

## Paddling the Marovo Lagoon, Western Province, Solomon Islands 23-30 August 2013

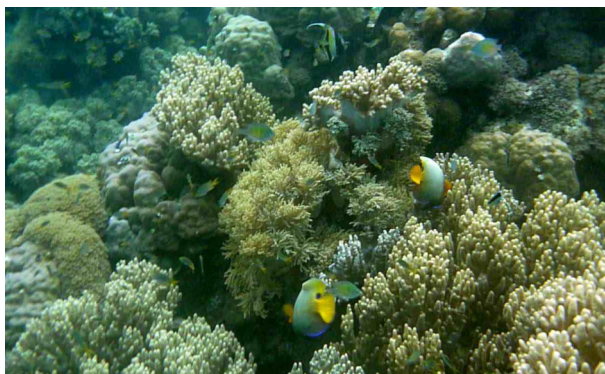
*Photos by Cheryl Christensen, Robyn Graham and Uepi Resort*

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Three QSKC paddlers were involved in this trip, organised by Craig McSween of Adventure Outlet, Southport, in conjunction with Dive Adventures of Sydney, a specialist travel agent for diving holidays in remote places.

We (a mixed group of paddlers, divers and other non-diving family members) departed Brisbane on Friday morning 23rd August. Early afternoon found us sweating at Honiara, transferring to the domestic terminal for our flight by Twin Otter to Seghe, a small service town on stunning Marovo Lagoon, the largest saltwater lagoon in the world. From Seghe we transferred by boat in a heavy tropical downpour to Uepi Dive Resort on the north eastern edge of the lagoon (the travel agent had warned us we would get wet, all part of the adventure).

Over two nights in our beautiful bungalows crafted from local materials, we familiarised ourselves with the resort facilities, swimming, snorkelling, eating delicious meals and having briefings and getting kitted out for our paddling trip.



the resort) and then to stay in guest houses in local villages for the next two nights. We had a local guide, John, a fantastic guy, whose regular job was in the office at the resort but he was also a strong paddler with a wealth of local knowledge, having grown up in one of the villages nearby. He interpreted pisin for us, liaised with the locals and explained things when the cultural gap got rather wide.

There were moderate headwinds (around ten knots) the first two days but with a myriad of islands available, on day one we were able to weave our way along the atoll, keeping in the lee of the wind wherever possible. Brightly coloured coral everywhere damped down the swell on the outer edge of the atoll.



The resort's Sea Lion plastic boats were very stable and seaworthy, although my hatches were definitely not water tight: luckily I brought some dry bags of my own for small items. Other people brought their own pfd's and paddles, but I was happy with the resort gear; it was all good quality, and dry bags were available if needed. We didn't have to carry food or camping gear, but we were carrying a cargo of gift items suitable for the children in the villages that we were to visit.

The plan was to camp out the first night (supported from



It was very rare that we scraped our boats. Tides were equable, insignificant even, and there always seemed to be enough water to float over the top. The heavily forested atoll islands offered few landing places apart from occasional palm fringed coral sand beaches.

Our night camping out at Sambulo was dry and bug free, although we were all taking antimalarials as a precaution. Next day our group of eleven crossed the open lagoon southeast-ward in choppy conditions towards the larger volcanic island of Vangunu. Here villages were dotted all along the coast. People seemed to be living very simply, almost a subsistence lifestyle; there were no roads, they got around in dugouts, which is how the children went to school.

The visits to the villages of Mbisuana and Chea were heartwarming, and eyeopening. Not even the heavy tropical rain on day three dampened the spirits or the welcome. People were very generous with us, but the comfortable but basic facilities were an education in themselves of living conditions far removed from our own – no electricity, no refrigeration, and a very different diet from what we are used to.

The Solomon Islands is one of the world's poorest countries, in terms of its per capita cash income. But cash is needed to send their kids away to secondary school, for example, so I felt good that my tourist dollar was being distributed liberally around the lagoon. Tourism seemed to me by far the more sustainable option than selling off their valuable timber in shonky, environmentally damaging logging operations.



I suppose each day we paddled about twelve kilometres, but with so much to see and experience, and in hot windless conditions on day four, this was enough. We returned in elated mood to the resort for two more nights and filled our last day Thursday with yet more snorkelling (couldn't get enough of it), buying up intricate wood carvings at an artisans market and doing a bit of rolling training with Craig. We even found time for some fishing, and Cheryl and Craig hauled in a huge GT (some sort of trevally I believe).

Retracing our steps on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> August went without any hitches. We were now much more relaxed about the conditions at Seghe airport - the dogs and chooks on the runway, the shack that is the 'terminal', the dividing up of the group into separate flights and staging of the flights etc, all of which had given us pause on the way out

There is much more to tell, but why should I spoil the surprise and delight of discovery for any of you who choose to do this trip in future years? A very grateful thank you to Craig and the team at Uepi resort for making it such a memorable trip.

By Robyn Graham

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