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The Forgotten Paradise of the Solomon Islands

Diving with Bilikiki Cruises

by Jack and Sue Drafaahl

When underwater photographers talk about the Pacific, one name always appears at the top of the wish list; The Solomon Islands. This cluster of more than 900 islands just east of Papua New Guinea is thick with the mystery and excitement of undiscovered diving treasures. In years past, this was the arena for many WW II battles; today these waters offer some of the finest deep walls, current diving, multi-passage caves, sunlit crevices, gently sloping reefs and dense mangrove shorelines in the world. After one short, 10 day trip in this virtually forgotten paradise, we were convinced we had found the ultimate dive location. We swam among large schools of Barracuda and jacks, descended walls covered with massive gorgonians, explored wrecks, snorkeled mangroves and snooped into many of the underwater caves that dot the shoreline. At White Beach, in the Russell Islands, we found and photographed the Spined-Cheek Anemonefish that graces the opposite page of this article. Endemic to the Solomons, the fish is rare; its host; a white anemone; uncommonly seen.

Our hostess for our Solomon Islands trip was the luxurious Bilikiki, one of two Bilikiki Cruises live-aboards (the other is the Spirit of the Solomons).

The diving off both ships is truly a dream. The animal life is so diverse you find something different on each dive. Both ships offer so many sites its impossible to see them all on one trip. With so many choices, the wear and tear on the reefs is minimized. Plus you never have to dive the same sites twice, although there are some places we could dive forever.

The first stop on our trip was in the Russell Islands, where we dived White Beach, near the remains of a loading dock at the end of an old airfield. Over the years, barges, Jeeps, trucks and assorted military equipment have found their eternal homes in the sea here. The dive starts very deep, with a visit to an old WW II truck, then divers follow a gentle slope up to the few remaining pilings of the loading dock. Although in only a few feet of water, the pilings have an incredible variety of animal life attached to them. We saw several lionfish, four types of nudibranchs, soft corals, tunicates, the infamous Archer Fish and several types of small sponges.

Next to the pilings there's a sunken barge so covered with animal life that it looks like a piece of modern art.

Another favorite site in the Russells is Custom Cave. The cave starts at the edge of the shoreline and extends back into the island. Intermittent beams of light guide your way. As you swim toward the back of the cave, you will run across pairs of gobies, several types of diurnal and nocturnal shrimp, eels, starfish, colorful sea anemones and a sprinkle of nudibranchs. You eventually reach a point where a large beam of light reaches down from the surface and leads you to an opening in the middle of the jungle. For the wide angle photographer, a shot of a model silhouetted against the opening is a must.

Marys Island is extremely popular because of its diving diversity. If you want schools of Barracuda and jacks galore, you can dive Barracuda Point. The dive at the point is a mild drift. Skiffs, called tinnies, drop you off up current from the schools and you gently drift right into the middle of them. As you round the corner, you can make a short swim back through a clownfish laden area with no current, then back to your point of origin to repeat the dive.

When either Bilikiki Cruises ship is moored at Marys, you can dive right off the stern to look for the smaller critters. The shoreline is only a few feet away and huge boulders, caves and cracks make this spot a minimal effort/maximum result dive. We made five full dives one day at Marys, all of which yielded different experiences. Right under the stern we found a three foot long sea cucumber, a moray eel, a three inch cowry, several nudibranchs and a very friendly cuttlefish.

As we moved to the Florida Islands, the managers informed us we were going to dive Velvia Reef. As we neared the 30 to 40 foot mound it looked drab and barren. However, as we got within a few feet of the bottom, we came face to face with so many colorful nudibranchs, fish, octopus and cuttlefish that we were firing our cameras faster than our strobes could recycle. Not surprisingly, everyone wanted to make a second dive on the same spot and so we did. The Bilikiki Cruises folks aim to please!

Our last two dives in the Floridas were Twin Tunnels and the Muck Dive. Twin Tunnels starts on the top of a pinnacle and stretches down toward the sides. It then bends out to the wall to meet large schools of fish. The Muck Dive is more of a muck, WW II wreck, wide angle, macro, old pier, fun dive. It has something for everyone. The highlight of this dive was discovering the remains of a Japanese float plane in just 15 feet of water. Although its wings and engine are broken off, the main fuselage is a haven for fish and corals.

The Bilikiki and Spirit of Solomons are owned by Rick and Jane Belmare, along with Rodger and Janita Radford. Their home port is Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands. In operation since 1989, the Bilikiki is considered one of the world's best live-

aboard. Owing to the increasing popularity of diving the Solomons, the Bilikiki couldn't handle all the demand for charters so a sister ship, the Spirit of Solomons, was added in 1992. Both are 125 feet in length, three decks high, 24 feet wide and were designed with diving in mind.

Diving from either boat is simple and easy. Whenever possible, the boats use mooring lines so you can access the dive sites via the swim platform. If that's not possible, then the tinnies are used. These 21 foot long aluminum boats have special benches designed for divers and camera pads for photographic equipment. The tanks and gear are loaded in advance and secured in a hole in the bench. When you reach the dive spot, the tenders help you put on your gear and hand you your camera once you are in the water. When you have about 80 percent of your air consumed, just ascend and the skiff will pick you up.

The two boats are similar but each has her own distinct amenities. The Bilikiki has a crew of 11 and two managers who work hard to spoil you rotten. There are 10 air-conditioned cabins below decks, each with private shower, toilet, double bed and a single bed above. Each room is spacious and well designed for comfort. There are reading lamps above each bed, storage space below the double bed and quick access to the mid-deck.

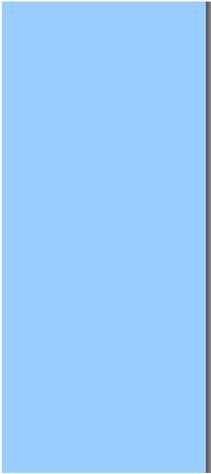
A covered dining area; where most of the meals are served; is in the forward section of the mid-deck. A variety of European, island and American foods are prepared in the main galley. Fresh fruit and vegetables are purchased daily from friendly villagers en route. The salon is the perfect spot to get drinks from the bar, relax and read a book or view a video in the multi-format video system.

The dive tanks and equipment preparation benches wrap around the swim platform. A large double deck camera table with a nonskid surface is in the middle of the dive deck for easy camera access. Two hot showers and a camera rinse tank are at the front of the dive deck, making your post dive activities very comfortable.

When you want to lounge around and read a book or get some sun, climb to the upper deck. There you will find several lounge chairs and an extensive library.

Since so many divers today have taken up underwater photography, a photo room was specially designed. The room features a battery charging station, some repair tools and E-6 film processing.

The Spirit of Solomons has 10 staterooms below decks. Four are private cabins with private baths; six are twin cabins that share two toilets and three showers. Each cabin is spacious with plenty of room for storage. One floor up you'll find three deluxe staterooms mid-deck. The staterooms offer Spirit's best accommodations.



The dive briefings and gear preparation take place on the forward dive deck. Cameras are stored on the large camera table and you can rinse them in the large camera rinse tank after your dive. There is a stern swimstep and hot water showers outside provide the perfect end to a great dive.

The lounge is right behind the dive deck, featuring an area to read, watch videotapes or relax in the evening. The galley serves the same type of European, island and American food as the Bilikiki. The spacious covered dining area is at the stern of the upper deck and allows incredible views of the islands while you dine. The forward sundeck provides an ideal setting for sunbathing between dives.