

TRIP NOTES

SOLOMON ISLANDS TRIP APRIL 2003

Please note that trip notes are exactly what the name suggests. They are not polished literal works. If you want to know something specific about the area visited, feel free to e-mail me.

This trip was a dedicated dive trip with little travelling in-country. As such little occurred other than diving.

Honiara (Capital of Solomon Islands)

I have dived this area in the past, so did not bother to dive Guadalcanal this visit. We had a one night stop over and spent the majority of this time walking the streets. Honiara rarely changes and the city (town) epitomises what you would expect to see in a city in the developing world.

The town is rather dirty and not very well set out. Rubbish is everywhere and the nationals have small fires burning in the gutter to either cook food, or burn rubbish. Shop fronts are wired to stop glass from being broken and many of the stores are 1960's period with minimal maintenance completed since this time. Residential areas and industry have been bundled together along an area of waterfront. Interestingly, the shops and trade stores are brightly coloured like similar stores in Papua Nui Guinea.

Vehicles are old style cars and utilities and the road are in very poor condition dotted with pot holes and wash outs.

The provincial museum was well worth a visit and although closed at the time, the guardian opened it for us to inspect. It was very interesting to read about the culture of the islanders before European settlement and initial colonial control by the British.

The Solomon Islanders are friendly and very inquisitive. I had absolutely no problems with any of the nationals I spoke with.

World War two relics can be seen in a number of locations, and I spied a Japanese mountain gun in a local park. The gun was in excellent condition. I also discovered quite a few igloo style structures that had been erected by the Americans and Australian during the war. These igloos were still being used and actually looked in better condition to other later made buildings.

Certainly, Honiara is a far cry from what it was when under British control pre 1970.

Maravargi, Florida Group Islands

Maravargi is a small village on a protected bay that has decided to attempt to cash in on the travelling tourist and diver by constructing a communal eating area, several bungalows and a lodge. The village is located in a bay amongst a group of islands that together form the Florida Group. Transport to Maravargi is across Iron Bottom Sound from Honiara; a trip that takes approximately 2 hours and passes the submarine volcano called Suva.

Maravargi itself is quite a nice village situated beside a swamp. The bay has a beautiful reef which is one of the best snorkel dives I have done. Currents in the bay are severe and whirlpools are common as the tidal surge occurs twice daily.

The Florida Group of islands visually are absolutely stunning. Many of the smaller islands have not been logged and white sandy beaches and clear warm water surround the islands. The larger islands are equally as stunning with densely forested high precipitous ridges dominating the topography. In contrast to this is the capital of the island group Tolargi which was an absolute eye sore. The shore was littered with unwanted material such as cans, broken bottles, plastics and other materials and basic infrastructure appeared to be non-existent.

Diving Maravargi

The snorkelling within the bay was exceptional, and the house reef was one of the best reefs I have seen in relation to species diversity and overall health.

On one snorkel Jolanda and I hung from the reef point in 2 meters of water and watched in amazement as a multitude of marine life passed by. Manta rays, sharks, schools of bonito tuna, dog tooth tuna, rainbow runners, turtles, giant trevally to mention a few. At one stage close on dusk a feeding frenzy developed which entailed schools of bonito tuna making a dash to capture small bait fish. This was added to by giant trevally seizing bait fish and a squadron of terns overhead diving steeply into the water to fill their quota.

Diving outside the bay was also interesting, although pelagic fish life was not as plentiful as I remember it from previous visits to the region. One particular dive which comes to mind was a 25 meter dive in a cave. At the rear of the cave there were a number of flashlight fish which when startled give off light! There were also tens of crayfish and a magnitude of shrimp spp. The shrimps would crawl over your hand and arm if you kept still long enough.

Turtle Release (Endangered hawksbill Turtle)

During our stay we noticed a blue plastic dive tub that was continually full of sea water. Being curious we investigated and to our horror Jolanda and I discovered a small hawksbill turtle. I questioned the villagers and they said it was a pet. They then took the turtle from the tub tied string to its flippers and let it go in the lagoon – for swimming practice! I attempted to buy the turtle but they were adamant it was not for sale as turtle meat tasted very nice. I queried others on the island and was informed it was a pet turtle, but when it was large enough they would have a feast with the turtle as the main and only dish!

The last night before our departure I dressed in dark clothes and made my way to the area where the turtle was being held captive. This was near the dive shop which was under continual guard due to recent petrol thievery. I slipped by the guard (who was sleeping), made my way slowly to the tub and reached in for the turtle in the dark. At this stage I was rather worried that I would grab the wrong end of the turtle and as a result receive a nasty bite. Luck was on my side and I gingerly picked up the hawksbill and placed the turtle on the sand. I then quickly retreated before the guard awoke.

Jolanda wanted to ensure that the turtle had in fact swum away, but by this time other villagers were on a nearby jetty overlooking the area. I decided to engage them in rather loud conversation drawing their attention away to Jolanda checking to see if the turtle had made its escape. I am sure they wondered why I was talking so loudly!

Oh well, Jolanda could not see the turtle so I can only surmise that a juvenile hawksbill turtle is swimming freely in the ocean around Maravargi - as it should be.

The next day was our day of departure and several villagers gave us rather “intense and evil” stares as we climbed aboard the fast boat for Honiara. I’m sure they knew it was us.....