

Solomon Islands



One of the last South Pacific frontiers, these islands are Melanesia at its most inspiring and secretive. Wanting to get off the beaten path? It's easy: there is no beaten path. Just you, the ocean, dense rainforest and traditional villages; it feels like the world's end.

In this enigmatic archipelago, blessed with a compelling history, intriguing cultures and natural beauty, opportunities to create your own trail abound. It's all about eco-travel: climb an extinct volcano, trek across a mountainous landscape as old as dinosaurs, slog through jungle paths to reach secluded waterfalls, and experience the leaf-hut villages where traditional culture is alive. Those looking for a bit less swashbuckling and more creature comforts will delight in soothing eco-lodges and the majestic scenery from a tranquil sundeck.

This is only the beginning. Divers will be in seventh heaven, whether exploring Marovo Lagoon's reefs or diving around the fleet of WWII ship and plane wrecks resting on the seafloor between Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Kayaking, surfing and fishing are also here. Above the surface, plenty of WWII relics scattered in the jungle will captivate history buffs.

The question, though, is this: after a few years of civil strife, how safe is the country? Thanks to foreign aid, the Solomons is bouncing back and visitors will feel more than *welkam*. Yes, you can do pretty much whatever you want, and will be limited only by your imagination.

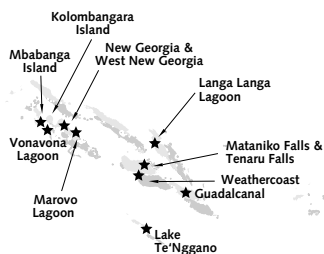
The best part is, there'll be no crowds to share in the experience.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking a dip in a natural pool at **Mataniko Falls** (p258) or **Tenaru Falls** (p259)
- Testing your Indiana Jones side in untamed **Weathercoast** (p261)
- Huffing to the top of the mount on **Kolombangara Island** (p274) to admire the Jurassic Park-like scenery
- Soothing your chakras at a laid-back resort on **Mbabanga Island** (p272)
- Diving and snorkelling in fish soup in **Marovo Lagoon** (p266)
- Feeling free in an intimate lodge at **Langa Langa Lagoon** (p277)
- Spotting rusty WWII relics on **Guadalcanal** (opposite) and west **New Georgia** (p265)
- Visiting a skull shrine on **Vonavona Lagoon** (p265)
- Listening to the cacophony of seabirds on the mysterious, World Heritage-listed **Lake Te'Nggano** (p279)

■ POPULATION: 524,000

■ AREA: 27,540 SQ KM (SEA AREA: 1.35 MILLION SQ KM)



History

See p22 for a run-down of the history of the Solomon Islands.

Geography & Climate

The third-largest archipelago in the South Pacific, the Solomons is a scattered double chain of islands which extends 1667km in a southeasterly direction from Bougainville Island in PNG. Some of the islands are rugged, heavily wooded and mountainous; others are tiny, low-lying atolls. The country's highest peak, Mt Makarakomburu (2447m) is on Guadalcanal. Volcanic activity and earthquakes occur frequently.

The dry season is from May to early December. Cyclones occur between January and April. Daytime coastal temperatures vary from 21°C to 32°C.

Culture

As in most Melanesian cultures, the *wantok* (fellow clanspeople) system exists here. Solomon Islanders' duties to their clan and village *bigman* (leader) are eternal and trans-geographic. *Kastom* (or traditional ways) involves dances, songs and storytelling. See p33 for more information on culture.

GUADALCANAL

The largest island in the Solomon group, Guadalcanal hosts the national capital, Honiara. There's no iconic calling card but a host of cultural sights. There are a couple of natural wonders and fantastic diving at Iron Bottom Sound, the famous graveyard of WWII's Battle for Guadalcanal, just off the north coast. Outside Honiara, the island has the genuine look of a lost world. The hills behind the capital eventually become a mighty mountain range rising to 2400m that separates the Weathercoast people from those on the northern coast.

HONIARA

Tension, riots? What tension, what riots? The capital of the Solomon Islands was at the epicentre of civil unrest and ethnic tension from 1999 to 2003. But how things have changed since the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) personnel in 2003, who helped quell internal violence, despite a short-

lived election-related uprising in 2006. The city is now looking optimistically towards the future.

Considering it's the first port of call for most visitors, due to its position as the hub within the archipelago, it's hard not to spend some time in Honiara. It's rarely love at first sight – the architecture wins no prizes and sights are sparse. Don't despair! Lift the city's skin and the place might start to grown on you. Hang around the atmospheric wharf, wade through the shambolic market, grab a few gifts in the well-stocked souvenir shops and get your first taste of Melanesian culture by visiting the museum.

Those who've just arrived from several weeks in the Solomon Islands' wilds, characterised by rough village life, now feel like they've stepped into Manhattan, with a spattering of epicurean indulgences (hmmm, thick banana smoothies...), shops heaving with consumer goods, the odd traffic snarl and a modicum of nightlife (yes, *nightlife*).

It's also the optimal launching pad for exploring Guadalcanal's outdoors and the various WWII battlefields around the city. For those who come from Port Moresby, Honiara might just seem like heaven on earth.

Orientation

The central area extends from the post office to Chinatown and can easily be covered in a 30-minute walk along Mendana Ave, the backbone of central Honiara, which runs east-west parallel to the seashore. In this precinct, you'll find the central market, the port complex, shops, embassies, banks, hotels and restaurants.

The 11km-urban spread along the coast has the settlements of Rove and White River to the west, while eastwards are Chinatown and Mataniko. Beyond are Kukum, Panatina and Ranadi, which make up the country's principal light-industrial zone.

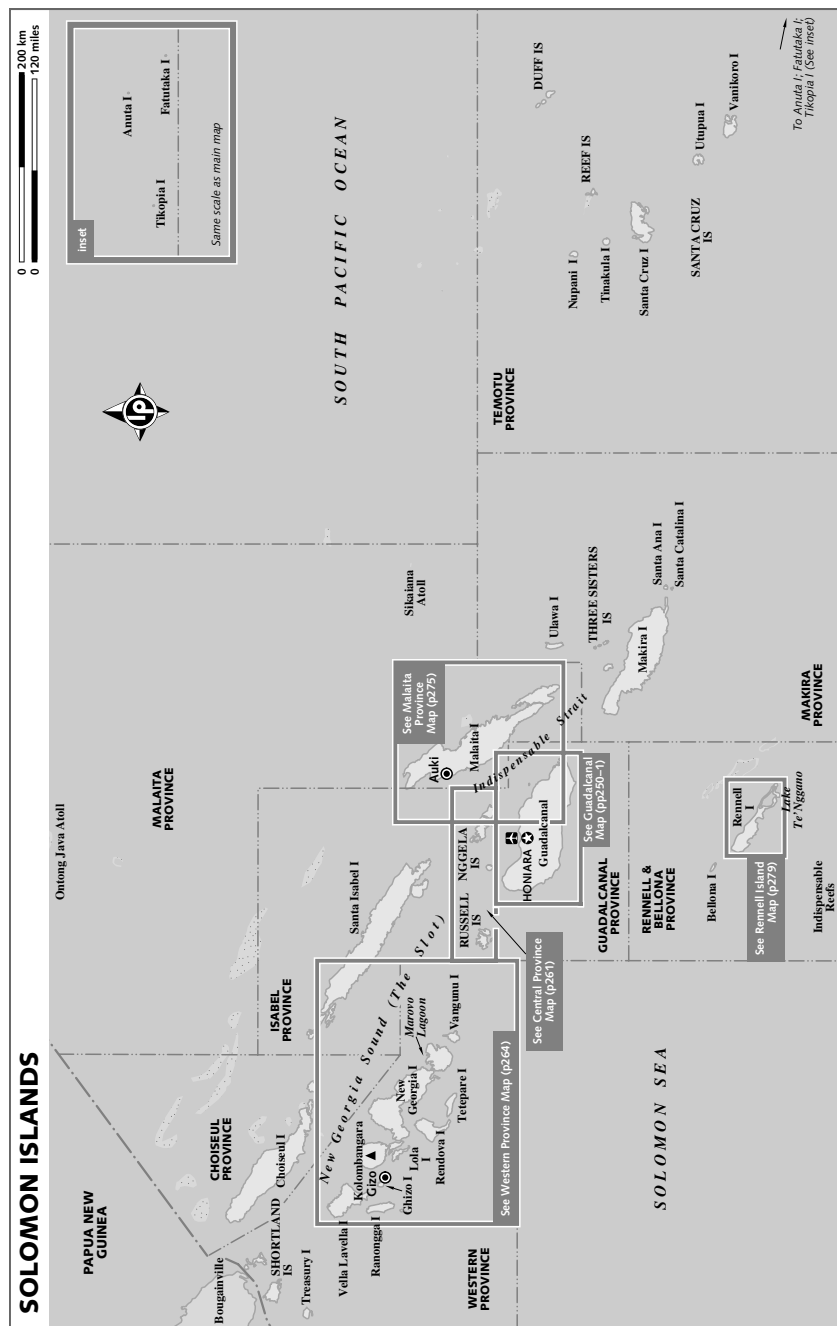
Information

BOOKSHOPS

Nautilus (☎ 26105; NPF Plaza, Mendana Ave; 📺 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) This German-run gift shop stocks a few books on the Solomons.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 999)



INTERNET ACCESS

There are various internet cafés in the NPF Plaza building. Rates average from \$S15 to \$S17 per hour. You can expect fairly speedy connections, and you can burn CDs and print documents. Most hotels also offer internet access for their guests, and some places have wi-fi. The following outlets are open on Saturday.

SoloSoft (NPF Plaza, Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) Upstairs.

TM Internet Cafe (NPF Plaza, Mendana Ave; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1.30pm Sat) Upstairs.

MEDICAL SERVICES

In-The-Zone Medical Clinic (☎ 23485; Hibiscus Ave; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) This private clinic, just beside the King Solomon Hotel, has been recommended to us by expats. After hours, call ☎ 25063.

Point Cruz Chemist (☎ 22911; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) A well-stocked pharmacy.

MONEY

A sign that Honiara has embraced modernisation: there are now four, shiny 24-hour ATMs in the centre, and they were all working when we visited. ANZ and Westpac have one each; you'll find two more booths (also owned by ANZ and Westpac) outside the post office. They accept Visa and MasterCard. ANZ and Westpac can also do cash advances on your credit card. Note that there is also an ANZ-operated ATM and a small bureau de change at the airport.

ANZ (☎ 21111; Mendana Ave; ☎ 9am-4pm) Changes all major currencies and travellers cheques. Has the best rates, but notoriously long queues as well.

ETHNIC TENSION: IT'S OVER

For years the Gwale people of Guadalcanal resented the fact that their traditional land was being settled by migrants from Malaita.

Early in 1999 the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) began to terrorise Malaitan migrants, which led to thousands fleeing back home. The Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) was formed and soon gained the upper hand. Hundreds died in the fighting.

Following mediation by Australia and New Zealand, the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed in October 2000. Conflict has ceased, thanks greatly to the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) presence throughout the whole country, implemented in July 2003. The RAMSI force includes personnel from Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, and is mainly a policing project, resulting in law and order returning.

Security was quickly re-established and RAMSI remains in an ongoing role while the country rebuilds. The presence of RAMSI means that the Solomons are safe once more, but it doesn't look like the personnel will be leaving any time soon.

Bank South Pacific (☎ 21874; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) Changes all major currencies and travellers cheques.

Solomon Post (☎ 21821; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) If there's nobody at the counter downstairs, go upstairs. Rates are lower, but there are no queues.

Westpac (☎ 21222; Mendana Ave; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) Changes all major currencies except euros in cash, as well as travellers cheques (euro-denominated ones are accepted).

POST

Solomon Post (Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Main post office. Sells envelopes and postcards, and has a philatelic bureau. Also houses a Western Union counter.

TELEPHONE

Many hotels have phones that their guests can use to make international phone calls.

Telekom House (☎ 21576; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Sells phonecards and prepaid SIM cards. Also offers internet connection.

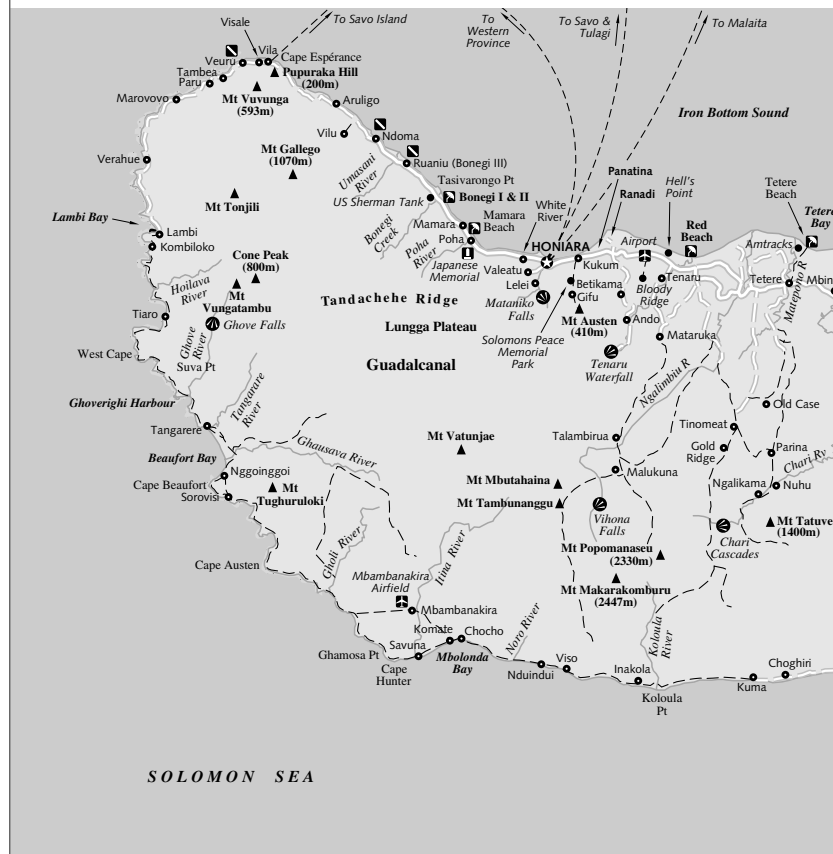
TOURIST INFORMATION

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (SIVB; ☎ 22442; www.visitsolomons.com.sb; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) There is little printed material, but staff can provide advice and contact isolated lodges and villages (by two-way radio) to make bookings. Ask for Chris or Stella. Also sells useful maps of the country (\$S60).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Guadalcanal Travel Services (GTS; ☎ 22586; guadrav@solomons.com.sb; Mendana Ave; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Well-established travel

GUADALCANAL



agency. Can arrange tours and bookings for major resorts in the Solomons. Ask for the knowledgeable Garedd.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Immigration Division (☎ 25081; Mendana Ave; ☎ 9.30-11.30am & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Located in the Department of Commerce, Industries & Employment building. Visitor permits (\$550) can be extended for three months. Takes 24 hours.

Dangers & Annoyances

Relax! You're not in Port Moresby. The RAMSI personnel quickly re-established law and order in the capital. It's now safe to stroll around the centre by day, provided you use your common sense and avoid walking alone in deserted streets. At night, take a taxi.

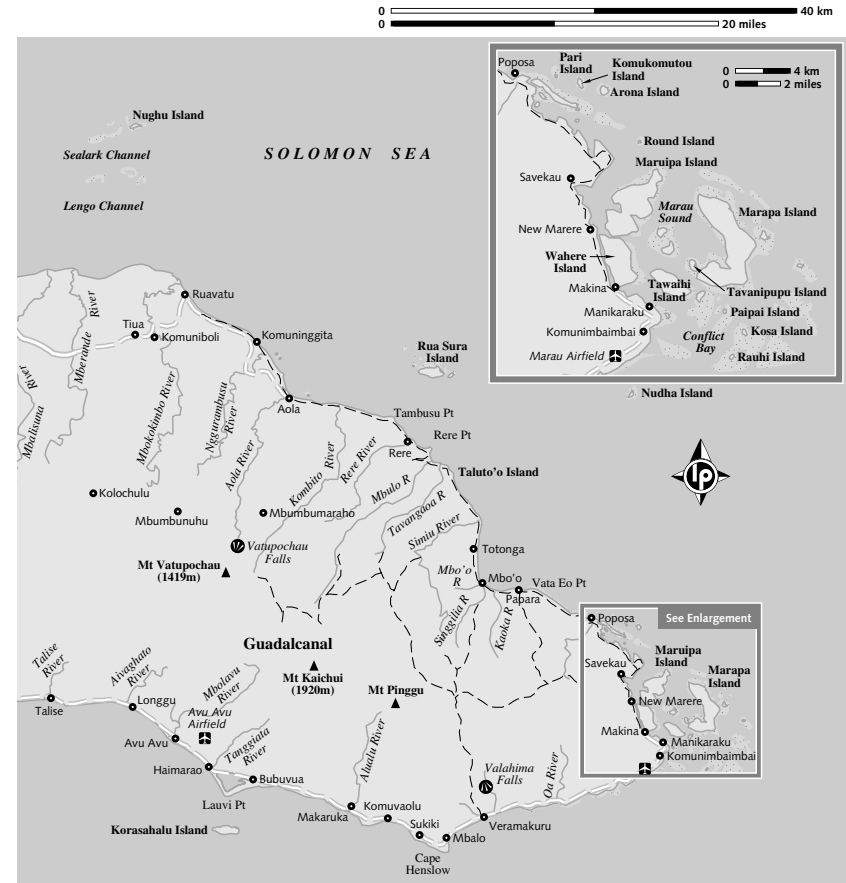
Sights

Honiara's attractions are mainly strung along the main drag. The main exceptions are White River Village (take a 'White River' minibus, S\$3) and Skyline Drive (take a cab).

POINT CRUZ

On 12 May 1568 Mendaña and his men erected a cross at a spot traditionally called Kua by islanders, renaming it Point Cruz. Then they said their prayers and claimed their discoveries in the Solomons for Spain.

Since the 1950s this small peninsula has been greatly extended with wharves and copra sheds. Boat services depart from Point Cruz to the remotest destinations in the archipelago. It's worth spending an hour or two soaking up



the atmosphere – there's always a busy scene here as copra boats and interisland passenger vessels load and unload.

NATIONAL PARLIAMENT

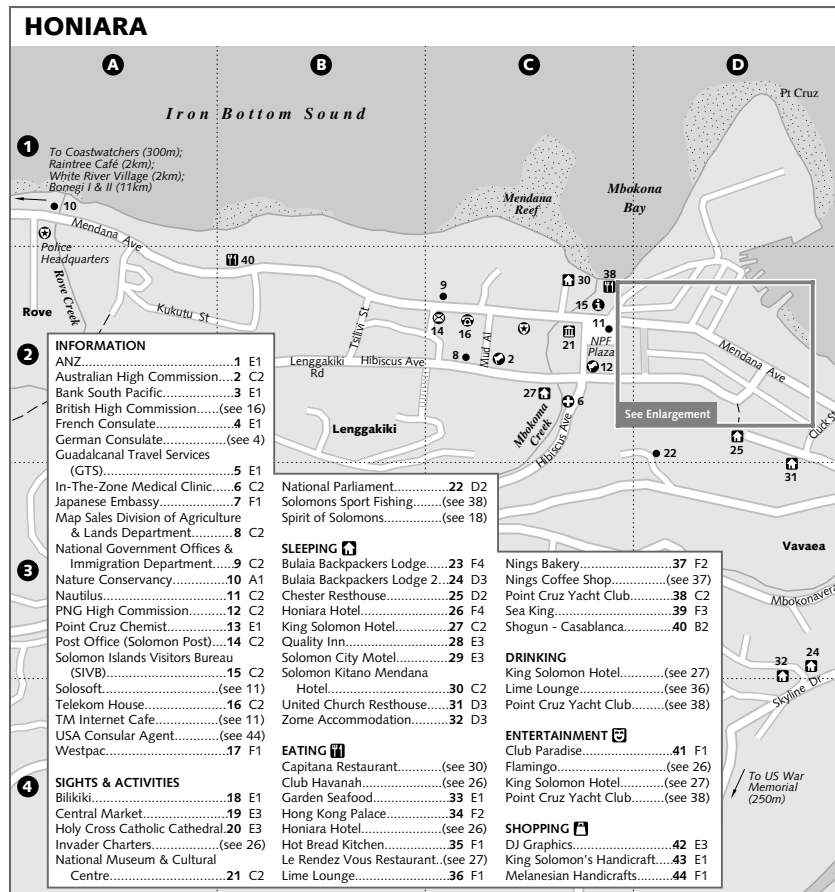
See the conical-shaped concrete building perched on the hill above Hibiscus Ave? It's the **National Parliament** (☎ 28520; Lower Vayvaya Rd; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri). Watching proceedings from the public gallery (take the eastern entrance) can be fun if you happen to be in town at the right time (one-week sessions are usually held every other month). Inside, the dome boasts a rich tapestry of traditional art, including arching frescoes. Opened in 1993, the building was funded by the USA.

NATIONAL MUSEUM & CULTURAL CENTRE

The modest **museum** (☎ 24896; Mendana Ave; admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) has only one room featuring displays and old photographs on traditional dance, body ornamentation, currency, weaponry and archaeology. Behind the main building there are eight traditionally constructed houses, each from a different province, as well as a few boldly carved wooden statues.

WHITE RIVER VILLAGE

Betel nut, anyone? This friendly Gilbertese settlement about 4km west of the centre is mostly famed for its betel nut market. Wooden stalls selling the much sought-after commodity are lined cheek-by-jowl



along the main road. Past the market, there's the Raintree Café (p255). Ah, the Raintree Café...

SKYLINE DRIVE

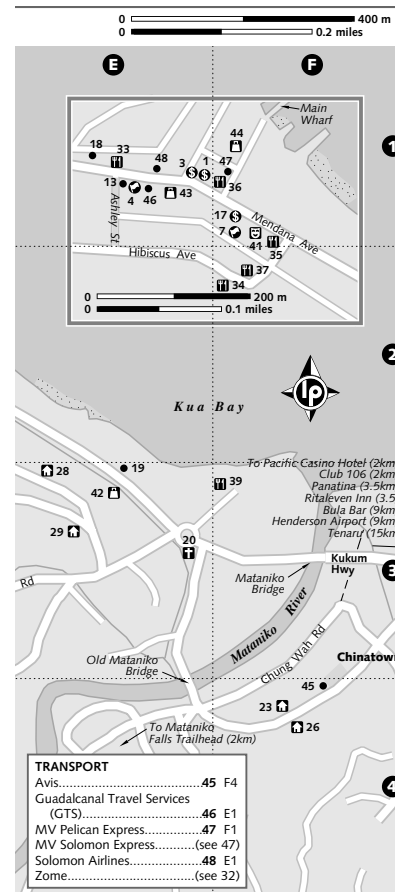
You can still follow this wartime jeep track for the 5km between Honiara and Valeatu. As it leaves Honiara, Skyline Dr overlooks the Mataniko River, providing a breathtaking view of village life below it. Enjoy it from the **US War Memorial**, a compound of marble slabs bearing detailed descriptions of battles fought during the Guadalcanal campaign. It was unveiled on 7 August 1992, the 50th anniversary of the US beach landings. It's a steep 30-minute walk up from Mendana Ave.

CENTRAL MARKET

While there's no chance of Honiara being mistaken for Dakar, the busy, bubbling **Central Market** (Mendana Ave; ☞ dawn-dusk Mon-Sat) assails your senses. It's the country's principal food market and covers a whole block between Mendana Ave and the seafront. It has a huge selection of fresh produce, especially fruits and vegetables, that come from outlying villages along the northern coast and from Savo island.

Also on sale are traditional crafts such as Malaitan shell money, souvenir shells and jewellery. The fish market is at the back – just follow your nose.

There's no bargaining, and there's no haggling to buy anything. Utter bliss.



CHURCHES & RELIGIOUS SERVICES

On Sunday, masses of well-dressed Honiarans attend morning church services. Most churches have several services on this day, usually lasting an hour and conducted in English, so you have no excuse not to repent your sins. Visitors are welcome to attend, but make sure you dress modestly. The most prominent religious building is the **Holy Cross Catholic Cathedral**, perched on a hill to the east of the centre.

CHINATOWN

What's left of once-thriving Chinatown? Sadly, after the riots that broke out in April 2006, not much (see p13). Chinatown's main street, Chung Wah Rd, was flanked with

colourful shops but most of them were destroyed. There are plans to regenerate the area in the near future.

Activities

If you're a diver, be sure spend a few days in the capital – Honiara has probably the best **diving** of any capital city in the world, on a par with Port Moresby. It has a fantastic collection of WWII wrecks lying offshore in an area known as Iron Bottom Sound. Contact the following outfits:

Coastwatchers (☎ 21255, 73672; coastwatchers@fastmail.fm) About 1km west of the centre, on the road to White River. One-day dive package is US\$140. Also offers snorkelling trips.

Invader Charters (☎ 23085; www.invadercharters.com.au; Honiara Hotel; 1-2-shore dives \$5500/700, equipment hire \$3300) Also has trips to Florida Islands aboard a 30m vessel (A\$450 for a weekend package to Maravagi Resort, p262) and snorkelling trips.

See p60 for more information on diving.

Tackle bigeye tuna, Spanish mackerel, kingfish, wahoo and sailfish with **Solomons Sport Fishing** (☎ 95105, 24498; mikehammond@solomon.com.sb; full-day \$35500), based at the Point Cruz Yacht Club.

Tours

The following outfits can arrange half-/full-day tours around Honiara, taking in the WWII battlefields, waterfalls and other sights. They can also organise trips to Savo and Tulagi. Prices vary according to the party size.

Destination Solomons Travel & Tours (☎ 23444; destsolo@solomon.com.sb) Run by Wilson Maelaua.

Guadalcanal Foundation Tours (☎ 38338) Run by knowledgeable John Innes. Focuses on WWII battlefields.

Tourism Solomons (☎ 27772, 21150; toursol@solomon.com.sb) Ask for Ross Hepworth.

Sleeping BUDGET

All places listed have communal kitchens, fan-cooled twin rooms and shared facilities unless stated otherwise.

United Church Resthouse (☎ 20028, 20144; Lower Vayvaya Rd; per person \$590, r \$5200-250) A thong's throw from the Chester Resthouse, this teetotal place features a handful of rooms that are in sore need of TLC; otherwise the place is in reasonable condition. Some rooms have saggy mattresses; others have three beds and

feel cramped. The best assets are the central location and ample views from the communal areas. It's manageable for a day or two.

Bulaia Backpackers Lodge (☎ 28819; Chinatown; per person \$5100) Rooms here are monastically plain and cleanliness is only just OK in the bathrooms – wear thongs (flip-flops) and pray you're not the last in line to shower. It's worthwhile if you're seriously strapped for cash. Some rooms are windowless, so check out a few before settling in. The smart Honiara Hotel is just across the street, so you can make use of its restaurant and pool. It's a 10-minute walk to the market.

Bulaia Backpackers Lodge 2 (☎ 23059; off Skyline Dr; per person \$5100) This is almost a carbon copy of the original Bulaia: same management, same nondescript building and samey rooms (albeit more recent and a bit brighter). Good value if you can handle a strenuous 20-minute steep walk from Chinatown.

Chester Resthouse (☎ 26355; mbhches@solomon.com.sb; Lower Vayvaya Rd; r \$5180) May God bless you in this neat little number run by Henry, an assiduous Anglican brother. Location is tip-top: Mendana Ave is just a few *singsing* steps via a shortcut. There's a comfy communal area with a polished wooden floor, where guests slump on couches in front of the TV. From the veranda, you can contemplate wide views of the harbour. No alcohol is allowed on the premises, but there's a small shop selling basic foodstuffs downstairs. All in all, it's great value, but it's not perfect: rooms are tiny and lack intimacy (windows open right onto the public area and corridors). Optimal for women travellers.

Solomon City Motel (☎ 24862; Lower Vayvaya Rd; r \$5150-250) Reposed over sloping grounds with lots of tree and flower coverage, this unpretentious joint is very different in atmosphere from the alcohol-free Chester Resthouse and United Church Resthouse. Wanna guzzle a few beers? No problem, the young manager will be more than happy to enjoy a few stubbies with you. The rooms are spartan and claustrophobic (the fan occupies half the ceilings). An OK place for unfussy male travellers.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Most places accept credit cards.

Zome Accommodation (☎ 26902; fax 26903; off Skyline Dr; r \$5250-300; ☎) This little B&B-like oasis in a quiet neighbourhood is a reliable standby despite being a bit far from the action, up a

steep road. The rooms, some of which come with private facilities, are compact and lacking in charm but perfectly serviceable. A new wing was being built at the time of research and will feature eight air-con rooms when it's completed.

Quality Inn (☎ 25150; fax 25277; Lower Vayvaya Rd; r \$5350-680; ☎) The linoleum floor should just be ripped out, the particle-board furnishings need to be replaced and the bordello-red curtains should be dumped, but the functional amenities, quiet setting and key location keep it on the radar screen. Digs are commodious and cleanish, and come with a balcony overlooking the harbour.

Honiara Hotel (☎ 21737; reservation@honiarahotel.com.sb; Chinatown; r \$5390-816; ☎) This hotel scores high on amenities, with a restaurant, a bar, a disco and, joy of joys, an Olympic-sized pool complete with sunlounges. Deluxe rooms in the recent wing (Nos 811 to 824 and Nos 831 to 834) are appealing and light-filled; they come with sea views and a private terrace. The standard rooms feel outdated and uninspiring in comparison.

Ritaleven Inn (☎ 22902, 39192; Panatina; r without bathrooms \$5450) A pleasant surprise, this well-maintained abode feels like a peaceful B&B, with only three rooms and a kitchen for guests' use. Top marks go to the shared bathrooms, which are squeaky-clean, and the thick mattresses. It's about 4km east of the centre, in the Panatina district. Minibuses and taxis pass by on the main road (a mere five-minute walk), so getting back and forth is easy enough.

Pacific Casino Hotel (☎ 25009; paccashtl@solomon.com.sb; Panatina; r \$5600-1110; ☎) Like a phoenix, this place has risen from the ashes after having been destroyed during the 2006 riots and had just reopened when we dropped by. Sad to say, but the two-storey barrack-style block is an ugly duckling, and the long corridors could set the stage for *The Shining*. The only touch of fancy is in the reception area, embellished with eye-catching frescoes. On the plus side, rooms are spacious, well organised and boast the requisite comforts. The extensive grounds encompass two restaurants and, as the name suggests, a casino. It has a waterfront location but given the odd layout most rooms have no views (despite what the brochure says). It's 2km west of the centre.

King Solomon Hotel (☎ 21205; Hibiscus Ave; r \$5825-1100; ☎) Traditional carvings greet you as you step in from the blazing sun into the

vast lobby of this longstanding favourite, which ticks all the right boxes: professional staff; a stellar location; a good restaurant; a congenial bar; and a variety of comfortable, well-equipped units scattered amid lush green gardens that carpet a steep hill. A kinky funicular shunts people between the rooms and the reception area. It has an inviting pool built into the hill.

Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel (☎ 20071; reserv@mendana.com.sb; Mendana Ave; r \$5850-1100; ☎) If you want to launch yourself into the heart of the action, this is your answer. Like most hotels in Honiara, this one has some bright rooms and some darker ones, so definitely ask to see a few before plonking down your money. A new wing was being built when we passed through. With any luck, it will be finished by the time you read this. Flake out in the lounge, make use of the well-stocked bar and refresh yourself in the little pool at the back.

Eating

Nings Bakery (☎ 28371; Hibiscus Ave; ☎ 6am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat, to noon Sun) You can gauge the level of carbohydrate addiction of an expat or local if they know about this bakery-cum-cafeteria. Those not in-the-know obviously haven't surrendered to the delights of the gooey pudding cake (\$3). Other temptations (though much more ordinary in taste) include chocolate cake and buns. Go. Just don't blame us if you can't fit into your wetsuit the next day.

Hot Bread Kitchen (Mendana Ave; ☎ 6am-8pm) For the most flavoursome buns (\$3) in town, take your sticky fingers to this unassuming outlet on the main drag. Come early; by noon it is sold out. Bread is also available.

Nings Coffee Shop (☎ 28371; Hibiscus Ave; mains \$515-40; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) Step into this attractive cafeteria-cum-fast-food outlet for an escape from the dusty streets. With its wrought-iron-like chairs and colourful walls, it's almost trendy by Honiarian standards. Tuck into marinated pork or beef, chilli tuna, fried chicken or sandwiches, or keep up your strength with a decent cappuccino. Small wonder it quickly fills at lunchtime (takeaway available). Same location as Nings Bakery, but separate entrance.

Point Cruz Yacht-Club (☎ 22500; Mendana Ave; mains \$525-50; ☎ lunch & dinner) Never short of a happy crowd, this Honiara institution is best known for its cold Solbreu than for its affordable fare. It's a shame, because the dishes are simple and

full of flavour. Burgers go down well with the brews here, but you can also treat your taste-buds to kingfish steak, sirloin steak or beef curry. And the seafood lies just beyond the glass. There are plans to refurbish the place, so keep your ears to the ground.

Line Lounge (☎ 23064; off Mendana Ave; mains \$525-70; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) This accomplished modern place that seems to have been imported direct from Oz thinks it is the snazziest spot in town. One thing is sure: it's the meeting point for expats who are yearning for a satisfying breakfast (muesli!) or a light meal. There's everything from palate-pleasing salads to well-made sandwiches and devilish banana cakes – and perhaps the illusion of being back home. The walls are adorned with paintings by local artists, which gives the place a splash of style.

Garden Seafood (☎ 22298; Mendana Ave; mains \$535-180; ☎ lunch & dinner) Here you can fuel up with Chinese staples such as sweet-and-sour fish fillet or prawns with nuts. The décor is a bit bleak and the food isn't the best (think gluggy sauce), but it's filling, cheap and very central.

Our pick Raintree Café (☎ 22086; White River; mains \$540-150; ☎ 7am-10pm) This suave number run by a group of ladies boasts one of the most agreeable settings in Honiara. Picture a lovely waterfront location and soul-stirring views of Savo. The tropical décor is easy on the eye, with wooden furnishings, thatched roof and candlelit tables – alfresco dining doesn't come any better than this (it's BYO). Choose between copious breakfasts, a parade of bountiful pizzas (served from 4pm), omelettes, daily specials chalked up on the blackboard and melt-in-your-mouth homemade cakes. And don't get us started on the fruit salad with honey and yogurt. Vegetarians should enjoy the crunchy 'garden salad' served in a traditional wooden bowl. It's such a shame that the service is so slow. It's in White River, about 3km west of the centre. Has wi-fi.

Hong Kong Palace (☎ 23338; Hibiscus Ave; mains \$540-200; ☎ lunch & dinner) This unmissable blood-red pagoda on Hibiscus Ave brings an unexpected dash of orientalism in an otherwise dull area. Inside, it's much more sterile, with neons and tiles, but you'll be too busy choosing from the mile-long menu to notice. Seafood is king of the castle here, with a wide choice of crab, shrimp, lobster, fish and squid dishes. The soundtrack is an odd cacophony that fuses the sizzling woks

in the kitchen and the blaring TV in the dining room.

Capitana Restaurant (☎ 20071; Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel, Mendana Ave; mains \$550-180; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Oral pleasures (of the Japanese variety) never tasted so good at this restaurant inside the Mendana Hotel. Ever heard of *yakisakana* (grilled kingfish in ponzu sauce) or *yosenabe* (hotpot of seafood, chicken and vegetables)? It's time to learn. If you're feeling conservative, stick to the sashimi or classic Western dishes. Another strong point is the wine list, with a wide selection of Australian tipples (from \$80). Two minuses: the faded tablecloths and the elevator soundtrack – nothing's perfect.

Sea King (☎ 23678; off Mendana Ave; mains \$560-200; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Ignore the chubby golden Buddha at the entrance; the stadium-sized dining room is less clichéd. This place has garnered high praise for its Chinese dishes that emphasise seafood.

Le Rendez Vous Restaurant (☎ 21205; King Solomon Hotel, Hibiscus Ave; mains \$575-180; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This is not the most romantic spot for a rendez-vous, but it has a reputation for fine food and an airy setting with funky wooden tables and chairs under a thatched roof. The menu covers enough territory to please most palates, with such classics as chilli garlic prawns, beef eye fillet, burgers and fish of the day. Good fruit platter too.

Shogun – Casablanca (☎ 28632; Mendana Ave; mains \$590-180; 🍴 dinner) One venue, two restaurants; it's perfect if you're undecided. The Alps meet the Pacific at the Casablanca. There's a good range of pasta dishes and hit-and-miss pizzas. Steaks, fish and lobster plump up the menu. Too bland for you? The refined interior of the Shogun puts you in the right mood for well-prepared Japanese dishes. There's a breezy terrace for alfresco dining.

our pick Club Havanah (☎ 21737; Honiara Hotel, Chinatown; mains \$5110-180; 🍴 dinner) Expats and the local glitterati saunter here for upper-crust fare with a strong French accent thanks to Georges, the French chef, who can be seen through the glass, working his magic in the kitchen. The pages of its menu are a gateway to wonder. What your palate with cracking *petits gris farcis au coeur d'ail* (snails with garlic), wolf down a lip-smacking *médailles de boeuf aux trois sauces* (beef medallions with three sauces) and finish off your meal with, say, *nougat glacé au miel et amandes* (frozen dessert with candied fruit, almonds, honey and whipped cream).

After having two satisfying dinners here, all we can say is: *vraiment très bon* (really very good). Just one grumble: the big fake fish and siren at the back are ludicrous.

Drinking

The bar scene is not that dead in Honiara. There are a few congenial spots where you can lubricate your gullet in pleasant surrounds. At the end of the night, take a cab to get back to your hotel.

Point Cruz Yacht-Club (Mendana Ave; 🍴 11am-midnight) Hands down, this is the coolest spot in town to sink a Solbrew and the best place to hear the local goos. It's the gathering place for yachties, expats, aid workers and local punters. The whole place is to be fully redesigned and it should be completed by the time you read this. Wi-fi.

Lime Lounge (off Mendana Ave; 🍴 7am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun; 🍷) A godsend when it's sweltering hot, thanks to industrial-strength air-con. It's the premier place to indulge in chilled liquid treats such as bush lime, juices and smoothies. Good coffee, too. Wi-fi.

Raintree Café (White River; 🍴 7am-10pm) Enjoying a sunset beverage in this wonderfully mellow place in White River is escapism at its best. Spiffing setting, right by the seashore. Luscious smoothies and vitamin-packed juices, as well as award-winning coffee. Wi-fi.

Hotel bars are open to non-guests and are a good place to hook up with expats. The in-house, pub-like bar at King Solomon Hotel was the most lively when we researched. Also try the bar at Mendana Hotel.

Entertainment

There are a few hotspots that deliver earbusting tunes and hot-and-sweaty dancing. They are rather naff by Western standards but after a few weeks spent in other provinces, you'll find them almost happening. Friday and Saturday are the liveliest nights but sometimes it can be pretty quiet for no apparent reason. Music-wise, expect an eclectic mix of island and Western hits. Entrance fees are \$510 to \$520.

The best places to showcase your à la John Travolta (or Olivia Newton-John) dance style include **Flamingo** (Honiara Hotel, Chinatown, p254); **Bula Bar** (Airport Motel, Henderson), close to the airport; **Club 106** (Pacific Casino Hotel, Panatina, p254); and the more recent dance hall at the King Solomon Hotel. They are safe for women travellers – there's security – but steer clear of inebriated

VOICES: DOROTHY WICKHAM, BROADCAST RADIO JOURNALIST

Dorothy is a former stringer for various international television networks and one of the leading journalists in her field in the Solomons. Until recently the country did not have its own national television station until One News TV was established in June 2006. Coverage is limited to Honiara but there are plans to cover other islands.

What motivated you to launch One News TV? I found it annoying to see that the coverage of my country was in the hands of foreign TV crews. This feeling culminated during the Tension, when I worked as a fixer for foreign TV crews. There was no local angle to what was said about the Solomons. With the help of Solomons Telekom, I built a small team and launched One News TV during the Soccer World Cup, to ensure maximum audience.

How have the locals responded to the broadcasts? We broadcast two hours per day, and people wait for our broadcasts now, which is a no mean feat given that radio has always been the predominant source of information in this country.

What about media independence? Well, it's pretty good here, we have freedom and we do criticise the government. Our editorial integrity is guaranteed. The biggest difficulty was to get politicians willing to talk in front of a camera; it was so unusual for them at that time. But now they understand the impact of this medium, and they consider One News as a tool to educate and inform people.

patrons. The very raucous **Club Paradise** (Mendana Ave), right in the centre, is best avoided.

King Solomon Hotel has a karaoke night on Friday and a twice-weekly traditional dance show. Honiara Hotel puts a dance show on Friday night. Live bands play at Point Cruz Yacht Club (opposite) on Friday.

Shopping

Honiara is a good place to pick up souvenirs. Why not bring back a nicely carved *nguzu nguzu* (no, it's not a penis gourd) for jealous friends at home? There are a few prominent stores with better-than-average crafts on or around the main drag, including **Melanesian Handicraft** (☎ 22189; www.melanesianhandicraft.com.sb; Point Cruz) and **King Solomon's Handicraft** (Mendana Ave). The NPF Plaza shopping mall hosts a few good stores. It's also worth considering the gift shops at the Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel (p255) and King Solomon Hotel, as well as the shop at the National Museum (p251).

For shell jewellery, head to the central market (p251). For T-shirts, postcards, CDs of local music and other souvenirs, **DJ Graphics** (☎ 22011; Mendana Ave) is the best bet.

Getting There & Away

AIR
International flights land at Honiara's Henderson Airport, and all domestic routes

begin and end in Honiara. See p306 for details of international flights. Guadalcanal Travel Services (p249) is an agent for Solomon Airlines, Our Airline, Air Niugini and Air Pacific. **Solomon Airlines** (☎ 20031; www.solomonairlines.com.au; Mendana Ave; 🍴 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-11.30am Sat) main office is in the centre of town.

BOAT

Most shipping companies have offices near Honiara's main wharf. Getting around by freighter is a slow process.

The most reliable service is offered by the two passenger boats **MV Pelican Express** (☎ 28104; Komi Fera Bldg, Point Cruz; 🍴 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) and **MV Solomon Express** (☎ 28064; Komi Fera Bldg, Point Cruz; 🍴 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri). Both run once a week between Honiara and Malaita (Auki, \$5160), and between Honiara and Western Province (Mbunikalo, \$5240; Seghe, \$5300; Noro, \$5340; Gizo, \$5380). Tickets can be bought on board.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The taxi fare from the airport into town is \$550. It's an 11km ride.

CAR

The following companies rent cars (from \$550 per day):

Avis (☎ 24180; qcmotors@solomon.com.sb; Chinatown)
Zome (☎ 26902; fax 26903; off Skyline Dr)

MINIBUS

Honiara's minibuses are cheap, frequent (in daylight hours) and safe. The flat fare around town is \$3.

TAXI

There are taxis everywhere in Honiara. They don't have meters but charge per kilometre (\$5).

AROUND HONIARA

Traversing peaceful settlements where time moves at a crawl, you wouldn't think the area outside Honiara was the centre stage of battles between rival factions during the Tension. Fear not, it's now perfectly safe.

There are excellent places within a day's travelling of Honiara. Even if visiting battlefields doesn't usually float your boat, you can't help but be moved by the poignant sites around Honiara that played a crucial role during the Pacific war.

Exploring the north coast by public transport is feasible but it's not really convenient. Most sights are not signed and are not easy to find without a knowledgeable guide. We suggest taking an organised tour with one of the reputable tour operators in Honiara (see p253).

East of Honiara

This side of Honiara is more built-up than the western side, with much development along the coastal road. Once you get inland to the central foothills, you'll get a back-to-nature feel. Most of the WWII battlefields are in the vicinity of Henderson Airport.

The road is surfaced as far as the Mberande River, and gravel from the Mberande River to Aola (Map pp250–1), the prewar capital of Guadalcanal, 76km east of Honiara. The road ends here and this is as far as motor vehicles can travel. Only footpaths and logging tracks continue beyond.

The following sights are listed in a geographical order, from west to east except for the grouped WWII sights.

MATANIKO FALLS

If you need to cool off, these little cascades beckon. The hike starts in Lelei village with a steep ascent to a ridge (without shade),

followed by an easier stretch amid mildly undulating hills from where you can enjoy smashing views of Henderson and the Guadalcanal Plains. Then you'll tackle the final section: a gruelling descent on a slippery, muddy path to reach the floor of the little canyon where the Mataniko flows. You can float all the way back to Lelei if there's enough water. It can be a lot of fun. It's roughly a two-hour return trip to do this walk, and a guide is required. Your best bet is to go through a tour operator (see p253) in Honiara. Good shoes are essential.

MT AUSTEN ROAD

The road to Mt Austen begins in Kukum and climbs up to the historical sites where Japanese troops doggedly resisted the US advance.

The **Solomons Peace Memorial Park**, about 3.5km from the main coastal road, has a large, white memorial. It was built by Japanese war veterans in 1981 to commemorate all who died in the WWII Guadalcanal campaign. Enjoy the sweeping views over Honiara and towards Savo and the Nggelas.

Continuing south for about 3km, the thick bush opens to reveal an elevated clearing about 200m west of the road (it's now partly occupied by a school). This is the site of the **Gifu**, named after a Japanese district by its wartime Japanese defenders. Very fiercely defended, it was the Japanese forward command post, important in their efforts to capture Henderson. It finally fell to the USA in mid-January 1943 after its starving defenders were wiped out making a final banzai attack. You'll find a more detailed description of the battle on a plaque at the turn-off.

About 2km south of the Gifu is the summit of **Mt Austen** (410m). A dirt track leads to a former **Japanese Observation Point**. Americans in WWII dubbed this spot Grassy Knoll. There's a plaque that explains the strategic importance of Mt Austen during WWII.

BETIKAMA

About 6.5km from Honiara and 200m before Lungga Bridge, you'll reach the turn-off for the Betikama Seventh-Day Adventist Mission (SDA), 1.6km to the south. The sprawling property comprises a large handicraft shop, **Betikama Carvings Shop** (☎ 30223; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Sun–Fri), specialising in Western Province products and stylish modern copperware. Much of the carving is done by

school children who've come to Betikama (Map pp250–1) from SDA villages in the New Georgia Islands.

Just outside the craft shop there's a small **WWII museum** with an outdoor collection of salvaged material (mostly US aircraft), two small Japanese anti-tank guns and a well-preserved British Bren gun carrier. Inside, at the rear of the shop, is a collection of WWII photographs and memorabilia.

WWII SITES

Outside the **Henderson Airport** entrance, it's worth having a look at the small **Memorial Gardens** that honour US forces and their Pacific Islander allies. In front is a Japanese anti-aircraft gun. About 100m to the west of the buildings is the scaffolding-style WWII control tower, disused since the early 1950s.

A track running either side of the airport leads south to an area called **Bloody Ridge** (Map pp250–1), or Edson's Ridge, after Edson's Raiders. Commanded by Colonel Merritt Edson, they defended the ridge against the Japanese in 1942 in their determined but unsuccessful attempts to seize the airfield. There's a little US war memorial on the ridge. About 1km beyond Bloody Ridge, you'll come across a Japanese war memorial that honours the 2000 or more Japanese killed during these actions. There's a \$20 *kastom* fee.

Back to the coast, you'll find a marble monument surrounded by long grass at **Hell's Point** (Map pp250–1), about 50m east of Alligator's Creek. This is a poignant site for Japanese visitors. The Japanese Colonel Kiyono Ichiki and his 800 men 'died with courage' here on 20 August 1942 after a banzai attack from the eastern side of the creek against US machine guns and artillery mounted on its western bank. There's also a deserted black-sand beach where you can lay your towel. It's about 2km west of the airport.

On this long sandy **Red Beach** (Map pp250–1), a lonely, very rusted Japanese gun, placed here by US veterans, points forlornly out to sea. This is the only reminder of the US landings here in 1942.

A few metres before reaching the shore of **Tetere Beach** (Map pp250–1), a dirt track to the west leads to 30 or more abandoned **amtracks**. Many of these rusty relics are shielded by prickly thorns, which adds to the poignancy of the site. There's a \$25 *kastom* fee.

TENARU

About 4.5km past the airport, a road heads inland and follows the west bank of the Tenaru River. After 1.5km there's Marine Hospital No 8, the first wartime hospital in Guadalcanal. It's in the grounds of St Joseph's School, in **Tenaru Village** (off Map pp252–3). Many of the old WWII buildings and the concrete base remain.

The **Tenaru Falls** make for an ideal plan B if you don't feel fit enough to tackle the Mataniko Falls. It's a fairly easy four-hour walk (return) from a tiny settlement about 2km south of Tenaru Village. It's flat and shady all the way. The path follows the floor of the river valley and cuts across the river's many bends, crossing and recrossing a dozen times before reaching the falls. The water's usually not more than calf-high. The truth is, at 63m, these waterfalls are much, much higher and more spectacular than the diminutive Mataniko Falls. They thunder down into a deep natural pool where you can take a refreshing dip – an instant elixir after all that exertion.

A guide is required. Your best bet is to go through a tour operator (p253) in Honiara.

West of Honiara

Life becomes very sedate as one heads west through some of the north coast's delicious scenery. Urban life is left behind once the road traverses White River and crawls its way along the scenic coastline to Lambi Bay.

At the time of writing, the tarred section ended shortly after Ndoma, but the road should be surfaced up to Visale by the time you read this guide.

The area boasts a high historical significance. The seas between Guadalcanal's north-western coast and Savo island were the site of constant naval battles between August 1942 and February 1943. By the time the Japanese finally withdrew, so many ships had been sunk it became known as Iron Bottom Sound (Map pp250–1).

It's worth stopping in **Poha** to take a peek at a **Japanese memorial**, with three marble slabs. There's also a rusty tank behind the memorial.

Popular with locals and expats at weekends, **Mamara Beach** has black sand and is OK for swimming and bathing.

About 12km from Honiara, **Bonegi** (Map pp250–1) is music to the ears of divers. Two

large Japanese freighters sank just offshore on the night of 13 November 1942 and make for a magnificent playground for scuba divers, who call them Bonegi I and Bonegi II. As the upper works of Bonegi II break the surface, it can be snorkelled. For more information on diving these sites, see p253 and p60. There's also a black-sand beach that is suitable for a picnic or a snooze under the swaying palms. There's a *kastom* fee of \$25 per person.

Just past the Bonegi II site, at Tasivarongo Point, there's a bush track that heads inland and runs about 400m to a well-preserved **US Sherman tank** called *Jezebel* which was used for wartime target practice once the Guadalcanal campaign was over.

At **Ruanu** (also known as Bonegi III), about 4.5km west from Bonegi II, there's a 6500-tonne Japanese transport ship, believed to be the *Kyushu Maru*, that just lies offshore – another superb playground for divers.

VILU OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

About 25km from Honiara, a turn to the south from the coastal road brings you within 1km to the **Vilu Open-Air Museum** (\$25; ☎ dawn-dusk). There are US and Japanese memorials, four large Japanese field guns and the remains of several US aircraft, including a Wildcat fighter whose wings can still be folded as they were for naval carrier-borne operations.

NDOMA

Continue about 1km to Ndoma. The main reason to stop here is to dive the wreck of the US B17 Flying Fortress bomber which lies 100m off the dark-grey sand beach (see p60).

CAPE ESPÉRANCE

Named by the French explorer D'Entrecasteaux in 1793 after the *Espérance*, it was from here that the Japanese successfully evacuated most of their 13,000 starving men at the end of the Guadalcanal campaign in January and February 1943. They assembled on a hill just behind the cape to await evacuation, and were then given one hour to board the waiting ships.

About 2km to the west is the settlement of **Vila**, which is a good place to find a shared canoe ride to Savo (see p262). About 1km further west (and 40km from Honiara) is **Visale**, a timeless hamlet blessed with a majestic setting – it's wedged between the sea

and a soaring, velvet-green hill. Soak up the rural atmosphere and visit the large Roman Catholic mission.

VEURU

About 42km from Honiara, the Japanese I-class submarine *I-23* is 350m from the shore on a nearby reef. It's a renowned dive site (see p60).

EASTERN GUADALCANAL

Eastern Guadalcanal's trophy piece is **Marau Sound** (Map pp250–1). This lagoon at the eastern tip of the island features a bewitching blend of islands, fringing reefs, shoals and coral gardens.

The only settlement of consequence is **Manikaraku**, with a few government offices, stores and a clinic. The region's star attraction is the mellifluous-sounding **Tavanipupu island**.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Tavanipupu Island Resort** (☎ 22586 in Honiara; Tavanipupu island; s incl 3 meals A\$250) If you've ever dreamed of having your own island paradise, this idyllic retreat has all the key ingredients – exclusivity, seclusion, atmosphere. Digs are in six tastefully decorated, spacious bungalows with hardwood furnishings. They are scattered in a well-tended coconut grove that overlooks the beach, and beds are possibly the most comfortable in the Solomons. There's no electricity, but kerosene lamps are provided. The restaurant utilises the freshest seafood, including lobster, and does good desserts. Snorkelling is excellent (gear provided) and you can work your tan on sandy beaches. In case you tire of looking at the sea, there's a library and board games. Bookings are made through Guadalcanal Travel Services (p249) in Honiara. Rates include boat transfers and meals.

Tawaihi Island Retreat (☎ 24634, 94127 in Honiara; Tawaihi island; s incl 3 meals \$5460) Peter, an Australian citizen, and his wife Dee, a Solomon Islander, go the extra yard to please visitors. On Tawaihi island, facing the mainland, three cheerfully ramshackle bungalows are equipped with firm beds, functional bathrooms and a veranda overlooking the sea. The beach is average but you can snorkel, bushwalk or fish. Book through Peter's contact in Honiara, Solomon Airlines or SIVB. Boat transfers from Marau airfield are included.

Getting There & Away

Solomon Airlines has a twice-weekly flight to Marau (\$\$910 return). This very scenic flight takes you over the rugged mountainous interior.

It's a 20-minute boat ride from the airfield to Tavanipupu island, and a 10-minute boat ride to Tawaihi island.

THE WEATHERCOAST

And now Guadalcanal's forgotten corner. A void on the travel radar, it tugs at the adventurer within. Travelling here is like a treasure hunt: the jewels have to be earned. The southern shore's poor weather conditions have discouraged human settlement, and there's only a sprinkling of sparsely populated villages along the coast, including **Tangarere**, **Mbananakira** (equipped with an airstrip), **Komate**, **Kuma** and **Avu Avu**.

Fast-flowing creeks tumble down the steep sides of tall, jagged mountains, some in a continuous chain of small cascades. Ridges covered in thick, green bush fall abruptly to the shore. With very rustic (but acceptable) facilities and not another foreigner for miles, this is somewhere to wind down a few gears.

The biggest problem (or advantage, depending on your perspective) is accessibility. Roads? Regular boats or flights? Dream on! You'll have to blaze your own trail – literally – on foot or by boat, or combining both. Making a journey on foot around the Weathercoast is testing, awe-inspiring and full of surprises, but it's a journey that you'll never forget. It's a four- to six-day coastal trek from Lambi Bay to Kuma, with splendid scenery all the way. The three- to four-day walk from Kuma to Marau Sound follows the most stunning part of the island's southern coast. If you want to shorten your trip, you can arrange canoe rides between villages. There's no formal accommodation, only village stays. A guide is mandatory.

Another option is to fly to Marau Sound (see opposite) and start your trip from there. Solomon Airlines also has a weekly flight to Avu Avu, but don't count on it for it's frequently cancelled. It's also possible to do cross-island treks starting from the northern coast.

The best source of information on hiking in the Weathercoast is *Treks and Adventures in The Solomon Islands* (March 2007), a 67-page guide written by a group of Australian expats. They provide very detailed descriptions of the treks as well as invaluable tips and contacts. It can be downloaded from the SIVB website (www.visitsolomons.com.sb).

CENTRAL PROVINCE

Lucky Honiarans. They don't have to venture very far before the outside world starts to feel a long, long way away. A two-hour boat ride transports them (and you) to yet another world either in the Nggela (Florida) group or on Savo.

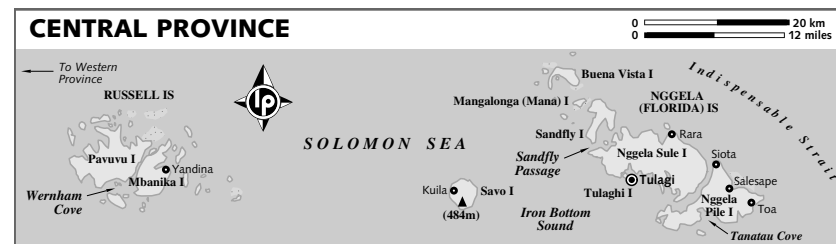
Central Province also comprises the Russell Islands. Only the Nggela group and Savo have tourist infrastructure.

NGGELA ISLANDS

Sipping a cold beverage at the Point Cruz Yacht Club (p256) or Raintree Café (p255) in Honiara you may well wonder what islands the rugged silhouettes looming majestically on the northern horizon are. They form the Nggela group, or Florida Islands, between Guadalcanal and Malaita.

The two main islands are Tulagi and Nggela Sule. They have fairly rugged interiors, convoluted coastlines, long white-sand beaches (they look great from the air on the Honiara–Auki flight) and mangrove swamps.

The Nggelas' main draws? Diving, snorkelling and an ultrachilled atmosphere.



Mangalonga (Mana)

Tranquillity reigns supreme on this small island near the northern end of the Nggela group. Come here for total isolation and decompress at **Maravagi Resort** (☎/fax 29065; r A\$50), which has an exceptional location – believe us, you’ll never forget your first glimpse of the gorgeous coral pinnacles that extend just off the dining room. Be sure to bring your snorkelling gear. The bungalows, while hardly posh, are clean and comfortable and feature private bathrooms, breezy terraces, mozzie nets and electricity. Avoid the six charmless adjoining rooms at the back. Food (meals per day A\$47) is tasty and copious. There’s not a great deal to do on the island apart from spending time in the water, but village visits and snorkelling trips to Sandfly Passage can be arranged. Boat transfers from Honiara cost a whopping A\$182 for two people (A\$276 for four). Credit cards are accepted.

Sandfly Passage

The **Sandfly Passage** is famous for one thing: the year-round presence of manta rays, which can easily be seen while snorkelling. It’s truly amazing. See p61.

Tulagi

In the middle of the Nggelas, on Tulaghi island, Tulagi was the Solomons’ former capital; it was also a Japanese base during WWII. This laid-back town, where time moves at a crawl, has a few useful services for travellers, including a post office, an ANZ ATM (but bring cash in case it gets wobbly), a Telekom office and a couple of places to stay. Boat building and the administration of provincial government are its main activities. There’s a **beach** on the western side of the island, but don’t expect powdery sand. It’s a leisurely two-hour walk following the 9km gravel track around the island.

There’s a fabulous **diving** off Tulagi, including world-class wrecks (see p61). Based at Vanita Motel, **Tulagi Dive** (☎ 32131, 32052; www.tulagidive.com.sb) is a highly professional dive shop run by Australian Neil Yates, who adheres to strict safety procedures for deep dives. Top marks for its excellent gear, too. Prices start at S\$350 for a reef dive (S\$450 for a deep dive). Gear hire is S\$400, and transfers from Honiara cost S\$500 return.

Most divers bunk down at **Vanita Motel** (☎ 32074; fax 32186; r without bathroom S\$180, r with

bathroom S\$230-250), next door to Tulagi Dive. It’s a no-frills place with bog-standard two-bed rooms, but it’s clean, quiet and affordable; perfect if you want to save your bucks for the lovely diving. Food (meals from S\$30) is average.

Women travellers who’d like to interact with local women can stay at the friendly **Mothers’ Union & Women Resource Centre** (☎ 32116, 32113; r without bathroom S\$150), a surprisingly well-kept house on the other side of the island. There are six fan-cooled rooms with laminate floors and a kitchen for guests’ use. Meals can be arranged on request. No alcohol is allowed.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats link Tulagi with Honiara (S\$60, about 1½ hours). In Honiara, they leave from the little beach near Point Cruz Yacht Club. The duration of the crossing is very much weather-dependent.

SAVO

If you’re a reality-TV show producer, rejoice: Savo has the ideal setting for your next shooting of *Survivor*, with a laid-back tempo, a couple of welcoming accommodation options and yes, wild, wild scenery. Though lying just 14km north of Guadalcanal, Savo is a world away from the capital, which will seem like a bustling metropolis once you’ve made it here. It’s an active volcano with a pair of dormant but potentially dangerous craters, one enclosing the other. Much of the island is fringed by coconut groves and a narrow strip of grey-sand beach.

The island has a number of **hot springs** and thermal areas containing boiling mud pools. The most easily accessible are Reoka hot springs, which can be reached after a one-hour walk following the course of the Kolika River upstream – a very scenic walk in a tropical setting. The final stretch is a bit tricky; you’ll have to clamber in parts. The water bubbling up is hot enough to poach an egg.

Make sure you see the **megapode field** which extends for around 400m along the beach, to the northwest of Savo. During the night, hundreds of female birds come to the field and dig down to about 90cm, where the temperature is ideal to incubate their eggs. Come very early as the birds fly off once the villagers come to harvest the eggs, which are considered a local delicacy.

Savo is one of the most dependable locations in the Solomons to spot pods of **dolphins**, which usually congregate off the west coast and can be seen frolicking around boats: a magical experience.

Sleeping & Eating

Book your lodging through Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau in Honiara (p249). The following places are in Kuila village on the west coast. They can arrange dolphin watching as well as guided walks to hot springs and to the megapode field (S\$30 to S\$80 per person).

Kuila Village Stay (s ind 3 meals S\$150) Four seriously rustic rooms in a house made from wooden planks, right in the village. Shared facilities.

Sunset Lodge (☎ 21213 in Honiara; s ind 3 meals S\$230) Owned by former Prime Minister and current MP Sir Allan Kemakeza, this is your best bet if you’re in search of a relaxing getaway without being too disconnected from the trappings of modern civilisation. It features 20 tidy rooms, some with private bathrooms, in a fairly drab concrete building on a hillside. Be sure to ask for a sea-facing room upstairs (downstairs rooms are pretty dark). Food is a definite plus, with copious meals using local ingredients, including (you guessed it), megapode eggs. Hmm, fluffy omelettes. It’s a 10-minute walk south of Kuila Village Stay.

Getting There & Away

Tour operators in Honiara (p253) organise full-day trips to Savo but we recommend staying at least two days to soak up the atmosphere. Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau in Honiara (p249) can also organise transfers (from S\$500 charter one-way).

Another option is to hook onto a shared boat ride from Vila (northwest of Guadalcanal) or Honiara (S\$80, about 1¼ hours). In Honiara, inquire at the little beach near the Point Cruz Yacht Club.

RUSSELL ISLANDS

Lucky you! If you read this section, this probably means you’re going to do a cruise on a live-aboard dive boat such as the **MV Bilikiki** (Map pp252-3) or the **MV Spirit of Solomons** (Map pp252-3; www.bilikiki.com), the only outfits that schedule regular trips around the Russell Islands. This is a famous dive destination, with exciting underwater topography and prolific marine life. For in-

formation on diving in the Russell Islands, see p61.

There are two main islands in the Russells group, Pavuvu and Mbanika, plus 70 smaller islets. **Yandina** is the only town of consequence. The archipelago has lots of hidden treasures: traditional cultures, lovely white-sand beaches, prolific reef growth, sapphire-blue waters and a pristine environment. Surprisingly, despite its phenomenal tourist potential and its proximity to Honiara, this gem of an archipelago hasn’t been developed – yet. Things might change in the near future, though; the Russell Islands is earmarked for development by local tourist authorities and investors.

Meanwhile, if a dive cruise is beyond your financial means, you can always fly from Honiara to Munda (or Gizo) over the Russells. On a clear day, the views you’ll get of the archipelago will be forever etched into your memory. Just be sure to get a window seat!

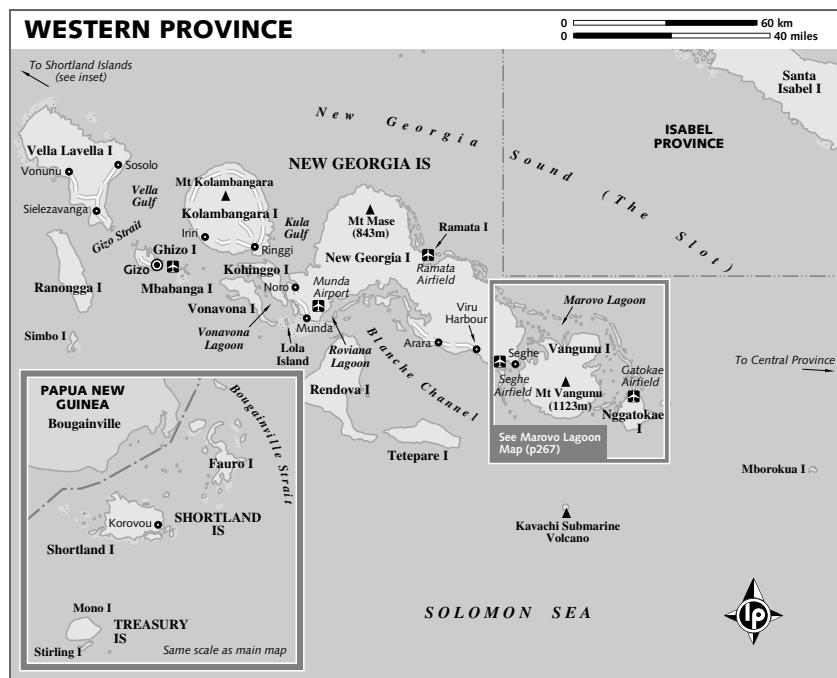
WESTERN PROVINCE

The Western Province hosts much of the Solomons’ tourist industry, and it’s no wonder. It has everything in spades. Rejoicing begins with the diving. With prolific fish life, a dramatic seascape and scores of pristine reefs (except for a few stretches that were destroyed by the 2007 earthquake), it’s heaven on earth for a diver. The Western Province also has much to offer above the surface: from WWII relics to skull shrines, and challenging hikes to village visits. Then there’s simply the visual appeal, with scenery reminiscent of an Indiana Jones or Tarzan flick: tall volcanic islands, croc-infested mangroves, expansive lagoons, white-sand bars, inky-blue seas, tropical islets and soaring mountains that pierce the sky. It’s not just a movie here, it’s real life.

Gizo, Munda and Marovo Lagoon are the three unmissable destinations in ‘The West’. Thanks to reliable inter-island boat and plane services, they can easily be combined and toured at a comfortable, leisurely pace.

WEST NEW GEORGIA

In the seduction stakes, the island of New Georgia and its western neighbours, including Vonavona, Kohinggo, Rendova and Tetepare, seem to have always played second fiddle to



the better-hyped Ghizo Island area or Marovo Lagoon. But we say: no longer! West New Georgia has its fair share of idyllic spots, as well as attractive accommodation options and a hatful of historical sights. And divers take note: the coral reefs are flabbergasting, with the added thrill of regular shark action.

Munda

New Georgia's largest settlement, the little town of Munda, on New Georgia itself, makes a convenient, if not glamorous, base for exploring the area's many attractions. It has the airport terminal, government offices, a police station and a well-equipped hospital. The **post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri) is in the centre, as is the **Bank South Pacific** (☎ 62177; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri), where you can change cash and travellers cheques. The ANZ branch, inside the post office, can do cash advances on your credit card (Visa and MasterCard), and an ATM ought to have been installed just outside the post office by the time you read this. Check your emails at **Telekom** (per hr \$548; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There's not much to see in Munda (and no real beaches), but it's worth taking a 20-minute walk from Agnes Lodge (opposite) to **Kia**, where you'll find the **US Dump** (\$520), which features a pile of WWII material rusting in the bush. On the main road above the US Dump, Bolton Lizu operates a small museum of WWII relics.

Munda is a destination of choice for demanding divers, who have the pick of lots of superlative dives (see p61). **Diving** is run by the very professional **Dive Munda** (☎ 62156; www.mundadive.com), based at Agnes Lodge. Two morning boat dives will set you back A\$150 with tank and weights, or A\$180 with all equipment. An open-water course costs about A\$630. At most dive sites, **snorkelling** (A\$45) is possible, offering good visibility and plenty to see.

TOURS

The easiest way to get a broad look at the delights around West New Georgia is to take a half- or one-day tour. Based at Agnes Lodge (opposite), **Go West Tours** (☎ 62180; ☎ 7am-5pm

Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) offers a wide range of excursions into Roviana and Vonavona Lagoons (including Skull Island), to Holupuru Falls, and various WWII sites (especially the relics at Enoghae, Baeroko Bay, Kohinggo and Vila Point). Prices start at \$450 for two people (half a day).

SLEEPING & EATING

Agnes Lodge (☎ 62133; www.agneslodge.com.sb; s A\$16-22, d A\$38-132, ste A\$155-190; 🏠) New Zealander and owner Don Croft ensures everything runs smoothly at this long-established venture right on the waterfront (no beach). You'll meet an interesting mix of people staying here, such as RAMSI personnel divers and Taiwanese businessmen. There is a variety of rooms for all budgets, from fan-cooled, two-bed rooms to self-contained units. The restaurant serves up excellent food, including a sensational Roviana lobster (\$\$110), and the convivial bar is the most happening place in town. It's a short walk from the airstrip. Credit cards are accepted.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The minuscule airport terminal has a **Solomon Airlines** (☎ 61152) counter. Solomon Airlines connects Munda with Honiara (from \$750, daily), Gizo (from \$395, daily) and Seghe (from \$395, daily). Flights go twice-weekly to Ramata (from \$395).

Go West Tours (☎ 62180), based at Agnes Lodge, has a shuttle service to Gizo (\$\$140, two hours, three weekly) stopping at Noro and Ringgi on Kolombangara en route. It departs Munda at 7.30am. The **MV Pelican Express** (☎ 28104) doesn't pull into Munda on its Sunday Honiara-Gizo route, but does stop at nearby Ugehe (from Honiara \$320) on Rendova and at Noro (from Honiara \$340), from where you can easily find transport to Munda. The **MV Solomon Express** (☎ 28064 in Honiara) does the same route on Friday (same fares).

Around New Georgia

Fancy a dip? Head to the 10m **Holupuru Falls**, just north of the bridge over the Mburape River, east of Munda. If you've got itchy feet, you can hike up **Mt Bau**, about 9km inland. You'll need a guide to show you the way (ask at Agnes Lodge, above).

Here's a surprise: **Noro**, 16km northwest of Munda up the Diamond Narrows, has

an 'industrial' feel to it, being home to the large government-owned Soltai fish cannery and it's the fastest-growing town in the Solomons. There's no reason to stop in Noro, unless you want to see the fish cannery. **Noro Lodge** (☎ 62138; Noro; d \$5130-200) caters mainly to fishery workers and has a licensed restaurant.

In **Baeroko Bay** you'll see the *Casi Maru*, a **sunken Japanese freighter** near the shore. Its rusty masts protrude from the water. It was bombed as its crane was loading cargo on to an adjacent barge. **Enoghae**, at the jutting northern lip of the bay, has several large **Japanese WWII anti-aircraft guns** still hidden in the scrub.

Roviana Lagoon

Extending 52km eastwards from Munda to Kalena Bay, **Roviana Lagoon** has many small idyllic islets formed from coral shoals. The best way to appreciate its visual splendour is to join a lagoon tour. Contact Go West Tours (opposite) in Munda or Zipolo Habu Resort (below) on Lola island. Due south of Roviana Lagoon, **Rendova** is home to about 3000 people. Climbing Rendova Peak (1063m) takes a two-day return trip.

Four kilometres east of Munda, **Nusa Roviana** is of strong historical significance. Notorious headhunter Ingava ruled from a coral-walled fortress built on the island until it was destroyed in 1892. His tribe had a dog, Tiola, as its totem. Remains of the **Stone Dog** and 500m of coral walls are still visible.

Vonavona Lagoon

Wow! This lovely lagoon extends for 28km between the tiny islets of Blackett Strait and the long, sandy island of Nusaghele. Within this area are many islets, ringed by coral-encrusted shallows interspersed with deeper seas.

You've probably seen the image of **Skull Island** on enough websites and leaflets. It's time to check out the real thing, on a tiny islet at the tip of Kundu Point on Vonavona Lagoon. A truly spooky sight, it's the final resting place for the skulls of countless vanquished warriors, as well as a shrine for the skulls of Rendovan chiefs. The skull house is a small, triangular-shaped casket which also contains the chiefs' clam-shell-ring valuables.

On **Lola island**, about 20 minutes by boat from Munda, **Zipolo Habu Resort** (☎ 62178; www.zipolohabu.com.sb; s without bathroom A\$70, d without bath-

room A\$100-140, deluxe A\$180) satiates the white-sand beach, coconut-palm, azure-lagoon fantasy and corners the market in castaway chic, with six spacious, fan-cooled bungalows. The recently finished deluxe unit boasts private bathrooms and unobstructed views over the lagoon. The restaurant (meals per day A\$60) gets rave reviews, and the beer is always cold. This place offers village tours, lagoon excursions, hiking, sportfishing and surf charters. Divers can be picked up at the resort by Dive Munda. Credit cards are accepted.

On **Kohinggo island**, there is a wrecked US Sherman tank at Tahitu, on the northern shore. It was lost in action in September 1943 when US marines overran a Japanese strongpoint.

Tetepare Island

Tetepare is a dream come true for ecotourists. No logging companies. No human pressures on the environment. No electricity. Just leatherback and green turtles, dugongs, hornbills, pygmy parrots and other rare wildlife. This large rainforest island is one of the Solomons' conservation jewels.

The best thing is that travellers can enjoy this slice of untouched paradise. The **Tetepare Descendants' Association** (☎ 62163 in Munda; www.tetepare.org; s ind 3 meals \$5250), which manages the island, welcomes visitors in its simple yet genuinely eco-friendly three-room leafhouse (no air-con, shared facilities). This place plans to build another two bungalows. A host of activities are available (from \$850). Why not assist rangers in tagging marine turtles, measuring coconut crabs or counting birds? Or enjoy a rainforest walk with a knowledgeable guide? Or snorkel around pristine reefs in a protected area? Or learn about customary plant usages? Or simply chill out on a secluded beach? Food is delicious too. No alcohol is available, but it's BYO. One downside: one-way transfers cost a steep \$1000 per boatload from Munda or Seghe and last two hours.

MAROVO LAGOON

Here's the province's trophy piece. The geography says it all: on New Georgia's eastern side, Marovo Lagoon is the world's finest double barrier-enclosed lagoon, bordered by the mysterious, volcanic New Georgia and Vangunu Islands on one side and a double line of long barrier islands on the other. It's rife with dramatic scenery, including hundreds

of beautiful small islands, most of which are covered by coconut palms and rainforest and surrounded by coral.

The main gateway to Marovo Lagoon, Seghe, is strung along the Njai Passage, which links Noro Lagoon to Marovo Lagoon. Most of the islands' villages are dotted along the coast.

Despite its sexy proportions, Marovo is far from being the gin-stained Edenic paradise that's often touted on posters or websites. A few notable things may leave you disillusioned. First, the island shorelines are heavily wooded – it's more mangrove-fringed coastal swamps than sweeping stretches of sand. Then there are the strains on the environment. Years of intense logging on New Georgia Island and Vangunu have left their scars literally. The side effects? Run-off both discolours the lagoon water after rains, which changes from aqua blue to brownish, and chokes up the reefs. The contentious logging issue discouraged the proponents of listing Marovo Lagoon as a World Heritage site.

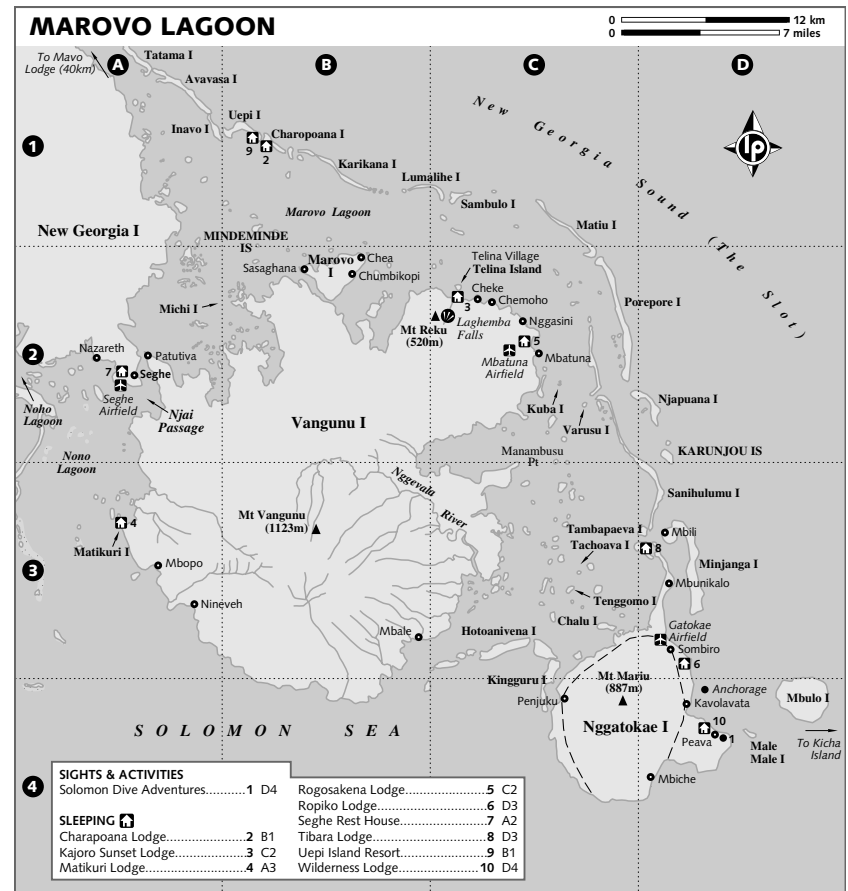
Information

There are no phones. Bookings for the resorts and lodges can be made through SIVB in Honiara (p249), through Solomon Airlines (p257) or the main tour operators in Honiara (p253). The most upmarket resorts have satellite phones and email access. There's no bank; bring a stash of cash. Wilderness Lodge and Uepi Island Resort accept credit cards.

Sights & Activities

Here is where you can visit villages where nothing happens in a hurry, be in awe of *tambu* (sacred) sites, clear your conscience at a Sunday church service, picnic on a deserted island, take a lagoon tour or a fishing trip, play sardines on the strand, hear the myths and legends of the islanders, meet master carvers or read a book in a hammock – it's a tough life at Marovo, isn't it? For the actively inclined, there are a few fantastic options too. Tours and activities can be arranged through the resorts.

A word about beaches: Marovo is not a beach holiday destination. Truly idyllic stretches of sand are as scarce as needles in a haystack. Expect dense, green foliage kissing the ocean instead. Should you come



across a gem of a beach, shoot us an email. Take note that Marovo Lagoon is strongly Seventh Day Adventist, so you can't do much on Saturday.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Oh to have a few more hours in the day to squeeze in more dives! Marovo Lagoon provides superb dives for both experts and novices. Channels, caves, drop-offs, coral gardens, bommies and clouds of technicolour fish (and yes, sharks are part of the package) – what more could a diver hope for? See the diving chapter (p62) for more information.

Marovo Lagoon has two state-of-the-art dive centres. One is based at Uepi Point (North Marovo Lagoon), the other is located

in Peava (South Marovo Lagoon). It pays off to dive with each dive shop to maximise your diving experience during your stay in Marovo:

Solomon Dive Adventures (satellite ☎ 8816 315 63887; www.solomondiveadventures.com; Peava) Opened in 2007, this newish operation run by ebullient Lisa Roquette is conveniently based in Peava, a 10-minute walk from Wilderness Lodge (p269). She runs dive trips to Mbulo, Kicha and Male Male Islands. Fun dives cost from US\$40 to US\$55, and gear rental is an extra US\$55 per day.

Uepi Island Resort (www.uepi.com; Uepi island) One of the best dive centres in the Solomons. Grant and Jill offer stunning dives (from A\$60) throughout North Marovo Lagoon. Caters mainly to the resort's guests but non-guests are welcome, space permitting.

The live-aboard dive vessels *MV Bilikiki* (see p263) and the *MV Spirit of Solomons* usually include the South Marovo Lagoon into their nine- and 12-day cruises.

With hundreds of lovely sites scattered throughout the lagoon, **snorkelling** is equally impressive. Lodges can organise lagoon tours and snorkelling trips, which cost anything from \$20 to \$100 per person depending on distance and duration. Bring your own gear.

KAYAKING

Diving is king in Marovo, but kayaking can be very rewarding too. Uepi Island Resort (opposite) can arrange multiday kayaking trips, overnighing in lodges along the way – an excellent way to discover the lagoon at a leisurely pace.

SPORTFISHING

Mavo Lodge (right) specialises in fishing trips. **Go Tours Travel** (☎ 07-5527 9855 in Australia; www.go-tours.com.au), based in Queensland, Australia, offers fishing packages to Mavo Lodge.

WALKING

If you've got itchy feet, it's easy to indulge in a bushwalking bonanza. There are various half-, one- or two-day walks through gardens, rainforest and friendly villages. Most lodges will be happy to provide a guide and help you organise your walk. Suggested walks include the two-day trek to Mt Mariu (887m) on Nggatokae, the two-hour walk to the hill that lords over Chea Village on Marovo island and the half-day walk to Mt Reku (520m) on Vangunu. Don't forget your camera – the views over the lagoon are heavenly.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a fairly good network of eco-lodges in the lagoon. These low-key establishments ('lodge' is a loose term) are built in the traditional style using local materials and are great places to experience an authentic cultural experience. There are few frills (read: foam mattresses, a rudimentary ablution block at the back of the property, cold showers) but a few tourist comforts are considered (such as a sit-down toilet if you're lucky and mozzie nets). Kerosene lamps are used for lighting. Meals are simple but wholesome.

If you're after solid amenities, opt for Uepi Island Resort (opposite) or Wilderness Lodge (opposite).

All places have a *seafront* location, but few have a *beachfront* location – we can't stress it enough.

MATIKURI

Matikuri Lodge (s/d \$560/120, per bungalow \$5125) This charming little place at the western arc of Marovo Lagoon grows on you quickly, with three island-style, well-proportioned bungalows that face the sea. Relaxing on your private terrace with a fruit juice in hand, you begin to think you must be a millionaire to be able to afford such a privileged existence. For budgeteers, there are four adjoining rooms in the main house, with walls that don't quite make it to the ceiling (not so hot for honeymooners). The dining area (meals per day \$100) has a large deck on stilts. Benjamin and his wife Jilly can arrange guided walks and village visits on Vangunu as well as trips to Bareho, a Seventh-Day Adventist carving centre (from \$50), lagoon tours (\$200 plus fuel) and visits to Seghe's market on Tuesday. There are canoes for hire (from \$50). Boat transfers to Seghe airstrip (20 minutes) are \$50 plus fuel. Bookings can be made through Solomon Airlines (p257), or you could try *pipolfastaem.gov.sb*, FAO: 'Benjamin Kaniotoku'.

SEGHE

Seghe Rest House (s/d \$575/150) There's absolutely no reason to stay here unless you get stranded in Seghe. Rooms are ultrabasic and the attached 'bar' is the focal point for a boozy crowd, seemingly any time of the day. It's just across the airstrip.

RAMATA

Mavo Lodge (s incl 3 meals \$5300) Located at North Marovo Lagoon, beside the Ramata airstrip, this well-regarded lodge specialises in fishing trips. Snorkelling excursions and cultural tours are also available. The three-bedroom house looks onto the open ocean.

UEPI & CHARAPOANA

Charapoana Lodge (s incl 3 meals \$5290) Just across the passage from Uepi island, this rustic place exudes a Melanesian family atmosphere. Amiable owner Katrey and his family accommodate guests in a large, well-built bungalow

with four rooms overlooking a narrow strip of beach (aim for the room that's the closest to the lapping waves). Food is copious and surprisingly varied. The 'mangrove toilet', if not exactly eco-friendly, is something to be used to be believed (watch your bum, darling...). Various activities are on offer (from \$150), including village visits, bushwalks, snorkelling and picnic trips. You can dive at Uepi Island Resort (below) if it's not full – it's a two-minute boat ride away. Return boat transfers to Seghe airstrip cost \$500.

our pick Uepi Island Resort (www.uepi.com) This extremely well-run resort is very popular with Australian divers, who stay here to get thrilled by the sensational dive sites right on their doorstep. Snorkellers will also get a buzz on the house reef that spreads from the end of the short jetty where the island falls away 30m to a deep tidal channel. The best thing is that it also appeals to honeymooners and families. The key to its success: a laid-back, uncomplicated yet well-organised approach. A series of spacious bungalows is scattered amid lovely bush gardens, spider orchids and coconut palms. They are more functional than luxurious (no air-con, ordinary furnishings). Meals are served in a breezy dining room with superb views. Perks include a bar, a library-cum-book-swap facility, and a DVD player in the common area. The resort has a full dive shop and there's a good activity programme, with traditional dance, overnight kayaking trips, snorkelling excursions and village tours. Compared with other places in Marovo, it feels much more Westernised, despite the fact that staff are local (apart from the Australian owners).

VANGUNU

Avoid Kuba Island Resort (on Kuba Island, an islet just off Vangunu), which is a meeting point for loggers in search of 'entertainment' – you get the picture.

Kajoro Sunset Lodge (s incl 3 meals \$5200) John Wein, the ebullient (some might opt for 'intense') owner, is a kind of local Che Guevara. He'll be more than happy to explain everything you ever wanted to know about the wrongdoings of local logging companies. Other favourite, but less contentious, topics include tribal history and local legends. He's also a renowned master carver and has a little 'showroom' where beautiful carvings are displayed. Digs are in a rustic bungalow with two

simple rooms facing the lagoon (no beach). Various tours and village visits can be organised, including a trek up to Mt Reku (520m).

Rogosakena Lodge (s incl 3 meals \$5250) Run by Ralph and his wife, who keep the place shipshape, this place eases you right into the peaceful lifestyle of Vangunu. The veranda overlooking the lagoon was rated as 'the best reading balcony in Marovo' by expat guests – we agree. Take a snooze in a hammock and throw your cares to the wind. The two rooms are simply designed, but welcoming. Ask for the room that faces the sea. The provided meals are average. There's no beach, but snorkelling trips to nearby islands can easily be arranged. If you happen to be there on a Thursday, the owners will take you by boat to Mbatuna market.

NGGATOKAE

Tibara Lodge (s incl 3 meals \$5180) This venue run by chief Luton is a hit-and-miss affair. Some travellers rave about the location and the snorkelling potential of the lagoon that girths the island's northern tip, but we found the two bungalows a bit derelict when we stopped by; probably due to a lack of recent traffic, which is an acceptable excuse. The wreck of a USAAF B24D bomber lies crumpled in the nearby bush.

Ropiko Lodge (ronspikoo@yahoo.com; s incl 3 meals \$5300) The two bungalows here are a bit worn out, so you'll get to stay in the main house overlooking the lagoon, and there is a coconut grove as the backdrop. A wrecked Japanese Zero fighter lies at the back of the property. Good snorkelling on the nearby reef.

our pick Wilderness Lodge (☎ satellite in the Solomon Islands +61 145 125 948; www.thewildernesslodge.org; s incl 3 meals A\$120) A more friendly place you'll be hard-pressed to find. Corey is Australian, his wife Waelinah is from Nggatokae, and you'll get the best of both worlds. The two rooms are immaculately maintained, the shared bathrooms are in top nick, the food is healthy, there's 24-hour solar-generated electricity, the house reef is sensational, there are lovely swimming and snorkelling spots just offshore and the atmosphere is delightfully chilled out. We can't think of a better recipe for paradise. Another strong point is the host of sea- and land-related excursions available, including diving (there's a full-service dive centre nearby), crocodile-spotting, 'coconut crabbing', river

tours, village visits and trekking Mt Mariu. One grumble: with only two bungalows, it quickly fills up (but two more units are planned). Terrific value. See you there...

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are two main gateways to Marovo: Seghe (for North Marovo Lagoon) and Nggatokae (for South Marovo Lagoon). A third gateway is Ramata (for Mavo Lodge, p268, and North Marovo Lagoon in case of bad weather at Seghe). Flights connect Seghe to Honiara (from \$566), Munda (from \$495) and Gizo (from \$465) six days a week. Take note that Solomon Airlines is fickle and flirtatious with Seghe's little airstrip, and flights are regularly rerouted through Ramata, especially in bad weather. Nggatokae is serviced from Honiara (from \$5617, three weekly) and Seghe (or Munda, three weekly).

BOAT

Both **MV Pelican Express** (☎ 28104) and **MV Solomon Express** (☎ 28064 in Honiara) stop at Mbunikalo (\$240, 20 minutes from Nggatokae), Nggasini (in central Marovo; \$280) and Seghe (\$300) on their way to Gizo. The **MV Pelikan Express** plies this route on Sunday (return on Monday) while the **MV Solomon Express** runs on Friday (return on Sunday).

GHIZO ISLAND

Mother Nature was profoundly unkind to Ghizo. The island was close enough to the epicentre of an underwater earthquake to have suffered a severe punch from the April 2007 tsunami. The southwest coast was worst hit, leaving Gilbertese villagers between Titiana and Saeraghi homeless. Unfortunately this sad event brought negative media attention to the area, affecting the local businesses including those geared towards tourism. However, Ghizo Island is on the mend. Enough aid workers have arrived to kick-start an economy catering to NGOs, and travellers, especially divers, are trickling in. Sure, rebuilding of homes has been slow but, all things considered, the destruction was fairly limited – nothing to be compared to the 2004 disaster in Asia.

Little Ghizo Island is a dwarf next to its neighbours, but it has the Solomons' second-biggest 'city', Gizo (pronounced the same, spelt differently), the most developed area outside the capital.

Gizo

Gizo is the hub around which the Western Province revolves. The 2007 tsunami did give Gizo a good licking, but the town fared better than the rest of the island and benefited from the presence of international aid organisations; its status of provincial capital helped.

Sprawled along the waterfront with its steep hills behind, Gizo is not bereft of appeal, although the architecture is charmless. There is a smattering of buildings gently rusting away under the tropical sun. Most places of importance are on the main street. Apart from the bustling market on the waterfront, there are no specific sights. The main reason to come here is (you guessed it) diving.

INFORMATION

Antech Computer Ltd (Middenway Rd; per hr \$550; ☎ 8.30am–7pm Mon–Thu, to 5pm Fri, 2–6pm Sun) Quick connections.

ANZ Bank (☎ 60262; Middenway Rd; ☎ 9am–3pm Mon–Fri) Has an ATM (Visa & MasterCard).

Bank South Pacific (Middenway Rd; ☎ 8.30am–3pm Mon–Fri) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Hospital (☎ 60224; Middenway Rd)

Immigration Office (☎ 8am–noon & 1–4.30pm Mon–Fri) Behind ANZ Bank. Can issue a visitor's permit if you proceed from Bougainville (PNG) and the Shortland Islands.

Police (☎ 60966)

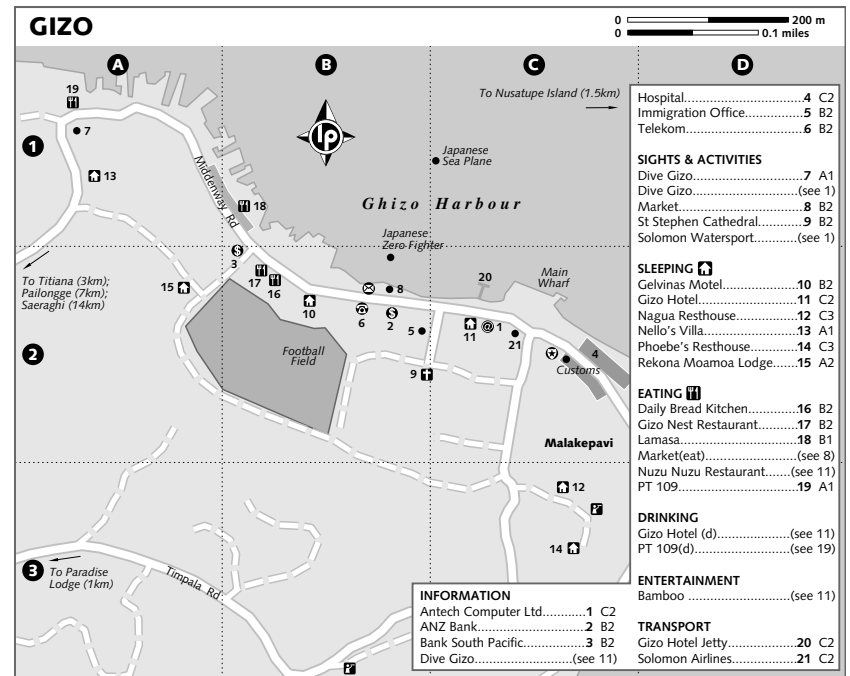
Telekom (Middenway Rd; per hr \$548; ☎ 8.30am–4pm) Sells phonecards. Internet access is available too (one computer only).

SIGHTS

Apart from a few churches and a handful of mildly interesting memorials, there's little to see in Gizo. Go to the **market** (☎ Mon–Sat) and soak up the atmosphere. Villagers from neighbouring islands (and even from the Shortland Islands) arrive each morning by boat to occupy their little stands under the shade of tall trees. The only place that could qualify as a sight is **World Fish Centre** (☎ 60022; Nusatupe island; admission \$520; ☎ by reservation), on Nusatupe island (Gizo's airstrip). This clam farm and research centre run by a New Zealand couple accepts visitors. There's a small visitor centre with information on research programmes. It's a good spot if you want to snorkel over giant clams of up to 1m long in the lagoon.

ACTIVITIES

Gizo has made a name for itself in **diving**, diving, diving (and maybe some snorkelling);



it's a first-rate dive destination in the Pacific. Sure, it lost some of its appeal thanks to the 2007 tsunami and its impact on several high-profile sites, but you won't leave disappointed after visiting here. At the time of writing, there was only one operational dive centre, **Dive Gizo** (☎ 60253; www.divegizo.com; Middenway Rd), at the western end of town (there's also a sales office beside the Gizo Hotel, p272). A solid professional outfit, it's been run by Danny and Kerrie Kennedy since 1985. They also operate Dive Munda in Munda (p264). They'll meet you at the airport or wharf and drive you to your digs. You'll pay A\$140 for a two-tank dive, including picnic (add an extra A\$20 for gear rental). An open-water certification is A\$630. We love their two-tank dive organisation; you spend your surface interval picnicking on a secluded island or having lunch at Fatboys (p272), a winning formula.

Most dives are less than a 20-minute boat ride from Gizo and include wrecks and reef dives. See p63 for more information on diving.

Another dive shop, **Solomon Watersport** (☎ 60646; Middenway Rd), had temporarily closed down when we visited. It normally operates from the Gizo Hotel (p272). It's run by Hans Mergozzi, who also owns Sanbis Resort (p272). Travellers should know about the bitter feud (but not take sides) between the two outfits.

There's no shortage of **snorkelling** spots on the lagoon, including **Kennedy Island**, just off Fatboys. Take the shuttle to Fatboys (\$50), hire snorkelling gear (\$50) at the resort and snorkel to your heart's content.

What's quite new to the Solomons is **surfing**, and we're not complaining. Here, you can be guaranteed almost virgin waves. There's excellent point surfing off Pailongge, on Ghizo's southern coast. The October-to-April swell rises to 2m or more. There's a great left-hander nearer Titiana village, with a long paddle out to the reef's edge, and a right at Pailongge. Dive Gizo (left) employs a local surfer who's finding new breaks all the time. Bring your own boards.

If island life is making you a little claustrophobic, you can stretch your legs on a walk

around Ghizo Island. Walks of various durations (anything from one to 10 hours) can be tackled. Ask at Dive Gizo (p271) for more details. If you're a **hiking** fiend, we'd unhesitatingly recommend the climb up Kolombangara (see p274).

SLEEPING In Gizo

Phoebe's Resthouse (☎ 60161; s \$560) On a hill overlooking the town, this is the best place in town to meet crimson-faced British medical students who work at the hospital as part of their studies. Phoebe's is one of their favourite ports of call, and they seem happy with the basic (read spartan) two-bed rooms with shared bathrooms. This place gets bonus points for its breezy veranda affording effortlessly picture-perfect views over the ocean and the neighbouring islands.

Paradise Lodge (☎ 60024; s without bathroom \$577, d \$5198-275) Call a psychotherapist! This welcoming abode obviously suffers from excessive self-esteem, but offers commanding views over the sea (with Simbo and Rendova islands seen on the horizon). It's perched on a hill in a quiet area, a 30-minute walk from downtown Gizo (\$820 by taxi). Bathrooms are in good shape. The budget rooms downstairs are cramped and a bit sombre; it's worth shelling out for the more expensive rooms upstairs, as they have private facilities and sea views. You won't have to venture outside after dark; homemade meals can be provided (\$40 to \$55). Credit cards are accepted.

Nello's Villa (☎ 60446; r without bathroom \$5165-200) 'Villa' is a pompous description for a simple house with ordinary rooms, but it's a safe bet for thrifty divers (it's almost next door to Dive Gizo, p271). Cheapest rooms have shared bathrooms. The wood-panelled dining room upstairs wouldn't be out of place in Scandinavia.

Rekona Moama Lodge (☎ 60368; r \$5180-350) Another budget option, with OK rooms. It was quite crowded when we visited; the three houses were occupied by the prison guards and their families, whose houses were washed away by the tsunami. It should be back to normal when you read this. The dearer rooms have private bathrooms.

Nagua Resthouse (☎ 60012; s without bathroom \$5110, r \$5330-440) A short (uphill) walk from town, this family-run guesthouse features plain, functional but well-scrubbed rooms

(the more expensive ones have good views). If you get up at night for a glass of water in the communal kitchen you might well come across, er, a few critters of varying sizes but hey, this is the tropics. Overall the whole place is decently maintained, linen is fresh and the staff is friendly. Prayers are held every Wednesday evening in the kitchen; join the ceremony. Amen.

Gelvinas Motel (☎ 60276; Middenway Rd; s/d \$5300/350; 📶) An honest-to-goodness outfit located right in the centre. It features spacious and quite comfortable rooms with access to a small balcony overlooking the main drag. Noisy? Yes, in the morning.

Gizo Hotel (☎ 60199; www.gizohotel.com; Middenway Rd; r \$5550-715; 📶 📺 📺) A classic, well-managed establishment, this is a perennial favourite for its central location, salubrious yet unflashy rooms and professional service. Popular with expats, aid workers and businesspeople, it can't quite shake that just-a-motel feeling, despite a swimming pool at the rear. Its trump card is its wide array of facilities (wi-fi, air-con, gift shop, bar and restaurant). Credit cards are accepted.

Mbabanga Island

A mere 10-minute boat ride south of Gizo, this island has a brochure-esque appeal, with an expansive lagoon and a string of white-sand beaches.

Sanbis Resort (☎ 66313; relax@sanbisresort.com; 📺) A place of easy bliss. The lagoon is turquoise, the six bungalows are creatively designed with a mix of blond-wood and dark-wood materials, the views of the ocean and Kolombangara will take your breath away, the beach is attractive, the meals are tasty and the whole place is genuinely eco-friendly. So, what's wrong with this delightful retreat? Nothing, but the atmosphere is a bit staid and the owner, Hans Mergozzi, had plans to sell the property at the time of research, so things might change anytime soon. Check while you're there. Wi-fi.

our pick Fatboys (☎ 60095, 66346 in Gizo; www.fatboysgizo.com; r \$5750-850) Look at the homepage on the website; there's no photoshopping tricks – it's truly like this. This oh-so-mellow resort is all about epicurean indulgences: relax in your tastefully designed bungalow (they blend tropical hardwoods, traditional leaf and high-quality furniture), enjoy a sundowner on your private terrace, snorkel over sensational reefs

just offshore, snooze in a hammock, treat yourself to a healthy meal at the wonderfully laid-back over-the-water restaurant or kayak over translucent waters. Proprietor Grant Griffiths is a good guy who ensures that there's a positive ambience. Beach-wise, it's a bit less overwhelming – you'll have to do with a narrow strip of sand. One thing is sure: after several days here, your mission to relax accomplished, you'll find it difficult to pack up and leave.

EATING

Daily Bread Kitchen (Middenway Rd; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sun) Parisian baguettes it won't deliver, but the bread is fresh.

Gizo Nest Restaurant (Middenway Rd; mains \$520-65; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Come here for a bellyful of chicken or beef dishes with a Chinese bent, or tuck into acceptable sandwiches that won't blow your budget. With its frilly curtains and naive murals, the décor is laughably naff.

Lamasa (Middenway Rd; mains \$25-35; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri) Blink and you'll miss it. That's how discreet Lamasa is, with its unobtrusive façade and inoffensive décor. It's nothing more than a few tables but it's hygienically kept and the fish 'n' chips are brilliant value. No alcohol. Too bad it's closed on weekends.

PT 109 (Middenway Rd; mains \$540-90; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri) Named after John F Kennedy's WWII patrol boat that sank off Gizo, and situated in a great waterfront location, this place has relaxed vibes. A blackboard displays a few simple dishes, such as local fish or chicken. Sometimes it's open for dinner.

Fatboys (☎ 66346 Gizo, 60095 Mbabanga island; mains \$545-120; ☎ lunch & dinner) What a sensational setting! The dining room is on a pier that hovers over the turquoise waters of Vonavona Lagoon. Feast on anything from fish 'n' chips to crayfish or chicken salad tortilla, that's if you can take your gaze off the extraordinary view. There are billiard tables, DVD screens and a reading library. After your meal, rent snorkelling gear (\$50) and swim over sandy shallows that extend onto Kennedy Island. Fatboys is only accessible by boat from Gizo; take the daily shuttle at 11am (\$50 one-way). It's best to reserve, but not mandatory.

Nuzu Nuzu Restaurant (☎ 60199; Gizo Hotel, Middenway Rd; mains \$590-135; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is the most atmospheric spot to dine. The breezy open-air dining room is suit-

ably exotic, with wood-carved posts, wooden tables and wicker seating. Food-wise it's a bit more conservative, with well-executed fish and meat dishes as well as daily specials. The Friday evening barbecue is popular.

Hmm, sweet bananas... For organic fruits and vegetables, as well as fresh fish, nothing can beat the **market** (☎ Mon-Sat) on the waterfront.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

The best drinking dens include the bar at the Gizo Hotel (opposite) and PT 109 (left). During the day, nothing can beat a frothy tropical cocktail at Fatboys.

If you want to relive *Saturday Night Fever* island-style, try **Bamboo** (Middenway Rd; ☎ Fri & Sat), which is part of the Gizo Hotel (opposite), which also has a karaoke evening on Friday, or PT 109 (left), which can get wild on weekends (those naughty medical students...).

SHOPPING

Dive Gizo (p271) and Gizo Hotel (opposite) have a rather wide selection of stone- and woodcarvings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The **Solomon Airlines** (☎ 60173; Middenway Rd; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) office is near the police station. The airfield is on Nusatupe island (canoe transfer \$820). Daily flights link Gizo to Honiara (from \$8840), via Munda (from \$8395) or Seghe (from \$8465) or both. From Gizo you can also fly to the Shortland Islands and Choiseul.

Boat

The **MV Pelican Express** (☎ 28104 in Honiara) and **MV Solomon Express** (☎ 28064 in Honiara) are an excellent alternative to flying. The 12-hour Honiara-Gizo trip costs \$8380 (\$8420, 1st-class upstairs seating). *MV Pelican Express* leaves Honiara's main wharf at 7am on Sunday, returning on Monday; *MV Solomon Express* leaves Honiara on Friday and returns on Sunday.

Go West Tours (☎ 62180; Agnes Lodge, Munda p265) runs a shuttle boat connecting Gizo to Munda via Noro (\$8140, two hours, three weekly).

Around Gizo

The main road out of Gizo skirts the shore to **Saeraghi** at the island's northwestern end. You'll cross **Titiana** and **Pailongge**, which were

HIKING IN KOLOMBANGARA

Growing weary of water activities? Consider climbing up to the crater's rim on Kolombangara (Map p264). It's an exhilarating two-day/one-night hike. You depart from Iriri village, on the western side of the island, where you arrange guides and porters (avoid Saturday, as it's a Seventh-Day Adventist village) and pay *kastom* fees. The first section follows a logging road. You then continue walking up through the thickly wooded forest to a clearing called Professor's Camp, where you sleep overnight. The next morning, be ready for an early start to reach the top before the clouds set in. The scenery is surreal, trees are covered in moss; as one hiker told us, it feels like you're entering the set of *Lord of the Rings*. From the summit, views over Vonavona Lagoon and the crater are mesmerising. Take note that it's a strenuous walk, so you'll need to be fit. Dive Gizo (p271) can arrange logistics (about \$51000 per person, including transfers from Gizo).

severely hit by the 2007 tsunami. Saeraghi has lovely beaches.

ISLANDS AROUND GHIZO

A perfect cone-shaped volcano that rises to 1770m, **Kolombangara** looms majestically on the horizon, due east of Ghizo Island. It's a two-day hike to the top and back (see above). It rises from a 1km-wide coastal plain through flat-topped ridges and increasingly steep escarpments to the rugged crater rim of Mt Veve. Logging has been a major activity, with **Ringi** being the main settlement, on the south coast. WWII Japanese relics are scattered around the island. **Vila Point** was an important WWII Japanese base and you can still see guns in the bush.

At **Sepo island**, a lovely retreat just 15 minutes from Gizo, in a beautiful traditional house (entirely rebuilt after the 2007 tsunami), is **Oravae Cottage** (☎ 66621, 66619; naomibaea@gmail.com; cottage incl 3 meals \$51000).

Definitely worth a visit is **Simbo island** for its megapode hatcheries and its volcano that can easily be climbed. There's also a sulphur-covered crater lake.

Mountainous **Vella Lavella** is dominated by the dormant volcano Mt Tambisala and it is noted for its bird life.

Unfortunately the reefs off **Ranongga**, which were once ranked among the most spectacular in the province, were uplifted during the tsunami in 2007 and lost much of their appeal.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The islands around Ghizo have no regular boat services. Your best bet is to find a shared ride at Gizo market. Expect to pay from \$40 to \$60. Dive Gizo (p271) can

arrange excursions to Simbo, Ranongga and Kolombangara islands.

MALAITA PROVINCE

Welcome to a secretive and fascinating world. Despite its huge potential, tourism is yet to take off in this quiet province that sees only a small stream of adventure travellers. In the main destinations (Auki, Malu'u and Langa Langa Lagoon) there's enough infrastructure to travel safely on your own. Elsewhere it's virtually uncharted territory.

The population is all Melanesian except for approximately 2000 Polynesians who live on the faraway atolls of Ontong Java and Sikaiana.

MALAITA ISLAND

Easily reached from Guadalcanal, Malaita is a hauntingly beautiful island with narrow coastal plains, secluded bays and a rugged highland interior that rises to 1303m at Mt Kolovrat. As well as a host of natural features, Malaita has an equally fascinating ethnic heritage. It's both an adventure island and a stronghold of ancient Melanesian traditions and rich cultures. Malaitans are said to cling more tenaciously to their customs than other Solomon Islanders, and their varied cultural life has fascinated many anthropologists; no doubt it will cast its spell on you too. Some Malaitans from the central and eastern parts of the island still worship ancestral spirits. The artificial islands in the Langa Langa and Lau Lagoons are another distinctive feature of Malaitan life, and the tradition of shell-money making is omnipresent in Langa Langa Lagoon.



Malaitan people have long migrated to other parts of the Solomons, particularly to Guadalcanal. Even today, in the post-tension era, Malaitan people dominate Honiara and are over-represented in Solomons' business, politics and power. It was resentment towards these successes and incursions that led to the ethnic tensions of the late 1990s (see p249).

Unlike in Guadalcanal and the Western Province, which are endowed with lodgings specifically geared towards foreigners, development of tourism is still in its infancy. There's not even a dive centre (sniff!). If your idea of a great holiday includes fully-fledged resorts, shops, restaurants and animation programmes, you may leave disappointed. But if real Melanesian life and

enormous natural beauty sound like the things you're looking for, you've come to the right place.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **Solomon Airlines** (☎ 40163; Auki; ✈ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat, 2-5pm Sun) has flights from Honiara to Auki (\$\$437, once to twice, daily). It also flies to Atoifi (\$\$500, twice weekly).

On Friday **MV Pelican Express** (☎ 28104 in Honiara, 38165 in Malaita Island) runs from Honiara to Auki (\$\$160) and returns on Saturday. **MV Solomon Express** (☎ 28064 in Honiara) runs from Honiara to Auki (\$\$160) on Tuesday, and onwards to Afio near Malaita's southern tip (\$\$220), returning on Wednesday.

GETTING AROUND

Auki's airfield is 10km from town. A ride into town costs S\$10 on the Solomon Airlines bus that meets every flight.

From Auki, there's a daily bus service to Malu'u (S\$50) to the north and daily trucks to Atori across the island (S\$40 to S\$60). To get to Langa Langa Lagoon (for Serah's Lagoon Hideaway, p278) from Auki, you can either take a taxi (S\$200), as there's a gravel road, or charter a boat (S\$300). For all other places, you'll have to charter boats to hop between coastal villages. If you're lucky, you'll find shared rides.

Auki

Curled around a wonderfully shaped bay and surrounded by jungle-clad hills, laid-back Auki is a delight to approach by sea. Otherwise Auki is a nondescript little port town, with a few low-slung buildings that aren't going to capture many hearts on their own. Luckily the sea lapping its shores and houses on stilts offer something to please the eyes. Wandering its quiet streets, you wouldn't guess it's the Solomons' third-largest town; everything moves slowly except at the lively market and the bustling wharf, at the town's southern end.

INFORMATION

An **ANZ** (☎ 40160; off Lobo Ave; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) with an ATM (Visa and MasterCard) and a **Bank South Pacific** (☎ 40484; off Lobo Ave; 🕒 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) are in the town centre and change

major currencies and travellers cheques. There's also a little **post office** (📞 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri). Get online at **Telekom** (per hr S\$48; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri).

SIGHTS

Auki is more a place to experience than a succession of tourist sights, but there's actually a smattering of natural sights outside town that will keep you entertained. One definite must-see is the friendly fishing village of **Lilisiana**, about 1.5km from the centre. With its traditional-style houses raised on stilts over the shore, it's photogenic to boot. Lilisiana's peaceful **beach** (off Map p276) is a narrow, long, golden sand spit beside coral shallows. It's immediately to the north of the village and is the closest one to Auki. Beside the beach is **Osi Lake** (off Map p276). With its murky water, it's not really a place to don your swimming kit and get wet, but it's a nature-lover's paradise, home to colonies of seabirds. You might be asked to pay a *kastom* fee of S\$25.

An hour's walk east of Auki is **Riba Cave** (off Map p276; S\$25), but you can make it shorter by taking a taxi (S\$20) then walk the final stretch (about 20 minutes) down to the entrance. It's a haunting cave, with stalagmites, several large subterranean chambers and an underground river. Caveat: it's very slippery. Take a powerful torch (flashlight) and wear sturdy walking shoes.

If you need to refresh yourself, nothing can beat **Kwaibala Waterfall** (off Map p276), about 3km from the centre. Take a taxi to the

Kwaibala River (S\$20); from there, 25 minutes' walk will bring you to the falls. Niagara-like thundering falls they ain't; expect modest cascades with a few pools where you can take a bracing dip.

You'll need a guide to visit Riba Cave and Kwaibala Waterfall, which are on private land and difficult to find. Contact **Silas Diutee Malai** (☎ 40389), a freelance guide who charges S\$200 for Riba Cave, S\$200 for Kwaibala Waterfall and S\$100 for Osi Lake. Make sure that *kastom* fees are included in the prices he quotes. He can also arrange cross-island treks and 'river drifting' on a tyre down the Fiu River.

SLEEPING & EATING

Auki Motel (☎ 40014; fax 40059; Lobo Ave; r S\$110-440; 🕒) There are three good reasons to stay in this little number: it has the best facilities in town (which is not saying a lot, given the lack of competition), bathrooms are in good nick and it features a range of rooms to suit all budgets. Oh, and it's central. Downstairs rooms are a tad cramped but have private bathrooms and shared air-con (the air-con unit is in the corridor). Pity about the flimsy mattresses in the cheaper, three-bed rooms upstairs (our backs still ache!), but you'll survive if you pile up two mattresses. The menu at the restaurant (mains S\$30 to S\$45; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) varies according to what's available, but usually includes fish fillet, chilli squid, chicken drumsticks and ice creams. And let's not forget the hefty breakfasts. No alcohol is allowed on the premises.

Golden Dragon Motel (☎ 40113, 40166; Lobo Ave; r without bathroom S\$143, r S\$210-320; 🕒) This isn't really the place to pop the question to your sweetheart, but the bare-bones rooms will do for a night's kip. The dearer rooms have air-con and private bathrooms. It's upstairs above some stores; if no-one's around ask at the Auki Store opposite.

Auki Lodge (☎ 40079; Batabu Rd; s/d S\$336/400; 🕒) This is distinctly unimpressive for the price; even 'Lodge' sounds pretentious for what you get. Think uninspired architecture, rooms with very ordinary interiors and lackadaisical service.

Rarasu Restaurant (☎ 40280; off Maasina Rulu Pde; mains S\$30-45; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) The only independent restaurant in town is a good surprise. Choice is very limited,

ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS

One of Malaita's features is the large number of artificial islands, particularly in Langa Langa and Lau Lagoons. Some of these islands date from the 1550s and new ones are built each year. Stones and dead corals from the lagoons are piled on a sand bar or reef, then sand is spread around, houses are built and coconut palms are planted. The islands serve a dual purpose: protection from head-hunters and freedom from mosquitoes. The largest islands exceed 1 sq km in size and can be very crowded; some are surrounded by a coral wall. Most, however, are tiny.

but the dishes are fresh and copious. The poached fish in coconut cream sauce does a good job of satisfying your hungry tummy. The vaguely barn-like surrounds ooze a ramshackle charm.

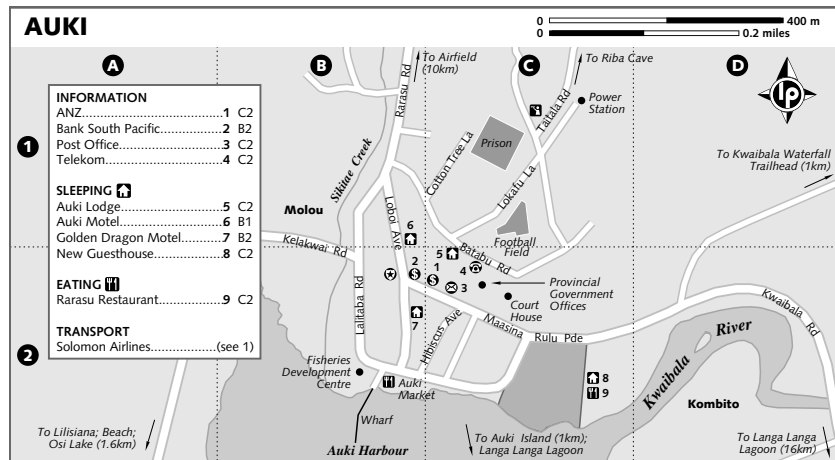
Two new lodging options will be operational by the time you read this book, which will be a small guesthouse beside Rarasu Restaurant and a 20-room motel owned by MP Charles Dausabea, tucked away in the hills overlooking the bay. Both places were still building sites when we passed through.

Langa Langa Lagoon

Scene: Langa Langa Lagoon at dusk. Close up: you're sipping a glass of bush lime on your private terrace at Serah's Lagoon Hideaway (p278), while a small fleet of traditional canoes is gliding past on the calm waters just in front of your bungalow. Soundtrack: hauntingly beautiful chants resonate from nearby villages. Paradise.

This is undisputedly one of Malaita's highlights. Extending from 7km to 32km south of Auki, the lagoon is famous for its artificial islands, particularly Laulasi, Alite and Busu. Langa Langa Lagoon is a strong centre for traditional activities, especially shell-money making. It's also renowned for shipbuilding. The only thing that might mar the experience is occasional dynamite fishing in the lagoon.

One proviso: if you expect Bora Bora-esque lagoons, you'll leave disappointed. Waters are more chocolate than bright turquoise, and you won't find stunning beaches to sun yourself on. No, rather people come here for



GO TO THE KWAIO, YOUNG MAN

Ready for a culture shock? Consider visiting the traditional 'bush' Kwaio, who live in eastern-central Malaita's mountainous interior. This area is very seldom visited by Westerners and the 1000 Kwaio people who live in the mountains near Atoifi and Sinalanggu have rejected the modern world in favour of the traditional life and religion of their ancestors. These Kwaio, as opposed to the Christian 'coastal' Kwaio, believe the ancestral spirits are omnipresent, and they practise magic and sorcery. Unmarried girls and women go naked and smoke pipes, while married women wear minute T-pieces. This is not your average 'cultural experience'; you do have to come prepared to avoid cultural faux pas with potentially serious consequences.

We met Ronnie Butala, a 'modern Kwaio' (he worked in New Zealand as an environmentalist for a few years) who can organise two- to three-day guided trips to meet the bush Kwaio. 'I only take a limited number of guests to limit our impact on these communities. I suggest you arrive in Auki, from where we take a truck to Atori. Then we take a boat to Sinalanggu and overnight there. The next day we hike up in the mountains for about three hours to the first Kwaio village. You'll feel you've stumbled onto an alternative universe. There are strict rules: never laugh; never snap photographs without consent; always urinate at designated places; women must be entirely naked when entering a Kwaio village and are not accepted if they have their period; toilet paper is forbidden. Things can turn nasty if you infringe a *tambu*. Anyway, you can't turn up alone. I employ a team of knowledgeable porters and interpreters. If you're lucky, you might attend impressive rituals, such as the turning of the dead or the sacrifice of pigs. Everyday we move to another village, because I don't want to overburden the Kwaio. If you want to make gifts, bring lighters, knives, razor blades or flashlights.'

One thing is sure: a visit to the Kwaio is a life-altering experience. 'I remember Westerners crying after this trip; they said it was so overwhelming. They even ended up questioning their values, the meaning of life', adds Ronnie with a smile.

Wanna question your own way of life? Contact **Ronnie Butala** (☎ 81745; rbutala@yahoo.com; Auki) or Destination Solomons Travels & Tours (p253). Ronnie Butala charges \$5400 per person (per day), including guides and food. Transfers from Auki cost extra (\$50 for the Auki-Atori truck ride, \$52000 return for the boat ride between Atori and Sinalanggu). Give a minimum of two weeks' notice.

the laid-back tempo. And the magical setting. And the supremely relaxing **Serah's Lagoon Hideaway** (☎ 40344, 72344; s ind 3 meals \$5100-160). This aptly named retreat is run with grace and flair by Serah Kei. There's one bungalow on stilts embellished with a few feminine touches as well as a four-room house. The ablution block is tiptop with, joy of joys, a proper shower and flush toilets. Sunset? Quick, get your camera ready and enjoy your own lagoon show from your private terrace, complete with traditional dug-out canoes passing by the silhouette of coconut palms. The meals are memorable, too; make sure you try the 'mangrove fruit soup'. Your host can also arrange lagoon tours as well as cultural shows, such as grass-skirt making, a demonstration of shell-money making and leaf sawing (from \$5200). There are also a selection of intricate carvings on sale. Call Serah and she will arrange transfers from Auki.

Northern Malaita Island

The 'north road' leaves Auki and follows the coast from Sisifu to Sisolo, providing lovely sea views. Long stretches of white-sand beach line the shore. The welcoming subprovincial headquarters of **Malu'u** is an obvious stop between Auki (four hours over 82km of passable road) and Lau Lagoon at the 'head road' two hours away. You can spend the night at **Malu'u Lodge** (s \$5100), which has fan-cooled rooms, a kitchen and shared facilities.

And now, **Lau Lagoon**. This 35km-long lagoon contains more than 60 artificial islands. There's no formal accommodation, but you can arrange your stay in a village; ask the chief.

For the fit and the adventurous, various customised **trekking** options in northern Malaita can be arranged through **Makario Tagini** (☎ 22911, 28089 in Honiara, 75227 in Auki) who works as lawyer in Honiara.

Central & Eastern Malaita Island

There's a road across the mountainous interior to the east coast around **Atori** that is washed out in the midyear wet season. The route begins near Dala, and its most scenic spot is at Nunulafa, where it crosses over the Auluta Gorge.

From Atori, you can take a dinghy to **Atoifi** and **Sinalanggu**, the main centres for Kwaio people who have left the bush and have embraced Christianity. Sinalanggu is the main launching pad for visits to the traditional Kwaio people (see opposite).

RENNELL & BELLONA PROVINCE

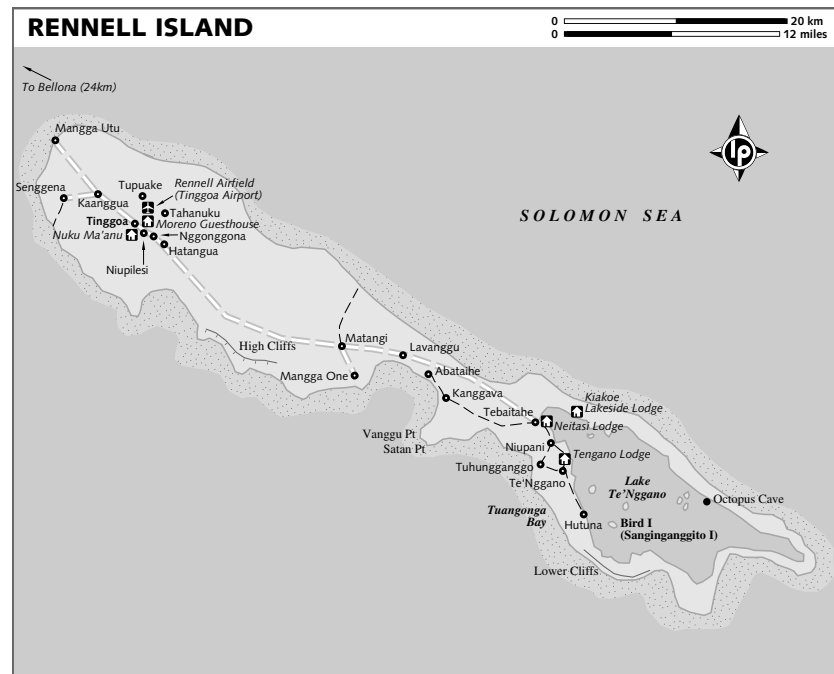
What a change. A mere one-hour flight from Honiara will transport you to yet another world. Life in this region is so different from that in the rest of the Solomons that you could easily feel you're in another country. Both islands are Polynesian outliers, sharing similar languages and cultures.

Geologically they are rocky, uplifted-coral atolls.

This province is largely untouristy, but it has a few solid accommodation options. Infrastructure was pretty poor when we visited (there was not even a bank) but modernity is slowly rearing its head. Mobile phones and an ATM should have made their mark during the lifetime of this book. Eastern Rennell has been a World Heritage-listed site since 1998 but, despite the locals' hopes, the listing hasn't brought flocks of travellers to its famous Lake Te'Nggano.

RENNELL

Rennell is a Shangri-la for eco-tourists. At 130 sq km, **Lake Te'Nggano**, in the southeast, is the South Pacific's largest expanse of freshwater and feels like an untouched paradise. The lake is the old lagoon floor and the tall cliffs that surround it are the old reef. Its western end has 200-odd coral islets and swamps. Four villages lie along the shore, including Te'Nggano, the subprovincial headquarters. It's famous for its abundant bird and marine life, including tilapia, giant eels and sea snakes.



PUSHING THE FRONTIERS: THE REST OF THE SOLOMONS

If, after visiting Malaita, Guadalcanal, Central and Western Provinces, you still feel the urge for more off-the-beaten-track adventures, and if time is really no object, consider travelling to the other provinces, where travellers are an absolute rarity. You'll need plenty of DIY spirit to surmount the logistical challenges (erratic flights or boats, basic accommodation, no telephones etc).

- One of the least-visited provinces in the Solomons, **Choiseul** has two airfields, on Taro island and in Kagau.
- Like Choiseul, the **Shortland Islands** are culturally closer to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, which lies only 9km to the north. There's one airstrip, on Ballalae, infrequently serviced by Solomon Airlines from Gizo.
- An untouched world located only one hour from Honiara is **Makira-Ulawa**. Kirakira is the main gateway. You'll find basic accommodation in Kirakira, Star Harbour and Santa Ana. There's sensational surfing off Star Harbour. The island is famous for its **Spearg Fighting Festival**, which is held late May on Santa Catalina island.
- Fall off the end of the earth in **Temotu Province**, which lies at the Solomons' most easterly point. Lata, the provincial capital, on Santa Cruz island, is the main launching pad for outlying islands, such as **Reef Islands**, **Utupua** and **Vanikoro**. Lata has a few guesthouses, including Luelta Resort and Fresh Point Resthouse, and the province's only airfield. One recommended guesthouse on **Pigeon Island** (Reef Islands), Ngarando Faraway Lodge (contact Ross Hepworth at Tour Solomons in Honiara, p253) is well worth the three-hour boat ride from Lata.
- A province that is a castaway's dream come true is **Isabel**, especially if you can make it to the **Arnarvon Islands**, the province's diamond tiara, off the northwestern tip of Isabel. It's a conservation area and one of the world's largest nesting grounds for the hawksbill turtle. There's phenomenal snorkelling too. There's one basic guesthouse run by the rangers. Trips to Arnarvon Islands can be arranged through **Nature Conservancy** (☎ 20940, 28095 in Honiara; tncdpm@solomon.com.sb; www.nature.org), whose office is across the road from the police headquarters. The gateways to Isabel are Buala and Suavanao, both serviced by boats and flights from Honiara.

Guesthouses at Lake Te'Nggano can organise excursions on the lake. Regular stops include **Octopus Cave**, a spooky cave on the north shore, and a visit to **Bird island**, where hundreds of cormorants, boobies and frigates nest year-round. It's a fascinating sight. Your guide might well climb up a tree to catch a cormorant or two for your dinner (not for the squeamish). Lake Te'Nggano is not really a suitable place to get wet. There's no beach, and only Brits could don their swimming suits and bathe in the milky, pea-green waters. The only place that's suitable for a dip is Octopus Cave, which has limp waters.

Sleeping & Eating

The island has a few simple resthouses which can be booked through Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau in Honiara (p249). Don't expect airs and graces; it's a bit rough around the edges, but it can be fun. Base yourself at Lake Te'Nggano. The only good reason to stay in

Tinggoa, 50km west of Lake Te'Nggano, is if you have an early-morning flight departure. Lake excursions can be arranged through your guesthouse. Plan on \$400 for two persons, fuel included.

Nuku Ma'anau (Tinggoa; r without bathroom \$5150) This place is based on Tinggoa's outskirts. There are five simple rooms in the main house and two stand-alone, dinky bungalows. Meals cost \$110 per day.

Moreno Guesthouse (Tinggoa; r without bathrooms \$5150) This is a clean place with 17 bare rooms and it's located near the airstrip. The meals (\$130 per day) are good.

Neitasi Lodge (Lake Te'Nggano; s incl 3 meals \$5160) Just beside the 'head road', at the 'entrance' of the lake. A rustic yet very atmospheric house on stilts, entirely built from natural materials, directly over the water. Has lots of ramshackle charm – perfect for re-enacting Swiss Family Robinson fantasies.

Tengano Lodge (Lake Te'Nggano; jhkaituu@yahoo.com.au; s incl 3 meals \$5190) There's no mistake: it has

an email address (via an internet connection at nearby Niupani village). This guesthouse has been upgraded and features a three-room house with shared facilities (flush toilets and clean shower). The strong point is the lush property. Canoe transfers from the head road (15 minutes) are free.

Kiakoe Lakeside Lodge (Lake Te'Nggano; s incl 3 meals \$5290) Located on the northern shore, which is a short boat ride away from the head road, this 'lodge' is the best organised of the lot. Digs are in a house perched on a hillside; it's a shame that room 1 is the only one with a lake view (other rooms are at the back). There are clean, flush toilets and a functional shower. Two bungalows were being constructed when we visited, and they looked promising. The owner, Lence, is MP for the provincial assembly and a bon viveur. If you want variety in your meals, ask for lobster (excellent), coconut crab (good), cormorant (barely acceptable) and, for the daring, flying fox (no comment). Canoe transfers can be arranged from the head road (\$80 one-way, five minutes).

Getting There & Away

From Honiara, Solomon Airlines (p257) flies to Rennell (\$630, twice weekly) via Bellona or vice versa. The Bellona–Rennell sector costs

\$5400. Rennell airfield is at Tinggoa, to the west of the island. Moreno Guesthouse (opposite) acts as the Solomon Airlines agent.

Getting Around

Getting to Lake Te'Nggano is a bit of a chore. The 50km of poor road between the Tinggoa airport and the lake runs through rainforest and takes at least three hours by 4WD (longer by truck).

The only 'regular' transfer service is organised by the people from Kiakoe Lakeside Lodge (left), who meet most flights to collect cargo, and charge \$100 if it's a shared ride and \$500 if it's charter.

BELLONA

Small yet densely populated Bellona has a lush interior and is encircled by forest-covered cliffs rising 30m to 70m. The cliffs are mostly easy to climb unlike Rennell's cliffs.

Bellona is pockmarked with **caves**; many of them the scene of island fables.

You can stay at **Suani Resthouse** (Tangakitonga; s incl 3 meals \$5170). On Bellona's east coast, **Aotaha Cave Resort** (s incl 3 meals \$5210) comes recommended for its enchanting setting. It's set around caves at the cliffbase, and some of the beds are in the cave itself! Both places can arrange bicycle hire and hiking and snorkelling trips.

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