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WORLD TRAVEL

Untamed Islands: Adventures in the Solomons



Photo courtesy of [Steve Haggerty@ColorWorld](#).

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HONIARA, Solomon Islands — If it weren't for the potholes, thousands of gaping pits jolting the way, I wouldn't have missed the sign on the tree. But Andrew, our guide on Guadalcanal Solomon Islands, knew everybody. "That's Dolphin View Cottage and there's the owner," he sa

a stocky, dark-skinned man in rumpled shorts, a faded t-shirt and flip flops. “It’s Guyas Tohabellana. He works here in Honiara. C’mon, let’s say hello.”

Down by the shore, Guyas’s son Mike sat at a picnic table with his sister, playing with his pet cockatoo. Behind them the beach sloped down to Iron Bottom Sound, the World War II graveyard where 50-plus sunken ships — American and Japanese — still rest, slowly rusting away. Across the water, Savo Island, site of the famously fierce WWII battle, shimmered on the horizon. For a minute the two men chatted, speaking local Pijin so quietly I missed most of it. Then Guyas turned to me and held out his hand. “You’re from America!” he said, beaming. “Do you like it here? Have you been to Gizo and seen the beautiful coral reefs? Yes, my grandfather was a [Coast Watcher](#) during the war, a spy you’d say, reporting Japanese movements to the Americans. He watched the [Battle of Savo Island](#) from right here.”



It’s a lazy day on Tavanipupu Island Resort, on isolated Island, with plenty of time for lunch in the shade. PHOTO CC HAGGERTY@COLORWORLD.



Guyas Tohabellana's son Mike poses with his pet cockatoo, at home on the shore of Iron Bottom Sound, on Guadalcanal.
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Arriving for a two-week trip in early 2019, we were lucky to be there before the corona virus pandemic and the country closed its borders. Two of just 25,000 annual tourists — fewer than a day at DisneyWorld — we seemed to be the only Americans there. But we did want to see some of Guadalcanal's famous battle sites, rusty tanks, long-buried artillery and the remains of downed aircraft. In 1942, when the first company of American Marines landed on [Guadalcanal](#), the local islanders fought a fierce battle, supporting the troops as eyes on the ground. Allies then, American tourists still friends, were greeted with an exchange of names and a handshake. "Americans are always welcome," said Ellison Kyere, from the tourism office in Honiara, the capital city, when my partner Steve and I had lunch at the Lime Lounge Café. "But we want them to know that there's more to see here than just scuba diving and more to do than scuba dive for wrecks. We have mountains that have never been climbed, national parks, preserves, miles of beaches, lagoons, forests and rare birds."



A Langalanga family, Margaret, Ester, Julie and their mother, from Malaita Island, north of Guadalcanal, laugh at their brother's silly joke. Members of a group who make "shell money" (beads from shells), they sell it in strands in the Honiara main market. Ten strands, each ten feet long, are the price of a bride, valued at about \$250.

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Planning a trip beyond Honiara is a tall order in this South Pacific nation, 2039 miles northeast of Australia. With 922 islands, three-fifths of them uninhabited, it's a hodge-podge of many cultures, dozens of traditions and 78 different languages. The website is a good place to start, at www.visitsolomon.com. But there's no hurry. With no covid19 cases reported as of July 1, 2020, the borders are closed and international flights are cancelled.



Local markets bring friends together, to share news and to shop for home-grown fruits and vegetables. Also given away — are piles of second-hand dresses and shirts, baby clothes, blankets and fabrics, items donated in the U.S. and other first world nations. Shipped to related churches overseas, they end up in rural communities.

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When it comes to picking a flight, Fiji Airways' non-stop, overnight flights from Los Angeles are a choice. The airline's gleaming new plane — an Airbus A350-XWB — has private beds in the front seats in the rear, with an overnight flight that lets you sleep. We arrived early enough for a seafood breakfast in Fiji's Nadi airport and plenty of time to board the Solomon Airlines three-hour flight. On arrival, I took advantage of the "tourist special," a SIM card good for 75 minutes, priced at \$10. The rest of the day we spent in the Heritage Park Hotel garden and pool, and booked a tour for the next day.



A scene found almost every evening and on most islands: Layers of pink clouds fading into a purple twilight
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We were still jetlagged when Andrew pulled up the next morning, driving a two-year-old, shiny car. I was impressed but he apologized. "All our cars are Japanese and they're all second-hand. We have the best ones," he said. "Never. And see this? The Japanese are building the overpass and paving the road, but it's taking forever," he added, as we inched past grimy storefronts and vegetable stands overflowing with greens, tomatoes and squash. "That new one, where everybody shops, is owned by a Chinese company," he said, nodding at a big-box department store, the kind China builds in every willing mineral-rich country. We've seen these "gifts" before. They are there to smooth the way for future highway contracts.



The foxholes in Bloody Ridge, one of the grassy hills above Honiara, a rude exception in this pastoral scene is a reminder that 40 American Marines died here in 1942, defeating the attacking Japanese. PHOTO COURTESY

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Mortified, I looked for something I could brag on — an American-built hospital or a college — but had already turned toward the American Memorial Garden, the cemetery and then to Bonegi E and a rusty tank. Then we headed to up the hills to **Bloody Ridge**, where Andrew parked, leaving a few minutes to walk past the row of overgrown foxholes and imagine the deafening noise and chaos as the Japanese rushed up from below and were beaten back. I wondered who they were, the 40 U.S. Marines who died here.



The 100-foot-long pier at Fat Boys Resort connects the Lodge, built on stilts over deep water, with a half-bungalows on shore. The lodge location — the bar, dining room, lounge and kitchen — protects the shoreline water coral and provides a boat dock. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY@COLORWORLD.

After touring Guadalcanal, we flew we flew north to a one-room water-side airport on Gizo, and then to Munda, on New Georgia, in the Western Province. The gateway to pristine rain for mountains, blue lagoons and sandy beaches, the Western Province was made for adventurers driver and a Fat Boys motor boat, we hopped aboard and in minutes we were speeding away (blue lagoon to the dock.

Fat Boys Resort, our base camp for three nights, was located on a small island, in a group of s near easy-to-reach tour sites. The first was Kennedy Island (also called Plum Island), where L John Kennedy and his PT-109 crew swam ashore after a Japanese vessel sank their torpedo b look around — and a quick swim — we headed away to another group of islets and sand bars, barbecue and snorkeling. “The ocean is washing the island away,” said Sam, the boat captain, the ice chest and a grill under a shady tree. “Why do these trees, with half of their roots in sa to be dying,” I’d asked. “People around here used to think they had a disease,” he said. “Now

knows why. It's global v



The outer islands near Fat Boys Resort, a maze of scattered coral reefs, tiny islets and sandbars, are close enough for snorkeling, diving, fishing and beachcombing. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY@COLORWORLD.



The dock at Gizo, population 6150, the largest town and commercial center in the Western Province, is busy on Friday, when sellers, buyers, families and fishermen come from nearby islands. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY

It was party time the next day in Gizo, the main town on Ghizo Island, at the Friday market. Fresh home-made dugout canoes docked at the waterfront, buyers crowded the aisles, coins change sellers hailed friends and old ladies filled their shopping bags. Everyone smiled, asking where and offering to pose for photos. Ngali nuts — the holy grail of island snacks — were in season up with a half-dozen packages in folded-leaves. Green taro leaves competed with slippery spir spinach), purple bananas, four or five kinds of potatoes, carrots and betel nuts, a popular and substitute for coffee or cigarettes. “What do they taste like?” I asked an older man with red-rice (the give-away), who offered me a seat in the shade. “Do they make you feel relaxed?” I ventured. “Oh, no, they give you energy!” he said, smiling, showing me how to fold 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 tomorrow.”

Flying on to Munda, famous for wreck diving, we checked into the Agnes Gateway Hotel on the waterfront, a group of rooms and spartan cottages advertised in scuba and backpacking magazines. Our cottage was beyond plain but it had a front porch with chairs, and hooks and a clothes line for bathing suits and diving gear. The restaurant and bar, conveniently adjacent to the check-in desk, served hearty, tasty affordable meals. Booking a boat tour out to Skull Island — the last stop for many a victim — now a popular tourist highlight — we joined captain Billy Kere, 40-ish and friendly, and as he introduced himself, a “descendant of the Roviana headhunter clan.” Once past the coral, Kere cranked up the speed and we roared out over the deep water for 5 minutes, the bow pounding the waves until we reached the island, a small pile of slippery rocks and sharp coral (wear tennis shoes). The skulls inside this gloomy cavern were piled high on every side, with more on a small altar, near a cement plaque where — where it is said — the headhunters buried a well-intentioned but unlucky Christian minister.

“Don’t worry, the headhunters are gone,” said Billy, chuckling. “Nowadays it’s all about love. But not then. If you sinned, your head came off.” Heading out, we docked at Island, a public park and the PT-boat base where Lieutenant Kennedy and his crew were static the war. The barracks and a new modern bathroom were open and several rusty artillery piece half-hidden in the bushes, facing out to sea. But a new monument stood in the center, garde



Green vegetables come with big leaves in the tropics. The helping her parents at the taro leaf stand in Gizo, wanted t we were from and whether we liked her country. PHOTO CO

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park's ancient keeper, who lives in a tent near the pier. Hustling over to us, he produced a car of the youthful Kennedy which belongs on the monument but which he hides at night. "It's been recovered twice," he said, as we snapped photos.



South Pacific chic reflect the mood at classic bungalows, in the shade at Tavanipupu Resort and Spa, so Guadalcanal. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY@COLORWORLD.

As the trip wound down, we headed for Tavanipupu Island Resort and Spa, one of the Solomo star properties. Installed in the same palm-shaded bungalow where England's Will and Kate o a previous world tour, we reveled in the screened windows, four-poster bed, indoor and outdo two sinks and a covered porch, a perfect place to watch the sunset. We swam off the dock in v we could see 20 feet down, canoed (with a guide) over acres of healthy coral, sampled the ch menu, climbed the hill for a view and walked around the perimeter, an easy 45-minute stroll.

On our own to explore, we met some of the local islanders, a chance to learn more about ever an outlying island: Finding fresh water, doing laundry, picking coconuts, planting vegetables, r



Melania, on the staff at Tavanipupu Resort and Spa, off the southeast corner of Guadalcanal, takes 15 minutes from her work day to make a gift basket for a guest, woven from narrow strips of sego palm. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY@COLORWORLD.

canoes, uses of native trees from other islands, and favors. When I asked who made the baskets in our room, I was taken to Melania who paddles to her home on an adjacent island. In her laundry, an open area behind the lodge, furnished with water, outdoor tubs and an improvised washboard, she showed me how to split and strip palm from sego palms, then we waded together. Before we left, she joined us for dinner, and I thought what most Americans do, besides swimming and suggested a couple of inexpensive low maintenance games: tether ball and the corn-hole. To my surprise, he'd never heard of them, hence a comic evening by charades.

At last, with two weeks of the trip at an end, we boarded a plane — lifting off a grassy field for flight back to Honiara. So many islands, bays, coral reefs, rain forests, volcanoes, wide broad estuaries and waterfalls. We realized how much we'd missed the Solomon Islands, unspoiled

spectacular, is one of the world's last untamed destinations. The roads need work, but those gaps and potholes might be just what's keeping the uncurious away. Potholes or not, we're going back.