



THE SPIRIT OF MOROVO - SOLOMON ISLANDS

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock

A dark cloud developed ahead of me. Curious, I swam nearer to investigate. The cloud billowed getting bigger and darker. Inside flashes of silver struck like a highveld thunderstorm. The cloud undulated with tumultuous movement. It was massive. As it twisted towards me I made out the characteristic shape of barracudas - the long sleek body, dark chevron markings and the mean looking straight jaw line.

Thousands and thousands of barracuda were swimming together in tight synchronized formation. The shape and direction of the shoal changed in perpetual motion as the front runners dropped back into the folds and others took over. Barracuda eyes



stared through me as they moved around me, always keeping their distance. Suddenly I was in the middle of a whirlpool of barracuda - totally surrounded by a wall of predators. As a few broke away and headed into deeper water the mass shifted spreading out endlessly into the distance. This phenomenal spectacle was unfolding before my eyes on Mary Island, Solomons.



Approximately 992 islands make up the Solomon Islands to form the third largest archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. Mary Island is only one such island situated midway between the larger Russell and New Georgia Island groups. When the Solomon islanders were still headhunters, tumoko (war canoes) stopped at Mary Island to prepare for battle. Today both lay claim to ownership yet it remains unoccupied and inaccessible unless one boards the liveaboard Bilikiki.

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The Bilikiki moors at Mary Island for an exhilarating day of unlimited diving. In the early morning the barracuda are thick and close to the reef. As the day progresses the main shoal moves further out to sea. Throughout the day small groups of a few hundred barracuda are sent to scout the reef briefly, before rejoining the main shoal. Meanwhile huge congregations of bigeye jacks stream continuously over the reef. Midday the jacks are sparkling silver but as late afternoon approaches courtship begins bringing colour changes from silver to black. Jacks pair off performing intimate displays as they search for the ideal mate. Lurking in amongst the shoal are Napoleon wrasses and trumpetfish while herbivores such as surgeonfish and fusiliers sweep behind the shoal feasting on the abundance of faeces. Late afternoon the main shoal of barracuda return to perform a few final spectacular pirouettes before scattering into darkness to hunt. That night while I was reliving this unbelievable experience the Bilikiki steamed on to Marovo lagoon - a green dot on the western horizon.



Since 1987 Marovo lagoon has been proposed as a World Heritage site. Approximately 157kms long, it is perhaps the largest lagoon in the world. Marovo has 2 inactive volcanoes and over 300 islands, sand cays and mangrove islets. Only 20 of these are inhabited by 50 odd villages. Diving here exemplifies the diversity Solomons has to offer. Wall dives on the outside reefs can drop off to 2000m, channel dives on an incoming current yield rich pelagic sea life whilst reef dives range from hard coral cities to soft coral gardens.



Most dives in Morovo are done on the outside reefs in crystal clear warm water. The most striking feature of the walls is the huge gorgonian fans. The fans jut out perpendicular to the reef as they face into the predominant current. The fans' labyrinths support a living community. In a spectrum of colours crinoids and featherstars dwell on the outer rims while damsels rest in the protection of the large fronds. Exquisitely beautiful longnose hawkfish take home ownership, seldom venturing far from the protection of their sanctuary. Yet even smaller, semi-

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transparent gobies regard the main stems as raceway tracks as they too search for food.

Living inside the crinoids is yet another ecosystem. Crinoid clingfish may occupy the very heart of the crinoid. By assuming the exact colouration as their host, they have



attained a perfect camouflage. Pairs of clingfish in grey, black, brown and even brilliant yellow are found. The crinoid's numerous arms often host *Periclimenes* shrimp couples. Again cryptic colouring makes these critters difficult to see. I must have scrutinized a dozen crinoids before I found a decent sized elegant squat lobster hiding amongst the cirri (feet). Even though the female is much larger than the male, the squat lobsters only reach a maximum of 2cm. I imagine my surprise when I realized this crinoid hosted both clingfish and shrimps as well. This was certainly communal living.

Ending dives in the shallows of Marovo Lagoon is always rewarding. The hard corals are prolific with yellow damsels and purple goldies zooming in and out of the coral structures. Trumpet fish swim vertically amongst whip coral bushes trying not to be noticed.

The sand patches in-between the corals are a haven for shrimp and shrimp goby combos. The common goby found in Solomons is the Steinitz goby but the delightful Twinspot or Crab goby are sometimes seen in pairs. When the Twinspot erects the two dorsal fins, two perfectly deceiving eyes are exposed - enough to mislead any would be predator. These little gobies use their pectoral fins like a hovercraft as they hover and hop across the sand to their holes.





Uepi Island Resort is located on one of the barrier islands at the edge of Marovo Lagoon. It offers excellent diving for those not wishing to do 5 dives a day on a liveaboard. The resort has spacious bungalows boasting panoramic tropical island palm tree and white beach views in an amalgamation of rainforest and coconut plantation. The island is 2,5kms kms long with the vast lagoon on the one side and New Georgia Sound (the slot) on the other side. This was the route Japanese ships dashed under the cover of darkness to replenish their troops on the islands during the war. Resort operators Grant and Jill Kelly have dived the area for 22 years and still join guests on dives as they proudly show off their favourite reefs and critters. Jill speaks fondly of pygmy seahorses. She recently videoed a pregnant male for 20 consecutive days documenting the progress of his tummy. The pygmy seahorses of Morovo are different in colouring and even smaller than those seen elsewhere in the Pacific. This newly identified species (*Hippocampus denise*) is extremely challenging to find. Even more frustrating is finding one only to watch as it uncurls its tail and swims further away on the fan. Worse still, it ducks through the latticework and you are left looking at a fan with a bobble where the tail was. At Uepi we were lucky to have Jill show us a fan with no less than 18 pygmies, one being a large (in pygmy terms) pregnant male at no bigger than 1cm.



The main house of the resort overlooks Charapoana Passage, a channel linking the lagoon with the open ocean. The house reef stretches on one side of this passage from Welcome Jetty to Uepi Point. Blacktip and grey reef sharks are habituated at the jetty ensuring a guaranteed sighting, whether



diving or snorkeling. On an incoming tide the opposite side of Charapoana Passage offers great diving. Starting on the outside wall the soft corals bloom in the current; goldies flit in amongst the multitude of fans, whips and ferns; a plethora of colourful reef fish go about their daily business; schools of fusiliers swarm in the current while sharks patrol the entrance of the channel. As the current rounds the point and heads up the channel so too do the pelagics - trevally, dogtooth tuna, mackerel, rays and the sharks.



Babata Passage, on the other hand, is completely different. A scenic boat trip from Uepi resort passes perfect tropical islands, villages and coconut plantations. On route one is conscious of being continually surrounded by islands. The boat negotiates a serene narrow canal to enter the shallow waters of a river lined with mangrove thickets. At the end of the river the boat is tethered to an

overhanging tree. Incongruously the shallow river becomes a sinkhole 28m deep. From the sinkhole divers enter a large cavern which empties into a vast canyon before spilling into the ocean.

The return trip from Babata Passage passes Seghe airfield. About 50m from the edge of the runway is the wreck of a Lightning P38 plane that didn't make it home. Laying in only 9m of water it is still in good condition with wings and twin tails intact. The P38 was armed with one 20mm cannon and four 0.50-in machine guns. The rounds of artillery shells packed into the nose of the plane are clearly visible.



The Solomon Islands has been in the news because of political tension. The tension, which was restricted to the capital, has been resolved and RAMSI officials (Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands) are helping rebuild the country. Villagers welcome guests to share their simple lifestyle. It's not uncommon for the entire village to be present for visits, the children having

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the most fun. From an early age children learn to paddle a wooden dugout. Whenever the Bilikiki lay at anchor children from nearby islands would paddle out to greet the divers and trade fruit and vegetables with the crew.

While most island life revolves around fishing and gardening, in Morovo its woodcarving that is the income generator. The rare Ebony, Queen Ebony, Kerosene, Rosewood and Coconut wood are hand carved and intricately inlaid with nautilus shell. The most popular carving is that of Nguzunguzu, a spirit figurehead traditionally positioned on the prow of the tomoko to ward off evil water spirits, guide the craft and protect the warriors. If the carved Nguzunguzo rests its chin on clenched fists then its represents war. It's quite a procedure to purchase carvings. Money is of no great importance as the nearest shop may be 2 days paddling away. Bartering for clothes, batteries, fishing and diving gear holds far greater value. The carver takes one aside to begin the negotiation. Everything is hush-hush. A first price is given. The buyer then spends the better part of an hour haggling and attempting to bring the price down.



During WW2 the Japanese occupied Marovo. The lagoon was the ideal place to hide ships among the hundreds of islands and a harbour was established at Wickham. The Japanese were soon detected by the Allied forces and at least 3 of their supply ships were torpedoed whilst at anchor. These wrecks rest upright in 30m of silty water. Lionfish love wrecks and these are no exception. Glassies, their prime source of food,



nervously congregate around the black coral bushes. It is easy to penetrate the large holds where artillery shells, mortars, drums and cables are lying around. 2 Wrecks can be dived in one day but due to proximity not on the same dive.

When tired of diving walls, caves and wrecks there are still the mangroves to explore. Colonizing the shallows they host an assortment of unusual sea life. The archerfish is one such fascinating critter. The archer fish squirts a jet of water at flying insects like a missile and then feasts on the crash victims. A variety of crustaceans, clams, nudibranchs, tube worms and starfish all inhabit the nutrient rich waters. Anemones find even the smallest rock on which to grow. Hiding under their folds are live porcelain crabs and shrimps but it's the rich colours of the clownfish that grab ones attention. Solomon Islands have no less than 7 different species of anemone fish.



The Solomon Islands are often referred to as 'islands lost in time'. Visiting Morovo Lagoon one certainly understands why. But it is this untouched remoteness that adds appeal to divers. There is so much to see in Morovo Lagoon, so much unexplored and unspoilt. Yet I will always remember the warmth of the Solomon Islanders as they shared their ocean realm with me.



Info

Location: NE off Australia 5-12 degrees south of equator

Day time temperature: 28 - 32 degrees

Water temperature: 28-30 degrees

Language: English and Pidgin English

Visas: Onward ticket required and visa

Currency: Solomon Dollar

Travel contact for Bilikiki Cruises and Uepi Island Resort:

www.bilikiki.com

www.uepi.com



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