

Walk on the wild side

The Solomon Islands lie on a path less well trodden. **Nick and Jenny Coghlan** discovered the delights and drawbacks of this wild corner of the South Seas

It was 1am on a hot, moonless night; Bosun Bird lay utterly still at anchor in Marovo Lagoon. But for some reason I slept uneasily, slipping in and out of a bad dream. Then I was suddenly wide awake; I must have heard something. I lay flat on my back under the sheet, my eyes wide open, heart pounding. I took a couple of deep breaths to relax.

Out of the corner of my left eye, I seemed to see something unfamiliar. Right by my head, only a foot from the pillow, there was a motionless figure, blocking my view of Jenny on the opposite bunk. For a moment I thought I was back in my nightmare. Then adrenaline took over. I shouted incoherently, thrust the sheet off, grabbed the machete-holding figure and bundled him up the companionway and into the cockpit – all without thinking. A second later, he was over the side and into his dugout, paddling hell for leather into the darkness.

The Solomon Islands can be an edgy place for cruisers. More than half the dozen or so sailboat crews we met over the course of three months had experienced an unpleasant incident of some kind. But while we doubled down on our security precautions after Marovo – keeping the cockpit well-lit at night, and a winch handle close by – it does

not pay, in our experience, to exude paranoia. So we also doubled down on maintaining friendly relations with the locals: always greeting them, asking their advice on good places to anchor. And trading.

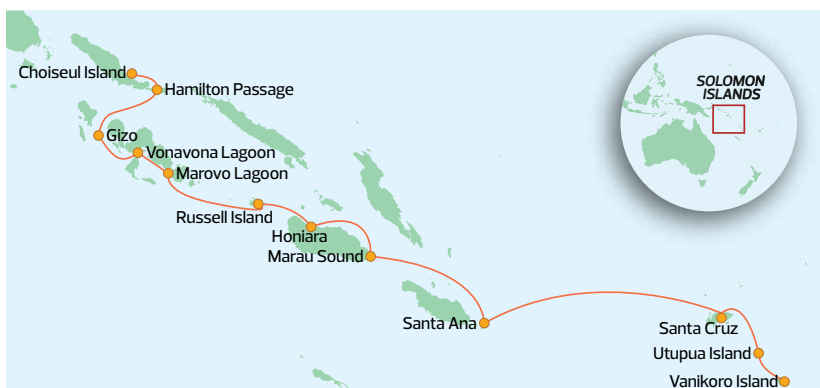
The trading can be interesting. We swapped a six-month-old edition of *The Economist* for four luscious crabs on one island, but were briefly stumped when a young man asked for our iPod in exchange for a pineapple on another; fortunately he was just as happy with two ballpoint pens. In the New Georgia group, many locals were converted to the Seventh Day Adventist faith in the late 1940s, and do not consume shellfish; but self-professed 'backsliders' will trade their lobster enthusiastically. As well as local produce, cruisers like to seek out the beautiful wooden masks for which the Solomons are famous: expect to bargain for at least a couple of hours for a choice piece by John Wayne (yes, that's his real name), and stock up in advance on a good selection of sandpaper and high-quality chisels.

Protected anchorages are plentiful in the islands, with the great coral-studded lagoons of Marovo and Vonavona offering dozens of idyllic spots, if you don't mind wending your very careful way through channels that are often only 6ft

deep. At Skull Island in Vonavona Lagoon, there are hundreds of macabre reminders of the pre-missionary days when head-hunting cannibals roamed these waters, but these days you can cheer yourself up with a cool SolBrew at the nearby Lola resort, one of the few tourist destinations in the Solomons.

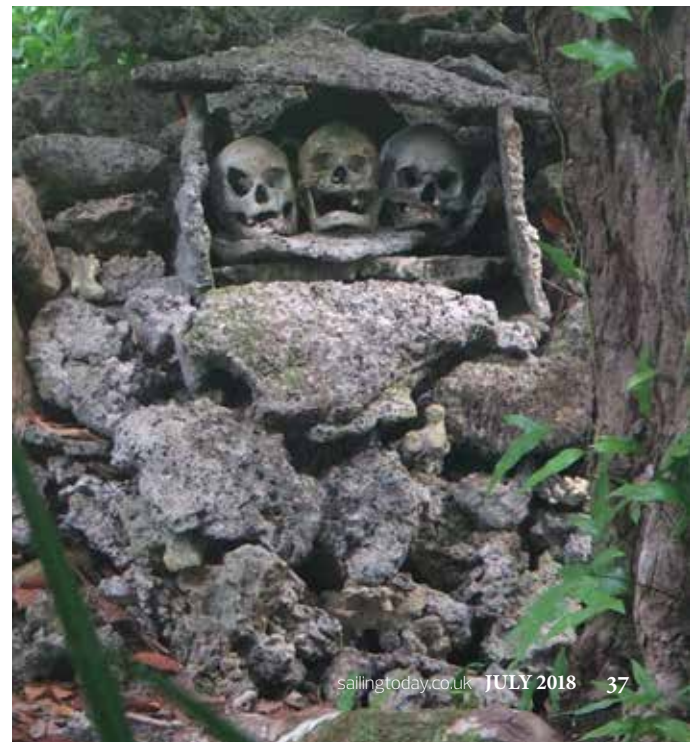
On Santa Ana Island, at the eastern end of the group, we were befriended by Greta Kuiper and her mother. Greta's father – now deceased – had been a Coastwatcher in WW2: one of a network of westerners who reported clandestinely by radio, to Australia on the movement of Japanese troops and ships through the islands. Reminders of the war are everywhere. The waters off Honiara are now named Ironbottom Sound on account of the 70 or more wrecks that litter the bottom (and which may cause your compass to shift). Honiara's international airport is still called Henderson Field, as it was when battle raged around it in 1942, with US marines fighting desperately to retain their first foothold on enemy territory.

Greta introduced us to all her friends, and soon we were trading not only for vegetables, but for laundry services, sponge cake and for the eggs of the unusual megapode. This bird (which is not locally endangered) 'nests' in warm sand and abandons its eggs (which are oval-ish and about twice the size of a hen's egg) as soon as they are laid; chicks can walk and fly the moment they hatch. One day, at her suggestion, the local chief took me (not Jenny: the site was taboo for women) to the traditional longhouse where, for hundreds of years, the bones of chiefs have been laid to rest in miniature wooden



OPPOSITE PAGE
(clockwise from top left) trading from onboard our Vancouver 27 at Vanikolo Island; it's more politic to trade for reef fish than catch them yourself; Makira Island; trading for megapode eggs, Santa Ana island; locals in canoes; waterside village, Marovo Lagoon; Skull Island, Vonavona Lagoon

NICK AND JENNY COGHLAN-ALAMY





canoes or – more recently and rather disconcertingly – in cardboard grocery boxes. As dozens of children clamoured around us, the chief told me in a matter-of-fact way that he would not be buried in this way; the local bishop had prevailed and he would be interred more conventionally, in the ground.

Formalities, happily for cruisers, are not greatly insisted upon. We had already visited two of the Solomon Islands before reaching any semblance of officialdom, at Santa Cruz Island, where, we were told:

“Oh yes, there will be customs, immigration, and even an ATM!”

Santa Cruz has an interesting history. When the Spaniards were exploring Peru in the early 16th century, a pressing question was the source of the gold used by the Incas in their fabulous ornamentation. In one of the great con-tricks of history, the conquistadors were told that it came from some islands “over the horizon”. Alvaro de Mendana was one of a number of sea-captains to take the Incas at their word. He sailed almost the entire width of the Pacific before stumbling in 1567 on this island where, imagining that this must at least be the site of King Solomon's mines, he gave the islands their modern name. Later he returned to find a colony here; it failed and all traces of the settlement have long since disappeared.

The erstwhile bureaucratic delights of Santa Cruz had also disappeared. But we were able to buy some local currency from the sole shop, owned by the island's only white man, Ross Hepworth. Ross's parents had sailed here from dreary postwar Britain to the South Pacific in 1947, aboard their yacht the Arthur Rodgers. Must be quite a

story there, we thought to ourselves as Ross breezily told us that all we needed to do was to check in once we got to Honiara, the capital.

Honiara is not a place to linger. Its artificial port is cramped and exposed, the streets unsafe after dark and bizarrely bloodstained by day (actually this is betel-juice, the national narcotic, chewed and randomly spat by all). There is a yacht club that is friendly enough, but being tied up a mere 50m from the front deck did not prevent a neighbour of ours from having their boat pilfered in broad daylight.

Gizo, in the far west, is an altogether more laid-back, pleasant place and is conveniently cyclone-free as well. The de facto yacht club here is PT-109, a straw-thatched bar on the waterfront named after John Kennedy's Motor Torpedo Boat. The President-to-be was on patrol in nearby Blackett Strait one dark night in August 1943 when he was run down by a Japanese destroyer that was part of the Tokyo Express, the high-speed convoy by which Japan sought to reinforce its outposts most nights. His subsequent leadership when the crew was stranded on nearby Plum Pudding Island turned him into a war hero and probably did no harm to his eventual political career. Among the local traders in Gizo are a persistent few who will offer you, at a “special price”, signed thank-you letters from JFK to their grandparents (mysteriously dated 1944 and on White House letterhead).

In Gizo we met the one and only Canadian ‘wontok’ (as a compatriot is known in pidgin; one talk = same language) and he introduced us to the local Hash Harriers. This branch of the worldwide running club has

as its slogan: “Jas Ranim, Wokim, Singim, Drinkim” (Just running, walking, singing and drinking...). And when I needed some medical advice, following the appearance of a lump in my abdomen, it was our Canadian friend who referred us to the local doctor:

“Oh, no big problem”, said the doctor after a professional examination. “It's a hernia. Common at your age. We're fixing them all the time... routine operation”.

“Oh yes.....and, er, what would the cost be? I'm not insured, you see.”

“Well, in American, about 7 dollars...But I should point out that the post-operative care in Honiara may not be optimal.”

I was all for it; the price was certainly right. Jenny, my crew and partner, was less keen. She thought I should fly out but, notwithstanding the more comfortable atmosphere in Gizo, was not comfortable about being left alone on the boat. So we spoke with Laurie, the boss of PT-109. He agreed to keep an eye on Jenny and Bosun Bird, while I went down to Sydney for the operation.

“But she'll need this...” he said with a smile.

He rummaged under the bar counter and brought out a large aerosol can of extra-strong bug repellent.

“Mortein. Great cockroach killer. It'll also blind anyone who might try something...at least for a couple of hours. Makes 'em real easy to catch, too. All yours.”

ABOVE
The PT-109 bar and yacht club, Gizo

BELOW
A peaceful evening scene in the Solomon Islands

For detailed cruising notes on the Solomons, see Bosun Bird's blog at www.bosunbird.com

