

Patience of Solomons

FIRST IMPRESSIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO COUNTER, SOMETIMES IT TAKES TIME AND EXPERIENCE.



I TRY not to be swayed by first impressions. I like to give myself a week or two before I really make up my mind about a place.

By then, the thrill of arriving has worn off and the reality of our surroundings has had a chance to sink in. However, some places make more of an impression than most. The small town of Lata on Ndende island, our first landfall in the Solomon's, was one of those places.

Approaching the beach in our dinghy I was surprised to see that the high tide line was not a collection of plastic bags and left thongs, as is the norm these days. Instead it was a wall of crushed soft drink cans, each one sharper than the next; all waiting to cut our feet and puncture our inflatable.

Unfortunately, after we carefully navigated the beach, the scene did not improve much.

It was market day and the small clearing at the waterfront was busy with people selling pumpkins and local fruit. Despite craving fresh veggies after our passage from Vanuatu I did not have time to eye the selection. I was too busy avoiding the gobs of brick-red spit that carpeted the footpath.

A local woman called out across the path, frothy spittle and bits of masticated bark spilling from her mouth as she spoke in broken English. Her eyes were wide and wired, like someone who has had ten too many cups of coffee. Her teeth, the ones she had left, were the colour of rust.

I could neither smile nor look away. My camera was at my hip, but reaching for it seemed intrusive and, maybe, a little dangerous.

I would discover that chewing betel nut is both a national past time and a national health problem. It was a habit that we would see throughout our ten month stay in the Solomon Islands, although rarely quite as vivid, or disgusting, as this first contact.

By the time we made it past the waterfront, up the dirt path and found the police station, my 'check-in' clothes were limp and what little makeup I had put on was now smudges of colour on my soaking wet handkerchief.

We waited for over an hour for someone to track down the officials that needed to see our boat papers, only to find out that the man from Customs was in a conference and we would have to return tomorrow.



Liapari Island.

The next day was, of course, a repeat of waiting around and sweating, but in the end, we had all our paperwork stamped. Not our easiest clear-in to date, but certainly not our most trying one either.

THE SOLLIES

The Solomon Islands, lovingly referred to as the 'Sollies' by some, are made up of over 900 islands lying east of Papua New Guinea and northwest of Vanuatu.

Scattered across the vast Solomon Sea, the landscape and the people vary greatly from island to island. Intensely tribal, the country has approximately 70 indigenous languages that are still spoken; however, like Vanuatu and PNG, the country is united by a lingua franca. Solomon Island 'pijin' is a type of creole that can trace its roots back to whaling ships, the sandalwood trade and Australian sugar plantation blackbirding of the 1800's.

The country also has a long, sad history of ethnic violence. One that has yet to be resolved.

We had decided to spend the South Pacific cyclone season in the Solomon Islands, a calculated risk. Known as an area of cyclonic genesis, it is rarely affected by the vicious storms it births.

Reports on various cruising forums spoke of a hurricane hole not far from the island of Ghizo in the far west of the Solomon's group. We were keen to check it out before the season really got going. Since there was nothing endearing us to Lata we pulled up anchor and started island hopping westward.

Our first stop was San Cristobel, a quiet island where we found a safe anchorage at Star Harbour and began what would become an almost daily affair of trading with the locals.

We took a calm in the forecast to spend a few days catching up on sleep before our weather window opened for our overnight passage to the capital, Honiara.

Although we did preliminary clearance in Lata we were required to pay fees and visit immigration officials in Honiara. I was also looking forward to stocking up on provisions

HANDY TIPS

- we kept a large supply of trade items on board while in the Solomon's. Pencils and notebooks were popular with the kids, as were barrettes, fishing line and hooks. Adult T-shirts and children's clothing and hats were requested, plus rice, sugar and tea were popular, especially when in communities far from urban centres.
- Solomon Islanders are very social people and will often visit your boat just for "story", sometimes hanging around past their welcome, particularly the kids. We found announcing in a friendly manner that it was "time to get back to work" or "time to go home" would clear the crowd of canoes.
- saltwater crocodile are widespread in the Solomon Islands. It is advisable to ask locals about recent croc sighting and attacks before swimming in an anchorage.
- betel nut is the nut of the areca tree. When mixed with slaked lime and chewed it has an intoxicating effect that is similar to nicotine and produces a chemical reaction that turns saliva dark red. It is chewed though the tropics despite being known to cause mouth and throat cancer, among other oral problems.
- although fuel is available throughout the islands it can be difficult to get in large amounts. Local boats run on petrol, so diesel can be very hard to come by. Be prepared to lug jerry cans.

in what I correctly guessed would be the only big town in the whole island group.

Our final passage was only 71 nautical mile, but variable winds and a noticeable counter-current upped the ante when it came time to navigate the busy shipping channel of Guadalcanal Island in the middle of the night. Thankfully, we passed without troubles and by daybreak we were ghosting towards our destination.

Disappointingly, Honiara lived up to its reputation. The small, deep harbour was congested and filthy. Known for its poor holding it took us three attempts to get the anchor to bite. While we cleaned up and surveyed our new surroundings we were relieved to read that the forecast for the next few days was benign, the not-great anchorage would be safe.



After a quick breakfast we assembled the dinghy and headed ashore to finish the check in procedures. Honiara is a busy commercial port, but not one that necessarily caters to pleasure yachts. The final details of our clearance were not so familiar with the port officials, which meant lots of waiting patiently, lots of sweating.

At the end of the day I was happy to have our passport stamps, fees paid and the ordeal finally behind us.

We spent a few days in the dirty, busy city doing chores: filling LPG tanks, stocking the larder for the holidays, getting laundry done, organising a sim card. We felt welcomed, if somewhat overlooked, at the Honiara Yacht Club and found refuge at a few of the older, finer hotels at happy hour.

The island of Guadalcanal is steeped in history and remnants of both the tragedies of World War II and the opulence of the good old days were hidden in plain sight, however we did not have much time to explore.

We knew were chasing a seasonal wind shift and by late December the winds would probably disappear altogether. Our engine had given us more than its share of trouble over the years and the less we had to turn the key, the better.

There were lots of islands that looked interesting on paper, we could have made it a lazy trip by day-hopping westward. But the more



we doddled the further we would be from our potential safe haven and, until we had seen the place for ourselves, we knew we'd be on edge. It was time to make tracks to Ghizo.

SECOND IMPRESSIONS

Our 200nm passage was slow. The fickle winds that ghosted us along during daylight hours left the sails hanging limp at night. Thankfully, the islands protected us from the open ocean swell so we were comfortable, if practically stationary at times.

At daybreak on day three a large wooden float, covered in birds appeared out of the murky dawn light. It had no lights or obvious markings and looked like it could have been a fish attracting device (FAD), but we were in 2000 metre depth without land visible.

For two windless hours we danced with the structure, which at times appeared to be moving. When we came within 100m of it we decided to spark up the engine.

We left our mysterious bird boat drifting on the horizon and the question, "what if we had crossed paths at night under full sail," floated around in my mind.

Finally, the wind filled in and we zoomed up Ferguson Passage towards Ghizo Island as the sun was bending towards the horizon. We found the barely marked, narrow pass through the reef

and looked forward to the shelter of the lagoon and the stillness of being on anchor after four torturously slow days at sea.

A strong current raced through the channel, dragging us sideways and close to the reef. Then, just as it felt like I could reach out and grab the corner marker, we broke free and navigated our way through the lagoon. We were happily surprised to discover that most of the beacons and markers we saw on the charts were still in place and functioning.

"OUR ANCHOR BIT IN 12M OF SAND, WE SETTLED IN AND I MARVELLED AT THE QUIET."

Hoping to treat ourselves to a hard-earned, cold beer we settled the boat in 12m of sticky mud and headed ashore just before dusk.

We found the famous PT109 Bar, named after the torpedo boat that was captained by John F. Kennedy during WWII and destroyed just outside the pass one dark night when it was rammed by a Japanese cruiser.

Expecting at least a few tourists, if not some boisterous local barflies, we found a darkened room and only a couple of weary staff. The few other small waterfront bars were shuttered.

LEFT: Hand carved bowl with nautilus shell inlay, Western Province.

ABOVE: The crowd of kids at Mono and Sterling Island.

RIGHT: WWII anti-aircraft gun.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The peace of the Vona Vona Lagoon.



hung on the hip. I could only hope the New Year had better things in store.

When the weather broke we decided to check out the cyclone hole at Liapari Island nearby.

BACK TO NATURE

Located at the southern tip of the large island Vella Lavella and just 12nm from Gizo Town, Liapari is hidden behind an extensive outer reef that shelters it from the weather and an inner reef that keeps the large bay calm in almost any winds.

At first glance the approach seemed a little intimidating but, upon arriving, the entrance became obvious and the shallow, man-made inner pass was well-marked. Our anchor bit in 12m of sand and as we settled in I marvelled at the quiet surroundings, such a world away from the grimy streets and busy harbour of Gizo town.

Liapari is a private island, now owned by the welcoming Noel Hudson, a Kiwi who has lived in the Solomon's since the 70's and his wife Rosie. Once a copra plantation, Noel arrived at Liapari in 1984 and took ownership in 2002, turning the business away from servicing the dying copra trade and to servicing the local shipping fleet and visiting yachties.

Besides offering a safe haven for the occasional storm he also has a dock for long term in-water storage, cottages for rent, a machine shop and labourers for hire and an open invite for all to join him in the 'roundhouse' at happy hour to share tall tales and cool drinks.

Satisfied that we had found a spot to hole-up if needed we were excited to start exploring the many islands of the western province. Our first stop the Vona Vona lagoon.

The Vona Vona (pronounced wanna wanna) is one of several large lagoons in the Solomon Islands, however it is not a cruiser hotspot like the Marovo Lagoon. This is in part due to incomplete charting; however, with the help of some GPS coordinates from Noel, running two navigation programs and keeping a sharp eye out on the bow when things got tight, we had no problems.

There are not many people living in the Vona Vona lagoon, which meant we got front row seats to enjoy some of the native wildlife that calls the Solomon's home. Over my sunrise cup of coffee, I would watch from the cockpit for crocodiles lazing in the muddy waters and listen for the telltale 'whoosh whoosh' of hornbill wings, audible long before their huge, angular silhouettes could be spotted.

On only a few occasions did I spot a crocodile, but for a week a pair of hornbills appeared like clockwork; in the morning flying west together and, as the sun was setting, returning to roost.

WAYPOINTS & CONTACTS

Waypoints for reference only, not suitable for navigation.

- Zipolo Habu Resort, Lola Island: www.zipolohabu.com.sb
- Laipari Ltd., Laipari Island, Noel Hudson: laipari@solomon.com.sb; H4KK@sailmail.com
- Ndende Island: 10°44.1 S, 165°49.7 E
- Star Harbour, San Cristobel Island: 10°49.0 S, 162°15.8 E
- Honiara Harbour, Guadalcanal Island: 09°25.7 S, 169°57.2 E
- Gizo Town, Ghizo Island: 08°09.8 S, 156°83.8 E
- Liapari Island: 07°56.8 S, 156°42.8 E
- Zipolo Habu Resort, Vona Vona Lagoon: 08°30.7 S, 156°16.1 E
- Munda, New Georgia Island: 08°33.1 S, 157°26.3 E
- Egholo, Rendova Island: 08°41.3 S, 157°73.2 E
- Mono Island: 07°24.0 S, 155°33.5 E.

Further down the harbour the Gizo Hotel was dark. Posted on the door was a government notice; the selling and serving of alcohol had been banned across the island for ten days because of a street brawl between locals. One man had been airlifted to Honiara with brain injuries, his condition precarious.

Two weeks in and my second impression was not much better than my first.

We had days of clear blue skies and still waters, so we took advantage of the weather, anchorage hopping and spending a simple Christmas in the safety of the lagoon. Gizo town may have been short on shopping options, but the lagoon was full of gifts: white sand beaches, a few welcoming, idyllic resorts and some amazing snorkelling.

However, when the forecast changed for the worst we headed back to the most sheltered anchorage in the area just off town. Within a day, four more boats appeared, one from Japan riding the worsening weather that had descended upon us.

During the day we watched the local kids surfing scraps of plywood on waves that were now breaking on an unnoticed reef near by. At night we watched through the squall as another boat drifted clear across the harbour, finally snagging on a reef 10m from the opposite shore before the crew awoke.

December 31st was a wet dark night, gusts reaching 50kn and flipping our dinghy that



After a week alone, we were happy to come across Zipolo Habu, a small resort located on an exclusive island in the middle of the lagoon. Welcoming to yachties, and catering to fisherman, the owners Joe and Lisa were happy to swap fish tales and answer any questions we had about navigating and provisioning in the nearby town of Munda.

This is also where we paid our entrance fee to Skull Island, a popular tourist attraction.

Preserved and displayed on a small island nearby is a collection of skulls from the infamous headhunting days. A gruesome part of ritualised warfare that was practised by the Roviana people that populate the area. The procurement of trophy skulls by area chiefs is thought to have represented power, rank and dominance over neighbouring tribes. The collection of skulls was moved to the island to commemorate the history of the islands before contact with the western world.

Death hung heavy in the air but, walking around the coral rock shrine and looking into empty eye sockets of these people, I felt a sense of peace. Their deaths may have been violent but the act of arranging them was done with care and respect.

Wanting to fill up on petrol for the dinghy and reluctantly in need of a cell phone signal to check emails we made our way to the town of Munda on the large island of New Georgia, at the eastern edge of the lagoon. Munda is a local tourist hub, partly thanks to the airfield that occupies a huge area behind the town.

Built in late 1942 by the Japanese, the airfield went virtually undetected by Allied air surveillance until it was operational. Located on an old palm plantation the construction was cleverly camouflaged by suspending the tops of coconut palms in a grid of cables.

The Japanese flattened the 44x1094 yard airstrip underneath, topping it with crushed coral. When the wires were cut and the palm fronds sprung upright, the runway was ready.

However, once in operation the Allied forces were quick to attack and, during the Battle of Munda Point, the airfield and the island fell to the Allied forces just shortly after the first Mitsubishi Zero landed.

The airstrip was not the only relic on the island. The Western Province was an important stage in the Pacific Theatre during WWII and we had already seen the leftovers of war peppered through the islands: Quonset huts lined the Gizo waterfront, rusty anti-aircraft guns stood silent guard at the mouth of many harbours, vintage American army jeeps prowled the streets of Munda.

But nothing prepared me for the vast and personal collection that Barney oversaw at the Peter Joseph WWII Museum.

IN MEMORIAM

Housed in a modest plywood shed Barney has been collecting items that have been found on the island for more than 20 years.

The project started innocently. One Sunday on his way to church a dog tag belonging to Peter Joseph, an American soldier, was unearthed. Barney believed that the object needed to be preserved, perhaps even one day returned, so he put it somewhere safe. Slowly other objects were discovered as people dug in their back garden or were exploring in the bush, so they brought the items to Barney for safe keeping.

Little by little his collection grew, and he eventually opened it to the public.

“KNOWN AS AN AREA OF CYCLONIC GENESIS, IT IS RARELY AFFECTED BY THE VICIOUS STORMS IT BIRTHS.”

LEFT TO RIGHT: Kids in canoes visit to sell vegetables.

Toothy smiles at Skull Island, Vona Vona Lagoon.



Since the island had been occupied by both the Japanese and Allied troops his collection reflected both sides of the war. Plane engines, safety gear, mess kits, expired medical supplies, helmets, weapons and ammunition covered the grounds and four long tables inside the shed. However, it was what was kept in the locked strong box that was the most moving.

Besides a large key ring filled with dog tags there was a selection of personal items: a fancy red-glass ashtray, a small brass frame with the faded photo of a woman smiling, a cigarette case with a calendar still intact inside.

“THE THRILL OF ARRIVING HAS WORN OFF AND THE REALITY OF OUR SURROUNDINGS HAS HAD A CHANCE TO SINK IN.”

As I turned each item in my hands I suddenly realised that the objects, luxuries carried and protected through the unforgiving years of war, belonged not to a soldier but to a man; a husband, a brother, a loved one. It gave a face to the stories that I had read. I then understood, it is what gave Barney his purpose.

This museum was not here to satisfy the many that come to marvel at the airplane engines and handle the American rifles or the Japanese handguns, although Barney is happy to explain the history of each of these items. It was a celebration of life and an act of remembrance.

We walked home under the midday sun in relative silence, both absorbed in our own thoughts. As we wandered the narrow, dirt streets that snaked through the encroaching jungle I wondered how much the island had

changed in the 70 years since the war had ended. I wondered how much we, the human race, had actually learned and changed.

We would continue to see evidence of battles fought through the Solomon Islands, but nothing as impressive, or as moving, as Barney’s humble museum.

STOCKING UP

After stocking up in Munda we continued east bouncing between the southern coast of New Georgia and the adjacent island of Rendova.

This is a popular area for visiting sailors as the locals are welcoming and the trading plentiful. Anchor near a village and you are guaranteed to get a parade of canoes come out to visit and trade.

The two main markets for trading were with the men and the children. The men offered their famous carvings, everything from functional bowls to large sculptural pieces. Most were made by hand with rudimentary tools and local hardwoods, many featuring intricate designs inlaid with nautilus shell.

Often shipping their wares to Honiara where they are sold at premium prices, the carvers are savvy businessmen and hardnosed bargainers.

Items like sandpaper, chisels and fine files were highly sought after trade items but they must be of good quality, not dollar store finds. The men are serious craftsmen that know the difference.

Power tools, like grinders and orbital sanders, were also asked for but as we have only 110 volt equipment we had nothing to bring to the table.

The men can also be very adamant that you buy something, especially if you have already purchased something from a previous visitor, so shop wisely. Rarely in the market for trinkets and souvenirs we found the constant stream of floating salesmen to be exhausting. After a while we searched out more remote anchorages in order to have a little privacy.

However, we thoroughly enjoyed trading with the children who offered fresh veggies that were foraged from gardens and fruit pillaged from the bush. In most villages boys who were eight years to ten years old were keen to take our requests for green coconuts. They paddled away to shimmy up a tree with their machete, an item we saw wielded with skill by even 5 to 6 year olds.

I would hear the commotion in the bush nearby as the giant nuts fell through the trees and landed with a sickening thud. A few moments later the boys were back with a half a dozen neatly trimmed coconuts, ready to cut open and drink.

The kids would arrive in leaky dugout canoes, coming both for the sale and the spectacle. Eggplants, local sweet potatoes, pineapples, guavas, capsicum, ginger, chillies, mushrooms, rambutans, tomatoes, beans, avocado, mango, pawpaw (papaya), pomelo and a variety of local spinach-like greens all arrived via canoe.

Occasionally we were presented with a few eggs, pale and small and probably stolen from one of the wandering chickens in the area. They were gingerly carried out in the folds of the paddler's shorts as they sat cross legged in their canoe. For months I had little need to visit the local food markets as we purchased everything over the rails.

WESTWARD BOUND

The seasons were changing again so eventually we knew it was time to move on. We did our outbound clearance in the town of Noro, home to the island's tuna fishing fleet and cannery, then pointed our bow west towards Papua New Guinea.

Our passage would weave through the outer islands, never far from land. When our GPS stopped working we decided to pull into the remote islands of Mono and Sterling, just shy of the border, to effect repairs.

Anchoring off the black sand beach of the village, trading with the local children was fast and furious. However, when our supply of pencils and notebooks ran dry our novelty wore off and the crowd dissipated. We were left to the task of troubleshooting our problem.

Steve was able to find the problem on the motherboard of the GPS unit, but it was irreparable. We would have to navigate with our emergency handheld GPS from the ditch bag, plotting our position on our electronic charts as we went.

The next morning as I was pulling up anchor for the last time I had a sudden urge to turn south again, to go back. Although we had spent ten months in the Solomon Islands I felt like we had just barely scratched the surface.

Our time in the Solomon's seemed like one long string of first impressions and I was not sure I had made up my mind yet. ≈

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