

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

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> THE WAY OF LIFE IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IS THE SAME AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN. NOT ONLY ARE THE ISLANDS LUSH AND SOMEWHAT PREHISTORIC, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY FOR US, THE REEFS REMAIN PRISTINE, BIG FISH AND SHARKS ABOUND AND INTERESTING CREATURES ARE TUCKED IN EVERY NOOK!

Living in Brisbane definitely has its perks. There's great critter diving on the Gold Coast, seasonal visits by grey nurse sharks and mantas and the city is a gateway to heaps of fantastic tropical diving. The Solomon Islands is only a few hours flight away but is a haven of unexplored and pristine reefs. I was off with my family for Christmas and New Year aboard the *Bilikiki*, which, along with its sister ship the *Spirit of Solomons*, are the only liveaboards in the country. We had a two week itinerary planned to visit a varied selection of the diving the Solomons has to offer, taking in the Russell Islands, Mary Island, Marovo Lagoon and the Florida Islands.

Russell Islands This was a great place to start. Due to the way the islands were formed there's many cuts, caverns and caves worth exploring. Some lead deep into the centre of the island and you can surface to be surrounded by overhanging trees, bats or even come face to face with a salt water croc! There's usually not too much marine life in the caves, but the light streaming through from the surface can be spectacular. The reefs are equally stunning with almost a 100 percent coral cover at some sites. It was also interesting to swim around the many bommies and under ledges to look for unusual creatures. We saw a few gorgonian corals with Denise's and Bargibant's pygmy seahorses, many species of nudibranchs and quite a few white-bonnet anemonefish, which are only found in the Solomon Islands and eastern Papua New Guinea.

Sadly, having dived predominantly in Asia, I no longer expect to see sharks on otherwise healthy reefs – they're virtually absent due to over-fishing for the insatiable trade in their fins. The Solomons was a pleasant surprise – we saw plenty of sharks, though I'm sure even here finning has taken a toll. We were buzzed by a stunning silvertip and saw more than a few grey, blacktip and whitetip reef sharks. As well as sharks, there seemed to be fairly healthy populations of Maori/Napoleon wrasse and





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 Main: The big eye trevally of Mary Island are endlessly entertaining to watch.
 Left to right: The nudibranch Nembrotha kubaryana is quite common in the Solomon Islands; A stunning reef at Mary Island; Denise's pygmy seahorses can occasionally be found but you'll need to look hard; A window into the jungle above.

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 Left top to bottom: Pyjama cardinalfish have some of the most psychedelic colouration in nature; A sunken log is prime real estate for all sorts of corals; A black tip reef shark; The colour of this ghost pipefish is unlike any I have seen before; Hard coral gardens in the Solomon Islands are spectacular.



bumphead parrotfish, both of which are often the first to go with heavy fishing pressure.

Mary Island

This is actually the tip of an ancient volcano and one of the highlights of Solomons diving. The densely forested, steep sided island is surrounded by miles of open ocean. One clear day we saw smoke from a distant volcano where a new island is in the process of being formed. We spent a few days at the site and I was keen to get in the water every time. Due to the remote location of the island the visibility is great and since there's no villages here the fish life was stunning. The shallow hard coral gardens are pristine but the most well known site is Barracuda Point. Though we personally didn't see the massive school of chevron barracuda which the site is named for, there were nice sized schools of a smaller barracuda species and bigeye trevally. Grey reef sharks patrolled the depths of the ridge that juts out from the site; there were whitetip reef sharks about too.



One afternoon, for a change of scenery, we visited the other side of the island to dive The Crater. From the boat it slowly became apparent that a huge chunk of the island was missing and a channel allowed the liveaboard to go right into the crater of the volcano. Hornbills, parrots and small birds were abundant and the odd dinosaur wouldn't have been out of place! Cabbage coral virtually



monopolises the entire crater, but it was still fun to explore.

Christmas Day Festivities

The vast majority of Solomon Islanders are Christian, so Christmas Day is one of the biggest events of the year. We joined a gathering of several villages on Christmas morning, filled with songs or dances performed by each village. These were amazing with elaborate costumes and routines; I especially liked a band that played plastic tubes of varying lengths using a sandal to hit the end and make different notes! We seemed to be the guests of honour, but the noise levels definitely went up a few decibels as we left and people really let loose!

Marovo Lagoon

On Boxing Day we cruised on to Marovo, the largest marine lagoon in the world which has many islands, reefs and great diving. We saw quite a few sharks in the area and several were inquisitive. One late afternoon we were diving on a reef just under the boat, and a number of blacktip reef sharks were cruising around. They were pretty curious about divers, probably perking up due to the time of day. One of the sharks repeatedly passed close to me and I noticed one of her eyes was damaged; she obviously couldn't see out of it. What amazing sensory ability – she was able to glean information about me by relying on her other senses.

There was plenty of other action besides



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the fish! During many dives we could hear rumblings of a submarine volcano. They were sometimes so loud that you could feel the vibrations through your chest and the fish didn't seem to know what to make of this sonic intrusion. Between dives we jumped in with spinner and bottlenose dolphins as well as pilot whales, which was pretty special. They didn't stick around for long but it was memorable all the same.

Guadalcanal Muck

I'm not passionate about wreck diving, but I'm still happy to spend time on them as plenty of interesting critters often reside on wrecks. Off the main island of Guadalcanal we dived the *Hirokawa Maru Bonneghi No. 1* which was just off the beach with a gentle sandy slope covered in debris. Perfect critter territory! I scoured every last twig, leaf and rock for eyes or other signs of life. I found numerous seahorses, ghost pipefish, nudibranchs, demon stingers and even a velvetfish. Some other divers wondered what my excitement was about and came to investigate the 3-4 inch velvetfish; after a few minutes trying to discern what on Earth I was looking at, they left me to it. Without a prior search image it's next to impossible to make them out.

The Solomons, having hosted some of the most intense fighting of World War II between Allied and Japanese forces are famous for their wrecks. There are many scattered throughout the islands, both

within and well beyond the limits of recreational divers. We dived White Beach which was the location of a US base. The reef is littered with trucks, pontoons and other debris that was sunk to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands after the area was abandoned. It's a very sheltered site and the water quite murky, but plenty of life is found on and around the relics. It's also worth searching the mangroves for interesting brackish water fish such as the archerfish. These small striped fish spit drops of water at insects resting on leaves above the water so they fall in and become easy pickings. The archerfish amazingly accounts for the refraction of light between water and air and adjusts its aim accordingly!



The White Bonnet anemonefish is endemic to the Solomon Islands and the eastern islands of Papua New Guinea.



Above a huge cave a local had left his canoe.

TRAVEL INFO:
 The Solomon Islands lie to the east of Papua New Guinea and some 2000km northeast of Australia. The country consists of over 900 islands, the capital, Honiara, is located on the island of Guadalcanal.
 Air travellers can reach Honiara via Nadi, Fiji; Brisbane, Australia; or Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.
 Bilikiki Cruises operates two liveaboard ships from Honiara. Both MV *Bilikiki* and MV *Spirit of Solomons* are 125ft long, and have a 24ft beam, making them very large and stable ships designed for South Pacific conditions. Both ships offer immense sundecks, plenty of covered areas and airconditioned accommodations.
 Reservations can be made direct on 1800 663 5363 or email bilikiki@bilikiki.com
 Visit www.bilikiki.com for more info.
 Diving is a major attraction in the Solomon Islands. Some of the dive sites visited by Bilikiki Cruises include the Florida Islands, the Russell Islands, Mborokua (Mary) Island and Marovo Lagoon in the New Georgia Islands. The number of reef species is believed to equal that of the coral triangle, which have the highest number of reef species in the world.



Finally the Floridas

Our last stop – we did nice dives such as Twin Tunnels, which has two perfect diver-sized tubes that go from 15 to 35 metres and have a lobster chamber at the bottom well worth checking out. The reef top was a plateau at around 10 metres and at that time was covered in nesting oceanic triggerfish. Luckily they weren't as aggressive to divers as some of their relatives are known to be and it was fascinating to watch them protect their nest scrapes from their neighbours and hapless fish that wandered into their territory. At another site, Nembelau,

amongst a bed of purple algae I found an amazing ghost pipefish I'd never seen before. It resembled a purple version of a Halimeda ghost pipefish or a delicate, slightly furry vivid pink-purple species that matched the clump of algae it lived on.

The Solomon Islands are a real diving gem and well worth a visit from Europe or America, let alone the short flight from Brisbane. Having had a taste of the variety of diving I hope to go back to spend some time in one place getting to know the reef's residents more intimately. Rarely can you find such pristine reefs with plentiful sharks and other big fish as well as amazing scenery above and below the waves.

Left to right: The Solomon Islands are full of tiny islands and sand cays; A mouth watering selection of local fruits and vegetables; Christmas Day celebrations attended by ourselves and many local villages.