
Yippee, Yahoo, Uepi, and Gizo...

Diving the Wild Western Provinces of the Solomon Islands

Some of my best dive trips are the ones where I can get away from it all. The first leg of reaching “away from it all” on this trip wasn’t that difficult. I flew Qantas to Fiji and connected with Solomon Air to Honiara, Solomons Islands. Then, after an hourlong flight from Honiara in an 8-passenger aircraft, a bouncy peek-a-boo approach through some low, rainy clouds, a totally terrifying yet exhilarating splashdown on a very flooded grass runway, and a 5-minute motorized canoe ride across the lagoon, I knew I had reached “away from it all”: Uepi, a small resort island on the edge of Marovo Lagoon. The journey seemed worth it immediately when I looked under the canoe at the dock and saw the multihued mantles of 12 large tridacna clams. And the lionfish. And the crocodile fish.

Whoopee Uepi

Uepi Island fits the description of remote and small. The buildings are tucked in between lots of coconut palms and other lush tropical foliage. Electricity is provided from 7 in the morning to 10 at night courtesy of a diesel-powered generator. The main lodge contains the dining room, a well-stocked bar with cold beer and surprisingly good Australian wines, and a small but informative library possessing several picture books on local flora and fauna above and below the water, plus lots of World War II history. A pleasant, open verandah across the front of the main lodge is

where guests congregate before and after meals to share tales.

Six guest cabins are well spaced across the property. This allows for plenty of privacy but, depending on your cabin assignment, can present a fair hike to your meals and diving — nothing too rigorous, but you may want to request a cabin close to the dive operation if you’re packing a bulky photo system. Cabins are basic. There’s no hot water, but that isn’t much of a problem in the tropics. All the windows are covered with mosquito netting, and cans of mosquito spray and packs of mosquito coils are supplied in each cabin. Actually, we saw very few of the feared mosquitoes (the Solomons have a nasty reputation for malaria), but that makes sense, considering how we smelled. Deet tended to be our fragrance de jour.

Meals were good: lots of fish and lots of wonderfully unidentifiable vegetables. Lunches were especially pleasant, brought to the cabins in covered baskets and always surprising (a rather unique Uepi pizza one day). The hosts, Greg Stockdale and Sue Wilkes, were pleasant and helpful and the resort staff cheerful.

Into the Water

The dive operation ran pleasantly, efficiently, and on schedule. Remember, with only six cabins, these people seldom see more than 12 divers at a time, and more often only six or eight. There were 11 of us diving

while we were there: five Australians, two New Zealanders, one Japanese, and three Americans (and we still used two boats; try that math in Key Largo). We met at 8 a.m. at the dive shop, got a quick but adequate briefing, then loaded our stuff aboard the two small aluminum skiffs. The dive sites were close to the dock, with our longest boat ride approaching 10 minutes. Twice we drift-dived back to the dock — from opposite directions! We were riding the tidal flow in and out of Marovo Lagoon.

We saw sharks on nearly every dive. We saw lionfish. And we saw lots of rays. But we never saw any other divers. It was great. The divemaster confined his max depth/max time/minimum pressure dictates to the dive briefing and simply kept us in sight during the dives (not a difficult task, given the visibility). None of us pushed any limits, however. Knowing your closest recompression facility is almost two time zones away keeps you on the conservative side. The dive operation had a list of sites, but I would recommend simply asking them each day to show you their best diving. We never had a bad dive, never felt rushed to return to the dock. If you need some names, ask for Uepi Point, Inside Point, and Landoro Gardens — but remember, the visibility depends on tidal conditions. Don’t miss diving or snorkeling along the shore right in front of the dive operation.

Nondiving activities are also served up by the resort staff. A village tour is available to a

neighboring island, including a delightful visit to the village school, where cultures can collide in a way that seems to benefit both the outsiders (us) and the young school children, who get to ask all sorts of questions. A small fee is collected from each tour participant and presented to the chief.

Uepi Island is not for everyone. But if you're comfortable in remote destinations, can handle a little risk, and have a strong need to visit the edge of civilization, this is a good place to go.

Big City Gizo

After Uepi (another 1-hour flight through another rainstorm, but this time in a DeHavilland Twin Otter with weather radar), Gizo seemed like the big city — and compared to Uepi, it is. We were met at the airport by the owner of Adventure Sports, a raggedy, disreputable-looking guy named Danny Kennedy. If you ever make it to Gizo, reward yourself and dive with Danny Kennedy. It's been 10 years since the last divemaster with Danny's charming goofiness left Grand Cayman; you find these guys only on the edge of the civilized world. I strongly believe that undue veracity has no place on dive vacations and therefore am not overly concerned about the truth of the tales Danny shared with us during the week. They were excellent entertainment.

Danny runs his operation cleanly and with a minimum of fuss, given the crowded conditions in his small shop and the amount of morning activity. He generally operates two skiffs and has a competent staff of boat handlers and divemasters. A look at his O₂ system (a rusty C-bottle and a Bend-Eez adapter) should be enough to keep you on the cautious side.

Ask Danny for a personal tour of the *Toa Maru*. I absolutely hate following anyone around on a dive, but cruising the wreck behind Danny was hilarious. He's a very controlled and competent diver. He moves through the wreck without stirring up the mud, constantly reaching into the unlikeliest places and pulling out gas masks, pistols, lanterns,

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ampoules, sake bottles, rifles, tea sets — then, just as quickly, hiding them again. About the time you figure he's shown you everything but the kitchen sink, he leads you into the galley. Diving with Danny Kennedy is like being 10 years old and diving with Ronald McDonald.

And in fact, the 446-foot *Toa Maru* is impressive. Considered to be one of the top five wreck dives in the world, she lies on her starboard side at about 90 feet. Her hatches are open, allowing for easy penetration. She's also inhabited by a school of flashlight fish, and Danny makes sure that divers know this and have a chance to turn off their lights while swimming through sections of the wreck that are dark as night. The streaks of luminescence as the fish swim by are indeed mesmerizing.

With the exception of the lack of clams under the dock, Gizo diving seemed to be every bit as good as Uepi, with the added spice of some World War II casualties. Once Danny is assured of the competence and common sense of his customers, he allows a lot of diving freedom. Besides the *Toa Maru*, the sites we enjoyed included Grand Central Station (a Gizo version of Palau's Blue Corner), Naru Wall, and Plum Pudding Island (where John F. Kennedy swam ashore after his PT- 109 was rammed). At Grand Central Station, we were privileged to watch a midwater collision between a reef shark and an eagle ray. Both were watching us too closely as they cruised from opposite but quickly closing directions along the reef. After a head-on impact, both quickly scattered in obvious embarrassment. We also saw a school of ten very large humphead wrasses looking like a herd of cows or small cars cruising the reef.

We stayed in a four-room guest lodge right across the street from Adventure Sports. It was clean and acceptable. Breakfast and dinner were provided every day and were also adequate, but nothing worth crowing about. Rooms are bright and airy. The bathroom's down the hall (but no hot water).

One night, Danny invited all the people diving with him to a home-cooked meal at his place. (Imagine that on Grand Cayman!) Fifteen of us crowded into Danny's small house and enjoyed steak, chicken, rice, beer, and after dinner, excellent coffee and a small snifter of Baileys. . . . Sheesh. This is away from it all.

Gizo has a certain turn-of-the-20th-century, robust, dusty seaport charm. People walk up and down the dirt streets at all

hours. Most smile if you catch their eye. Excellent local carvers offer some exquisite pieces worked out of native hardwoods or river rock. Fish themes predominate.

Adventure Sports is not for the weak or the disorganized. You're expected to load your own equipment into the boat, and also to unload it, rinse it off, and store it back in the dive shop after your dive. If anything breaks, there's no fully stocked service center available; come prepared. The boat is a long, narrow aluminum skiff with no easy way to reenter once you have back-rolled into the water. Boat rides can be an hour or more, and wet.

If you're prepared for all of this, it's great place to go. I wanted a look at the edge of the civilized planet, and I got a room with an edge-front view.

Reservations: Uepi can be contacted through Tropical Paradise in Australia, phone/fax 011-61-77-75-1323. Adventure Sports on Gizo can be reached at 011-677-60253 or fax 011-677-60297. Island Dreams Travel (800-346-6116) offers a 7 nights of lodging/6 days of diving with Adventure Sports on Gizo for \$795, which includes airport transfers, daily breakfast, diving, taxes, and some tours.

Air: Fares fluctuate but run around \$1,100 to \$1,500. It's not always easy to get around the islands once you arrive. Solomon Air changes schedules continuously, searching for elusive profit. Be prepared to wait. The Solomons are a good add-on for a Fiji trip, with incredibly low fares to the Solomons out of Nandi.

On Uepi, bungalows run \$51 a day (double occupancy) and meals (the only game in town) \$40 a day. Dives are \$32 per.

Check dive travel wholesalers for package prices.

General: The Solomon Islands are an archipelago covering 10,639 square miles in the southwest Pacific about 1,200 miles northeast of Australia. Part of the British Commonwealth, the islands are a parliamentary democracy with a population of 350,000. The capital is Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal.

Each island in the Solomon group contains a mountain range; some peaks reach 4,000

feet. The climate is tropical, with temperatures of 70–90°F year round. The annual rainfall ranges from 60 to 200 inches, so one way or another, you'll probably get wet.

Health & Welfare: For information on how to protect yourself from the extremely high incidence of malaria in the Solomons (not to mention other horrid tropical diseases like dengue fever), call the Center for Disease Control's international travelers hotline at 404-332-4559.



Flotsam & Jetsam

The Anti-Shark

An electronic anti-shark device being tested in South Africa shows promise of being very effective in repelling sharks by leaking a specific kind of electricity into the sea around the diver or surfer.

I've felt like I must have been wearing just such a device on some dives, when everyone else sees the sharks except me. However, I suppose I wouldn't mind flicking the on switch of an anti-shark appliance if I had to float on the surface for any length of time.

Crooked Island

A few reports have trickled in over the past couple of years recounting excellent diving around Crooked Island in the Bahamas. I've been trying to coax an editor down to

Pittstown Point, a small resort on the island, although the resort wasn't really set up for divers. With its nearby runway, it catered mainly to families with private planes.

Pittstown Point is now Caribe Bay and things seem to have changed drastically. It's being promoted not only as a dive resort but for its natural park/preserve research program that aims to prove the only way to enjoy our marine world is without unduly harming or disturbing it.

Exactly what this means, we'll have to find out, but I've heard that diving guests will be able to participate in marine studies if they so desire by reporting on marine life they see. The program is being set up under the auspices of the Bahamas National Trust, the Aquarium of the Americas, the Virginia