



Welcome Aboard

Bilikiki Cruises, Solomon Islands

We're pleased to have you join Bilikiki Cruises for your diving excursion in Solomon Islands. Often called the "Happy Islands", we hope your visit here will be the source of some great diving, new friendships and exciting memories.

Solomon Islands is not a well known destination, so to help you prepare for your trip, we've put together some notes on Solomon Islands, the people and the diving with Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. We hope they are helpful.

Geography

The country of Solomon Islands is located between 7 and 12 degrees south of the equator, about 1,250 miles (2,000 km) northeast across the Coral Sea from Queensland, Australia. Most flights from North America route through Brisbane, Australia, or Nadi, Fiji. There are also flights from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

There are 922 volcanic islands and coral atolls in the Solomons, spreading across 1,000 miles (1,600 km) of the Pacific. The six major islands, are Guadalcanal, Malaita, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Makira and Choiseul. There are another 40 smaller but significant Islands plus many atolls and cays. About a third of the islands are populated.

The People

Population is about 400,000 with about 90,000 living on Guadalcanal, the largest, and most heavily populated island. The capital city, Honiara, with a population of 45,000 is also located on Guadalcanal. When you arrive in Solomon Islands it will be at Honiara International Airport, a short distance out of Honiara. Honiara is the base for Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. and this is where your cruise will begin.

The indigenous people of the Solomons are Melanesian and Polynesian, and most, except for those in and near Honiara, still live in traditional style in rural villages. The official language is English, and the unofficial language is Solomon Pijin, an interesting language developed from English words and Melanesian grammar. There are 87 native languages plus 13 dialects, that are used in the home villages and islands.

There are also small populations of European, Asian and others who reside in the Solomons. Many of the expatriate residents are from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Britain or United States, and hold medical, technical or teaching posts for the Solomon Islands Government. Others are hoteliers, missionaries, plantation operators and business people. There is a small Chinatown in Honiara. In the mid-1950's many settlers from the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati) resettled from their own over-crowded and drought devastated Islands. Their dance, the Batere, is frequently performed in Honiara.

Government

Solomon Islands is an independent nation, and a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Government is parliamentary democracy based on the British system.

Passports and visas

Passports are required for entry to Solomon Islands, and a visitor's permit will be issued for nationals of United States, most Commonwealth and most European nations on arrival, as long as the traveler holds a return or ongoing ticket. Passports must be valid for 6 months after entry to Solomon Islands, so check your expiration date and renew your passport if necessary. We can help arrange visas for those originating in countries for which visas are required. If in doubt contact us for information in this regard.

Climate

The islands are located just below the equator and enjoy a year-round tropical climate, moderated by the sea air. Rainfall averages 10 inches (250 mm) per month year round. January to Mid March, the southern summer, is generally wetter and warmer, with frequent short, sharp cloudbursts followed by bright sunshine. In the southern winter, May through December, the south-easterly trade winds produce pleasantly mild weather. Rainfall is usually light and several days apart. Humidity is generally high, particularly inland, but is significantly lower on the coast and aboard ship or on the small islands.

This close to the equator the sun is very intense, so expect to use plenty of sun block. Day time temperatures average in the high 80's to low 90's F (28 – 33 C) all year round.

Clothing and dress

T-shirts, shorts and bathing suits are suitable on board attire, with a light windbreaker or sweatshirt for the odd cool or breezy morning, or after your evening dive.

On island excursions, T-shirts and walking shorts are generally acceptable, but ladies should be sensitive to local customs, and not wear bathing suits or abbreviated shorts or other brief clothing ashore. Ships personnel will be happy to advise you on comfortable and appropriate dress. Footwear is seldom required on board ship, although slip-ons or thongs are popular. For shore excursions and for travel, light-weight, rubber-soled slip-ons or laced shoes are excellent.

It is recommended that you travel light, with cotton shirts, blouses, slacks and shorts. There is never a need for anything more formal than a cotton sport shirt or blouse. Nor is there a requirement for a different outfit everyday. There are limited laundry facilities aboard ship and these are busy full time making sure that you have a supply of fresh towels and linen. Hand-washable, hang-to-dry cottons are "in" in Solomon Islands.

Health

Travelers to Solomon Islands should consult their doctor or local health unit about immunizations, vaccinations and oral preventatives for hepatitis A, malaria, polio, tetanus and typhoid. Anti-malarial medication is recommended and travellers should ensure other shots and vaccinations are up-to-date.

There are numerous malarial prophylactics. At the moment Doxycycline is popular and effective against malaria. It is also an antibiotic and therefore offers some protection from coral cuts and other scrapes. Malarone is also being widely used and has very few side effects. Be sure to check with your doctor for his recommendations. The only one we ask you to avoid is Mefloquine (brand name Lariam). It's side effects can mimic decompression sickness which can make things difficult on board, to say the least.

It's not that there is an undue health risk in Solomon Islands; however medical care is not always immediately available, and a minor health problem -untreated- can ruin an otherwise perfect vacation. Information may be obtained by contacting the Center for Disease Control and Prevention at 404-332-4565. You can also find information on their web site, www.cdc.gov.

Water and food aboard the ships of Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. or any of the commercial hotels, resorts or restaurants is not a problem, but elsewhere drinking water should be boiled and all food well cooked.

DIVING

Water temperature

Divers in the Solomons are usually comfortable in a Lycra or at most a $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (2- 3mm) wetsuit. Water temperature will be in the 82°F to 85°F (28° C - 30° C) range, but after multiple dives per day you may find that you need some thermal protection.

Water clarity

Visibility will range from 75 to 125 feet, with occasional sites with much better visibility, and yes, you will have dives with visibility less than 75 feet. The Solomon Island waters are very nutrient rich. They support the entire food chain from microscopic creatures to major predators. Because of this, visibility may be less than that of some other world famous dive sites, but for this same reason you will find a multitude of large and small critters to observe and photograph. In some cases visibility may only be 10 or 15 feet, because of all the fish blocking your view!

Photographic notes

Bring both macro and wide-angle lens for your cameras if you are into underwater photography. The Solomons are a photographers paradise, so equip yourself accordingly.

Most divers are now shooting in digital format, and it is best to bring your laptop so that you can view and edit your images. The ships are fitted with 110 volt electrical outlets for battery recharging, and both ships have large camera tables for checking equipment, as well as, digital projectors and wide screen LCD TVs with USB inputs.

Depths

Most diving need not be deep as the reefs start close to the surface. Often the reefs drop off gradually allowing you to explore extensively at relatively shallow depths. You will find walls, however, often in close conjunction to a reef, suggesting multi-level computer assisted diving. For safety, it is always recommended that you do your deep dives in the earlier part of the day with gradually shallower activities as the day progresses. Also do the deepest part of your dive first, finishing in less depth while you off-gas and enjoy the beauties of the shallow reef.

Just a word of caution. Solomon Islands is in a remote part of the world. The nearest recompression chamber is about 1,500 miles (2,400 km) away in Townsville, Australia. In a diving emergency, a light aircraft will be required to evacuate the patient from the ship to Honiara, then evacuation to Townsville is in a recompression chamber aboard a King Air turbo-Prop. Cost will be at least USD \$30,000. The moral is, don't get bent, and if you are going to, make sure you have insurance that covers scuba related injuries or illness. It is mandatory that divers aboard Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. vessels carry medical evacuation insurance. We recommend you contact Divers Alert Network (DAN) for information on divers insurance. Call them at 1-800-446-2671 in North America.

Remember you'll be doing a lot of diving, probably four or five dives per day, and that adds up to a lot of nitrogen. Pace yourself, and consider sitting out a dive every now and then.

Nitrox

Nitrox is available on both ships at a cost of USD\$20.00 per diving day. Persons wishing to use Nitrox must be certified in it's use.

Shipboard life

MV Bilikiki and MV Spirit of Solomons

The ships of Bilikiki Cruises Ltd., *MV Bilikiki* and *MV Spirit of Solomons* are among the great live-aboard dive boats of the world. Both ships are 125 feet long and 24 feet wide. They are large and seaworthy and offer unparalleled comfort at sea. Passengers are accommodated in air-conditioned cabins and staterooms. *Bilikiki* has 10 double or twin-share staterooms all with private facilities, and *Spirit of Solomons* has a mix including two double staterooms with private facilities, five double or twin-share staterooms with private facilities, and six single cabins sharing two toilets and three showers. The ships both have large sundecks as well as open covered decks. The lounge areas are comfortably furnished and feature large tables, a bar, multi-format TV/VCR/DVD and an extensive library of reference material and recreational reading. The ships each carry a crew of 11, plus two managers who are responsible for diving and ships operations. The crew are well-trained, friendly, attentive and professional.

Electricity on board

Power throughout the ships is 240 V 50 cycle, using Australia style 3-prong outlets. There are also plenty of American style 110 V 60 cycle outlets for charging cameras, strobes, divelights, etc. These outlets are only for charging purposes so if you intend to use hairdryers, shavers, etc. you will need to bring adapters. These are generally readily available from Radio Shack and other electronic supply stores.

Meal service

Meals are always important when you are traveling and diving, so the galley staff do their best to produce quality and tasty meals and snacks. Three hearty meals are served buffet style daily, and between meal snacks are always ample. The menu will usually include a selection from fresh and cooked vegetables, meat, fish, chicken, pasta, rice, bread or toast, scones, biscuits and of course, tea, coffee, hot chocolate and all the usual condiments to complete the meal. Occasionally pizza will be on the menu and desserts may be cakes, pie or puddings. There is always lots of fresh fruit; and fresh lime juice, called bushlime, is popular as a thirst quencher. Galley staff are also prepared to assist with special menu requirements, but we request notification of such needs well in advance of the departure date, to ensure that arrangements can be made and supplies obtained. Both ships have a bar with basic service including highballs, beer and wine. Soft drinks are also available. There is a charge for bar drinks and soft drinks.

Diving

Diving facilities are second to none. Large dive decks with individual storage for gear, racks and hangers for suits, freshwater showers, separate rinse tanks for photo gear, and easy access to the skiffs. Tanks are filled at the end of each dive then rigged for the next one. Bilikiki Cruises crew are trained to expertly handle your tanks and other gear. The only time you have to touch your tank is when you're diving and it's on your back!

Diving is done mothership fashion with divers shuttled to the dive site in one of the two specially designed aluminum skiffs (called "tinnies"). Once in the water, the divers are tracked by their bubbles and can be picked up by the tinnie crew and shuttled back to the ship almost the minute they reach the surface. This eliminates long swims, current fighting and sitting in the hot sun while waiting for other divers to surface.

A briefing will precede each dive, and the Managers will outline the type of dive, what you can expect to see and recommendations regarding current, depth, and activities. Divers set their own profile in conjunction with their buddy, their computer and their previous diving activities, and are welcome to discuss their plans with the Managers for assistance and advice.

The dive schedule is established by the managers, but this is flexible to accommodate the desires of all the passengers. An evening briefing usually outlines the plans for the next days diving, and passengers comments and input are welcomed. The ships do not follow a specific itinerary during the course of a cruise, and weather and diving conditions, and the preferences of the passengers, will all affect the dive sites chosen and the length of stay in any given locale. In general, on a 12 day or longer cruise the ship will visit the Florida Islands, Russell Islands and Marovo Lagoon, and depending on weather conditions, Mborukua Island (also known as Mary Island). Seven and nine day trips generally operate in the Floridas and Russells with a possible extension to Mborukua if weather and time permits.

Gratuities

While tipping is not common in the South Pacific, it is an accepted practice among live-aboard operations and others offering service to North American and European clientele. If you believe the service you have received warrants it, a gratuity to be shared among all the crew should be given to one of the managers at the end of the trip.

The Villages and Villagers

You will be traveling in and among the Islands during your stay with us, and you will have many opportunities to meet the Solomon Island people. Solomon Islanders are a proud and friendly group who have been making passengers aboard the Bilikiki Cruises ships welcome since our first trips in 1988. You will be invited to visit their villages, schools and churches and they will be very pleased to display, and sell, their carvings, baskets and other goods. Ships managers regularly purchase fresh fruit and vegetables from the villagers and their canoes of produce make regular appearances when we are near villages.

While anchored off their villages the ship will be visited by these very skillful sailors in their dugout canoes. The boating and swimming ability of the children is quite remarkable and very entertaining.

Solomon Island lifestyle remains very traditional, with a smattering of western influence. Village houses are still built of palm leaf intricately woven to shelter the occupants, although some corrugated iron is used for building. Villages are usually clean and neat with clearly defined paths among the buildings. Please remember that these are private homes and visitors should never enter or look into individual houses without permission.

The Solomon Islanders raise crops in their market gardens near the villages and also raise chickens and pigs for food. Fish is also an essential part of their diet, and often when our ship is anchored off a village for the night, the village men and boys will come out to catch the fish that are attracted by the ship's lights.

Carvings and Artwork

A word about buy and sell in Solomons. The native carvings and artwork are outstanding. The artists follow traditional styles, and produce work using ebony, kerosene wood and stone, and the wood carvings are often inlaid with shell. Prices will range from very modest to exorbitant depending on the size and quality of the piece and the price obtained, or expected, from the last customer. Pricing is always in Solomon Island Dollars, and exchange at current bank rate can be made with your ships managers. It is always wise to listen to the briefing by the ships managers about shopping as each village is different, and the managers can give you a good expectation of prices and quality. Some mild "negotiation" on prices is expected, but please respect the pride of the artists and avoid "aggressive" haggling or other activities that diminish the value of their work.

Travelers Gifts

Travelers to the Solomons often ask what they might bring as gifts to the people.

Keeping in mind weight limitations for your flight in, you can consider items like pencils, pens, notebooks, erasers, rulers and other school-type goods. These are popular with adults as well as the children. We suggest you avoid candy or other sweets. Instead, consider inexpensive toothbrushes, combs, hair clips, elastics, and hair bands, and other simple grooming aids. Old t-shirts, shorts or lengths of cloth that can be used to make skirts. Used or inexpensive reading glasses are very popular. Also, small coin purses.

Many Solomon Islanders count on fishing for their daily food, therefore fishing lures (plugs, etc.) and fish line are valuable for them. Mask, fins, and snorkels are also well received.

And if you can manage the weight, elementary-level books and maps for the village schools will be very much appreciated.

Items you use that can be left behind at the end of the cruise, like flashlight batteries, pens and pencils, baseball caps or your LA Kings T-shirt, are also welcome.

Currency

The currency used in Solomon Islands is the Solomon Island dollar, and this is what is required for shopping around town, and for purchasing carvings and other handicrafts from villages while on Bilikiki or Spirit of Solomons. Currency from other countries can be exchanged at the airport, from any of the banks in town, or to a limited degree on board our vessels, from the managers. Payment for any on board extras such as bar drinks, boutique items, film developing and gratuities are paid to the managers at the end of the trip. For these items currency from any country on world exchanges, travellers cheques, Visa or Mastercard are accepted. Credit card transactions will all be converted to Australian dollars for processing at the exchange rate on the day.

Contact Numbers

The ships are well maintained and carry all necessary navigation and communication equipment. The ships maintain regular radio contact with the Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. office in Honiara, and limited message capabilities, for emergency or urgent communications, can be made available. Solomon Islands is a remote area and cell phone coverage and internet access are not available on board ship. There is a satellite phone available for outgoing calls, and calls are charged by the minute. In case of emergency have your family or friends contact our office in Honiara.

Phone 011 677 20412 Fax 011 677 23897 Email bilikiki@solomon.com.sb

Please keep incoming messages brief as they will need to be transcribed and read out over the radio. If you wish to reply you may then make an outgoing call via Satellite phone.

Finale

Have fun on your trip to Solomon Islands. You are about to be treated to some outstanding diving and world class hospitality. We hope you enjoy it.

On your return we'd be pleased to hear your comments about Solomon Islands, Bilikiki Cruises and the highs, and the lows of your diving and your trip. We'd also appreciate your comments on additions, deletions or changes to these notes, for the benefit of future travelers.

Please contact Rick or Jane Belmare by mail, fax or email or phone at:

**Bilikiki Cruises, PO Box 656, Iroquois Falls, ON, P0K 1G0, CANADA.
Phone 1 800 663 5363 Fax number 253 484 7102 Email to: bilikiki@bilikiki.com**