

FLOATING INTO THE FARAWAY

Finding solace in the Solomon Islands is an easy task on a new cruise that combines history, nature and culture.

Words Leah Glynn Photography Gerald Rambert

The MV Taka drops anchor at stunning Maravagi.



A floating crowd assembles to do business in Mane Bay.

It's 6.23am according to my Fitbit, and the hot trickle of sweat snaking its way from the back of my neck, down my cheek and directly into the furrowed crease of my brow tells me we're in for another sultry day in the Solomons.

I'm struggling to hold a graceful downward dog position, and the gentle rocking of the boat is making it almost impossible to keep my balance. As for emptying my mind and focusing on nothing but the present – the slightest breath of a warm breeze and the gentle chant of “omm” – I'm failing miserably and already thinking ahead to breakfast, the day's scuba dive and whether it's possible to get sunburn at such an early hour.

This is the daily 5.30am yoga session aboard the MV *Taka*. Well, it would be if it started on time, but out here we're on what's affectionately known as 'island time', which means any semblance of punctuality no longer exists, replaced instead by a more relaxed 'go with the flow' vibe.

Myself and 11 others are travelling with Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises, on a seven-night voyage exploring the gorgeous Florida and Russell Islands. Our trusty vessel is the aforementioned MV *Taka*, a 30-metre liveaboard that boasts 12 comfortable cabins, a communal dining area and more than enough space for lounging around. It's no *Queen Mary 2*, but if you've come to the Sollies in search of five-star luxury, well, this probably isn't the right trip for you.

Still untouched and relatively removed from the majority of the modern trappings that have infiltrated much of the South Pacific, there was little I knew of the Solomon Islands before touching down, apart from it being home to some of the friendliest people on Earth and also being ridiculously, rub-your-eyes-it-can't-be-real beautiful.

Even the flight time was a surprise – it's just a three-hour trip with Solomon Airlines to Honiara, the capital, from Brisbane.

Comprising 992 islands – of which just 147 are inhabited – the Solomons welcome only 30,000 tourists annually, most of them avid divers lured by the promise of pristine, healthy reefs or history buffs interested in the fierce violence that erupted in the archipelago between the Japanese and American allies during World War II.

It's a narrative the team behind Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises is hoping to enhance via these new seafaring expeditions. On a mission to showcase another side of the Solomons, the cruise has been carefully crafted to offer cultural experiences, an up-close look at some of the breathtaking natural attractions, plus a stack of water-based activities, all while still incorporating the ever-appealing diving and history components.

And that's exactly what I get on my week-long adventure, during which time normally spent checking Instagram is replaced with surfing or stand-up paddleboarding, while regular Netflix sessions are swapped for nightly bouts of stargazing.

With yoga done and dusted by 7am it's time for a hearty breakfast. Steaming somewhere out in the middle of the ocean, you'd be forgiven for expecting little more than cereal and toast on the menu. Not on the *Taka*.

With the kitchen manned by local chefs Charles and Fred – in fact, all *Taka's* crew members are Solomon Islanders – it's not long before a feast emerges from the depths of the galley. Bacon, eggs cooked to your preference, pancakes, sauteed veggies, fresh tropical fruit, yoghurt... You name it, they'll cook it up for you, even cereal and toast, if that's all you fancy.

It's a meal designed to fuel us for our upcoming scuba dive at White Beach, the site of an old World War II wreck, in the Russell Islands. A former American military base, White Beach was abandoned hastily and all equipment simply pushed into the water by soldiers upon departure. That means there's

a plethora of vehicles, machinery and artefacts lying just below the surface.

Despite considering myself quite the water baby, I've never had the opportunity to go diving before, and I'm half terrified, half excited about the prospect of giving it a crack.



In deep meditation during a morning yoga session.



The MS *World Discoverer* at its final resting place, Roderick Bay.

The ship is now an unorthodox playground for the island’s kids who have built flying foxes, rope swings and diving platforms on the upper levels.

Our crew consists of two fully qualified PADI dive instructors, and our cruise leader, Chevone Whitaker, is also fully qualified. Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises was founded by Belinda Botha, who operates the highly successful Dive Munda in the Western Province of the Sollies, so naturally diving is part of the itinerary.

Newbies like myself are offered the opportunity to undertake the introductory PADI course, which permits guided dives down to 12 metres below sea level. Chevone, who also happens to be Belinda’s niece, takes our crew of four dive virgins through the required dry-land training, during which my initial buzz of excited nerves turns to full-blown terror.

“The most important thing to remember is to keep breathing,” Chevone states matter-of-factly. It sounds simple enough, but with various hand signals to remember and emergency procedures running through my head, I’m beginning to worry my natural breathing instincts may not kick in.

Trying to keep a lid on my heightened emotions, we head to the shallows to test out our newly learned skills in the lukewarm, aquamarine waters. With every fibre of my mind and body convinced the act of surviving underwater is impossible, I’m shocked upon taking my first gasp and finding that, yes, the equipment actually works and, no, I haven’t drowned yet.

And that’s all it takes for me to completely relax. Before long I’m descending into the depths of the water, dappled sunlight illuminating the passing reef and highlighting corals the colours of Pantone swatches – lavender, peach, buttercup yellow and burnt orange. Tropical fish dart past leftover bullets and casings, while royal blue starfish cling to pieces of scrap metal once used for communication towers.

Time ceases to exist underwater, and after what feels like five minutes we slowly make our way back to the real world. I clumsily clamber back on the boat, a round of applause greeting my fellow first-timers and I, before a freshly cracked coconut is thrust into my hands. Through a giant grin I knock it back, quickly discovering nothing tastes sweeter than that first post-dive bev.

After that, a feeling of euphoria doesn’t quite leave me. It’s present during our visit to Roderick Bay, a place that has become somewhat of a reluctant tourist destination thanks to the wreck of the MS *World Discoverer*, a German cruise ship that ran aground in the bay in April 2000. A looming presence – the ship is more than 80 metres in length – it’s now an unorthodox playground for the island’s kids, who have built flying foxes, rope swings and diving platforms on the upper levels.

The warm welcome we receive from Chief Patrick and his community is one of flowered leis, fresh coconuts, dancing and music. They’ve come to embrace the increased interest in their island since the wreck turned their home into an attraction, and aren’t shy about sharing stories, showing us their wares and offering tours of the village.



The kids aren’t camera shy in the Sollies.



A local child in a dug-out canoe.



Children of all ages dress in traditional garb and participate in welcome performances when tourists visit.

That feeling is there again when we drop anchor at Mane Bay. Enticed into the water by the promise of waterskiing, stand-up paddleboarding and snorkelling, it doesn't take long for word of our arrival to spread.

Within minutes we're surrounded by children of all ages – some as young as two, who seem barely able to walk let alone paddle – in wooden dug-out canoes, eager to trade their form of transport for ours. SUP boards and blow-up unicorns are quickly commandeered and my fellow cruisers and I realise we've fallen victim to a calculated and well-practised ambush. There's nothing we can do about it, of course, as these kids rule the waters.

Over by the *Taka*, business is getting underway. An important ethos of the Solomon Island Discovery Cruises is a focus on sustainable tourism, and a way of delivering on that promise is by actively involving the local communities. It's the reason why island visits and hosted performances are so integral to the cruise, and why more than 30 canoes, loaded with fresh fruit and vegetables, have suddenly converged on the boat.

This makeshift floating marketplace – every bit as loud and enthusiastic as one you'd expect in Southeast Asia – allows for both the boat to top

up its supplies (the use of fresh, local ingredients for our meals is an outstanding feature of the trip) and provides a monetary opportunity for the residents of Mane to sell and trade their produce. It's an ongoing agreement every time the *Taka* steams into the bay, and a win-win for all involved, especially in these outer islands where any form of income from tourism is virtually non-existent.

Our final morning begins as all the others have: alarms going off at 5.25am for yoga on the top deck. This particular morning, though, our view is slightly different. We're on the outskirts of Honiara and there's a slight haze in the air, while that unmistakable end-of-holiday feeling reverberates between my fellow yogis and I.

As we settle into the now familiar moves of our sun salutations, I once again slip into the familiar pattern of thinking ahead to what's on during the day: taxis, flights, transfers and more flights. I feel the slightest hint of anxiety start to creep in, so I take a couple of extra-deep breaths and sneak a peek at the orange-hued horizon instead.

I may have fallen out of step with the rest of the group as a result, but I figure since we're still technically on island time, it's not going to matter too much if I soak up the last of the early-morning Solilies sun for just a little longer. ☺

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Solomon Airlines flies return from Brisbane to Honiara four times a week.
flightsolomons.com



TOUR THERE

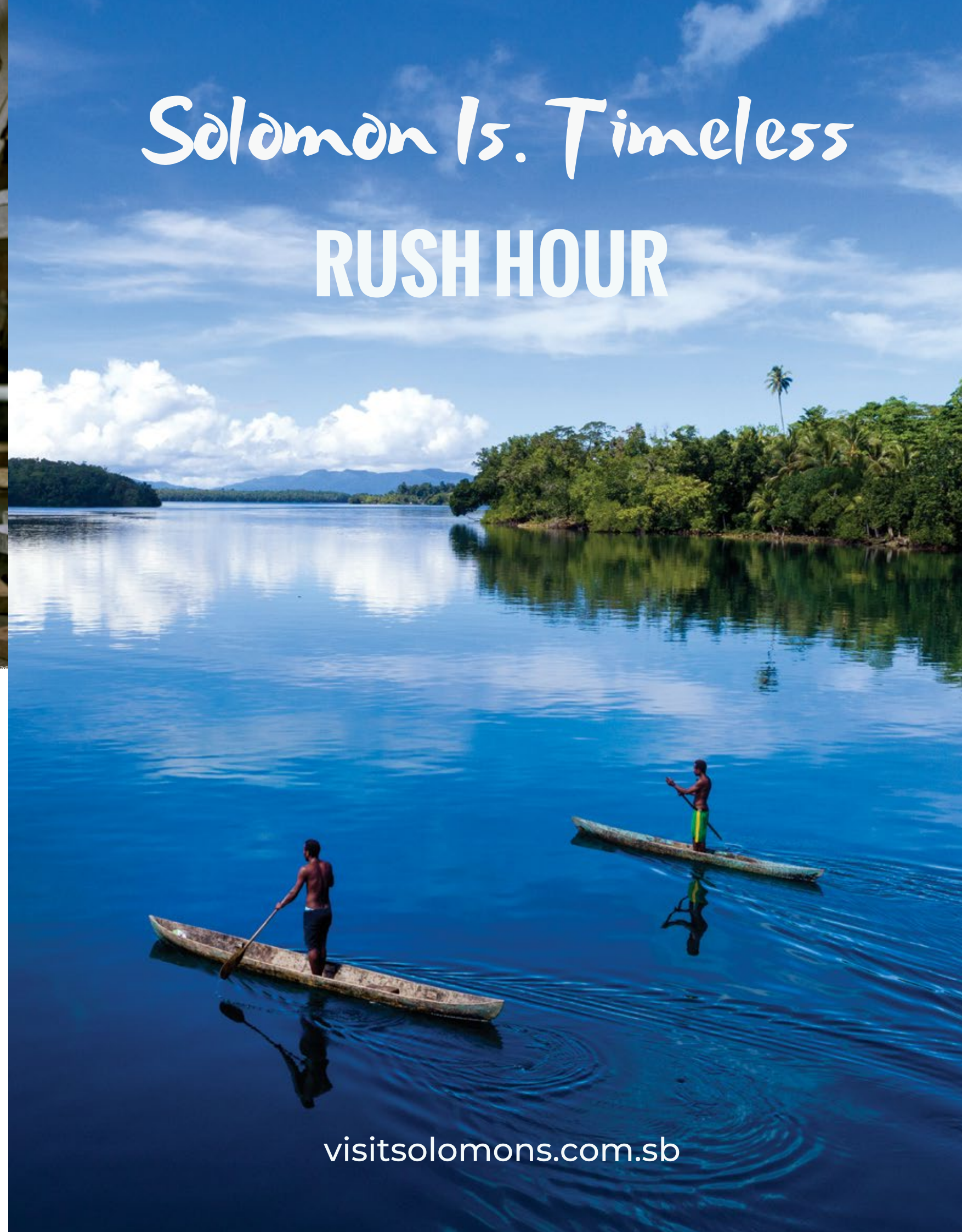
Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises offers seven-night tours of the Florida and Russell Islands, departing and returning to Honiara, from AU\$2499 for a quad-share room. This price is inclusive of all meals and activities. A daily kastom fee of AU\$30 per person applies separately. Scuba diving gear is available to rent.
sidcruises.com.au



GET INFORMED

For more information on planning your trip to the Solomon Islands, including accommodation options, activities, transfers and health and safety advice, head to the Visit Solomons tourism website.
visitsolomons.com.sb

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