Solomon Islands: the hottest holiday destination in 2016

by Fiona Harper

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Hot on the heels of William and Kate's royal visit, travel writer *Fiona Harper* recommends you clock onto Solomon Islands time soon!

Worshipping celebrity culture has never been my thing. Nor do I understand monarchists' obsession with Royalty beyond a mild interest when members of the Windsor family grace Australian soil with their presence. In reality, their presence, or lack of, in many Australians' eyes is of little consequence.

So it's a little disconcerting to find Kate and William and their private habits dominating my thoughts in the Solomon Islands.

Drifting off to sleep to a soundtrack of swishing coconut palms I wonder which side of the bed William prefers. Plumping one of seven pillows beneath my head I imagine Kate doing the same thing.

Looking in the bathroom mirror I see Kate's face. I even think about William sitting on the royal throne for his morning constitution, undoubtedly taking in the same view I do of tropical trees and pandanus palms, a wooden dugout canoe tethered to its roots.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Did they take advantage of the private outdoor shower to wash away royal sweat, I wonder. Who wouldn't? Showering outdoors in the tropics is one of life's secret pleasures. Speaking of secrets, Prince George's birth date in July 2013 is no mystery but his conception date remains a closely guarded secret. You do the math…

If romance was in the air at Tavanipupu Island Resort during September of 2012, well, who could blame them? The Royal Suite is just the sort of place loved-up couples adore. It's one of nine thatch -roofed bungalows dotted around a former coconut plantation on a tiny island in Marau Sound.

Norwegian traders purchased the island from village elders in the 19th century in exchange for a smoking pipe, ten shillings and a musket, which seems like a screaming bargain. New management took over the 1970's-built resort in late 2014 and are giving it a spruce up. Not that it needs much: Kate and Wills seemed perfectly happy and relaxed on island time.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Snorkelling is one of the main attractions here but equally popular is swinging in a hammock strung between coconut palms. Or sitting on the jetty, legs swinging freely, watching fish dart amongst kaleidoscopic coral. It's pretty relaxed. As is much of the Solomons actually.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Approximately one hour's flight from Honiara on the southeastern tip of Guadalcanal, Tavanipupu Island is one of almost 1,000 islands in the Solomons. Known as the Hapi Isles, the archipelago is a treasure trove of natural beauty kissed by a sparkling ocean. Scuba divers and snorkellers have always known this. As have surfers, finding their own waterlogged paradise with so many reef breaks most don't even have heard.

Marovo and Vonavona Lagoons are much-photographed media tarts but there are countless lagoons and islands equally as spectacular. Saltwater the clarity of gin is the main attraction for water babies, with extensive gardens clamouring for attention with their 'look at me' rainbow-coloured corals.

Fish species, (some never recorded elsewhere) come in ridiculous shades of blue, from iridescent turquoise to the deepest cobalt. Purple staghorn that rivals eggplant for colour intensity contrasts against sunshine yellow boulder corals.

The water temperature is marginally cooler than body temperature creating an almost embryonic sensation of floating in fluid yet hovering in space.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

The Solomon Islands' secrets are being shared amongst travellers keen to visit the next holiday 'hot spot'.

Qantas recently announced a codeshare agreement with Solomon Airlines between Honiara and Brisbane and Sydney. Other international codeshare agreements and expanded domestic flights are in the pipeline.

The Solomons though are unlikely to become as tourist-heavy as neighbouring Fiji. Last year around 20,000 visitors touched down at Honiara International Airport, easily less than half the number of visitors Fiji receives each month. Indeed, Solomon Island travellers arrive almost by invitation only. Sssshhh, don't tell too many people!

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Villages scattered far and wide are dabbling their toes in tourism, building waterfront homestay huts and welcoming travellers to enjoy village life. Segara village claims to have the best beach in the Solomons – they may be right!

Women weave coconut palm frond baskets for use much as the western world use plastic containers and disposable plates - though the Solomons' version is far more sustainable. Who needs tinfoil when banana leaves do the job admirably: leaves are used to wrap fish, yams and potatoes before being placed beneath fire-heated stones in earth ovens.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Fishermen catch the family dinner from timber canoes hewn from tree trunks using hand lines, wound around driftwood. If they're clever enough to catch more than the village needs, they'll sell their catch to waterfront hotels. Mouth-watering crayfish (or lobster, call it what you will) are in abundance and appear on every menu no matter whether breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

The Solomons remain much as they have done for decades with hotels and resorts pretty low key and friendly. There's plenty of opportunity to check into a beachfront bungalow, whether luxury or simple and get to know the locals.

The aforementioned Tavanipupu Island Resort is at the luxury end of the scale, while quaint Oraveo Cottages are positioned on their own private island in Western Province. Completely rebuilt after the 2007 tsunami, the main bungalow sits over the water while others are built high on stilts among the treetops. Owners Naomi and Patson are hospitable hosts while their talented offspring provide entertainment in the form of acoustic guitars and song. The vibe is relaxed and welcoming.

Image credit: Fiona Harper

Fatboys Resort is about a 15 minute boat ride from Gizo though it feels a million miles away from civilisation. Arriving by boat from the island airstrip, serenity descends long before you set foot on the overwater restaurants deck. Jutting about 100m into Vono Vono Lagoon the water is so clear it appears non-existent with giant clams competing for attention with colourful schools of tropical fish.

Check into beachfront bungalows or an overwater 'honeymoon suite' and slip into island time. Take a day trip across the lagoon to famous Kennedy Island where the future US president hid from Japanese during WWII after his own vessel was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. The crew from Fatboys will put on a seafood spread Kennedy and his companions could only dream of.

I'm sure if Kate and William were mere commoners like the rest of us they would have tossed their watches away and happily succumbed to Solomon Islands time.

Bathed in tropical sunshine year-round and a few hours flight from Brisbane, we're tipping the Solomon Islands to be the 'hot' holiday destination for Australian travellers in 2016. Get there soon.

More information: Visit Solomon Islands

Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventures. Follow her at Travel Boating Lifestyle

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