

DESTINATION SOUTH PACIFIC

Next door and a world away

Ancient treasures await in the Solomon Islands - but you must learn to let go as they are best enjoyed unplugged, writes *Daniel Scott*.

TRAVELLING in the Solomon Islands, with little Wi-Fi, mobile coverage and no map, it's sometimes hard to know where we are or what day it is. As our tinny bounces across a glassy lagoon, under a shiny blue sky nudged by bruised purple clouds, I search the seascape for clues.

Fleeting, I imagine myself as Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana, who reached these islands on an epic voyage, in 1568, and named them after King Solomon, believing he'd found the Biblical land of gold.

I know we're somewhere in Western Province, among the lower of the Solomons' double chain of nearly 1000 islands, slung across more than 1600 kilometres of ocean.

I recall that we flew into Munda, on New Georgia island, around three days ago and that it's the largest coastal community we've visited, yet still took only five minutes to cross town from the airport to our guesthouse. I think we're scooting towards Rendova Island, en route to tonight's accommodation. However, I've no idea what atolls, appearing like green molehills flung up by burrowing marine creatures, or which lagoon - is it Vonavona or Roviana? - we're passing through. In these ultra-connected times, such uncertainty is discombobulating, but the mystery is liberating too.

While the Solomons are on Australia's doorstep, with direct flights from Brisbane to Munda and to the capital Honiara meaning we can be amidst this swirl of tropical islets in three hours, it remains our least discovered neighbour.

In 2024, the nation had 25,000 visitors, compared to Fiji's more than 1 million, and only 8000 Australians came here, mainly from an intrepid cohort of surfers, divers and fishers. So, not knowing where we are is part of the adventure. The Solomons are an antidote to modern overtourism.

Yesterday, our small group of two Australians, one Kiwi and our Solomon Islander guide, Eldona, were the only guests at Zipolo Habu Resort, on Lola Island, occupying all four of its overwater bungalows.

My day began with some diving, a short boat ride off Munda, just me and local instructor, Euna Zama. Zama guides me through two dives, the first following a reef toward Shark Point, down to 28 metres. It includes the rare sight of a moray eel sashaying out from its hole in the reef, as well as four dancing eagle rays and large schools of barracuda.

On the second shallower dive, along the coral-covered Munda Bar, we see shoals of glinting silver baitfish and two grey reef sharks patrolling the reef. The engaging Zama is a young Solomon Islander eager to share her exciting backyard with visitors.

In the afternoon, after arriving at Zipolo Habu, our group visits nearby Skull Island,



where headhunters once stowed the trophies of decapitated enemies. It's an eerie rock graveyard with multiple gaping craniums staring out from amid a tangle of palm trees.

We end our day snorkelling off the resort, watching the sunset over the lagoon and dining on grilled lobster and reef fish.

This morning we arrive at Titiru Eco Lodge via that short, dislocating boat journey. The family-run lodge has basic bungalows set behind the mangroves of Saqiri Cove and backed by orchid gardens and the welcome, with flower necklaces and coconut juice straight from the husk, is genuinely warm.

That warmth pervades through a cultural performance by local villagers, during which

we are shown traditional practices including clay bathing, cooking using hot stones and constructing huts from pandanus leaves.

Later, Titiru manager Carlos paddles me out through the mangroves in a dugout canoe, enabling me to snorkel along a deep drop-off. At nightfall, while there is intermittent Wi-Fi here, we're no longer missing constant connectivity and soon head to bed.

After our time in Western Province, it is almost a shock to reach Honiara and check into our rooms at the Heritage Park Hotel, complete with mod-cons like plentiful hot water and reliable internet.

Over the next two days, we explore Honiara and its surroundings, beginning at the Solomon Islands National Museum, which has exhibits dedicated to its people's

Clockwise from main: A child at Hotomai Cultural Village; Skull Island in Vona Vona lagoon, Western Province; Titiru Eco Lodge; Glassy lagoon near Munda. Pictures by Daniel Scott

prehistoric migrations and their heritage, living off land and sea, using traditional knowledge. Another gallery commemorates the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers, a network of locals and Allied servicemen that tracked Japanese movements during WWII and helped ensure the rescue of future US President JF Kennedy, after his patrol boat sank, in 1943. The Guadalcanal campaign, in which Allied forces fought to liberate the Solomons from the Japanese, between August 1942 and February 1943, was one of WWII's most crucial. The American Memorial, on Skyline Ridge, above Honiara, is a moving monument to thousands of Allied servicemen who died defending the islands.

Back on Honiara's waterfront, the large Central Market is the city's busiest social hub and full of colourful organic produce, from taro and yam to pineapple, and the Craft Centre, adjacent to our hotel, is the place to browse for souvenirs.

On our final day, we venture into Honiara's hinterland, stopping first at Hotomai Cultural Village, 20 kilometres inland, where we are given an enchanting insight into Guadalcanal Island life. It begins with a hair-raising challenge by warriors and a welcoming Kuko dance by its women and ends with two melodic tribal chants.

Continuing up the dirt road into the hills, we reach Parangiju Mountain Lodge, from where we do a guided 5.5km return trek to Tenaru waterfall. Descending through rainforest, echoing with the caw of tropical birds, and requiring an ankle-deep crossing of Belaha river, this trail reveals the natural beauty of Guadalcanal's mountainous interior. After cooling off in a natural pool beneath the 100m falls, we trek back up to the lodge for lunch overlooking the coastline.

As our Solomon Islands' sojourn draws to a close, with sundowners at our hotel's waterside bar, our guide Eldona has a gift for us. It's a map showing the nation's hundreds of small green landforms played across the vast Solomon Sea and South Pacific Ocean.

Circling the locations we've visited, I finally know where we've been, but I'm already missing the mystery of travelling among these undiscovered islands.

The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Solomons

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Solomon Airlines flies from Brisbane to Honiara and Munda. flysolomons.com

Staying there: Zipolo Habu Resort, Lola Island, has air-conditioned bungalows from \$272 per night. Titiru Eco Lodge, Rendova island, has bungalows from \$226, including meals. Heritage Park Hotel, Honiara, has rooms from \$500. zipolohabu.com.sb; visitsolomons.com.sb; heritageparkhotel.com.sb

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