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SOLOMON ISLANDS TOURISM POLISHING THE GEM

By Samantha Magick

In one short week in Solomon Islands, I snorkelled remarkably fish-rich reefs, visited a rustic, fascinating and deserted-but-for-me war museum, meandered through food markets, ate leaves smothered in ngali nuts straight from the fire on an atoll beach, talked to local artists about their work, and spent hours staring out to sea watching the colour of the water change and squalls race across the horizon.

I was one of just 30,000 or so people who visited Solomon Islands last year. In terms of holiday visitors, the Solomon Islands receives less than one percent of the Pacific market share.

The country aims to do better.

The ambitious 2015-2019 National Tourism Development Strategy aimed to see tourism generate over SI\$700 million for the economy (or 7 percent of national GDP), increase the number of those employed in the workforce through tourism to 30,000 and increase the total number of arrivals to 32,500 (equating to 9.2 percent growth per annum) amongst other metrics. The final analysis is not yet in, but there is a sense there is still a way to go. Most of the country's visitors come from Australia, with smaller numbers coming from Asia, New Zealand, the US, Papua New Guinea, and, like me, from other Pacific Island nations.

So what is the Solomons drawcard in a crowded and competitive market? Every industry figure we spoke to, local or not, pointed first to the country's rich and diverse cultures.

"The DNA for the destination is the culture," says Tourism Solomons CEO Josefa Tuamoto. "Here there are so many cultures, within a province there is so much and so authentic. When I say authentic, I mean it."

Tuamoto is a Fijian with many years of experience in that country's tourism industry. Also hailing from Fiji is James McGoon, who has a background in finance and banking. Now the Senior Business Advisor at Strongim Bisnis, McGoon is a fan of the sense of 'thrill and adventure' offered by the Solomon Islands.

"For Fijians, there is a strong relationship to peacekeepers... but when you come to Solomon Islands, it is alive. You actually see and feel the remains of war. But more than that it is the culture, it is the people we have. It's less commercialised and its spectacular... I think it appeals to those who are willing to try something different, and to come back and experience life in its simplest form."

The connection to living history is perhaps epitomised by Barney Paulsen, who runs a quite remarkable museum from a shed in his Munda backyard. The Peter Joseph World War II Memorial Museum is a room overflowing with war relics. Nothing is labelled but it is all meticulously organised by type and origin (American or Japanese) and Paulsen himself is a walking catalogue.

He first picked up a US dog tag (belonging to Peter Joseph Palatini, hence the museum's name) in 2002, and has not stopped collecting artefacts since. His favourite items? "I love the Tommy Gun, brass knuckle duster, those dog tags," he says, pointing at a bracelet of metal plates. Visiting his museum is a special experience; you feel like one of the privileged few. It is this sense that you are seeing something few others have witnessed that Solomon Islands tourism leaders hope to leverage.

POSITIVE SIGNS

Sanjay Bhargava, the General Manager of the Heritage Park Hotel which is a sprawling property in central Honiara, has seen a lot of change in the industry since he arrived from India in 2010.

For a start he says it is easier to find the right staff. "We don't struggle so much nowadays to get the right people; we find willing workers and we find committed workers." The hotel prefers to take university and college trainees, "because we like them to feel that their education is being recognised" but also has an in-house training manager to maintain standards and support staff who may not have had the advantage of formal tertiary education. He also employs staff from Fiji, part of the regional mobile workforce because, "they are interested in their own growth...and when their attitude is good, there is nothing to stop them."

Visiting Munda in Solomon Islands' Western Province, we had some insight into what industry training looked like when we landed on the beach where the Tabaka Technical Institute is based. Instructors there took a few minutes to show us around the instruction areas, and a small accommodation area that was being finished for guests. The Institute offers a Certificate III course in Tourism and Hospitality, with students learning how to host guests and do basic book-keeping in content that is customised and informed by industry consultants.

Late last year Taiwan shifted diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China. Settle into a cane chair at the Heritage Park Hotel's veranda restaurant, and you can peruse a Chinese tea menu. It's a little touch designed to cater for Asian guests says Bhargava, and predated the diplomatic switch. He predicts the switch will bring major changes to the industry, "maybe big time investors, they'll definitely be improvement in tourism."

Tourism Solomons' Tuamoto hopes the switch will see Chinese investment in the sector. "That would be a big thing for us apart from just the sheer numbers in terms of marketing. That would open up a lot of things."

"If you ask anyone in tourism in the Solomons, their main issue is infrastructure. That needs to be developed so that it is much easier to access. If the Chinese government is able to support that, they're talking about supporting the Pacific Games, that's part of our sports tourism angle so we can



Young performers at Saeragi in Western Province



Dogtags at the Peter Joseph World War II Memorial Museum at Munda



The view from the Agnes Gateway Hotel



Sanjay Bhagvara at the Heritage Park Hotel



Josefa Tuamoto, CEO of Tourism Solomons

utilise that and hopefully that same complex can start to host the big conventions,” Tuamoto says.

Bhargava agrees, but says work needs to be done to attract Chinese visitors. “It needs a little more attraction for them. They need to have more glamour. We need casinos. We need places where people can spend money.”

When asked about niche and emerging markets, Tourism Solomons CEO Tuamoto laughs and says, “we are the niche, ‘because we have 30,000 arrivals [per annum] and that’s like a day in Fiji.” The sector strategic plan sets out a goal of 60,000 visitors annually by 2025, which could generate SI\$1 billion (A\$179 million) in revenue.

For the Heritage Park, conferences are a big market, and they are expanding conference facilities to meet this demand. Conferences and functions contribute 40 percent of business to the food and beverage operations.

The 2023 Pacific Games is also seen as a huge opportunity. Bhargava says about 9000 rooms will be required, and while many of them will be in schools, hostels and private houses; hotels and other tourism properties will also benefit. China has already committed to funding infrastructure for the Games.

There are other promising developments on the horizon. The newly-landed cable link should improve digital connectivity, and hopefully bring down costs for businesses such as the Heritage Park, which keeps its customers connected from the time they land at the airport and board the hotel bus, to the moment they leave.

Solomon Airlines flies from its Honiara base to 21 domestic destinations. It also operates international flights to Brisbane, Fiji, Vanuatu and Kiribati using an Airbus A320, and has codeshare flights to other destinations with Air Niugini, Air Vanuatu, Qantas Airways and Air Kiribati. Just last year, Solomon Airlines started a direct flight from Brisbane, Australia to Munda in the Western Province, which is opening up new opportunities in that province.

Strongim Bisnis works with tourism operators, particularly small businesses in the provinces, to work together to better promote their destinations, build capacity and learn from each other. It is working with the Western Province Tourism Association to increase memberships and deliver training in connection with the new Brisbane-Munda service, with Solomon Islands Discovery Expeditions to market new domestic cruises, and helping roll out minimum accommodation standards alongside the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Strongim Bisnis is also supporting loan applicants and helping them to complete applications for flexible loans initiated by Solomon Airlines and the New Zealand government. The Solomon Islands Tourist Infrastructure Development Fund was established to help operators in Western Province with interest-free loans to improve the standard of accommodation. Early loan recipients included Munda’s Agnes Gateway Hotel, Titiru Lodge and Zipolo Habu Lodge.

The Agnes Gateway Hotel is currently being run by Derrick Kera, the grandson of its founder, the eponymous Agnes.

Kera said the family was proud to have built something local, and that the new flights from Brisbane had increased their occupancy rate, but there was still a lot to be done to maximise its potential, such as packages focused on diving, traditional fishing and other cultural experiences. But he also felt his country needs to think about what sort of tourism it wanted to create.

“[For] me personally I wouldn’t want something so big, there can be a lot of negative things tourism can bring.” Kera’s preference is for village, eco-based development; something the Western Province is ideally positioned to offer.

BARRIERS TO GROWTH


The leisure market makes up about 30 percent of Solomons visitor arrivals, with returning Solomon Islanders and business travellers making up significant proportions of arrivals. Tuamoto would like to see that rise to 50 percent or more, but says this requires more reasonably priced but high quality rooms.

“Prices are a big issue. If you want to bring a family, there’s flights and accommodation. That will get into your pockets when you can go to Fiji or Samoa, Tonga or Vanuatu for half the price.”

Tuamoto also sees opportunity in the creation of more packages. Currently there are only about seven wholesalers, and they tend to be focused on narrow niches such as diving, birdwatching, fishing, surfing and trekking.

Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) CEO, Atenasi Ata, works closely with Tourism Solomons and other industry bodies. Ata says for their membership broadly, priorities include unlocking land, advocating for enabling infrastructure, and taxation reform. Ata and her team have made strong calls for reduced utility costs. The SICCI Chair was also part of the government and business delegation to China late last year. Ata says regardless of who is the partner, the relationship should be about “job creation, it should be about enabling private sector growth in the country. One thing that we try and bring up is about sourcing local content as much as possible, so whether it is contractors, services providers, etc. that’s our angle of engagement.”

Like the SICCI, Bhargava at the Heritage Park would like to see changes to the taxation structure, and welcomes moves to introduce a Value Added Tax as a way of bringing more equity into the tax system. He says in some cases, items offered to guests are taxed three times if they are imported. The government has also flagged plans to introduce customs and excise changes this year.

The global tourism environment is expected to be grow this year, driven largely by Asian travellers. In the longer term, the Solomon Islands is well positioned to benefit from this with improvements to connectivity, pricing and accommodation offerings. The Solomon Islands tourism product—rooms, infrastructure, service, costs—needs a little refinement, tourism leaders agree. As Sanjay Bhargava put it, “It needs to be given a polish; it should shine out.” 

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