

island adventures

Wogasia Spear Festival

Fiona Harper travels to Santa Catalina island to witness the Wogasia Spear Festival.

The intrusive cackle of a chicken penetrates my slumber. It's not the only sound to infiltrate – Aorigi village is anything but quiet. Loud music emanates from a hut nearby, a mix of tinkly island-style crooning and 80's hits. Villagers come and go drawing water from the communal well located a few metres away. Pre-dawn, the church bell rings out from the neighbouring South Seas Evangelical Church daily as the faithful are called to prayer. Dogs bark. Then they fight. Children cry. Crowing roosters cock-a-doodle-do 24 hours a day. At least they keep their distance. Unlike the brazen hen which is strutting around near my head, cackling in glee.

Festivities marking the start of Wogasia (pronounced Wog-arse-ee-ah) Spear Festival are anticipated to start around midnight so I'm catching some mid-afternoon rest in anticipation of 48 sleepless hours. The exact festival launch time is ambiguous, determined by stars and tide aligning. Village chiefs will make the call when 'the time is right'.

The homestay hut I'm billeted in, with hosts Greta and Joash, daughter Janet and grandson Joash Jr, is stifling. Sweat trickles in rivulets from my body, making sleep almost impossible anyway. I've come to Santa Catalina Island, Makira Province to join the annual festival to celebrate fertility, friendship and the promise and hopes of

a successful future yam crop. It's the biggest event of the year in these parts and everybody gets involved.

Welcomed by Chief Silas, the Chairman of Santa Catalina Development Association, he says "Welkam, welkam, welkam to our visitors. The facilities we offer you are the best we have, please bear with us. You are amongst the sweetest people in the Solomons, almost as sweet as their coconuts."

It's true, villagers have opened their meagre homes and their generous hearts, welcoming us warmly.

Post-midnight, Greta walks me to the village square where about 30 conch shells are removed from their shrine, marking the start of Wogasia festivities. The haunting call of the conch is the cue for villagers to fiercely beat the ground with palm frond spikes. It sounds like firecrackers exploding as beaters run through the darkness dodging flaming coconut husks being tossed at them along with foul-smelling liquid concoctions. It's a way of seeking atonement for wrongs over the past year. Beaters are then tossed into the ocean, now cleansed of their former troubles.

The entire village amasses on another beach awaiting dawn when the first spear fight begins. The anticipation and excitement is palpable. Betel nut is passed around amidst much chewing, gnashing and spitting. Teenagers

Young boys painted head to toe in orange clay scramble through the forest, rushing down the mountain with spears aloft while men chant prayers to their ancestors.



Above: Young girls covered in banana leaves. Opposite page: initiated men throw spears and children blow conch shells.

Spears are tossed into the ocean symbolising settled grievances as bad spirits are carried away on the outgoing tide.

are permitted to approach one another during this time to show interest in one another, in a sort of chaperoned courting ritual otherwise discouraged.

As golden sunlight hits the beach the first spear fight begins. Males from opposing tribes hurl wooden spears at each other to settle grievances while demonstrating their masculinity, cheered on by villagers rooting for their loved ones.

There are a hundred or more warriors tossing spears at each other. Most miss their mark. The fight lasts for about 15 minutes before Chief Matthew calls time.

Returning to Greta and Joash's hut, over breakfast of biscuit and black tea they explain the day's activities. The women will ascend the central plateau to collect yams and prepare costumes made from banana leaf. Young girls will dig up clay from a secret spot which boys and men will use for body painting.

"We'll go up the mountain at 9 o'clock," Greta tells me. The timing however is irrelevant as I'm the only one who has a

watch. It's close to 11am by the time we join other women already up there. Ladies are seated on the forest floor stripping banana fronds that young girls have collected. They sing in a high-pitched chant, invariably collapsing into laughter at the end of each round, their songs inspired by hope and promise for a successful upcoming yam season. The yam crop provides the basis for sustenance and is vital for their health and wellbeing.

Descending from the mountain a few hours later the women form an orderly line balancing woven baskets on their heads. Young boys painted head to toe in orange clay scramble through the forest, rushing down the mountain spears aloft while men chant prayers to their ancestors. The rhythmic hum of conch shell bugling sets the pace for a mock raid through the village.

The second spear fight takes place between men and initiated boys. This one is much more intense as spears fly through the air with serious intent. Before too much damage

is done however Chief Matthew calls it off, all is forgiven and warriors pay their respects at the kastom house.

Girls with their identity concealed beneath striking costumes made entirely from banana leaves parade into the village square. Toes poking out beneath a sea of swishing green are the only clue these mesmerising creatures are human.

Festivities reach a crescendo as conch shells are handed over to women who rush into the sea, giving a final cacophony of conch shell blasts.

Spears are tossed into the ocean symbolising settled grievances as bad spirits are carried away on the outgoing tide.

I don't realise until later, but by virtue of visiting during this significant festival I'm initiated into my hosts' tribe. By the time I leave I'm ostensibly related to half the island.

We celebrate family, friendship and the promise of a new yam season, feasting on communal pudding made from coconut flesh topped with smoked fish.

Sharing village life on a small island devoid of electricity, running water and flushing toilets has its challenges. What villagers lack in facilities, however, they make up for in friendship.

Smiles are offered freely and strangers are welcomed warmly. Meals consist predominantly of root vegetables: yam, pumpkin and taro along with pana (otherwise known as breadfruit). Bananas and coconuts are in abundance. Wayward chickens and roosters also make it into the pot occasionally.

Don't let the lack of modern conveniences deter you though – living with village people is a rare opportunity to enjoy low impact grassroots travel. Tourist dollars also make a significant contribution to villagers who have few income earning opportunities. •

More information Solomon Island Visitor Bureau and book with Solomon Airlines at www.flysolomons.com