

Journey into the unknown.

by James Malcolm

Islandtime's James Malcolm swaps the tranquil beauty of New Zealand's Coromandel Coast for an island hopping adventure through the serene waters of the Solomon Islands.







World Discoverer wreck ©Mike Bhana

Remember Star Trek's the classic sci-fi TV series? You may recall their mission was to 'boldly go where no man has gone before'. My Solomon Islands assignment was not quite as audacious as that, but I did anticipate travelling into the unknown. And to be honest, I couldn't wait. Many of my adventures have been to out-of-the-way places, where you can get away from the crowds and get a feel for life as it is. The eight day itinerary with Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises promised a Pacific Island version of this and I'm happy to say it delivered.

Smiles for miles.

When you first step on board the *MV Taka*, you'll meet the local crew who will greet you with the warmest of smiles. They're a little shy to start (no doubt a reflection of the laid back place they live), but in next-to-no-time you'll enjoy some great banter and a ton of laughs. Relaxed attitude aside, the crew are also very professional. On-board safety is a top priority and each cruise starts with a thorough briefing on the rules that govern behaviour on the vessel. Most of it is common sense, but it's still reassuring to know you're in safe hands.

Blood, sweat and tears.

Belinda Botha is the owner of *MV Taka*. Belinda has owned and operated dive operations in the Solomon Islands for some time and these Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises have only come about because of her vision and drive to make it happen. After all, custom building *MV Taka* into a live-aboard vessel was no small task. Belinda was close to tears when she addressed us, such is her passion for this venture and the Solomon Islands in general. It's a place she loves to call home.

Lazy no. Active yes.

If you think you're going to come on board the *MV Taka* and do next-to-nothing, this cruise isn't really for you. Yes, there's time for chilling out with your favourite book, or kicking back with a few cold beers, but the emphasis is on trying new things and making the most of this pristine natural environment.

What a way to start the day.

Each day started with an early morning yoga session. Top deck of the *MV Taka* was our floating studio and you couldn't imagine a more inspiring place to stretch – looking out across serene, blue waters and lush tropical rainforest. The only sounds you hear is the chirping of colourful birds also waking from their morning slumber! Correction. The other sound was the instruction of *MV Taka's* resident yogi, who takes everyone through a routine of gentle poses and focused

breathing. I have to admit that the first few days were a bit of shock to my system, but as the cruise went on, my body did start to loosen up and I began each day looking forward to the session. Funnily enough I've kept the yoga up at home.

Surf perfection.

The Solomon Islands has been on the radar of travelling surfers for some years now, but as a rule it has remained uncrowded. Most surfers stick to the handful of dedicated surf resorts spread across the various islands. This Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises is not a 'surf charter' as such, but if you do like riding the waves you could be in for a real treat.

I've been surfing for a good 35 years, and still get in the water weekly. I couldn't believe my eyes when we motored into a sheltered bay and off in the distance is a perfect left hand reef break peeling along a deserted point. Not a single surfer in the water. Unbelievable. My first thought was 'how do I get out there?' Second thought, my mates at home are never going to believe my luck.

For a surfer, this was like winning Lotto. One of the crew dropped me off to the break and for the next four hours I had the time of my life. Perfect waves, warm crystal clear water and colourful coral everywhere. Boom.

Surfing aside, the *MV Taka* comes packed with a myriad of water toys such as paddleboards, wakeboards, tube and canoes. You can spend hours exploring the calm, crystal clear waters at your leisure.

Underwater wonders.

Scuba divers were the first 'tourists' to visit the Solomon Islands. Home to over 900 islands, it's a divers (and snorkelers) paradise. This untouched beauty has an abundance of World War II relics that now form artificial reefs teeming with masses of fish and an incredible variety of coral. Then add in caves, drop-offs, ledges, turtles, rays and hammerheads!

On this voyage every stop-off point was amazing, but the standout was Mane Island, a small island within the Russell Islands Group. Over the years I've spent a lot of time in the water, but without a doubt, this snorkelling experience opened up a whole new world.

The visibility was mind-blowing and the marine life literally swarmed around you. If the morning dive wasn't good enough, the afternoon dive through the famous 'Leru Cut' was like being on another planet. This long narrow passage cuts deep into the island. As you move along, shafts of sunlight filter through the trees creating a magical light show. Wow!

Genuine connection.

In some South Pacific destinations it's common for visitors to enjoy their holiday without ever coming into contact with people in the local community – apart from the staff they might meet at a resort. There isn't anything wrong with that, but in the Solomon Islands, visitors should expect their travel to be much more immersive. The itinerary of the *MV Taka* was the perfect example.

On almost every stop we were met by men, women and children from the local villages, who would paddle up to our vessel in traditional, dug out canoes. Each one carrying a bounty of fruit and vegetables - bananas, pineapples and papaya - all freshly picked and delicious. It's a simple way of life in the Solomon Islands. And it's fascinating to soak it all in and compare it to our own busy Western lifestyles.

Later in the voyage we have the opportunity to get a deeper understanding of everyday life during a village visit. After tendering to a beautiful beach on Karamulun Island we're met by an older gentleman who is the village chief. He has a regal air about him and he graciously leads us to his village where the dancers are waiting in traditional dress. The colours are amazing and the performance is quite spectacular. The stars of the show are the children, their big smiles are infectious. Again, the people in the village have a natural shyness, but they soon warm up. After 'breaking the ice' they walk us through their home with pride (and an insightful running commentary). They're lovely people that have been untarnished by the outside world and they're a joy to be around.

One heck of a wreck.

One of the most fascinating experiences on this cruise was the visit to Roderick Bay, where a cruise ship named *World Discoverer* struck a large uncharted rock and was grounded on the shoreline to avoid sinking. That unfortunate event happened on April 30, 2000. After nearly two decades being beaten by the elements, the wreck is ravaged by rust and overgrown with plant life. Against this unique backdrop we all enjoy a barbeque on the beach, a fantastic swim (with rope swing) and another first-class performance of song and dance.

Walking through wartime.

When you're cruising through such tranquil waters, it's hard to picture the same place being a war zone. But in 1942, some of the most intense fighting of World War II took place in the Solomon Islands. The Japanese had occupied the islands and had begun construction of naval and air bases, in part, to block the supply line between the



Fact File:

Solomon Islands Discover Cruises

Vessel

The *MV Taka* is a luxurious 30-metre live-aboard vessel that offers the best on-board accommodation in the Solomon Islands.

Crew

A 12-person crew includes your trip director, skipper, boat crew, wait staff and chefs.

Living Area

A large air-conditioned lounge and dining area with great food, TVs, DVDs and a dedicated camera area for our photographers.

Cabins

Four categories – Master, Deluxe, Standard, Quad.

Cuisine

Local and international flavours using fresh, local produce.

United States, Australia and New Zealand. The Allies countered the Japanese with a campaign of hard fought battles in the central and northern Solomons.

It was fascinating to stop off on the island of Tualagi and see some of the remnants of war and hear some amazing stories of hardship and bravery. The American Marines overcame the Japanese command posts during the Battle of Tualagi, but not before 307 Japanese and 45 marines had died. Rusty machine guns still litter the island, along with caves where the Japanese went to great effort to store their ammunition and supplies. Grenades, mortars and even light tanks were used in the fighting and in desperation the Japanese resorted to hand-to-hand combat when their ammunition ran out. Very sobering stuff.

A trip to remember.

Belinda Botha has created an active itinerary that makes the most of the Solomon Islands natural environment, unique culture and rich history. It's not a sit back and relax luxury cruise – it's not meant to be. It's more a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get outside your comfort zone and try new experiences that will leave a lasting imprint. If you're after a 'real' adventure in one of the most beautiful, unspoiled places on earth, quite simply, get on board. **LI**



James Malcolm visited the Solomon Islands as a guest of Tourism Solomons, Solomon Islands Discover Cruises and Solomon Airlines. For more information visit Tourism Solomons www.visitsolomons.com.sb, Solomon Islands Discover Cruises www.sidcruises.com.au and Solomon Airlines - www.flysolomons.com.