

Off the Beaten Track – Western Province, Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands

Tracy Provost

So, you want a special holiday but like to stay connected to kids and education? Have you ever considered the Solomon Islands? In the Western Province on Marovo Lagoon visitors are infrequent, in the villages at least. It isn't cheap like Bali or Fiji but you can make a real difference with your investment of time, dollars and energy.

There are all sorts of ways you can contribute to the local community.

Do you love fishing? Why not try your hand at catching the big one? Or just happy with whatever comes up? Tuna and wahoo abound. Other species often caught include Rainbow Runner, Mahi Mahi, Spanish Mackerel, Trevally, Sailfish and Marlin to mention a few. There are spinner dolphins, and if you're lucky, manta rays, orcas and sperm whales to see. Locals can't afford the fuel for the boats so villagers, children included, are fish-deprived despite living in a fishing paradise. By hiring a boat and driver and paying for fuel you get to catch fresh fish to eat and feed the village. Take your own gear. It's a good feeling....



Not into fishing? No worries. Snorkelling and SCUBA that surpasses what the Great Barrier Reef has to offer is available in many locations in Marovo Lagoon. Spearfishing too, if that's your thing. The reef is amazing, and if you pick where to stay cleverly, on your doorstep you will find soft corals, hard corals, lots of fish, seahorses, shoals, drop offs, shallows and the deep. There is so much to see, so bring your snorkelling gear (SCUBA gear is available for hire if too heavy to bring). The lagoon also has a concentration of World War II relics for the history buffs. It is also possible to visit the last head hunting village in the Pacific for a cultural experience not to be missed.

Every dollar you spend allows the families employed to pay for high school and post school education. A visit here is a great way to have fun and help the locals too.



Why not visit a school or volunteer to help?

All high schools in the lagoon are boarding schools. Kids get two meals of rice and vegetables (which they grow in the school gardens) each day. Fish once per week if they are lucky, or if someone drops some in for them. School generally runs from 8-10 and 11-2 daily. Gardens are tended in the afternoons. Meals are at 10 and 6.

English is the students' third language. Visits from past and current teachers are especially welcomed. Expect a computer problem every visit (everything is salt affected and no money is allocated to maintenance). Don't plan to stay an hour – plan a day at least! (You'll find an Aussie curriculum in place in most schools.)

Primary school is usually local to large villages. Students paddle to and from when they can't walk. Teachers are moved every three years. Again, all lessons are in English, a long way from native Marovo languages. Year 6 students sit an English-based test before graduating to high school. Visits to these schools are precious and highly valued. Take books to read, paper for kids to write on or create with, and pencils to draw with. Teachers love gifts of stamps and coloured chalk!

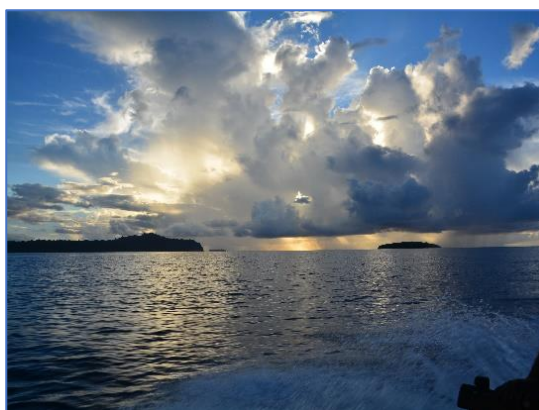
Each year in May and November Medical Marovo visits nine villages in the lagoon with a team of volunteers. Doctors examine up to 250 patients in a day and services include pathology, diet advice, eye tests, exercise advice and pharmacy. This is the only medical support available in the lagoon currently apart from a couple of nursing clinics. Surgery is organised and happens over the two week period when doctors and nurses are there. Past teachers can join the team putting systems in place and helping ensure every patient receives all their services in a single day. Diabetes and hypertension are big here.

So where to stay and how to get there?

Choose a village stay or a lodge in a village for maximum community involvement and maximum impact of your dollar. These places charge per person for full board. You'll get a mix of local and western food. Lots of fruit and veg and seafood in the meals provided. Local foods are supplemented by what comes by ferry.

We like The Wilderness Lodge (closed for maintenance until October 2019), Minado Lodge and Driftwood. Minado is best for SCUBA diving and snorkelling, Driftwood for spearfishing and Wilderness for fishing and snorkelling. Minado is developing their fishing expertise. Matakuri was great but seems to now be closed. All have Facebook pages.

Expect an adventure to get there and back. Solomon Air flies from Brisbane to Honiara (3hrs) and connects to domestic flights to Seghe (1hr). As island time is apparent in all walks of life here, expect flights within an hour of schedule most of the time (they can be early or late). Depending on where you stay it is then up to 2½ hrs in an open longboat. Don't be surprised if you arrive after dark. The boat captains are excellent.



Alternately you can go out to the islands on the ferry (about 10-12hrs). If you do choose the ferry, expect company, even if you book the cabin. People sleep wherever there is deck space. Lodges will send their longboat to meet the Ferry.

A truly rewarding amazing holiday destination off the beaten track!

Contributor details

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Tracy was Principal of Ulladulla High School from 2003-2013. Since retiring from the Department she has been involved in a variety of activities including developing a wellbeing student diary, NSW SES leadership and travel off the beaten track. Tracy is a Life Member of the NSWSPC and continues her interest in learning.

