

# In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

## The *Spirit of Solomons*

### “You Sneeze, You Lose”

*This trip is worth the money, but is it worth twice the money? Our correspondents arrived in the Solomons having fully prepaid their trip on the Bilikiki to Sea Safaris long before the departure date. To their horror, they had to ante up the the full amount again just to get on the boat because Sea Safaris had failed to pay Bilikiki Cruises, despite their repeated requests. As of press time, the correspondents have hired an attorney to try to get their money back from Sea Safaris.*

“You sneeze, you lose.” *Bilikiki* manager Kay Nevin was showing limited interest in the garden produce the Solomon Islander was selling from his dugout canoe, so the merchant valiantly attempted to repeat the Western cliché that Kay had uttered on a previous market visit. He came close, but missed the mark.

Interaction with the local islanders was just one of the fascinating dimensions of this trip. During our 11 days cruising

the reefs of the Solomon Islands, we figured out why Chris Newbert chooses to book the *Bilikiki* for over 3 months solid each year.

### Musical Live-Aboards

The flagship of Bilikiki Cruises, Ltd., is, of course, the *Bilikiki*, which has been in operation since 1989. A second, smaller ship, the *Kirio*, was sold to a Vanuatu dive business this past year. The third vessel, the *Spirit of Solomons*, has been used for the past 2 years for ecology/culture tours, but in early 1994 it was refitted as a dive boat to rival the *Bilikiki*.

We were booked on the *Bilikiki*, but as it turned out, our cruise had only 8 of the possible 20 divers. The owners, Rick and Jane, chose to change our charter to the *Spirit*, as the *Bilikiki* had just gotten a new engine and was still being tested. Jim and Kay, the 4-year veteran managers of the

*Bilikiki*, ran this particular *Spirit* charter. Also on board were new *Spirit* managers Roger and Lori, who had just transferred to the Pacific from Peter Hughes’s Caribbean live-aboards.

### The *Spirit* Moves Me

The boat has only a couple of rules, both of which seem reasonable: (1) Once you’ve

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consumed alcohol, you don't dive the rest of the day; (2) Use good sense. It was refreshing to find an operation that doesn't mandate arbitrary depth limits or remaining-air requirements. On our trip, everyone used computers, and solo diving was not a problem.

And dive we did. We dived three outer island groups — the Floridas, Russells, and New Georgias — with a 3- to 4-hour open-ocean steam between areas. On some crossings the water was a little choppy, but within each island group it was protected and comfortable. Transfers were done in the evenings, so only a night dive was lost each time.

The Floridas and Russells are primarily reef dives with sloping topography and minimal current. Hard corals are diverse and in excellent condition, with occasional small soft corals. It was the variety of life on these reefs that was stunning. Every day we found some creature that could not be identified in any of the multiple guidebooks aboard. Highlights included several banded sea snakes, many lionfish (including juveniles), crocodile fish, cuttlefish, leaf fish, and a large Spanish dancer. We were also treated to a psychedelic display of flash-light fish on two night dives.

Anemones and their colorful guardians were ubiquitous. Frisky orangefin and shy pink were the most common anemonefish, with frequent dusky and spectacular percula clowns. We saw anemones with striking pink or purple mantles every day.

Nudibranchs seem more abundant in the Solomons than in other Pacific locations. We photographed 26 different species, several of which did

not appear in any of the guidebooks.

From the Russells we steamed to Mborokua, or Mary Island. At this solitary volcano, which stands alone in open sea, we encountered our first real current diving. Shortly after splash-in at the entry point, we were engulfed by a huge school of jacks, which appeared to have taken up residence here. As we sank down over the ridge, the current grew stronger and two separate schools of

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arrow and blackfin barracuda came into view. Grey and whitetip reef sharks patrolled the wall, as did several enormous dogtooth tuna who let us get within 10 feet of them.

Our dives in the New Georgia group were less dramatic, probably because of the poor (50-foot) visibility. We concentrated on some walls outside the lagoon with moderate current and many fish. Large schools of rainbow runners, fusiliers, pyramid butterflies, arrow barracuda, and redtooth triggerfish cruised back and forth along the walls. Beautiful sea fans 8–12 feet across were packed below 60 feet. Soft coral trees in all shades were profuse.

Although we saw sharks on almost every dive, the

Solomons cannot rival Palau's Blue Corner or Australia's Great Detached Reef for pelagic intensity. One New Georgia dive was highlighted, however, by two mantas gliding up from the depths and cruising overhead in dramatic silhouette.

## The Mother Ship

Both *Bilikiki* and *Spirit* use a "mother ship" diving format ideally suited to these waters. The crew loads BCs and tanks into two specially built 20-foot outboards called "tinnies." Divers descend a 3-step ladder from the mother ship into the tinny, ride 1–2 minutes to the dive site, and backroll into the water. Individual divers are plucked up whenever and wherever they choose to surface. This mother ship format allows divers to roam independently for as long as their air, computers, and film allow, without having to worry about finding the boat. In nearly 40 dives, we never had to wait more than a minute for pickup.

Jim and Kay are the archetypal perfect live-aboard hosts: gregarious, upbeat, conservation-minded photo enthusiasts who clearly love diving, the islands, and the villagers. They never seemed to tire of chatting with the guests, telling stories about the islands, helping guests find marine creatures in identification books, or giving technical advice on cameras. They gave two slide shows during the trip, exhibiting their impressive photographic talents.

Cuisine on board was excellent. Nearly every day Kay bought delicious fresh fish, fruits, and vegetables from islanders who peddled their products from dugout canoes. Water, coffee, tea, cocoa, and freshly squeezed limeade were

available self-serve at any time, and sodas, spirits, and the local beer (SolBrew) were available at extra charge.

## Who's Who

Both *Bilikiki* and *Spirit* are large, stable 125-foot vessels. The *Bilikiki* carries 20 divers in double rooms with private toilets and showers; the *Spirit* accommodates 26 divers in a mix of rooms with private and shared facilities. All berths are air conditioned day and night. Each ship boasts all the luxuries you'd expect from an upper-end liveaboard: excellent food, an immense sun deck with plenty of lounging space, a hot shower on the dive deck with ample fresh water, fresh towels after every dive, large camera tables and dunk tanks, daily E-6 processing, a slide viewing table and projector, video editing equipment, and an extensive library of fish identification books and dive videos. Each ship has a crew of two managers and 11 islanders.

Despite *Spirit's* recent refit, the *Bilikiki* is still the better of the two. Its layout and floor plan are more functional than the *Spirit's* meandering central hallway, and its aft dive deck is more convenient than the forward deck on the *Spirit*. As a bonus, the *Bilikiki* has a dedicated camera workroom with individual battery charging stations.

Bilikiki Cruises' monopoly on the pristine Solomon waters will soon come to an end. A rival live-aboard, the *Solomon Sea*, will begin running charters sometime this year. This 85-foot ship is operated by Frederick Douglas, former owner and manager of Fiji's *Matagi Princess I*. During our visit, the *Solomon Sea* was anchored in the harbor, undergoing renovations.

## Why So Many Boats?

The magic of the Solomon Islands is the incredible abundance and diversity of both dive sites and marine life. While no site boasts the world's best or biggest of anything, the islands deliver consistently beautiful dives with fabulous marine life viewing and photography opportunities. The bonuses — pristine, uncrowded dive sites, gorgeous topside

scenery, a luxurious, stable mother ship, and glimpses of island culture — make the *Bilikiki* operation an experience that you will not want to miss. You sneeze, you lose.

## Details at a Glance

**Cost:** The *Bilikiki* is \$295 per person per day (double occupancy), with primarily 10- and 14-day cruises available. The *Spirit* is \$275 per person per

## Cure or Disease? Take Your Pick

I was trying to give blood, but they didn't want it. They didn't want donors who had taken malaria medication in the last year. If they didn't want my blood, why should I want it?

My zeal for taking medicine to prevent malaria had been rapidly waning since I had read a piece in *Harper's*, a series of letters from an American surgeon who was working at the Red Cross hospital in Kigali, Rwanda. It was a poignant piece, but it was his reference to malaria medication that I was thinking about.

"Night falls and my fever rises. Yes, it could be malaria. Kigali is a thousand feet high, but there are still mosquitoes and malaria. We have two drugs here that can treat malaria: Fansidar and Lariam. Nether is to be taken willy-nilly. A complication of Fansidar is called Stevens-Johnson syndrome, also known as Watch-every-square-inch-of-your-skin-drop-off syndrome. I saw a photo of it in a medical text. The odds? 1 in 10,000, 1 in 100,000. . . . Larium — my own stock from Yale — can cause acute psychosis. . . . Fansidar or

Lariam? Skin loss or psychosis? What a choice."

This guy is a doctor *with* malaria, and he's debating taking the medication, yet I'm popping Chloroquine or Lariam (mefloquine) on almost every dive trip to the tropics!

I've just heard from a group of ten divers who were diving Papua New Guinea. All were taking Lariam, yet four of the ten returned with malaria. While there may be some controversy concerning the medication's risks and effects on our bodies, one thing is no longer debatable: do not let the fact that you are taking preventive medicine lure you into a false sense of security. Malaria-carrying mosquitos bite during the evening and night. Be paranoid. Apply DEET, wear long sleeves, and make sure your sleeping quarters are cleared of mosquitoes. Sleep under a net if possible. In other words, just don't get bitten.

It used to seem like an exotic and romantic disease. Now it just seems scary.

day, on primarily 7- and 10-day cruises.

**Reservations:** Major wholesalers, or Bilikiki Cruises, Ltd., P.O. Box 876, Honiara, Solomon Islands, phone 677-20412, fax 677-23897. Chris Newbert's Rainbow Sea Tours, Inc., has the *Bilikiki* booked from mid-September to

cancelling underfilled flights on short notice (ours was cancelled), so it makes sense to arrive in Honiara 2-3 days prior to ship departure. Local Guadalcanal battlefield tours are available, as well as excellent beach diving on the shallow Bonegi shipwrecks about 15 minutes from town. Island Divers is affiliated with Bilikiki

removed the X-ray machine after they could not stop islander employees from riding through it and looking at each others' bones!

**Rental Gear:** Nikonos V and strobe \$35 per day. Flashlight \$5 per day. BC, regulator, and dive computer each \$10 per day.

**Dives:** Four scheduled dives daily, with an additional night dive on most evenings.

**Visibility:** Variable, depending on weather. We experienced 75-100 feet in the Floridas and Russells, 50 feet in New Georgia.

**Water Temperature:** 80-85°F year round. Bring a heavy Lycra or light wetsuit.

**Season:** The boats are available for charter from mid-March to mid-December, as January and February are the cyclone season. The driest months are October and November, but be prepared for overcast weather and violent rainstorms at any time.

**Health:** The Solomon Islands are prime malaria territory. Although no one on our cruise had a problem with mosquito bites, prophylactic antimalarial medications are necessary. The Centers for Disease Control (phone 404-332-4555) currently recommend mefloquine (see sidebar, page 3). There is no hyperbaric chamber on the Solomons; the nearest is days away in Townsville, Australia.



## Sightseeing in the Villages

The Solomon Islands are beautiful above water as well. The multiple islands are rugged and verdant, with beautiful sandy beaches lined with coconut trees. We passed many thatch-hut villages, and at any given time we could see at least one villager fishing from a dugout canoe.

Three separate village trips turned out to be major highlights of the cruise. We shuttled ashore on tinnies and were led on tours of small villages by their respective "big men" (chiefs). The Solomon Islanders were very friendly and genuine; they seemed proud to talk to us in broken English about their home and their way of life. T-shirts and shorts have become standard village attire, but most homes are huts of woven thatch, and nearly

all boats are paddle-powered dugout canoes. The children were cute and playful, and loved having their photos taken. Two of the villages put on short cultural dances in native dress, and the third allowed us to view and barter for their superbly crafted ebony carvings. Although each trip meant missing one dive, miraculously no one felt short-changed.

At each village, Jim and Kay were welcomed like lost relatives. They chatted with chiefs and village elders and knew many of the children by name. On one dance, Jim joined the performers and sang along, to the immense delight of the islanders. There are a number of young "Jim" and "Kay" namesakes running about the villages.

mid-December for both 1994 and 1995; phone 808-326-7752, fax 808-329-8000.

**Airfare:** Round trip Los Angeles to Honiara ran \$1,274. We flew Qantas nonstop from LAX to Nadi, Fiji, then took the "two-airlines-on-one-airplane" Air Pacific/Solomon Air connection to Honiara. Air Pacific/Solomon Air is notorious for

Cruises and is located at the Mendana Hotel, the Motel 6-like (but best) accommodations on the island. A departure tax of thirty Solomon dollars (about US\$10) must be paid in local currency at the Honiara airport. Plan on arriving at the airport 2 hours before your flight, as luggage must be laboriously hand-checked in security. Airport authorities

### Questions or comments? Write us!

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