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Welkam to the hapi isles

For kilters, surfers and divers, the many islands of the Solomons offer spectacular promise as well as wonderfully wholehearted people.

Story by Gabi Steindl Photography by Stephan Kleinlein

“MISS, PLEASE STEP ON THE SCALE”. The lady behind the check-in desk shot me a betel nut-stained smile.

You know you’re flying somewhere remote when they weigh you as well as your bags. That impression was confirmed when my precious board bag was belted down across several reclined seats by the co-pilot himself.

Further east than New Guinea, the Solomon Islands are truly off the beaten track, seeing only about 6,000 tourists a year. I quickly discovered that photographer Stephan Kleinlein and I were among the first to come to this South Pacific archipelago of almost 1,000 islands, searching for wind and waves.

On first impressions, Honiara, the capital, was a little intimidating. Dusty streets were

mined with massive potholes and choked with traffic. Throngs of people filled the pavements, dreadlocked and black-as-soot, many with little betel nut bags around their necks, periodically gobbing blood-red jets of spit.

It didn’t help that I was shaken out of bed quite literally by a 6.7 earthquake at 6am on my first morning. The early start was handy though, as we were meeting Simon Downing, a diplomat at the Australian High Commission, who took us freediving on the 135-metre *Kinugawa Maru*, one of scores of wrecks that litter this corner of the Pacific, on land and in the water [see box, right, for more on diving].

Downing told us how on his last visit, he and his girlfriend were chased by a saltwater crocodile. Climbing onto the only small part

of the wreck above water, they were marooned there for hours as the slate cruised round them.

Thankfully our dive was beautiful rather than bloodcurdling and we headed back to town to meet Garedd, our local travel agent and fixer. Inked up with Melanesian *ta moko* (story-telling tattoos) and weighing about 120 kilos, he was Chief Tui of Disney’s *Moana* brought to life. He was our link to the tiny island paradises we hoped to use to hopscotch across the country. We felt immediately in safe hands.

First stop was Gizo, capital of Western Province and named after an infamous local

LAND/SEASCAPE

The contours of healthy hard corals off Guadalcanal mirror those of lush Mt Chiromaghati behind.



Wrecks and reefs – By Paul Niel

AT DAYBREAK ON AUGUST 7, 1942, American Wildcats – carrier-based fighter/bombers – swooped low over the hills of Tulagi Island, their target a recently established Japanese seaplane station. They strafed the area several times, firing and dropping bombs, and within minutes, 15 seaplanes and several support boats were bound for the bottom of the lagoon. They had fired the opening shots in the Battle of Guadalcanal, a major turning point of World War II as it was the first time the Allies went on the offensive in the Pacific.

Tulagi sits the other side of a 40-kilometre sea channel from Guadalcanal, the principal island in the Solomon Islands archipelago and home to its capital, Honiara. Some of the war’s fiercest naval battles played out in these waters and the more than one hundred wrecks that lay on the seabed have given the area the nickname of ‘Iron-bottom Sound’.

Almost a lifetime later, debris remains strewn across the ocean floor. Although softened by time and encroaching nature, the wrecks still hold a poignant power. Guided by Bob Norton, owner of Raiders Hotel & Dive based on Tulagi, my wife Esther and I descended onto them in November 2018 in thoughtful mood. Despite the lagoon’s warm embrace, they were a chilling reminder of the horrific scenes that must have played out that summer dawn in 1942.

Visibility was sketchy. Norton told us this was thanks to recent logging close to the coast that had spurred greater runoff than usual. It only heightened the aura of mystery for us as we dropped to around 25 metres onto the wreck of a Japanese aircraft. A four-engined seaplane codenamed ‘Emily’ by the Allies, it had been used by the Imperial Navy for long-range reconnaissance. With a wingspan of almost 40 metres, it was a sleeping giant on the ocean floor, surprisingly intact more than 75 years after its sinking. One wing had collapsed but the fuselage, engine and cockpit were still easily accessible. As we circled, Norton signalled us to keep our distance from the fire corals growing over the plane – a more effective defence today than the inert and encrusted rear machine gun.

All diving is pretty close to exploratory in



PHOTO (WRECK): KLAUS OBERMAYER

these waters, and Norton told us how he and an Australian historian had found two new aircraft wrecks just the previous week. Most of these wrecks are at depths far out of reach for recreational divers. The USS *Atlanta*, an American light cruiser sunk in January 1943 and resting at more than 120 metres, was first dived in 1995.

“We get interested technical divers here from time to time, but very few go down to the *Atlanta*,” said Norton. “You have just a few minutes at the wreck for a total dive time of several hours. The claim is that more people have walked on the moon than dived to that wreck.”

More accessible is the wreck of the USS *Kanawha*, a 150-metre oiler, sunk by Japanese bombers in April 1943. Sitting upright in around 50 metres of water, it still requires a decompression dive to explore. We were awed by the sheer magnitude of the wreck, but ran short on air having barely explored the foredeck.

Diving in the Solomons is not only about wrecks. Sparse population and limited development have left abundant and diverse marine life, and to sample this we moved to the islands around New Georgia, 200 kilometres west of Tulagi. There, in a magical lagoon, is an island now known as Kennedy Island, where the later US president was rescued by local tribesmen after his boat was sunk by the Japanese.

We were based nearby on the rainforest-

covered island of Rendova, dominated by a large volcano. The lodge is run by Kilo, a local tribesman, whose wholehearted welcome included sharing *kava*, a numbing root-based drink, and an introduction to their neighbour: “Yes, that’s our local croc,” he said. “He rests here almost every morning.”

The saltwater predator was very much on my mind as we dived next day. Soon though, the vivid soft corals, schools of jacks and curious whitetip reef sharks seized my attention. A moray eel slowly wound its way through coral caves, hawksbill turtles floated by, while a boxfish took a nap in a corner. An amorous remora, a cleaner fish that attaches itself with a sucker, amused us by clamping onto the mask, fins and rashguard of my dive buddy, much to her frustration.

It’s experiences like these that made diving in the Solomons feel original – unspoilt, with surprises around every corner. According to Belinda Botha, manager of local operator Dive Munda, new dive sites are found almost every week. In 2015, she helped a team led by American adventurer Klaus Obermayer film biofluorescence on coral reefs – when organisms reflect incident light back in a different colour. The team anticipated finding sharks that exhibit the phenomenon but were floored when they captured footage of the first biofluorescing reptile, the hawksbill turtle.



head-hunter. My own head was plastered against the window the entire 50-minute flight. It was worrying to see the ragged wounds of clearcutting puncturing the forest below – we were told the Solomons is logging at 19 times faster than is sustainable and will lose all its forest by 2036 at this rate.

Happily, the ocean appears to suffer fewer impacts. I watched impossible shades of blue and turquoise flicker past until an equally impossible ‘airport’ came into view: the entire islet of Nusatupe (‘Coconut Crab’), the apron close enough to the ocean to be wet by spray.

At the jetty were Jeremy and Shamiah Baea, fit local lads in their early twenties waiting to escort us to Sepo, their family’s private island. Jeremy Baea is also founding president of the Solomon Island Surfing Association whose 25 members share 10 boards between them. I’d brought a surfboard, leash and loads of surf wax from Australia to help them out.

Less than half the size of a football pitch,

AT HOME IN THE BREAKERS

Scattered around the quaint airport of Nusatupe are tiny island outposts where the sea is central to life: both a source of sustenance and a place to relax.

the Baea’s little patch of heaven has been in the family for generations and is home to Oravae (‘beautiful’) Cottages. Our modest accommodation there was a wooden stilt bungalow, simple but magical, stood over surreally turquoise water with an outside shower and a hammock on the deck.

We filled the following days with freediving, surfing and kiting. The spotless white-sand islets and glassy water often made me feel like I had been Photoshopped into some unimaginably perfect scene.

Leaving one small snow-white atoll, barely big enough for me to set out my lines, the wind suddenly dropped to nothing and I had to rescue myself to the next island downwind. Washed-up Robinson Crusoe-style, I only narrowly escaped a painful encounter with the fringing reef. Pulling my kite up on the beach, I spotted the island’s owners watching from afar – wary of this blond alien. Thankfully, Jeremy and Shamiah arrived to explain and I paid the *kastom* fee for my intrusion.

Next stop was Ulawa (Spider) Island, a tiny speck in Makira Ulawa Province, in the less-developed east of the country. So tiny was Ulawa that the two of us had to fly in separately from all our gear! There Garedd had organised for us to stay in Ripo village with his tribe, the





Ahetola, as their first-ever homestay visitors.

Our hosts were toothless 67-year-old Uncle Aaron, his wife Florence and son Yanni, and Great Auntie Harriet. With a big white afro, she was reckoned to be about 100 years old, though nobody knew exactly.

A mattress with a fly net was made up for us in Aaron's shack. Made of *ngali* nut wood and bamboo, it was all tied together with *loya* cane rope and topped with a hand-woven roof of sago palm leaves.

There Aaron sat on the front deck for hours telling stories in broken English, laughing his infectious, high-pitched laugh, singing and mashing betel nut into a paste – normally done with your teeth – in a portable mortar, to happily stick between lips already bright red with juice.

A separate hut served as a kitchen with a stone oven and fire pit charged with coconut

husks, raised sitting mats and the 'pantry' – an open shelf stacked with the staple root crops: yam, taro, *kumara* (a sweet potato), *kasawa* (cassava). Here Florence cooked simple yet unforgettable meals, often flavoured with rich fresh coconut milk, with the highlight – flying fish taro coconut pudding – taking 15 hours preparation and cooking in all.

Showering was done outside – in my case at night, under the stars – in a *lava lava*, or sarong, as custom dictates that women have to cover up at all times: showing any thigh or wearing trousers is taboo.

Morning dawned with a rooster crow and a blast of the big conch at the church opposite. Sounded by one or other of the tribe in rotation, the sound summoned all to mass.

Another tradition is kite fishing, using a loop of spider web instead of a hook and a sago leaf kite. Aaron assured me he catches

kingfish up a metre long with this technique. He also told me how people in the Solomons don't fear sharks but deify them, believing they are living embodiments of the souls of deceased ancestors.

Ripo is on the west coast of Ulawa, where there is only reef and volcanic rock, no beach. So every day I rented the only flatbed truck on the island to head over to a palm-fringed beach with squeaking snow-white sand on the east coast, hoping for wind. Every day more kids squeezed onto the back of the truck to come along, as many had never made the hour-long drive across the island before. There we body

ALWAYS TIME FOR PLAY

The people showed their warmth time and time again, bridging worlds with their easy smiles and laughter which the author was happy to encourage.





surfing and played on the beach for hours, some remembering these happy times by balling sand up in leaves to show their families back in Ripo.

A still-more remote stop was Namuga Village in the Star Harbour area, two flights and a 45-minute boat ride from Ulawa. There I stayed with Alfred Murray of the Atawa tribe who runs the Star Beach Resthouse. There is no electricity (though Alfred does own a small generator) or internet here and the only means of transport is by boat.

In the pioneering days of surfing, Star Harbour was spoken of in the same tones

reserved for Fiji and Bali, but such exploration came to a standstill as a result of 'the tensions', a low-level civil war in 1998-2003. Now I introduced Alfred to kiting with some footage on my laptop and explained what conditions would work best for me. Getting the gist, he mentioned a beach on the other side of the peninsula, near Toraa village. It was difficult to access, he said, but had a "million dollar view".

Boating through a narrow, mangrove-shaded tunnel to this ominous beach was spooky and my mind saw every floating log or half-submerged root as a saltwater croc. We

"BEST DAYS OF THEIR LIVES"

The kids of Ulawa clown about on what was their first visit to the other side of their island.

anchored the boat in deep mud and walked the last 15 minutes along the riverbed until the forest opened up to a small village built on the sand: Toraa.

The beach here was several kilometres long, with high, salt-sprayed cliffs at its southern end. In the village, wide eyes stared from all angles. I smiled and waved and asked for the chief of

the village. Directed to his hut, I met Eratus, the scrawny, 75-year-old chief. He beamed a beautiful, white-toothed smile and in broken English invited me to meet his 10 kids and 20 grandkids.

I handed him presents brought specially from Australia and asked for permission to kitesurf on his beach. Though I'm pretty sure he had no clue what I meant, he granted me access. The wind wasn't in my favour right then so I'd need to return another day, but with his blessing, it was just a matter of time. That night though I came down with the worst muscle pains of my life, a high fever and headache. It was dengue fever, I later learned, and it was four long days before I was able to regain my feet and get back to the hunt.

Though still weak and aching, I returned to Toraa and this time it was windy. Launching my kite, the kids were hooting and jumping deliriously. I took a few of the bravest for a ride on my back out over the reef. My dengue-drained muscles were screaming, but the kids' joy propelled me through the pain. They had placed such trust in a foreigner, offered such kindness, it was the very least I could do. The Solomons – you're very welkam. **AA**

STARTING THEM YOUNG

The author gets a little help from inquisitive young Solomon Islanders.



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

For kitesurfing, the best time is between June and September, with the highest chance of consistent breezes. As a rule of thumb: the East is more windy than the West.

For surfing, the best season is from October through to April.

How to get there

Solomon Airlines flies to Honiara from Brisbane and Sydney several times per week, with codeshare connections from neighbouring South Pacific nations. Virgin Australia also flies direct from Brisbane.

Further info

Language: More than 60 languages are spoken in the Solomons, but Pijin, a creole of English, is the predominant form of communication. Most islanders understand a little English too.

Local etiquette: Visiting beaches may require payment of a kustom fee to local landowners. Dress codes are modest. All tourists, especially women, should be sensitive to avoid offending local customs.

Contacts

Garedd Porowaii at Solomon Island Travel and Tours can help with travel across all the

islands. Email solomonislandtravel@gmail.com.

Oravae Cottage, www.oravaecottage.com, is the idyllic island home of the Baea family and a good base for diving wrecks, surf excursions and more.

Dedicated dive outfits include Raiders Hotel & Dive, www.raidershotel.com, on Tulagi Island; Tulagi Dive, www.tulagidive.com, on Guadalcanal and Uepi Island resort, www.uepi.com, in Marovo Lagoon.

For diving around New Georgia, Dive Munda, www.mundadive.com, builds itineraries in conjunction with lodges such as Titiru Eco Lodge, www.titiruecolodge.com/en/ on Rendova Island.



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