

From war to wonderland

Unlock secrets of the Solomon Islands

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

HONIARA, Solomon Islands — If it weren't for the potholes, cavernous pits slowing us down on the road to Honiara, in the Solomon Islands, I might have missed the sign on the tree, "Dolphin View Cottage." But Andrew, our guide, knew the road by heart.

"That's Guyas Tohabellana," he said, waving at a stocky, dark-skinned man in rumpled shorts, a faded T-shirt and flip flops. "He works here in Guadalcanal. C'mon, let's say hello."

Beyond the bungalow, Guyas' two teenagers lounged on a picnic table, playing with their pet cockatoo. Behind them the beach sloped down to Iron Bottom Sound, the World War II graveyard where 50-odd American and Japanese ships lie at rest. Across the water, Savo Island shimmered on the horizon.

For a couple of minutes, the two men chatted, speaking Pijin so quietly I couldn't make out the words. Then Guyas turned to me and we shook hands.

"You're from America!" he said, switching to English and lighting up. "Do you like it here? Have you been to Gizo and seen the beautiful coral reefs? Yes, my grandfather was a coast watcher during World War II, a spy you'd say, reporting Japanese movements to the Americans. He watched the battle of Savo Island from right here."

A NEW STORY TO TELL

A name and a handshake are de rigueur in the Solomons, deep in the South Pacific. Being American counts, too, especially here, where 5,800 Americans were killed or injured fighting the invading Japanese.

"We're known for two things," said Ellison Kyere, from the tourist office, when my partner Steve and I met him for lunch at the Lime Lounge Cafe, in Honiara. "For the battle sites and for scuba diving, under the water. It's time to tell the story of island life on land."

A tall order, indeed. The islanders, mostly Melanesian, are scattered over 347 of the country's 922 islands, speaking both Pijin and one of the country's 75 different languages. Some are farmers; some work for the government. Some wear grass skirts and use shell money for barter; others are proud to count headhunters among their ancestors. A few own speed boats; most paddle to market in a "mola," a homemade dugout canoe.

We took the overnight Fiji Airways flight from Los Angeles to Fiji's Nadi airport, changed planes, then flew on to Henderson International Airport, in Honiara, the capital city. I'd brought my phone so I took advantage of the airport's "tourist special," a SIM card good for 75 minutes, for just U.S. \$1.30. And we booked a guide for the next day's city tour.

We were still jetlagged the next morning when Andrew pulled up in a shiny black SUV. "All our cars are Japanese and they're all second-hand," he apologized. "Never get new ones. And the Japanese are building an overpass and paving the street and it's taking forever," he added as we inched along past grimy storefronts and vegetable stands overflowing with greens, tomatoes and squash.

"That one, where everybody shops,



Photos by Steve Haggerty / ColorWorld
Fatboys Resort, built over deep water to accommodate boats and to protect coral near the shore, encourages guests to relax, or if absolutely necessary, sample the scuba, snorkeling, fishing and village walks. On Mbambanga Island, in Ferguson Passage near Gizo airport, Western Province, Solomon Islands.



Market day on Marapa Island brings families together to buy, sell and visit.

is owned by a Chinese company," he said, nodding at a big-box department store, the kind we've seen in other third-world countries, there to pave the way to building and mining contracts.

EPIC TRANSFORMATION

I looked for something I could brag on — an American-built hospital or a college — but we'd already turned away, heading to the Memorial Garden cemetery, the American War Memorial and Bonegi Beach, famous for wreck dives. "That's Bloody Ridge," Andrew said, parking the car on a grassy hump of land.

Standing there, imagining the chaos of battle, it felt unreal to be gazing out over sleepy fields while at my feet, still visible, were the fox-holes where 40 U.S. Marines died. The trip — now nicknamed "Solomons 101" — began in earnest when we flew north to airfields at Gizo, on Ghizo Island, and Munda, on New Georgia, both in the Western Province, the gateway to equatorial rain forests, volcanic mountains, blue lagoons and sandy beaches.

Met by a skiff and driver, we were off, speeding over a shimmering blue lagoon, to Fat Boys Resort, an all-inclusive, palm-thatched lodge built over deep water, with five bamboo-walled guest bungalows perched

on the shore. Our base camp for the next few days, the lodge was a short boat ride to Kennedy Island, where we went ashore to see where Lt. John Kennedy and his PT-109 crew hid after a Japanese vessel sank their ship. And close enough to a string of shallow reefs to spend a couple of hours snorkeling, before landing for a grilled-lobster picnic.

"The rising ocean is washing the island away," said Sam, the boat captain, when I asked why one of the trees, its roots submerged in saltwater, seemed to be dying. "People used to think the trees had a disease," he told me. "Now they know it's global warming."

It was party time the next day at Gizo's Friday market. Families in dugout canoes docked at the waterfront, buyers crowded the aisles, coins changed hands, sellers hailed their friends and old ladies filled their shopping bags. Everyone smiled, asking where we were from and posing for photos.

'THE HEADHUNTERS ARE GONE'

Ngali nuts — the holy grail of snacks here in the islands — were in season, so I stocked up with a half-dozen folded-leaf packages. Green taro leaves competed with slippery spinach (Malabar spinach), purple bananas, carrots and betel nuts,



Market day in Gizo, on Ghizo Island, Western Province, is a chance for vegetable stall sellers like Alice, seen here, to reconnect with friends.

advertised in scuba magazines. Signing up for a tour to Skull Island, we met boat captain Billy Kere, 30-ish and friendly, and a "descendant of the Roviana headhunter clan," as he told us. Heading for deep water, pounding over incoming waves, we finally docked at tiny Skull Island, just big enough to hold piles of rocks and rows of ancient skulls, victims of long ago battles.

"Don't worry, the headhunters are gone," said Billy, chuckling. "It's all about love nowadays. But not then," he added. "If you sinned? Your head came off."

Going on to Lubaria Island, the PT-boat base where Kennedy and his crew were stationed during the war, we went ashore to visit the barracks and look at the monument. Ata, the keeper, produced a carved wood bust of the youthful Kennedy, which he hides at night. "It's been stolen and recovered twice," he said, leading me to a group of rusty cannons. The real surprise was the modern bathroom.

Two days later, as our adventure wound down and we boarded a 16-seat Twin Otter for the flight back to Honiara — an aerial tour over islands, bays, coral reefs, rain forests, volcanos, waterfalls and mountains — I suddenly realized how much we'd missed. The Solomon Islands, spectacular, varied and pristine, with an annual visitor count of just 24,000, remains one of the world's last untamed destinations (www.visitsolomons.com.sb). The roads aren't awfully good, especially in the country. But potholes or no, we'll be going back.



Mike Tohabellana, at home on Guadalcanal, plays with his pet cockatoo.

commonly chewed here, an affordable substitute for coffee or cigarettes.

"What do they taste like?" I asked an older man with red-rimmed eyes (the clue), who offered me a seat in the shade. "Do they make you feel relaxed?" I ventured to ask.

"Oh, no, they give you energy!" he said, smiling, showing me how he folded the nut and leaf together with a pinch of slaked lime (ash from burned clam shells). "One or two of these and I want to get up and work all day."

Flying on to Munda, on our next leg, we checked into the Agnes Gateway Hotel, on the waterfront, a spartan set of rooms and cottages



Sixteen-passenger Twin Otters, work horse of Solomon Island Air interisland flights, keeps the engines running while passengers returning to Honiara climb aboard. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands.

What if plans change but policies don't?

BY CATHARINE HAMM
Tribune News Service

A friend and I signed up for a Smithsonian Journeys European trip. Unfortunately, she fell and broke her wrist, which required extensive surgery, and the doctors told her not to travel. I invited my daughter to go with me and paid my friend for the cost of the trip, but now the Smithsonian and Odysseys Unlimited tell me that it is too late to change the reservations to my daughter's name. Can anything be done?

— Valerie Read, Dana Point, Calif.

What can be done has been done: Smithsonian Journeys made an exception and agreed to let Read's daughter fill in for the injured friend after we raised the issue.

But the meat of the crisis is what should have been done, which has nothing to do with Smithsonian and more to do with us as travelers.

Smithsonian wasn't obligat-

ed to make this exception.

A cancellation made within seven days of booking this trip would have netted a full refund. A cancellation, even caused by a medical problem 95 days or less before departure? No refund.

Its website repeats the no exceptions mandate.

This fine print is really not so fine: It looks to be about 13-point type, more than a third bigger than the body type you might find in a newspaper article.

Rule No. 1 of travel must be this: Read the terms and conditions. They are boring. They are frightening. But you must read and understand them, whether they are for an airline (and this is particularly critical for low-cost carriers), a hotel, a cruise line or a tour company.

As with most companies, the closer you get to departure, the more you'll be penalized.

In this case, however, the



request was to change a name. Isn't that a simple matter?

It's not as easy as it might seem, said Karen Ledwin, vice president of program management at Smithsonian Travel.

Airline tickets are usually nonrefundable for the lowest fare categories, which is what most of us fly. That means you probably won't get your money back if you're never using the ticket; you will pay a penalty if/when you do change your ticket, and the name on the ticket probably cannot be changed.

Besides the flight, there are administrative and contractual costs, Ledwin said, that come into play if changes are to be made. For example, does the new participant want a different kind of hotel room, and is it still available?

And one more thing: "Any time you do something like this, you increase the chances of error," Ledwin said.

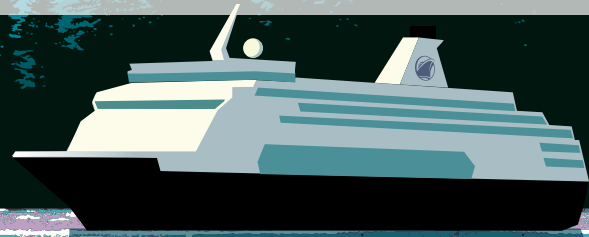
Presenting On Stage
ALASKA
Event

Preview the wonders of an Alaskan journey at this exciting multi-media presentation from AAA Travel.

EXPERT PLANNING ADVICE • VIEW STUNNING FILM FOOTAGE

Tuesday, October 16, 2018 • 6:30 pm
CANADIAN HONKER EVENTS AT APACHE
1517 16th Street West in Rochester

Register to attend at AAA.com/Events
or call 507-289-1851, Option 7



18-TR-1244F