

SOLOMON AIRLINES' COMPLIMENTARY INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

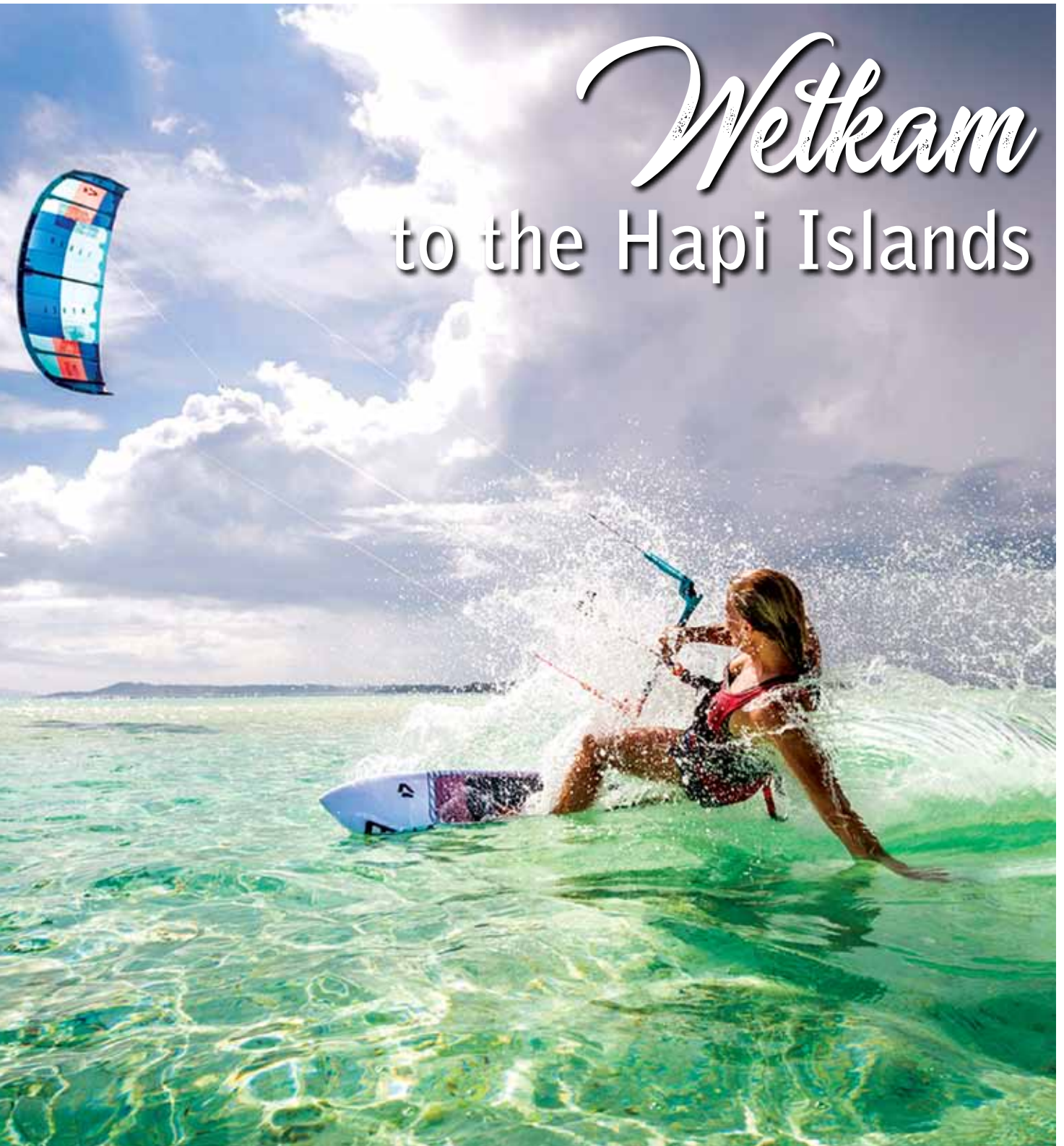
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Wetkam to the Hapi Islands



*Words by Gabi Steindl
Photos by Stephan Kleinlein*

“Miss, please step on the scale”. It took me a few moments to understand, before stepping onto the old-fashioned scales and my

weight was noted down next to my bags. I have never been weighed before at the check-in on any of my travels to over 70 countries. Holding onto the handrail of the Twin Otter, I banged my head on the tiny doorframe before taking one of the 16 seats. When my rather large board bag appeared,



squeezed into the cabin by the co-pilot and then belted on a few fully reclined empty seats next to me, I knew this was going to be a real adventure.

My plan was to search for wind and waves, in a country that not many (if any) kitesurfers had ventured to before! I took an amazing action sports photographer, Stephan Kleinlein with me to capture this epic adventure. I knew it would be a challenge, but I was committed to pioneering kitesurfing and finding the best places for it.

First stop on tour was Gizo. My nose glued to the small Plexiglas window during the 50 minute flight, I was squealing with excitement at the multi-shaded, dazzling nuances of turquoise and blue expanding between the uncountable small paradise islands poking out like emeralds below.

I had to blink a few times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating, spotting the small landing strip for Gizo, located on the nearby island of Nusatupe — the entire island serving as airstrip and the surrounding turquoise water almost touching the runway. Already waiting at the jetty were Jeremy and Shamiah Baea. By boat we headed to Sepo, the family's private island that their dad Patson inherited of his grandfather in 1950, home to "Oravae" (meaning "beautiful") Cottage. My palace was a simple but for me magical, wooden stilt bungalow with the vast expansion of surreal turquoise waters just below, an outside shower and a hammock on the deck.

The days at Oravae were filled with exploring by boat, freediving, surfing, and of course kiting! I got goose bumps

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Destination




landing by boat at the most beautiful white sand spit that I've ever put my kiter feet on. Launching my kite and gliding over translucent, azure glass with little sharks underneath chasing bright little fish, and Jeremy and Shamiah stoking out on the sandbank, felt like somebody had pasted me into Photoshop.

Freediving the Toa Maru, the Solomon Islands' biggest and most impressive wreck (at recreational diving depths) as well as one of the South Pacific's most intact WWII shipwrecks in general, just around the corner from Sepo Island, blew my mind.

Another highlight of my kiting in Gizo was launching off a tiny snow-white island, just big enough to put my lines out. Cruising around in another Photoshop backdrop blissed out by the beauty of nature, the wind suddenly stopped. Only just making it to the next island downwind, I landed Robinson Crusoe-style only narrowly escaping a bad encounter with live coral. Un-

scathed I pulled my kite up the beach. The owners of the island watched me from afar and must have thought an alien dropped in. Once Jeremy and Shamiah arrived with their boat, I could pay the 'kastom' fee. We enjoyed a yummy picnic on the beach that Ma Baea had packed for us, including cooked sweet potatoes, fresh seaweed and Ngali nuts, a delicious nut the size of a large almond that grows on the *Canarium Indicum*, a tall indigenous tree. Suddenly a "gang" of wild pigs appeared demanding the luscious coconut I was sipping on. After I had my share, I cracked it with a small machete and passed it to my new little snorting friends. Satisfied they trotted over to check out my kite and had a bit of a splash in the ocean.

Jeremy Baea is the founding president (in 2014) of the Solomon Island Surfing Association that consists of about 25 members, yet only 10 have their own surfboard, so they share. I brought a surfboard, leash and lots of surf wax from Australia to donate to them, which would be the prize for the winner of the annual surfing competition at Christmas. It was a beautiful feeling to know for one of the locals the dream of "having one's own surfboard" will soon come true.

Big elephant tears rolled down my cheeks waving good-bye to the Baea's and Oravae from the little boat that took us back to the airport to fly out to Stop No.2 on my pioneering tour. 

This is part one in a three-part series on Gabi and Stephan's travels in the Solomon Islands. Parts two and three will appear in future editions of Solomons Magazine.

In brief:



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