

travel



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SOUTH PACIFIC

SECRETS OF THE SOLOMONS

A World War II ground zero belies the island paradise

Story and photographs by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Growing up in Hawaii, I am no stranger to lovely tropical 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 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 Solomons 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 ancestral beliefs remain part of the culture.

Against this historical backdrop, I arrived 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 Lamatopopoho. 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.

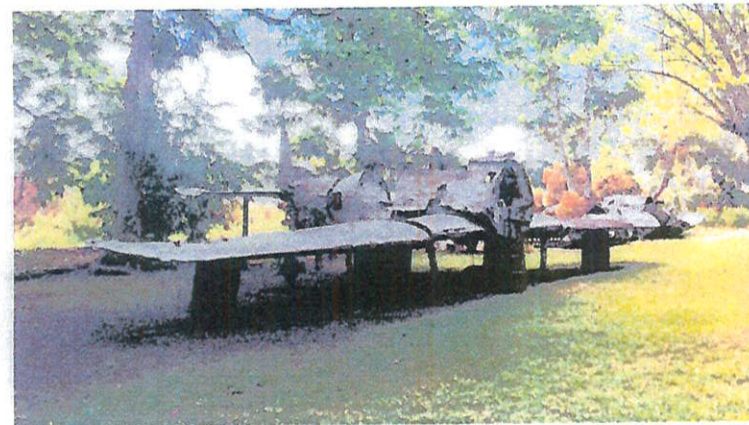
The waters between Guadalcanal and nearby Florida Island are a graveyard of downed ships and planes — both Japanese and American — that islanders call "Iron Bottom Sound." Continuing west we stopped at Bonegi Beach 2. Just a few feet offshore rests Kinugawa Maru, an enormous Japanese transport ship, 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.

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Kasolo, above, was later renamed Kennedy Island, in honor 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 several war relics, including an American bomber, below left. Islanders crowd the beach on Market Day in Marau, below right.



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