Solomons.

World War II featured fierce fighting across the Solomons and, on the island of Tulagi, tourist officer Simon Teva points out some reminders of the history that was made here. At Blue Beach, where Allied forces landed in 1942 to fight the occupying Japanese, you can still see the Quonset huts that once stored ammunition tucked into hillsides and limestone cliffs pocked with bullet holes. Nearby, a stretch of water has earned itself the moniker of Ironbottom Sound for the dozens of warships and aircraft now littering its floor.

Another historical quirk can be found in the Western Province, near Gizo, where, in 1943, a Japanese destroyer sank a patrol boat — the *PT-109* — commanded by a youthful John F Kennedy. After swimming to an unoccupied nearby island, the young lieutenant and his stricken shipmates survived for days on nothing but coconuts, convinced they were completely stranded, before being spotted by a couple of local men in a canoe — Eroni Kumana and Biuku Gasa. Kennedy scratched a message asking for help into a coconut shell and Kumana and Gasa, putting their lives at risk, delivered it to an Australian coast watcher, ultimately prompting a rescue. The future American president never forgot the incident, maintaining contact with the two men throughout the rest of his life, and even using the coconut as a paperweight on his desk. In return, the Solomon Islands named Kennedy Island after him.

Peace has long since returned, leaving this pocket of the South Pacific a sleepy idyll once more. As we sail the last leg of our cruise, bottlenose dolphins appear to ride the bow wave and hammocks swing on the top deck of the *MV Taka*, inviting a slower pace of life. It would take months to unearth the many sights and stories held here. The Solomon Islands is raw yet beautiful, untamed yet safe. And it is worth making a visit now, before the rest of the world catches on. 

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