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ISSUE 91

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Journey to Ballalae

ONE SON RETRACES
HIS FATHER'S WWII
FOOTSTEPS

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These additions not only provide more travel choices but also support economic and tourism growth in our region. We're especially proud of our growing Pacific connections, making travel across our neighbouring islands seamless and convenient.

Enhanced Services and Strategic Initiatives

As part of our strategy to diversify revenue streams, we're excited to introduce initiatives that add value for you while supporting Solomon Airlines' growth. One such initiative is our Early Bird offer, which gives you discounted fares on all international routes when you book in advance. This is our way of rewarding early planners with competitive pricing.

Additionally, we've launched a 40kg checked baggage allowance on our IE707 Sunday flight from Brisbane to Honiara. This is perfect for weekender travellers, frequent flyers, and those visiting friends and family. This initiative highlights our focus on capacity management, increasing passenger load factors, and enhancing your satisfaction.

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*Our mission to connect
the Solomon Islands
with the world is
stronger than ever.*

Our Commitment to You

At the core of everything we do is you—our valued passengers. Your safety, comfort, and satisfaction are our top priorities. As we continue to grow, Solomon Airlines remains dedicated to building a stronger, more resilient airline. We're committed to ensuring financial sustainability through diversified revenue streams, thoughtful capacity management, and investments in our people and technology.

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CEO of Solomon Airlines

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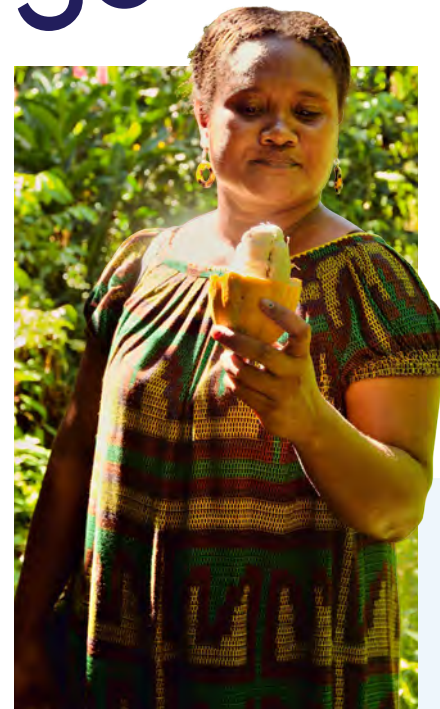


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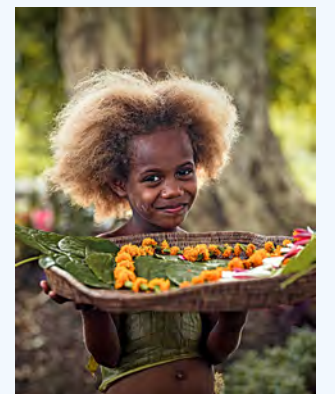
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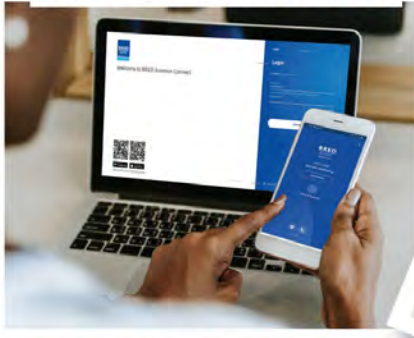
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Out and About

BIG BREAK

Solomon Islands' own Chris Kamu'ana Rohoimae has clinched the title at ABC's Pacific Break 2024—the region's biggest music competition.

Chris won the competition with his evocative song, *Naratana manu*. This impressive achievement sets the stage for Chris to perform at Australia's prestigious WOMADelaide festival in March 2025.

Chris, a 28-year-old from Malaita Province, began his musical journey two years ago, fuelled by a childhood passion ignited by his father, a traditional panpipes musician. His music is a harmonious blend of contemporary and traditional sounds, with *Naratana manu* or "the birds crying" being his winning song. Sung in the Are-Are language, the song revolves around resilience and navigating life's challenges.

The song captivated the judges, including WOMADelaide Associate Director Annette Tripodi and Australian musician Hau Lātūkefu, who praised Chris's ability to draw listeners in with his powerful vocals and the haunting sounds of the au po'o panpipes. Hau described the piece as a blend of traditional and contemporary, with the potential to captivate on a grand scale.

This year's Pacific Break saw over 300 entries from 18 nations, showcasing the region's rich diversity and talent. As Chris takes the WOMADelaide stage, he represents not just his own dreams, but the vibrant cultural legacy of the Pacific.

As the winner, Chris is set to perform at WOMADelaide 2025, a contest responsible for launching the careers of other singers from the Pacific region. ▶

The 10 finalists for ABC's Pacific Break 2024 were:

- Francisco Bhagwan – *Take Your Time* (Fiji)
- Kali Tui – *Nanumi Au* (Fiji)
- Liz Vamarasi – *Malele* (Fiji)
- Microchild – *Canopy* (Guam)
- Carnie Reimers – *Stars Collide* (Marshall Islands)
- Tarvin Toune – *Rosie* (Papua New Guinea)
- Tyron Scott – *Adore You* (Papua New Guinea)
- **Christopher Kamu'ana Rohoimae** – *Naratana manu* (Solomon Islands)
- Lester Bibao Kisina – *All Work Out* (Solomon Islands)
- Vanessa Quai feat. Young Davies – *Hemi Oraet* (Vanuatu/Solomon Islands)



Out and About



SCHOOL'S IN

Students throughout the Pacific region have greater opportunities to study climate change research and stay on top of the latest digital innovations with the official opening of a new campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the Solomon Islands.

The King George Campus is in Honiara and was officially launched on October 3.

The \$70 million campus will enable more students access to world-class facilities, with a focus on sustainability and climate change research – the campus features a solar PV farm and rainwater harvesting as well as a disability and special needs centre.

The new campus is set to provide a range of courses spanning its six schools and institutes, including Information and Communication Technology, Accounting, Finance and Economics, Communication and Education, Geography, and Ocean and Natural Sciences.

The university is aiming to position King George Campus as a regional facility that will help achieve the action plan for the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy.



It also has plans to ramp up its career counselling services, human resources, and USP's governance and management frameworks, to ensure it provides a comprehensive and supportive educational environment for students throughout the Pacific region.

The new campus was designed and constructed with respect to the local setting and its traditional architecture, an area USP prioritises to preserve traditional Pacific knowledge. These designs can be seen in the roof form, balustrade, sun shading screens, and "lif haus" student study huts. ▶

Photos courtesy of The University of the South Pacific



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Journey TO Ballalae



Retracing my father's WWII journey to Ballalae Island Memorial

WORDS AND PHOTOS BRIAN HILL

My father was born during the First World War in July of 1918 and 22 years later he enlisted into The Royal Army Medical Corps on the 5th of March (1940).

He was posted to the 198 Field Ambulance Division and was sent to Malaya in 1941, arriving in Singapore three months later. The city fell to the Japanese in February of 1942 and my father was one of 1,800 men that were either reported missing or killed in action.

“There’s a small war memorial on Ballalae Island to commemorate the 517 British POWs who perished, my father among them.”

My mother received a Certificate of Death from The War Office on February 4 years later (1946) confirming that my father was one of those 1,800 killed on Valentine’s Day, 1942 while serving in the Far East.

Fast forward to 2012 and my son-in-law, Colonel (Retired) Marty Lade L/RAMC, decided to search within the Army Medical Services Museum in Aldershot (UK) for more information. He miraculously came across a surviving copy of a Singapore Changi POW No.1 Camp journal entitled ‘The Oner’, produced by inmates in either May or June of 1942. The journal had been signed by a few members of the 198 Field Ambulance Division, and among them was my father’s signature.

Left: Brian Hill and his daughter touch down on Ballalae Island.



My father hadn't died like my mum and I were led to believe. Instead, he was one of the few survivors of that fateful Japanese massacre and was held as a POW for a short time. But it wasn't until late 2019/early 2020 that we discovered my father was then put on a ship (Kenkon Maru) along with 5 other RAMC to help support the British Royal Artillery "Gunners 600 Party" in October of 1942.

Around 600 POWs disembarked on the island of New Britain in New Guinea after one hell of a voyage but for 517 men, this wasn't their final destination. Those fit enough to travel boarded another 'hell ship' bound for Ballalae Island in the Solomons.

Once there, the POWs were forced to build an airstrip for the Japanese, encountering unrelenting and appalling conditions. They were overworked in the tropical sun, beaten and starved. But after an American air raid in which many prisoners were killed because there were no trenches to take cover in, the Japanese army ordered all surviving prisoners to be disposed of by any means, fearing that the Americans would soon take the island.

This is how my father actually died, alongside the remaining POWs (including his fellow medics). They were massacred in cold blood by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1943. Not a single one of those 517 men taken to Ballalae Island survived.

"Even though I'm 85 years old, it felt only right to retrace his footsteps all the way from the UK to this small island in the Pacific."



When Ballalae Island was re-occupied by the Allies in 1945, a mass grave was discovered. It was estimated to contain the remains of 436 men. Every single man's service tag had been removed so they could only be identified by the artefacts linking them to the missing "British Gunners 600 Party" transported from Singapore in October of 1942.

Their remains were exhumed and permanently re-interred in individual graves at Bomana War Cemetery, near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea on the 13th of December 1945.



Their headstones are marked with the words 'A Soldier of the 1939-1945 War Known Only to God'. But my father wasn't known only to God; some 70-odd years after my mother received his death certificate, I had found him. At last.

That was in 2020: it's now August of 2024, and I'm here on Ballalae Island. There's a small war memorial on the island to commemorate the 517 British POWs who perished, my father among them. And even though I'm 85 years old, it felt only right to retrace his footsteps all the way from the UK to this small island in the Pacific. ▲

Clockwise from opposite: Brian and his daughter stand alongside Solomons Airlines staff and the commemorative plaque; connecting with the locals; standing with the commemorative plaque; Brian paying his respects to his late father.

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SAILING THE SOLOMONS

Seven years at sea...

An interview with James Ashwell, owner and captain of Uhuru of London, on sailing the Solomons, living life to the max, and an unexpected seven years at sea.

WORDS SUPPLIED PHOTOS JAMES ASHWELL



When James Ashwell and his crew of three set sail from Fowey, Cornwall in late September 2017, it was bone-chillingly cold with choppy seas and foreboding skies, a world away from the 27-degree Celsius, year-round average temperature of the Solomon Islands.

Fowey, a port town with an 11-kilometre deepwater estuary, is a busy passageway for commercial and leisure vessels and a port of call for cruise liners from around the world.

Its harbour entrance is notoriously rough during ebb tides and strong south-westerly winds. But the *Uhuru of London*, an Oyster 62 blue water cruising yacht, managed to forge its way to open sea.

On board were James Ashwell and his two closest friends Juan Pena and Hamilton Arroyo. They had little to no ocean sailing experience between them, other than steering small charter boats on European holidays. Also on board was hired instructor Jean Petty, an expert solo round-the-world sailor with a remit “to teach us how not to die”, quipped James.

“Interestingly, the start of our journey, leaving from Fowey, and a storm en route to Lisbon, was the scariest and most dangerous passage we have endured in seven years at sea.

“Looking back, it’s amazing that we didn’t turn around, and just go home,” he added.

The journey was never supposed to be seven years long, but rather a shorter two-year escape from the UK. Still, the decision to embark on a life at sea together had required a leap of faith for everyone onboard.

For James, the decision was clear. At 36, he had already experienced career achievement, the premature loss of both parents and success as an entrepreneur.

“My goal was never to sail around the world but to spend time with people I care about, have time for those I meet, and to get away from the crazy life I had been living,” said James.

“And while we achieved those objectives, after a year in the Caribbean, we decided not to sail back to the UK as planned.”

Instead, the crew sailed on to Colombia and from there, through the Panama Canal to Cocos Island, Galapagos, Gambier via Pitcairn and to Easter Island in the South Pacific.

After Easter Island and a month in French Polynesia, they sailed further to the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand, their southernmost port of call. After a stop in New Zealand, the plan had been to then sail north again to New Caledonia, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomons, before continuing to Papua New Guinea and beyond.

“The Solomon Islands was always an intended destination for us,” said James.

“Even the name ‘Solomon Islands’ evokes the idea of adventure.”

“Since I was a child, I’ve been slightly obsessed with maps, especially interesting geographical features.

“The Solomon Islands fascinated me, including Nggela Island on the northeast side of Guadalcanal, with its slither of a channel that just begs to be sailed.”

However, it would be six years before they reached the Solomon Islands, with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic forcing them to pause in New Zealand for over two years.

“2020 was a year many of us never expected, and lockdown in New Zealand was the most severe in the world.

“I couldn’t control how that year would turn out. I couldn’t visit my friends and family, or plan our immediate future.

“But it did mean time for maintenance and during that process, we discovered a host of

Opposite: *Uruhu of London* sailing the waters of the Solomon Islands. **Above:** Crewmates ready for an adventure.

dangerous defects that could easily have caused tragic and unthinkable consequences."

In 2023, with *Uhuru* gleaming, and the kinship of buddy boats *Velerio Katoosh* and *WindHippie*, they departed New Zealand for New Caledonia, Fiji and Vanuatu before the anticipated short hop to reach the Solomon Islands.

The 300 nautical mile sail from Luganville Vanuatu to Lata, should have been an easy two days, had the weather not turned menacing.

Erring on the side of caution, *Uhuru* sought shelter in the most unlikely of locations – the ancient volcanic cone of the remote island of Ureparapara, also known as Parapara.

From an aerial perspective, maps of Ureparapara resemble a large round water lily leaf, with a long split in its centre where the ocean has breached its eastern side.

The split is a spectacular harbour with steep headlands at the entrance, before a 3-kilometre stretch into the centre of the cone.

"With storm clouds brewing, we had no choice but to head there, surfing down large waves as we turned to enter the mouth of the crater," said James.

"Once inside, the sea turned as flat as a lake, and we were surrounded by towering jungle-clad cliffs. Out of sheer

necessity, we had stumbled across an incredibly beautiful place in splendid isolation. Or so we thought.

"As soon as we arrived, we were joined by inquisitive locals who paddled out from a tiny village nestled inside the mouth of the inlet.

"When we left a few days later, we felt we had made new friends, and were able to help in a small way, fixing their spear gun and a generator, and welcoming what seemed like half of the village who came to use our Starlink Wi-Fi."

Uhuru finally reached the Solomon Islands in August 2023, entering the country at Lata, Nendo Island.

"Shortly after we had lowered our quarantine flag, a lovely lady, whose house overlooks the small bay, welcomed us to the Solomon Islands with a beautiful bouquet.

"We have never been welcomed to a country like that before and felt it was a good omen for what was to come."

Over the next few days, the crew spent a fair amount of time with Hilda. They toured her garden filled with colourful flowers, shared a traditional meal and met her children.

"One afternoon we went for a swim in the bay and were joined by a school of tens of thousands of small fish. It was a magical afternoon swimming through the huge balls of fish and watching the rays of the setting sun catch on their silver scales."

After a few days in Lata, the crew sailed north to Marapa Island, aware that the window for heading over the top of Papua New Guinea would close in late October when the winds and current switch of direction would make passage almost impossible.

"This seasonal change became our ticking clock requiring swifter progress through the Solomon Islands than we would have liked," said James.

"We broke our journey in the Marapa Islands and the anchorage I chose at the tiny island of PaiPai turned out to be one of the most beautiful we have been lucky enough to enjoy.

But the unforgettable experience of crossing the Nggela channel was calling.

"The only problem was that there was no Nggela channel data available on any charts to indicate its depth, so it was impossible to know if *Uhuru*, measuring 2.5m in draft, was going to be able to sail through.

"We knew we could only attempt it in good strong daylight, and only if the weather and conditions were right.

"We found an anchorage nearby that felt nice and really safe. The next morning there was a clear blue sky and at 5AM before sunrise, we raised anchor and headed for Nggela channel.

"Like many places on our journey, it's hard to describe the thrill of discovering such spectacular natural beauty."

"It's fair to say I was extremely anxious and my anxiety levels only continued to rise the closer we got," said James.

"The channel in places was barely wide enough to turn *Uhuru* should it get too shallow, and I was petrified of grounding her.

"As we slowed to 3kts and gingerly entered the passage, I was sweating, and my heart rate was sky high as the depth reduced from 25m to 5m. From the drone images, I could see just how shallow the waterway was with the bottom clearly visible.

"It took several hours to navigate the channel, and I felt a huge relief once we made it out to the open ocean. But it was well worth the worries as we passed by stilt villages and beautiful jungles just a few metres away."

James counts the welcome they received in Roderick Bay, Central Province as a standout of their entire journey.

"On the late afternoon of our arrival, a local paddled over and invited us to come for some drinks. As we arrived at the beach, his entire family welcomed us in traditional dress singing and chanting as we climbed from the dinghy.

"The beachfront was decorated with a palm arch, and we were presented with floral leis, coconut juice, plates of food and

Opposite: The crew spent time snorkelling shipwrecks. **Above:** Diving the waters of the Solomon Islands between the islands. **Right:** The marine life is abundant in the Solomons.





a dance performance by the children as we sat by the fire.

"We also spent an afternoon exploring the MS *World Discoverer* in Roderick Bay, which makes the most brilliant accidental waterpark! The wreck provides a climbing frame for swings and zip lines, and her belly is lined with coral and tropical fish below the water.

With just weeks left in the Solomon Islands, the crew set sail to find and dive the Leru Cut in the Russell Islands.

"We were lucky to hear about it by chance, from a passing super yacht captain we had a beer with," said James.

"We firstly had to find an anchorage in the Russell Islands, which turned out to be impossible as it's all about 50m deep, so we tied up to the morning buoy of one of the local supply boats.

"Then we visited the local village, asked for permission to be there and offered a range of handy items as a gesture of thanks.

"The following day, it was a one-hour dinghy ride to meet the Chief responsible for the Leru Cut, whose permission we also asked.

"It took us ages to find the entrance to the cut, and when we did, we realised that it was a sheer wall of razed sharp rock, so we spent another

hour trying to figure out what to do with the dinghy!

"When we finally got into the water all of the effort was immediately worth it. The Leru Cut is a long passage cut deep into the land not quite wide enough for a couple of divers to swim side by side.

"Looking up you can occasionally glimpse the jungle, and shafts of sunlight shine through gaps above, to light parts of the tunnel. Inside, the water was insanely clear, adding to the strange feeling of floating inside a room."

The crew's last stop in the Solomon Islands was at Marovo Lagoon, New Georgia, the world's largest double-barrier reef lagoon.

"We found the perfect spot to anchor in Marovo, and although we could have spent months there, we knew we had to leave soon.

"We water-skied at sunset, chilled in the hammocks and became obsessed with catching squid, and once a delicious yellowfin tuna that fed us for several days.

"On one of our last days, we asked the locals if we could buy some carvings, and we agreed to meet on the beach the next morning.

"To our surprise, it felt like most of the local community had turned up, setting out what could only be described



as a market with dozens of stalls, just for the four of us!

"We ended up with some stunning carvings and the locals ended up with loads of tools, fishing and diving gear and school supplies. Everyone was happy.

"On our way out of Marovo Lagoon, we visited Tetepare Island, lingering before saying goodbye to the Solomon Islands.

"Tetepare is the Southern Hemisphere's largest uninhabited island, and we were struck by how incredibly wild it is, with waters teeming with life and jungle spilling out over the shore.

"I spent our last night in the Solomon Islands falling asleep to the sounds of Tetepare and contemplating the next chapter of our adventure – sailing on to Papua New Guinea.

"Like many places on our journey, it's hard to describe the thrill of discovering such spectacular natural beauty.

"The lessons of the past seven years have been many, but most importantly, we are committed to encouraging the protection and preservation of our oceans.

"The ocean is simply incredible, amazing, dangerous and beautiful.

"Once you've lived on it and explored parts of it where few have ever been, it's very difficult to leave".

Clockwise from opposite: Connecting with locals is a big part of the adventure; the *Uruhu of London* heads toward a shipwreck; a local woman in traditional dress welcomes the crew.



At the time of writing, *Uhuru of London* had just left Lombok, in the Java Sea, next stop Borneo... with an estimated three more years to complete their circumnavigation of the world.

Follow *Uhuru's* amazing adventures on Instagram @uhuruoflondon

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A sweet new chapter begins

WORDS AND PHOTOS SUPPLIED

The social enterprise Kokonut Pacific Solomon Islands (KPSI) has helped villagers across the region create sustainable coconut-based livelihoods for over two decades, and now its hoping to create another sweet revenue stream for them by adding a sprinkle of cocoa into the mix.

In the South Pacific, the coconut tree is lovingly called “The Tree of Life.” For generations, coconut trees have played a vital role in daily life – providing food, shelter, and income for families. Every part of the tree is used for purposes ranging from cooking to construction.

Working hand in hand with over 1,000 local farmers across 3,000 hectares of land, KPSI embraced this long-standing tradition whilst bringing something new to the table. KPSI introduced an innovative technique called Direct Micro Expelling to village communities, enabling them to produce organically certified virgin coconut oil for the domestic and international markets.

Opposite: Sustainability is at the forefront of all KPSI products. **Above:** Cocoa beans in their natural state. **Below:** The lush greenery of the Solomon Islands.



“From the beginning, our goal was to build something sustainable, something that would last.”

Colin Dyer, Co-Founder and Development & Marketing Director



Community



KPSI has worked closely with local communities to help them expand the viability and sustainability of a range of high-quality coconut products, sold under its well-known KOSI brand.

In 2024, as KPSI celebrates its 20th anniversary, it is proudly launching a range of Solomon-grown and processed KOSI cocoa products.

Drawing on its established connections and extensive experience with coconut production, this move into cocoa represents a natural and thoughtful evolution. It builds on KPSI's strong network of farmers, many of whom have been growing cocoa alongside coconut for years.

Grown on ancestral lands beneath the towering coconut trees, KOSI cocoa boasts a rich flavour with herbal notes, making it a treat for chocolate lovers. The range includes drinking chocolate, cocoa butter, cocoa powder and cocoa nibs.

KPSI is the first in the Solomon Islands to offer end-to-end cocoa products—from cultivation and processing to retail. With an initial focus on local sales, its short supply chain supports low food miles and reduces the product's carbon footprint, making it as sustainable as it is delicious.

"From the beginning, our goal was to build something sustainable, something that would last," says Colin Dyer, Co-Founder and Development & Marketing Director.

A short supply chain supports low food miles and reduces the product's carbon footprint, making it as sustainable as it is delicious.



"When communities develop their own markets and retain the value of their products within their own hands, it can change lives."

For KPSI, the launch of the KOSI Cocoa range is more than just a business venture; it's an extension of its commitment to the community. By changing the way cocoa is produced and sold in the Solomon Islands, KPSI can continue to support stable employment and provide coconut farmers with an additional revenue stream.

This start-to-finish approach not only enhances the economic stability of island communities but also fosters sustainable development, reducing the need for people to leave their villages in search of opportunities. By preserving the social fabric that is so vital to Solomon Island communities, KPSI is paving the way for a more resilient future for generations to come.

"This new cocoa range is about using what we have—our land, our people, our knowledge—to create something truly valuable," says Dyer.



Clockwise from opposite: Learning from the best; KPSI works closely with local communities; cocoa production is a family affair; a stroll through the cocoa storage warehouse; cocoa production in action.

Community

KPSI is now seeing a generational shift in the communities it works with. The next generation is taking over the family farms, armed with the decades of knowledge that has been passed down to them. This generational progression not only ensures that the wisdom of the past is preserved but also gives young people autonomy and a sustainable pathway forward in an area that often lacks opportunities.

"We're incredibly proud of our new KOSI cocoa products," says Maureen Taro, Product Manager at KPSI. "They highlight the bold, distinctive flavour of Solomon Islands cocoa and, more importantly, they represent the hard work and dedication of our people."

Looking ahead, KPSI's commitment to the Solomon Islands remains unwavering. The launch of its KOSI Cocoa range marks a significant milestone and the beginning of an exciting new chapter. "After 20 years, we're just getting started," Taro says. ▴

Right: The range of KOSI cocoa products.



KPSI warmly invites you to celebrate the dedication and hard work of Solomon Islanders as they continue their journey of growth.

Enjoy the rich flavours of Solomon Island cocoa by trying **KOSI Drinking Chocolate** on board today.

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Home, Sweet Homestays

WORDS AND PHOTOS CHRISTINE RETSCHLAG

The emerging Solomon Islands province of Malaita may only welcome 30 tourists a week, but that doesn't prevent them from receiving a warm reception in some cool homestays.

From the ocean to the mountains, and the township in between, here are three perfect places to lay your head in this largely undiscovered province.



1. GET HIGH ON MOUNTAIN AIR

It's only 12km from Auki town, but it's a one-hour 4WD drive adventure across some gnarly roads to get to the hilly Haodaikirio Homestay.

Upon arrival, you'll be greeted by local warriors painted in tribal markings performing some of the best pan-pipe music and dancing you'll experience anywhere in the Solomons, against the backdrop of this mountainous setting.

At about 380-metres high, the air is cooler up here, which makes a stay in Steven Misiosi's homestay overlooking the cavernous valley below even sweeter.

Steven currently has two guest houses on site (and an outside loo with a view), while two more are under construction.

Pan-pipe dancing complete, watch the tribe's women cook taro and coconut before partaking in a local feast (tip: try the local chicken which tastes like duck).

Haodaikirio is popular among birdwatchers for its proximity to local cascades where visitors can swim.



Clockwise from above: There are plenty of cool homestays in Malaita; a stay at BH Family Lodge is the perfect base to explore the province; local warriors painted in tribal markings.

2. GO TO TOWN

With its wide, dusty streets and timber buildings, Malaita's township of Auki carries somewhat of a wild west feeling, and if anyone were to play the character of Calamity Jane, it would undoubtedly be the bright and bubbly Hazel Harohau.

Hazel is the owner of the Malaita BH Family Lodge—an eight-bedroom, eight-bathroom homestay with two central dining and living areas.

This clean and comfortable accommodation, with its yawning second-floor verandas, is so coveted that even the Australian High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands Rod Hilton stays here when he's in town. Happy hostess Hazel, who is an unofficial tourism ambassador for the town, says "big" Malaita (there's a separate, smaller island called "small" Malaita) measures some 4,522km².

"We are the most populated island province in the Solomon Islands with around 172,000 people, while Honiara only has about 70,000, and we speak 13 languages in this province," she says.



BH Family Lodge is an ideal base from which to explore Malaita including its annual Shell Money Festival and the Central Market, as well as other day trips including to the nearby Kwaibala Cascade where a downhill walk ends at several ice-cold pools visitors can plunge in.



“We thought it was an opportunity to open people’s eyes to our ancient shell money and that Malaita is renowned for its boat builders.”

3. LAZE BY A LAGOON

Framed by the 900-metre-high Mount Alasa-a, Malaita’s Langa Langa Lagoon is home to traditional dugout canoes and the Taflabana Guest House opened by Edwin and Hilda Sofaemaena 2.5 years ago.

Hilda and Edwin are two of only 10 to 15 people living near Skull Island or “Laulasi”.

Only men are permitted to visit a burial ground after which the island is named, while it’s a case of females only in the “Bisi”, designed for women’s business such as menstruation and giving birth.

Skull Island is just one of many authentic experiences in which visitors to Taflabana Guest House, on neighbouring Taflabana Island, can partake.

“Four years ago, I said to my husband ‘It is nice we have our house at Langa Langa but let’s build our own island’. We thought ‘What about a little guest house where people can come?’” Hilda says.

“We thought it was an opportunity to open people’s eyes to our ancient shell money and that Malaita is renowned for its boat builders.”

Taflabana Guest House is home to one bungalow, a four-room guest house, and a central kitchen, a shower and two toilets.

Hilda, who sold traditional shell money to contribute to building the guest house, is among a wave of women bringing tourism to life in the region.

“For us women to go into this area, you are playing with the big boys,” she says.



“They don’t realise it is us women making things happen in the background.

“In our culture, you have the men going to the ancestral houses, but don’t forget the pig offered to the higher Gods is raised by a woman.”

Above left: The Langa Langa Lagoon is home to traditional dugout canoes.

Above right: Hilda is among a wave of women bringing tourism to life in Malaita.

GETTING THERE

Malaita is a 45-minute flight from Honiara or a two-hour express ferry ride across Indispensable Strait.

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In the footsteps of bushmen

A serious adventure to some of the world's most remote bush tribes.

WORDS TAYLA GENTLE
PHOTOS BEN MCNAMARA

Despite the bucketing rain, the bolting lightning and the river water that's thrashing up around my armpits, I can't take my eyes off the man's bare backside in front of me. But it's not what you might think—the man is a traditional bushman, wearing cultural nambas (a leaf penis sheath), and he's guiding us through Malekula's drenched jungle.

Actually, he's more than guiding us. He's saving us. After falling three hours behind schedule, our trekking day has turned into a long, torrential trekking night. So any shortcut, even if it means striding waist-deep through a river during a storm, is welcome.

But as we continue to trudge, dripping and mud-caked, into a sugar cane field—stalks so tall they block out the moonlight—I start to question why I came to Vanuatu. And why, specifically, I agreed to hike the Manbush Trail.

"Slowly, slowly," says Eddie, one of the local guides, as we brave a particularly strong current. Eddie is half my height, and probably half my weight too, but he's got a vice-like grip on my upper arm—the only thing stopping me from sailing downstream. As we make it to the other side, pants wet but cameras dry, he high-fives me. I think Eddie is enjoying himself. I'm enjoying myself too.

I'm trekking with a small group of Ni-Vans (Vanuatu people) from neighbouring islands;



Then, with a crash of thunder to match my epiphany, I remember—because I like my adventure served with a side of challenge. And it's been too long between expeditions.

Shaped like a sitting dog, Malekula is the second largest and one of the most culturally diverse islands in Vanuatu's archipelago. And yet it's also one of the least-visited thanks to its reputation for being remote and inaccessible (oh, and historically cannibalistic). Flying into Malekula, the island certainly looks remote and inaccessible. From above, its jungle is an impenetrable fortress of green, dotted with rivers that glint like lost gold and a smattering of thatched roofs. No major highways or signs of beach-side mai tais. Just the way I like my islands.

an Australian travel photographer; and a crew of local guides and porters. For the first few days, we tackle the Dog's Head Trek—a coast-to-coast traverse from the east to the west part of the island's north. The region here is split into Smol Nambas and Big Nambas tribal territory and is packed with ancient stories, myths and legends. And some of Vanuatu's most remote bush villages.

Opposite: A traditional bushman wearing a cultural nambas.
Above left: A bushman wearing a traditional tribal mask.
Above right: Local kids fascinated by the camera.



The days are sweaty as we explore the volcanic landscape; walking through lush rainforest, stopping to eat fluffy navara (coconut heart) and crack open nangai nuts. I suck on sweet cacao flesh, drink fresh water out of a bamboo trunk and taste the centre of a palm tree. It's a bit like creamed corn. "You'll never go hungry in the jungle," says Stepson, a Malekula local who now calls Port Vila home. And I believe him; this trek has turned into quite the food tour.

Speaking of food, we're quickly—and intimately—acquainted with Vanuatu's national dish, lap lap. Like a gelatinous cake crossed with a casserole that's made love to a stew, lap lap is made from grated root vegetables (often taro or yam) wrapped in banana leaves and baked underground. Then slathered in fresh coconut. It's a hearty meal and good trekking fuel, even if the texture takes a little getting used to, which is lucky considering we eat it five days in a row.

The interior of Malekula is basically 'on-foot only', meaning vehicle access is patchy in parts and completely off the table in others. How these communities got solar panels, rainwater tanks and roof sheeting to the far flung corners of this jungle is borderline miraculous. But here they all are—little bare-chested kids running out as sentinels as we arrive.

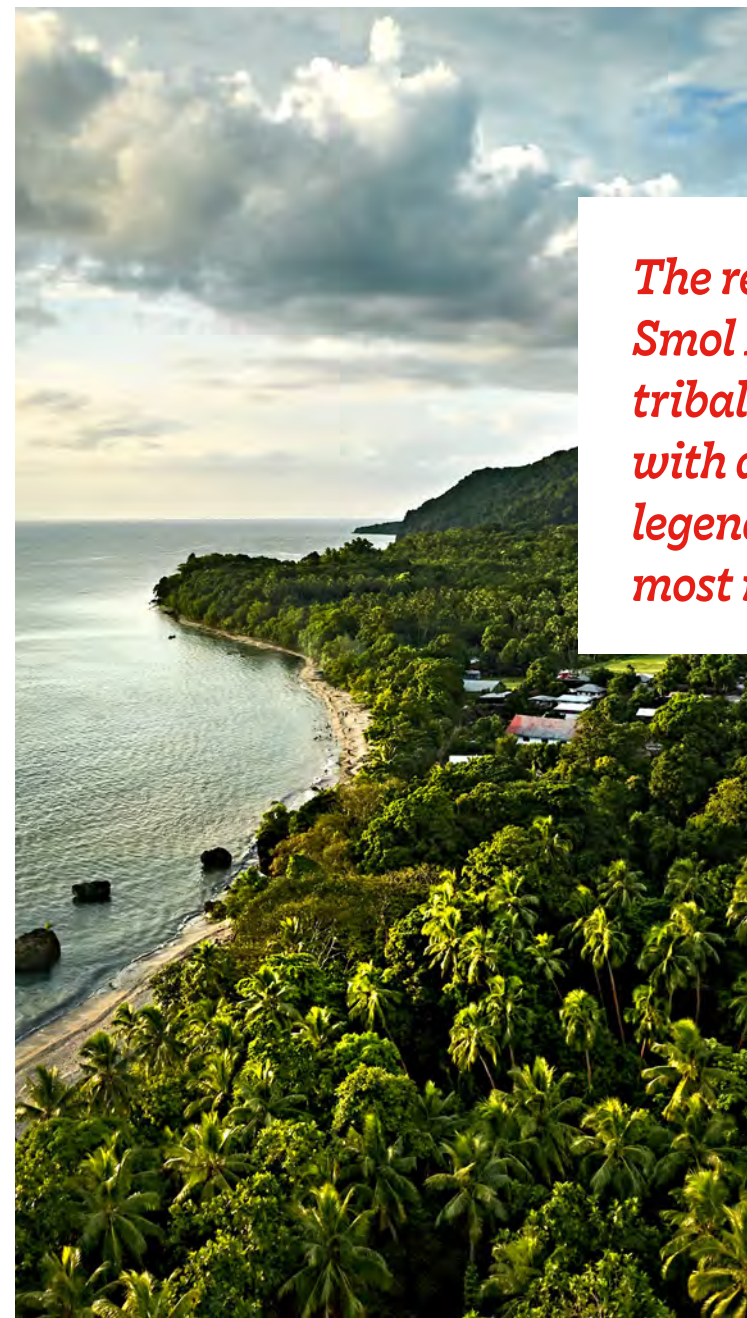


I shake hands with chiefs and smile at local mamas; I coo at tiny babies and take photos with kids like the president doing an electoral meet-and-greet. It's customary to welcome guests with food, so we're ushered into homes to feast on freshwater prawns and juicy hunks of paw paw. I've been told in the past that Ni-Vans are the friendliest people in the world, and this level of hospitality is only proving it to be true. At night we bucket shower off the sweat and sleep on the floor of local huts, waking with the crow of early rising roosters.

The Manbush Trail, on the other hand, is more extreme. The days are longer, the landscape is larger and the villages are even more isolated. It's a five-night odyssey; exactly the kind of journey I've been craving.

We're joined on the first day by Robert, chief of 13 clans and big man in town. Robert is the brains behind the Manbush Trail, having liaised with all the villages along the 70-kilometre route to bring it to life.

The region here is split into Smol Nambas and Big Nambas tribal territory and is packed with ancient stories, myths and legends. And some of Vanuatu's most remote bush villages.



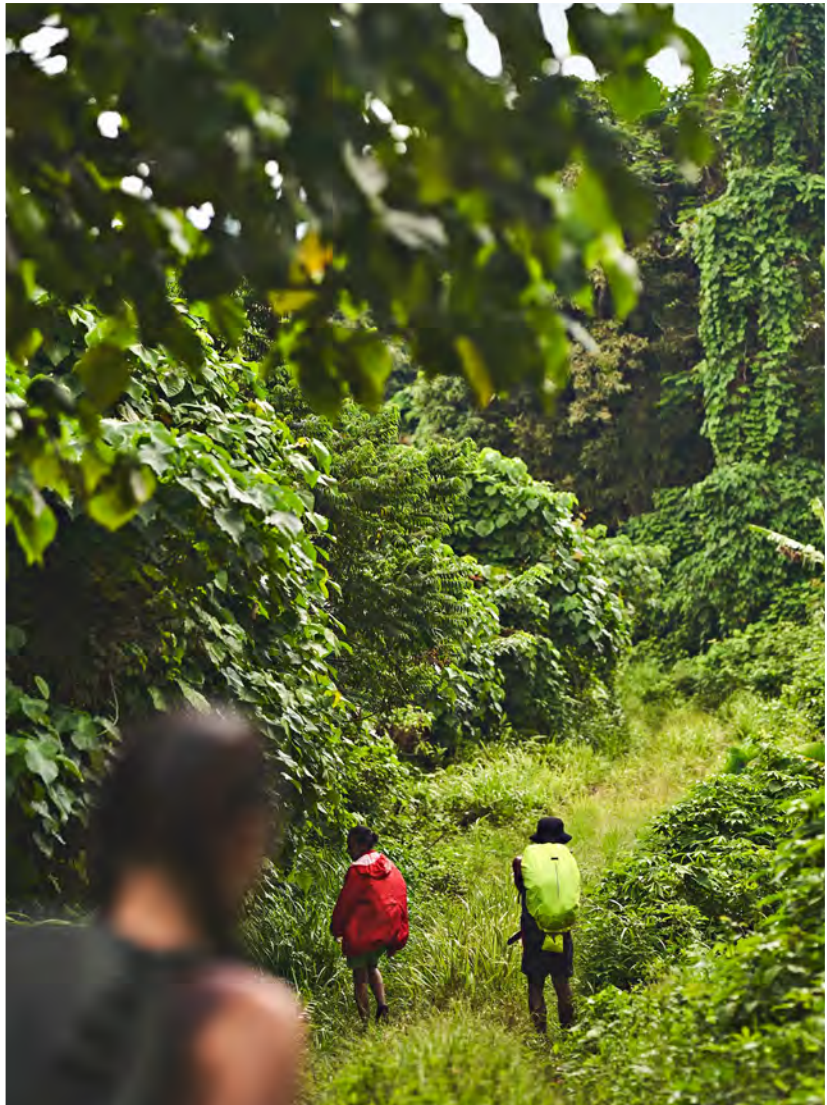
In the morning, he teaches me how to husk a coconut. At lunch, he shows us how to light a fire "like a real bushman". As we climb and scramble, slip and slide, up and down the dense valleys, his rallying cries (somewhere between a yodel and cooee) ring louder than the cicadas. Men from nearby villages cry back at him.

At night, Robert welcomes us to the land with a kava ceremony at the nakamal (meeting hut). Kava is an earthy-tasting traditional drink—dating back over 3,000 years—made from the root of the kava plant and served in half a coconut shell.

Clockwise from opposite: The dense jungle from overhead; a local woman with tribal paint on her face; where the jungle meets the sea; sunset on a dugout; macheting a coconut.



Adventure



Tarzan-like banyan tree. “We’re about to enter a kastom area,” he says. “From here, until I say, we have to be quiet. No spitting. No talking. No toilet stops.” This taboo area is a sacred place; blessed with salt water, despite being nowhere near the sea.

Our group falls into a single trekking file as we navigate the roots and rocks down hill. The rain eases, as if even its droplets are too loud. A bird, somewhere to my left, takes flight and I hear the soft rustle of its wings. I’ve never experienced a jungle falling silent before; goosebumps break out over my body that have nothing to do with the breeze.

Trekking the Manbush is some of the most technical hiking I’ve ever done, but doing it in silence is an almost meditative experience. The rainforest is so unmistakably alive, even in its quietude.

What I’m learning is that there’s a lot of magic here. Like the spring that promises eternal youth (the porters knocked back litres of the stuff) or the part of the forest where whistling is outlawed (because it will bring on a plague of mosquitoes) and the couple who had an affair and were subsequently turned into banyan trees.

And then there’s the sea, which appears like a magical mirage on the horizon, just as my bones start to feel weary and my boots begin to rub. In a collective daze—trekkers and guides and porters alike—we do the final slog down to the coast and collapse into the water. Clothes, and in some cases, boots, still on.

We let the Pacific Ocean soothe our cuts and scrapes. We wash the sweat from our hair. And in true Malekula style, it starts to rain. Heavy, pounding drops that cloud the water and sting my face. And I can’t help but laugh—I came to Malekula craving an adventure, and that’s exactly what Malekula delivered. A soggy, scenic, spectacular adventure.

Now I just need a kava shell, or two, to celebrate. ▲



GETTING THERE

Solomon Airlines offers flights from Honiara, Brisbane, and Auckland to Espirtu Santo, Vanuatu.

Flying direct to Santo takes just 1.5 hours from Honiara, and 2.5 hours from Brisbane.

Flying from Auckland via Vila, travel time is 4.0 hours including a one-hour stopover in Vila.

Honiara > Port Vila > Auckland	2 x per week (return)
Honiara > Espiritu Santo > Port Vila > Auckland	1 x per week (return)
Espiritu Santo > Port Vila > Brisbane	1 x per week (return)

Known for its calming effects on the nervous system, Ni-Vans like to say ‘alcohol makes you stupid but kava makes you wise’.

“Drinking kava is bonding,” Stepson explains to me, handing over a shell. “We drink it in the dark, in the quiet—it’ll make you feel so peaceful.” Turns out Stepson’s a bit of a kava king, so I’m learning how to imbibe from the right guy. That night he downs three shells; his snores echo through the hut walls.

I stop trying to stay dry and learn to embrace the downpours. One day, in between showers, we eat lunch—roasted taro and wild boar—on a cloud of banana leaves. We use a banana leaf as a plate. Sometimes as an umbrella. The night before we even slept on banana leaves. Ben, the travel photographer, tells me his fitness watch tracked it as his best recorded REM in months. 5-star beds? Don’t need them.

On the third day, George—another local guide—signals for us to stop by a huge,

Left: Local mama in traditional paint. Above: Following the trail through the jungle.

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Guide

A Quick Guide to Honiara

Conveniently positioned centrally within the South Pacific and embedded deeply in World War Two history and Melanesian culture, Honiara is not only the capital of the Solomon Islands, but a great base for travellers visiting the South Pacific.

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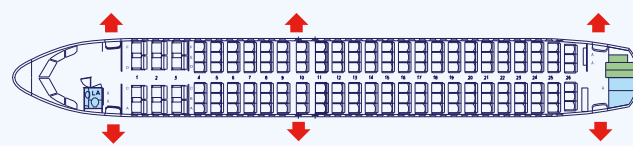
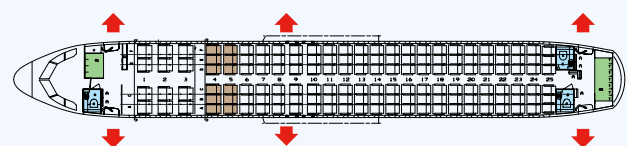
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 Seating capacity **36**
 Crew **3 crew including 1 cabin crew**
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Twin Otter

Length **15.77 m**
 Wing Span **19.81 m**
 Range **1,350 km**
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 Email: germany@apg-ga.com
 Address: Leonhardstrasse 22,
 61169 Friedberg, Germany

HONG KONG
 Ph: (852) 2826 9228
 Email: hongkong@apg-ga.com
 Address: APG 10/F Tung Ming Building
 40 Des Voeux Road, Central Hong Kong

JAPAN
 Ph: (81) 50 33882939
 Email: japan@apg-ga.com
 Address: 8F ATT New Tower, 2-11-7, Akasaka,
 Minato-ku, 107-0052, Tokyo, Japan

MALAYSIA
 Ph: (603) 2141 2701
 Email: malaysia@apg-ga.com
 Address: Suite 1001, Level 10, Wisma
 Lim Foo Yong, 86, Jalan Raja Chulan, 50200
 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

NEW ZEALAND
 Ph: (64) 9 969 7602
 Email: flysolomons@airlinemarketing.co.nz
 Address: Airline Marketing NZ, Level 10
 BDO Tower, 120 Albert Street,
 Auckland 1141, New Zealand

PHILIPPINES
 Ph: (632) 8896 90 75
 Email: philippines@apg-ga.com
 Address: 2nd Floor, Lydia Building
 39 Polaris Street, Bel Air,
 1209 Makati City, Philippines

SINGAPORE
 Ph: (65) 6339 5500
 Email: singapore@apg-ga.com
 Address: APG Singapore Pte Ltd,
 114 Middle Road #05-01, Singapore 188971

TAIWAN, CHINA
 Ph: (886) 2 2368 7828
 Email: taiwan@apg-ga.com
 Address: 11F, No.111, Sec 2 Nanjing E. Road,
 Taipei, Taiwan 104

VANUATU
 Ph: (678) 22836
 Email: estella@vanuatutravelservices.com.vu
 Address: South Pacific Travel, Novo House,
 Port Vila, Vanuatu

UNITED KINGDOM
 Ph: (44) 0844 482 1670
 Email: uk@apg-ga.com
 Address: 3 World Business Centre,
 Newall Road, London Heathrow Airport, Hounslow,
 TW6 2TA, United Kingdom

USA
 Ph: (1) 888 468 5736
 Email: solomonairlines@airlinepros.com
 Address: AirlinePros, Suite 358-360,
 420 Lexington Ave, New York, NY 10170, USA

Domestic Connections

Solomon Airlines Routes —●—



Contacts

SOLOMON ISLANDS — Office

Head office: (677) 20031
 Reservations: (177) local or (677) 23506

OUTER PORTS

Santa Cruz: Sales & Reservations
 Ph: (677) 53159

Gizo: Sales & Reservations
 Ph: (677) 60173

Munda: Sales & Reservations
 Ph: (677) 62152

Kirakira: Sales & Reservations
 Ph: (677) 50070

International Offices

AUSTRALIA — Reservations

Ph: 1300 894 311 or (61) 7 3860 5883
 Email: reservations@flysolomons.com

AUSTRALIA — Operations

Address: Ground Floor,
 International Terminal,
 Brisbane Airport, QLD 4008, Australia

FIJI — Nadi

Ph: (679) 6722831
 Address: P.O. Box 10229,
 Nadi International Airport, Fiji

Cargo

AUSTRALIA

Ph: (61) 7 3119 2571
 Email: bneexports@airway.com.au
 Address: Airway, 8 Hibiscus Street,
 Brisbane Airport, QLD 4008, Australia

EUROPE

Ph: (31) 0 206481220
 Email: sandervanderploeg@speed.nl
 Address: Speed B.V, Schiphol Airport,
 The Netherlands

NEW ZEALAND

Ph: (64) 9 3523409
 Email: akl.gsa@airway.co.nz
 Address: Airway, Level 6, 2 Commerce Street,
 Auckland CBD 1010, New Zealand

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Ph: (677) 36592
 Email: cargo@flysolomons.com.sb
 Address: Henderson International Airport,
 Honiara, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands

Destination Guide

Things to remember before your trip to the Solomons

Climate

Tropically warm and humid with coastal day temperatures averaging 28C (82.4F). April to November tends to be drier and November to April wetter.

What to wear

Light and casual... take it easy!

Health

Malaria can be a problem. Take anti-malarial medication a week before arrival, once a week during your stay, and for four weeks after departure. Consult your chemist or doctor about an appropriate brand of tablet. Maloprin is usually recommended.

Immigration

Commonwealth, United States and most European visitors do not need holiday visas but need return or onward tickets. People intending to work must have work permit.

Honiara

Our capital is eight kilometres (4.97 miles) from Honiara International Airport.

Airport Tax

SB\$305 payable by passengers 12 years and over) boarding international flights, and these are generally added onto the cost of your air tickets.

Currency

The Solomon Islands dollar (SB). \$100, \$50, \$20, \$10, \$5 and \$2 Solomon Islands notes, while coins are \$1, 50c, 20c, 10c and 5c.

Business Hours

Government and business general hours are Monday to Friday, 8am to 4:30pm, with a one-hour lunch break normally beginning at noon.

Shops and some offices open Saturday 8am to 12 noon.

Electricity

220-240 volts in Honiara and some outer island centres.

Banks

ANZ Banking Group open Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm. Pan Oceanic Bank Limited opens 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday, and the Hyundai Mall main branch opens 10am to 1pm on Saturday. Bred Bank opens 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Bank of South Pacific opens 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday.

Transport

Taxis and buses are readily available in Honiara. Rental cars are available from Economy car rental and Elite Vehicle Rental Ltd.

Honiara Airport Taxi Association (HATA) also provides airport transfers, tours, car hire and general transport service in Honiara.

Telecommunications

Local, international calls and internet services are available through Solomon Telekom Company Limited (Our Telekom) and Bmobile networks. 4G network is available in Honiara, Auki, Munda, Noro and Gizo whilst all other provincial hubs are equipped with their 3G networks. SATSOL is also another internet service provider (ISP) in Honiara, other regional and provincial areas in Solomon Islands.

International Air

Solomon Airlines operate out of Honiara and Munda International Airports, while other carriers include Fiji Airways and Air Niugini.

Domestic Air

Solomon Airlines operate services throughout the country.

News Media

The country has a vibrant media landscape, offering choices in both English and Pidgin. Radio services are offered by state radio, Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, private operators and religious bodies.

Our Telekom relays BBC and other satellite TV networks while Island Sun and Solomon Star are the two daily news papers.

Tipping

Not expected and not encouraged.



ANNOUNCEMENT

MORE FLIGHTS TO LINK REGION

Passengers in the Pacific region will find it easier to travel between the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Zealand with Solomon Airlines adding a third weekly commercial flight between Honiara and Port Vila in Vanuatu, and between Port Vila and Auckland in New Zealand.

The flight addition, which began on 2 October and will run until 1 January 2025 before resuming from 2 April, complements the airline's existing flights and is part of its commitment to boosting tourism, trade, and cultural ties within the Pacific.

The newly added service flies to Auckland on Wednesdays, departing Honiara as flight IE722 at 2:50pm, arriving in Port Vila at 4:50pm, and departing Port Vila at 5:50pm as flight IE710 before arriving in Auckland at 11:05pm.

The return from Auckland on Thursdays departs at 1pm as flight IE711, arriving in Port Vila at 2:15pm, and departing Port Vila 3:15pm, to arrive in Honiara at 5:15pm.

These new flight times complement the existing schedules between the three destinations, ensuring seamless connections for travellers:

- Monday: Honiara > Santo > Port Vila > Auckland
- Tuesday: Auckland > Port Vila > Santo > Honiara

- Wednesday and Friday: Honiara > Port Vila > Auckland
- Thursday and Saturday: Auckland > Port Vila > Honiara

The inaugural flight carried 86 passengers to Auckland, and departed to Auckland with 111 passengers, marking an encouraging start to this expanded schedule, and enhancing access to the rich cultural and natural attractions of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

The increased connectivity not only supports tourism but also strengthens business and cultural exchanges within the region. ▶

For further flight details and bookings go to flysolomons.com

For more details on the destinations of Port Vila and Santo visit vanuatu.travel



PROMOTION

EARLY BIRD GETS 30% OFF

Secure 30 per cent off the normal fare price for year-round return airfares on international routes in 2025 during Solomon Airlines Early Bird promotion.

The Early Bird offer is for discount travel in February, March, May, August and September 2025. The sale ends on 30 November 2024. ▶

For details, visit flysolomons.com/about-us/news/general/solomon-airlines-early-bird-promotion-october-2024

MEMBERSHIP

RELAX IN THE BELAMA LOUNGE

There are more options to take advantage of Solomon Airlines exclusive Belama lounge at Henderson International Airport (Honiara) with the creation of new membership tiers, including family and corporate memberships.

In addition to snack and beverage service, complimentary wireless internet and comfortable lounge seating, Belama lounge membership offers a range of benefits that can



WEEKEND SHOPPING BONUS

Solomon Airlines is thrilled to introduce a special treat for its valued economy passengers on flight IE707 from Brisbane to Honiara every Sunday. Starting from October 13th, passengers can enjoy an increased checked baggage allowance of 40kg, to take the stress out of weighing their Brisbane shopping purchases. ▶

For details, visit flysolomons.com/news

include priority check-in, express clearance in Brisbane and extra baggage allowance. ▶

For details, visit flysolomons.com/belama-club

BELAMA CLUB

Belama ME benefits:
Priority check-in | Express clearance in Brisbane | Preferential seating at check-in
Access to Belama Club Lounge in Honiara for you and 1 companion

Belama PLUS benefits:
All Belama ME benefits and access to Plaza Premium Lounge in Brisbane

Belama MAX and BUSINESS benefits:
All Belama PLUS benefits and access to Air New Zealand Lounge in Auckland

Ask about our FAMILY program including Belama ME benefits and more.

Belama ME

Belama MAX

Belama PLUS

Belama FAMILY

Belama BUSINESS

Mr. John Smith Wade
World Health Organization
MEMBERSHIP NUMBER: IE7 90001
MEMBER SINCE: 01/10/2024
VALID THRU: 31/12/2024

flysolomons.com

Solomon Airlines



UPDATE

PEACE MARATHON ON PAUSE

The Solomon Airlines Peace Marathon, which was initially scheduled to take place in October, has been delayed, with the starter's gun now expected to fire in 2025.

The annual event, which first began in 2009, is a celebration of fitness and culture, including a full 42km marathon course, plus a 21km half-marathon, 10km and 5km races and a 2km fun run.

Held in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture & Tourism and Tourism Solomons, the next date of the 2025 event is yet to be announced with the airline stating more comprehensive planning was needed with its partners to ensure the safety and enjoyment of all participants, volunteers and spectators, and to ensure it was an event that would attract regional and international athletes.

Solomon Airlines stated that it was dedicated to upholding the values of peace, unity, and community that the marathon represents. The marathon has become an important annual event, not just for promoting health and camaraderie among residents and visitors alike, but because it also gave participants an insight into WWII History on Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands.

Whilst the airline has expressed regret at any inconvenience the postponement may have caused, it says the postponement will ultimately lead to a more memorable experience for everyone involved.

The airline has encouraged interested runners to keep engaged and continue training.

'We appreciate your understanding and thank you for your continuous support. Thank you for your continued enthusiasm for the Solomon Airlines Peace Marathon. Together, we look forward to a successful event in 2025!' ▴

APPOINTMENTS

SOLS TO BOOST PROFILE

Solomon Airlines has appointed Airline Rep Services as its General Sales Agent (GSA) in Australia, tasked with providing tailored sales and marketing support to promote the national carriers' weekly flights from Brisbane to Honiara and Munda.

GSA will help grow Solomon Airlines presence and promote the exceptional diving and surfing in the Solomons to Australians. Airline Rep Services is a division of the CVFR Travel Group. ▴



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[southpacificoil](https://www.facebook.com/southpacificoil)

Our values
Respect, Integrity, Care, Honesty

ENERGY FOR THE NATION

Honiara's Entertainment Hub



Welkam to Pacific Crown Hotel

Pacific Crown Hotel offers a convenient location just 5km from the International Airport & 3km to Point Cruise (Honiara's CBD).

Our suites include private balconies, lounge areas, mini-bar, WiFi, satellite television and air-conditioning.

Sip on cocktails and dine in our famous Garden Bar & Restaurant of Malaysian Chinese cuisine!

Let us show you the warmth of Solomon Island hospitality!

Support our talented local live bands from Wednesday to Saturday at canoe bar. Happy hour 4-8pm daily.

Try our motu (Solomon dish) on our cultural nights every Thursday and watch our beautiful tamure dancers share a mix of local and international dance stories.



PACIFIC CROWN HOTEL

(677) 45000



RESERVATION@THEPCH.COM



WWW.THEPCH.COM



PACIFIC CROWN HOTEL, KUKUM HIGHWAY P.O. BOX 1298