

## DESTINATION SOLOMON ISLANDS



# Cruising

*The enchanted archipelago*

For the past six mornings we've awoken to one extraordinary location after another, beginning each day with a gentle yoga session

In the pre-dawn darkness luminescent plankton hovers in a silken sea, twinkling as bright as a starry sky. A lone reef shark glides silently beyond the dive platform, its white tipped dorsal fin piercing the surface like a knife. Our stern mooring line hangs limply from a gnarly mangrove tree. As the sky lightens in the east forest shadows retreat, revealing dense jungle clinging to a vertical cliff. The silence is broken by birdsong.

We begin our first round of sun salutations on the sky deck, breathing pure forest-filtered air into our lungs as yoga instructor Katie Thomson guides us through our daily yoga class.

"Focus your attention on this beautiful view, take a deep breath and hold," she instructs. A sense of serenity washes over us as we absorb the silence, the peace, the absolute tranquility of the crescent-shaped cove we've awoken to.

The previous day a pod of dolphins had escorted us into this anchorage at Mane Bay, in the Russell Islands Group north of Honiara.

This morning's tranquillity is a substantial contrast to the previous when the bay was a convulsing knot of cross-cultural humanity. Then, the water was churning as 20 or more dugout canoes, Solomon Islanders' ubiquitous form of transport, hung off our stern, the kids clambering on board or swinging off the mooring line. Hand-carved from a single tree trunk, some of these canoes were captained by blond, tousle-haired youngsters barely old enough to dress themselves yet capably propelling a canoe. Others were piled high with produce: pineapples, papaya, bananas and coconuts, tomatoes, leafy greens and sweet potatoes. Brisk negotiations ensued between farmers and crew as Chef Charles adapted his menu to suit available produce. But for the kids who turned

PICTURES: Fiona Harper and SIDE.





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up in droves, the main action was in the water, creating their own laughter-rich soundtrack which echoed around the bay. Six or more youngsters piled upon inflatable SUP boards. Others were towed behind the ship's tenders on an inflatable tube. Adding to the cacophony of activity, guests water-skied or wake-boarded, dived off the top deck, snorkelled the shoreline, paddled dugout canoes with the locals or simply floated in the sea amongst the good-natured chaos. It was exhausting, but in the way of those rare tropical holidays that leave you equally spent, yet exhilarated; inspired and enchanted.

For the past six mornings we've awoken to one extraordinary location after another, beginning each day with a gentle yoga session before the day's more exuberant activities begin. Snorkelling and scuba diving, water skiing and tubing, skurfing and surfing, SUP boarding and swimming, village

walks and cultural performances fill much of the daylight hours. In quieter moments we relax in hammocks with a book, chat with fellow guests and laugh with crew members who have noticeably gained in confidence as they get to know our dozen guests on-board.

And we eat. We eat well. One day it's a beach BBQ on a tiny slip of an island. Another it's sundowners and snacks against a scarlet sunset viewed from the Sky Deck, the precursor to dinner. Each night we fall into a satisfied slumber, our skin tingling with the kiss of tropical sunshine.

We explore villages on Karomulun and Marulaon Islands and are privileged to witness Marulaon Villagers' inaugural public dance performance as they open their arms to visitors for the first time. Ever-inventive, musicians fashion instruments from bamboo into pan pipes. Plastic pipes cut to different lengths are struck with rubber thongs to create foot-tapping rhythms.



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A plastic drum and improvised didgeridoo provide bass notes. It is grass roots culture at its most entertaining as villagers watch from the shadows, erupting into belly-bursting laughter as our group is invited up to dance. Our group of eleven passengers have travelled from as far afield as Mauritius, New Zealand and Australia to join MV Taka to cruise through one of the world's last remaining wildernesses.

Tourism is a burgeoning industry in the Solomons, with the seven-night Solomon Islands Discovery Cruise through the Florida and Russel Islands offering an extraordinary introduction to the country's cultural and scenic treasures. With almost 1,000 islands, only 147 of which are inhabited, travelling by small expedition-style ship seems so logical it's surprising that it's taken until now for intimate cruising to be offered. Previously flying between islands was the only real option with Solomon Airlines flying to Honiara from Brisbane and Port Vila with domestic connections to around 20 regional airstrips.

The archipelago has always been popular with divers attracted by gin-clear water and a plethora of WWII wrecks that, after 70-odd years, have become popular habitats for marine creatures. Snorkellers too are spoilt, with hard and soft corals along with an abundance of fish life. Little-known treasures like Leru Cut are equally spectacular for both snorkellers and divers. Here a vertical-sided cavern plunges to a depth of 12m and is lit by shards of light piercing through aquamarine water. Ancient and timeless, it feels like something from the lost world. But there is much more to the Solomons than dive sites and the MV Taka is your ticket to cultural and geographical treasures found nowhere else.

At Roderick Bay, the 87m-long ship World Discoverer's cruising days ended abruptly after striking a reef. The wreck now lies in shallow water on her starboard side 20m from



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the beach. The ship's former white-painted topsides sprout trees poking through portholes. Ceramic tiles cling stubbornly to swimming pool walls pitched at an alarming angle. Village children launch themselves from a flying fox and rope swings, creating their own maritime adventure playground.

For Belinda Booth, who fell in love with the country during her first visit in 2013, the Solomon Islands are simply magical, promising enchanting possibilities seen nowhere else. A successful business dynamo focused on sustainable tourism, she is passionate about empowering locals and developing their skills by creating employment opportunities. Having developed tourism operations in South Africa and the Caribbean prior to landing in the Solomon's Booth understands the extraordinary attractions the Solomon Islands offer to travellers looking for authentic, raw experiences that are managed sustainably for the long term.

"The Solomon Islands are one of the world's last wild frontiers. We need to protect it," she says. Booth's blue sky vision is to see the country's first qualified female maritime captain. She's also keen to assist villagers to create cultural tourism opportunities.

Multi-skilled twenty-something Cruise Director Chevone Whittaker, who has qualifications as a Chef, Human Resources Manager and Dive Instructor, says the best part of her job is



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the people she works with along with passengers who come aboard. The Solomon Islander crew take great pleasure in sharing the adventure with guests, even composing their own farewell song which brings much laughter and happy tears when sung on the last evening.

"I enjoy the environment of being on a small vessel, meeting different types of people from many countries. But also working with this amazing Solomon Islander crew and seeing how they react with each other and international guests is what I enjoy most," she explains.

Whittaker says that the Discovery Cruise has some flexibility to accommodate passenger interests within reason, whether they be cultural, photographic, surfing, diving or snorkelling oriented. If there was demand, yoga classes could be expanded to twice daily or incorporate yoga under the stars. It's all about understanding and anticipating guest needs.

"The great thing about the Discovery Cruise is that we can adjust the schedule and the type of activities we do," she says, her face lighting up as she describes the thrill of taking four absolute beginners through an introductory scuba course.

A seasoned surfer from New Zealand on his first visit to the Solomons declares the surf break near Marovagi to be one of the best he's encountered anywhere in the world. It's a big call.



Right on cue, while steaming between islands, when the dorsal fin of a pilot whale breaks the surface Captain Jackson brings MV Taka to a stand-still so we can watch the giant mammal cruise unhindered through the pass.

The hour we spend watching the whale and the sense of wonderment over the entire vessel as we gather on the bow is just one of many highlights of a week bursting with them. My advice? Cruise the Solomon Islands now before the word gets out about this little-known paradise. 🌴

#### MORE INFORMATION

Solomon Islands Discovery Cruise: [sidcruises.com.au](http://sidcruises.com.au)


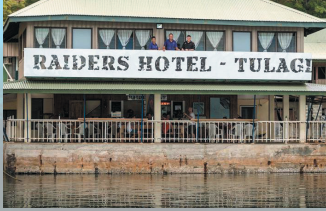


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