



HAWAII'S BACKYARD The Paleaku Gardens Peace Sanctuary honors different traditions and religions >> D3

SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE --- D6 LAS VEGAS ADVISOR >> D6



SOUTH PACIFIC

Kasolo, above, was

later renamed Ken-

of Navy Lt. John F.

Kennedy. The future

president swam to the

island after his patrol

boat was hit by a

Japanese destroyer

and capsized in 1943.

At Vilu WWII Museum

near Honiara are sev-

ing an American bomber, below left.

Islanders crowd the

beach on Market Day

in Marau, below right.

eral war relics, includ-

nedy Island, in honor

SECRETS OF THE SOLOMONS

A World War II ground zero belies the island paradise

Story and photographs by Julie L. Kessler

rowing up in Hawaii, I am no stranger to lovely tropi-cal islands with unusual histories. My travels also have brought me to the Society, Cook, Andaman, Fiji and post-colonial Caribbean islands, to name a few. To quench my never-ending thirst to understand island cultures and their unique place in geopolitical history, I found myself in the Solomon Islands shortly before Pearl Harbor's 75th anniversary and a few months before the 100th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's birth.

The Solomons are like no other island nation I'd visited. For this reason and many others, it was certainly worth the long flight getting there.

Guadalcanal Island and WWII

The Solomons — a group of six large islands, $986\ \mathrm{small}$ ones and countless atolls in the South Pacific -- stretch about 900 miles from Papua New Guinea in the north toward Fiji in the south.

Coveted by competing 19th-century colonial powers. Britain declared the islands a protectorate in 1893, and colonial rule officially commenced in 1896.

More than 50 years later during World War II, the Solo-mons were the site of perhaps the bloodiest battle of the Pacific theater when U.S. Marines wrested Guadalcanal from entrenched Japanese troops. Both sides sustained heavy losses before American forces prevailed in February 1943.

The Solomons gained independence in 1978 but remained part of the British Commonwealth. Today the population is about 635,000, with 85 percent residing in rural villages and 500,000 living without electricity. Malaria is still active, education is not compulsory and the Solomons remain one of the South Pacific's poorest countries. Though English is the official language, there are also about 120 indigenous languages and most residents speak a Melanesian-based pidgin. Ninety-five percent of islanders are Christians, but traditional anestral beliefs remain part of the culture.

Against this historical backdrop, Larrived at Henderson Airport in the Solomons' tiny capital of Honiara on Guadalcanal.

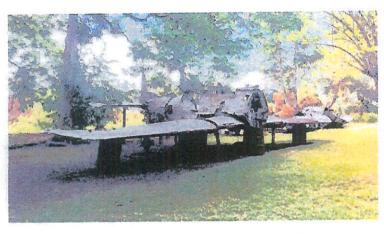
Checking into Honiara's Heritage Park Hotel, I devoured a meal of red snapper marinated in coconut milk and promptly hit the sack to recover from the long flight.

In the morning my guide Eli and I drove west to Lumatapopoho. Village elder Primo, wearing only a tapa loincloth, greeted me with a hearty handshake and broad smile. His topless, grass-skirted wife Paulina and several grandchildren joined us. Five-year-old granddaughter Dalissa, Primo proudly stated, "was named after former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice." The family compound consists of three thatched huts. At one pavilion Paulina cooked a stew of cabbage and potatoes in a pot sitting on hot stones. Fish, chicken or pork are reserved for celebratory occasions. Outside the sleeping pavilion, Primo repaired the roof using sago palm fronds while I played with the children until Eli motioned it was time to go.

The waters between Guadalcanal and nearby Florida Island are a graveyard of downed ships and planes -- both Japanese and American — that islanders call "Iron Bottom Sound." Continuing west we stopped at Bonegi Beach 2. Just a few feet offshore rests Kinugawa Maru, an enormous Japa-nese transport ship, a casualty of U.S. bombing. Nearby at Bonegi Beach 1, another ship, the Hirokawa Maru, is fully submerged about 15 feet below the water's surface. Marine life is abundant around these mega vessels, and the snorkeling in Bonegi's clear, warm waters was remarkable.

STAR-ADVERTISEE

Please see ISLANDS, D4





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PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

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Stopping at a road stall for fresh coconut, we continued to the outdoor Vilu WWII Museum. On a large swath of land owned by the Kona family are fairly well-preserved Japanese anti-aircraft guns, U.S. and Japanese fuel tanks, and aircraft including Japanese "Betty" bombers, American Douglas dive bombers, Grumman Wildcat F4Fs and TBF Avengers. On the family's own initiative, they hauled these enormous items - most from Henderson — sparing them from scrap metalists.

Avoiding history in Honiara is impossible. The oneroom National Museum displays old spears, fighting clubs, ceremonial armbands, belts, shell money and various pidgin-translated Bibles circulated by early missionaries. In one corner are U.S. uniforms. weapons and 1940s Coke bottles. Visiting the Guadalcanal American Memorial, an outdoor tribute to Americans and Allies who died during the Guadalcanal campaign, was sobering. Perched peacefully on a hill overlooking Honjara's coastline, massive carved granite outlines the campaign's history from August 1942 to

February 1943 liberation. The first major step to victory against Japan took place in a most unlikely war theater. It was not the Solomons' war, though by virtue of geography it became ground zero.

Tavanipupu and Marau Sound atolls

Thopped on a 1970s Twin Otter for the 30-minute flight to Marau, on Guadalcanal's eastern tip. A bit of panic set in as we descended onto the short, narrow, grassy airstrip. From a nearby dock a 30-foot powerboat sped me to Tavanipupu, an island of 39 acres with 11 thatched huts and a dining pavilion set amid swaying palms. My oceanfront hut had an incredibly comfortable kingsize bed with mosquito netting, indoor and outdoor showers, seating area and large lanai with a comfy

hammock. Tavanipupu gained notoriety in 2012 when British royals Prince William and his wife, Kate Middleton, stopped here for a night. Lore and timing have it that Prince George was conceived here. However, several other locales have laid claim to the royal conception.

Swimming in bathtub-temperature water at Marau Sound, I came face to face with armies of clownfish, angelfish, starfish, groupers and endless corals. Behind my mask I felt crowded by the marine life's sheer numbers. The neon color explosion was so intense that underwater sunglasses would've come in handy.

My three days there were a dreamy blur of crystalline snorkeling, kayaking, reading and hammock swaying. If, in life's adventures, happiness is a blissful destination. Tavanipupu is it.

Western Province and JFK

Flying to the Solomons' Western Province required changing planes in Honiara.



Just a few feet offshore at Bonegi Beach 2 ests the partially submerged Kinugawa Maru, an enormous Japanese transport ship destroyed by U.S. bombs during World War II. At left, the sleeping pavilion at Tavanipupu Island Resort where Britain's Prince William and his wife, Kate, spent time.

IF YOU GO ...

Solomon Islands

THE BEST WAY

From Honolulu Airport, connecting service (change of planes) to Honiara is offered on Fiji Airways via Nadi. Fiji. Restricted, round-trip airfare begins at \$1,395, including taxes and fees. Domestic air service between Honiara and outlying islands' remote airstrips is on Solomon Airlines, beginning at \$200 round trip.

WHERE TO STAY

In Honiara:

Heritage Park Hotel, P.O. Box 1598, Mendana Ave., Honiara. Phone 677-24007, www.heritageparkhotel. com.sb. Contemporary four-star hotel with great beds, hot showers, pleasant pool/bar area and great coastline views. Doubles start at \$205 including Wi-Fi. Near Marau Sound:

Ocean-view bungalows on private island at Tavanipupu Island Resort, phone 677-36082, Tavanipupu. com. Take domestic flight from Honiara to Marau airstrip. Bungalows start at \$200 including boat transport to/from Marau, paddleboards, kayaks, snorkel equipment and Wi-Fi in dining pavilion only. Boat trips to nearby atolls can be arranged for nominal petrol cost. Additional \$50 per person for three meals daily, with breakfast served on bungalow lanal.

Near Kennedy Island: Simple, ocean-view bungalows in idyllic spot on Mbabanga Island near Gizo, phone 677-60095, solomonislandsfatboys.com.au. Take domestic flight from Honiara to Nusatupe airstrip. Bungalows start at \$175, including boat transport to/from Nusatupe, pad-dleboards, emerked equipment and Wi Frin change pa-villon only. Boat trips to nearby atolls can be arranged

for nominal petrol cost. WHERE TO EAT

In Honiara most restaurants are in Western-style hotels. The two standouts were Club Havanah in Chinatown's Honiara Hotel, where French Chef Georges prepares incredible seafood dishes and chocolate mousse to make one weep with joy. Phone 677-21737, honiarahotel.com.sb. Hakubai at Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel serves sushi so fresh it was swimming moments before, P.O. Box 384, Mendana Ave., phone 677-20072, kitanomendano.com.

Outside Honiara and on outer islands, there are eateries outside the hotels and bungalows that have dining pavilions or attached, reasonably priced restaurants.

Scuba diving: Including among WWII wrecks, the best way is on an all-inclusive live-aboard. Solomon Island Dive Expeditions offers several seven- to 11-day itineraries (with 24 to 30 dives) on its monohull, 100foot, 13-cabin, live-aboard custom dive vessel. 2017 prices start at \$2,772 inclusive. Phone 877-300-9487 or 206-925-3953, solomonsdiving.com.

World War II sites: Local guides for half- or full day can be arranged through the Solomon Island Visitors Bureau. Phone 677-22442, info@sivb.com.sb, Visit Solomons.com.sb. Or make a shortlist and jump in one of the plentiful, unmetered taxis that charge the equivalent of just \$13 per hour or \$1.25 per kilometer. Honiara is tiny, without a single streetlight, and all sites are within about 30 minutes of its center.

LEAVE AT HOME

Blue jeans and dark clothes are mosquito magnets. Also, leave jewelry, dressy clothes and makeup at home as they won't be needed.

DON'T FORGET

Solomons tourism is in its infancy, thus one must pack a large dose of patience — and several good books — as domestic transport departures by plane or boat can change times often without explanation. Malaria is still active, so prophylactic medication is necessary, as is strong spray or cream repellent, preferably containing a high level of DEET, used diligently. Board shorts are a good idea for snorkeling, paddleboarding and kayaking, and water shoes come in handy.

TO LEARN MORE

For general information and trip ideas, see visit solomons.com.sb.

An hour later Larrived at Nusatupe airstrip, jumping point to Gizo, Kasolo Island (later renamed Kennedy) and Olasana Island.

Near Nusatupe a guide named Panda took me to Fatboys Resort on Mbabanga Island. The hotel's five simple bungalows and dining pavilion hover over Vonavona Lagoon and face Kennedy Island. Schools of brightly colored fish and black-tip sharks swim in translucent waters while hotel guests dine comfortably above.

After settling in, Panda navigated on a 10-minute journey to Gizo's waterfront market. After buying mangoes and downing fresh coconut, I meandered into a tiny storefront to buy board shorts.

Heading south in Panda's boat to uninhabited Olasana, I walked along the sand where 73 years earlier on Aug. 1, 1943, the heroic story of a future president began to take shape. It was here that 26-year-old Navy Lt. John F. Kennedy and his crew landed after their ship, Navy torpedo boat PT-109, was struck and cut in half by a Japanese destroyer. Kennedy and his crew spent the next hellish days fighting strong currents as they swam to the closest islets: Kasolo, Olasana and Naru. On Olasana I envisioned

JFK's initial relief on finding dense trees that provided cover from the Japanese. However, the exhausted sailors found no fresh water, so JFK and Ensign George Ross swam on to Naru, where they found a tin of water and a one-man canoe. After rescuing his men on Olasana and returning to Naru, Kennedy carved a plea for help on a coconut which was delivered to an Australian coast-watcher by two native scouts working for the Allies. For his courage and leadership, Kennedy was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps medals, and a Purple Heart for the back injury he sustained in the collision with the destroyer.

With that heroic story in mind, we arrived at tiny Kennedy Island, exactly 100 paces, top to bottom. For our aqueous efforts, a Fatboys cook arrived to serve a delicious meal of grilled crayfish, snapper, sweet potatoes and ice-cold Solbrew

We spent another day snorkeling and paddleboarding with Panda, this time to several fertile atolls and sandbars along Ferguson Passage. Then, sadly, it was time to leave.

Flying home over the bright blue waters of the South Pacific, I marveled at JFK's valor and courage under treacherous conditions and thought about the gift of hope he gave to his men and would one day give to a na-

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