

T Vacations & Travel

AUTUMN 2020, ISSUE 114

Australia's
favourite
travel
magazine

THE Adventure Issue

PAPUA NEW GUINEA,
ICELAND'S ARCTIC COAST,
SOLOMON ISLANDS, THE SAHARA,
USA SKIING, AUSTRALIAN
RECOVERY TOURISM & MORE



PLUS: HOLIDAYS UNDER SAIL • VENTURE DEEP INTO VANUATU



#SOLOMON ISLANDS

Solomons reign supreme

Unspoiled, underexplored and uncrowded, the Solomon Islands offer visitors an island culture as fascinating as it is gentle.

Words by Bev Malzard

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O NEAR, AND YET... SO NEAR indeed. A group of Pacific islands north-east from Australia, just close enough to Papua New Guinea to pop over and borrow a cup of sugar, and barely a three-hour flight away from Brisbane, the Solomon Islands beckon the adventurous – the traveller who doesn't need to be coddled, who has forgotten what a genuine welcome and a shy smile feels like.

The Solomons are home to 650,000 people, on major islands and, at last count, 900 small ones. Some are unpopulated and others house small tribal communities, rustic villages and even schools, hospitals, and touristic concerns, with all these connected entities separated into ten provinces.

After an easy flight from Brisbane, I landed in the middle of a 37-degree steamy afternoon on Guadalcanal. The drive into the haphazard capital, Honiara, is a straight



OPENING PAGES: An uncrowded bay teeming with marine life. THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT: A shy visitor; Local islanders bringing fresh coconuts and fruit; Traditional dancers on Anuha; The women have lots of beaded accessories. NEXT PAGE: The men prefer paint for dramatic effect.



line of road. Some surface sections are rather 'rustic' and others are smooth as silken tofu; the Japanese government is rebuilding roads here.

Past higgledy piggledy rows of little market stalls laden with fat watermelons, hands of bananas, pawpaws, melons and an array of green vegies, there's a cramped row of betel nut shops, the *snack du jour*. Please no spitting.

EXPEDITION BY SEA

As easygoing as the Solomon Islands are, some of them aren't easy to get to and from. The islands are spread near and far, and transport limitations are left to untangle by local airlines, private charters and banana boats which are 'authentic', if not a little slow and basic.

For me, I'm being introduced to the Solomon Islands the perfect way: on the expedition ship *MV Taka*. Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises run the ship and offer a stunning experience to see much of this locale, above and below the water.

This is a small, boutique-style vessel with an array of activities to please all manner of

cruisers. Discovery Cruises' program offered by the company is more than the usual 'eat, dive, sleep' routine so often offered in this part of the world. Creative chefs plus yoga, surf, free dive and scuba instructors share the joy with Kastom cultural guides to introduce visitors to the islands' natural beauty, but also to meet the locals and be immersed, even for this short time, into the Solomons' culture and traditions.

While the divers dived, I took up residence in the clear shallows to float and ponder the meaning of life.

If diving is your thing, then your dreams will come true: exquisite coral gardens, underwater caves decorated with swaying sea plants and an array of tropical and pelagic (deepwater) fish and marine life that make these some of the top dive spots on the planet.

But being men and women in black disappearing below the surface is just one element of these cruises.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Solomon Airlines flies five times weekly from Brisbane to Honiara (3 hours, 15 minutes) on Airbus A320 aircraft. Economy fares include meal and beverage service and a generous allowance of 30kg checked luggage and 7kg of cabin baggage. On Saturdays, flights from Brisbane fly direct to Munda, renowned as one of the world's most desirable dive destinations, before continuing on to Honiara. flysolomons.com

Tourism Solomons
visitsolomons.com.sb

Solomon Islands Discovery Cruises
sidcruises.com.au

As each day onboard unfolds, there is a new vista to absorb. A delightful sight is to see tiny dugout canoes being paddled in the middle of the sea – where do they come from, where are they going? Tiny kids, no more than five or six years old, are paddling furiously to get to our ship or to their island. Sometimes, two or three in the dugout, they fall out, scream with laughter and climb back in. They are smiling little superheroes.

The *MV Taka's* salon is where to head for breakfast and check out the day's activities. This is where the magic happens. The food is so good and servings so generous, we all linger longer to eat and talk. This lovely, cool (blessed air-con) space is for enjoying the meals, hanging with the crew, getting the plan for the adventures ahead and then meeting up to compare the day's experiences afterwards.

First stop was a classic deserted beach on Karamulun Island, one of the Nggela (or Florida) Islands. While the divers dived, I took up residence in the clear shallows to float or paddleboard, and ponder the meaning of life. We sat in the shade of the





noble palm tree (is there nothing this tree can't provide for sustenance?) and the more nimble-fingered of our small group made our own serving baskets for the beach lunch.

The next day of discovery was at Mbonegi, a highly prized dive site. The shallow parts of the sea here yield rusting WWII barges, discarded elements of occupation and hulks of crashed planes that remain as spectres of the past. Reports from the divers were glowing with ecstatic reviews of the ghostly encounters. I sat on deck in the breezy bliss, continuing to ponder the meaning of life.

WALKING THROUGH HISTORY

A morning on the island of Tulagi introduced us to this once-colonial capital of the Solomons that was occupied for a few industrious months (May 1942) by the Japanese, who got to work building trenches and carving out caves for armaments and snipers. The American forces arrived in August 1942, the might of Uncle Sam clobbered the occupation and the Yanks moved in.

Not to trivialise the battles fought in the Solomons but, as with any Pacific Island

nation that was dragged into WWII, all is quiet as dark green creepers have covered old and rusting relics; old men's tales of the past are becoming silent as the young live in peace and look towards the future.

I'd been at sea for three days now and was studiously ignoring the fact that I only had three more days here. And look, an elegant pod of a dozen or more dolphins began racing the ship, swiftly crisscrossing in a joyful dance. The names just rolled off my tongue by this point: Mane, Mirror Pond, Mbakui Island, White Beach, Havasini, Maravagi and Roderick Bay.

The next cultural interaction happened at Olevuga village on Anuha Island. We were welcomed to the village by Chief Raymond and invited to share the traditional dancing and music of the island. Sometimes being an audience for local dancing can be a little cringeworthy – all display and no substance, that we are voyeurs to the culture – but not here. The pride of the dancers (men do their own thing and so do the women) was more than evident in the bold and chanting rhythm we encountered with these sincere performances.

Back on board for sunset yoga on the top deck, I enjoyed this new innovation on the ship. Yoga instructor Shaun Bowler, living and teaching in the remote settlement of Munda, is from New Zealand and teaches a very gentle and mindful yoga. The passengers and crew joined the yoga classes and we stretched to our limits, feeling all the better for it. Yoga is also held every morning before breakfast; I attended a couple of early sessions but then took note from Antonio, a dive instructor who practises Spanish sleeping yoga instead. Hola!

Here, immersed in the Solomon Islands, there was so much glorious downtime to ponder the meaning of life.

And the meaning? Yoga, rest, read, weave, swim, rest, snorkel, eat (and wolf down the banana chips served at snack time), stand on a deserted beach and, after the sun disappears in a glorious blaze of red, look up to the infinity of stars and planets that crowd the black night sky.

It is to slow down, look out, down and up and make friends with our Pacific neighbours. *Welkam* to country. 🌴

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