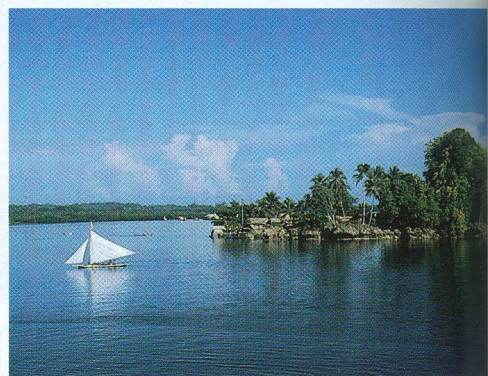


Magical realism

Belief in spirit sharks and plants that can make you invisible are part of daily life in Solomon Islands. **Paul Miles** returns to the South Pacific archipelago in search of enlightenment



HOW MANY LANGUAGES in the world have a word for the sound two trees make when they rub together in the wind? The language of Gela – one of about 80 languages in the South Pacific nation of Solomon Islands – does. It is *gaitangi*.

Many years ago, a young woman gave birth in the woods. She named her offspring Gaitangi, for that was all she could hear: the trees rubbing in the wind. There was no crying from her newborn; he was silent, grey and disturbingly limbless. Gaitangi was a shark. Sobbing, the woman released him into the winding river, from where he swam out to the reefs and waves.

Until about 20 years ago, Gaitangi still answered to the chief of Takola village. The old man, waving a piece of ginger, would stand at the sea's edge and call 'Gaitangi' with solemn incantations, and the shark would come right up to the beach to be stroked and fussed over. He was recognisable by his fin, patterned like the bracelet his mother had given him.

The old chief is now dead, buried in the sandy ground in front of the building of

leaf and bamboo that is St Mark's church. No-one calls Gaitangi now. The people of Takola aren't even sure whether he is still alive. Areas of the reef surrounding the small island are still reserved for his use, just in case. He is their guiding spirit, although they wouldn't like to call him that now that they are Anglicans.

Takola, with its houses made from rainforest trees, its sandy ground dotted with brightly coloured shrubs and its equally colourful stories, is typical of many villages in Solomon Islands. As on many of the thousand islands in the archipelago, there are no roads and no electricity.

Solomon Islands is a quiet, little-known backwater of a country, which is surprising, really, when you consider its size – its land mass is bigger than the Fiji islands. But once it played a central part in world events. During World War II, the main island of Guadalcanal was the setting for fierce fighting in the battle for the Pacific Ocean. More than 40,000 soldiers were killed, mostly Japanese. Ridges and beaches were re-christened 'Bloody' and 'Red'. Solomon Islanders helped the US forces,

Left, Takola village on Mana Island in Solomon Islands' Central Province. Top, Lau Lagoon, Malaita Island. Above, the market in Honiara, capital of Solomon Islands

acting as 'coast-watchers' in return for bottles of Coca Cola or tins of meat – rare cargo in a world of natural produce.

Today, most of the 400,000 or so islanders still live a semi-subsistence lifestyle. The climate is hot and sultry and the volcanic land is fertile: food falls from the forest and leaps from the sea. Homelessness and hunger are unknown, but life isn't easy. The people work hard, carving wooden canoes and paddling over the reefs to fish.

Fish is cooked in ovens of hot stones, along with sweet potatoes wrapped in leaves, served with the leaves of an edible hibiscus, unromantically called 'slippery

Malaitan children.
Below, boats moored
on Honiara's beach



cabbage' and boiled with coconut milk. There is little use of herbs or spices and no intricate presentation. It is solid, filling fare.

I lived in Honiara, Solomons' capital, for five years, and it is simple, village life that for me holds the country's magic. There is diving and bird-watching, but that's all. There is great potential for tourism, but never more than a few thousand visitors arrive each year. Of those, maybe only a few hundred are 'tourists'.

While there are several village-style guesthouses and a few dive lodges, especially in picturesque Western Province with its myriad islands and lagoons, there are no large resorts. This is not the place to come if you want to sip a cocktail by the lagoon while you listen to ukulele-playing natives in grass skirts. Solomons has all those elements, but unlike other Pacific Ocean destinations, in Solomons they are the genuine article, not tourist trappings.

A few people still do wear grass skirts or bark loin cloths. Youths fashion ukuleles and strum tunes for their own enjoyment. There are lagoons, including the longest in the world. And the cocktail? Well,



there's a local soft drink called 'cocktail'. Who needs manicured paradise?

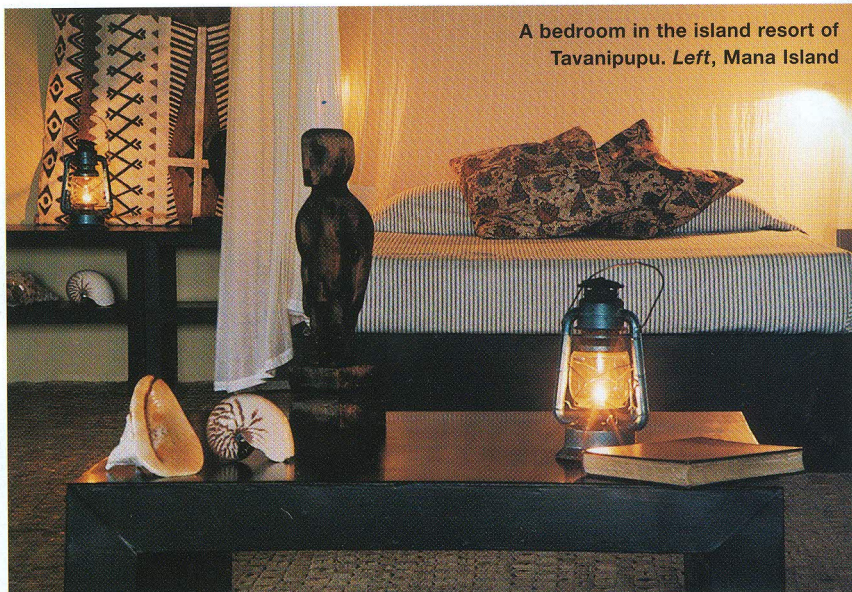
The nearest you may get to that is the boutique resort of Tavanipupu, a small island on the easternmost tip of Guadalcanal. Here, Englishman Dennis Bellotte and his late partner Keith Pascal carved their dream from an old plantation, once owned by Norwegian traders who, back in the 19th century, bought the island in exchange for some firearms and settled to trade pearl shell and copra. The six steep-roofed chalets set among the coconut palms, although not in the league of an Amanresort, are beautifully designed and furnished with ethnic *objets*

d'art. Lighting is a mix of solar-powered halogen spots and kerosene lamps. Meals are uncomplicated, made from fresh produce sold to the resort by local villagers: live mud crabs trussed up in vines, shiny Spanish mackerel, big juicy pineapples.

The landscaped grounds are full of orchids and water lillies. Tavanipupu is now 10 years old. It is 'lived in', homely. The leather on the chairs is cracking, the sago-leaf roofs are weathered; there are spiders in the shower. Perhaps its biggest claim to fame is being the 'favourite island' of castaway Lucy Irvine, who used to visit during her year-long stint on Pigeon, an even more remote island in Solomons.

Getting to Tavanipupu involves a 12-hour journey from Honiara balancing on oil drums in a small cargo ship (or, if you're lucky, a four-hour trip in a motorised canoe.) There used to be flights that would make the 30-minute journey from Honiara and land on the grassy airstrip of the mainland near Tavanipupu, but that was before 'the troubles'.

For a brief period between 1998 and 2000, Solomons, once known as 'the ➤



A bedroom in the island resort of Tavanipupu. Left, Mana Island

Days pass paddling in dugout canoes or hiking through the rainforest with a guide who points out leaves used to make a maiden love you

► happy isles,' entered a period of upheaval, a bad dream from which it has only recently awoken. Ethnic tension between settlers from another island and the indigenous people of Guadalcanal erupted into a minor civil war. Otherwise charming, innocent youths – some of them my friends and neighbours from years before – made guns from piping and umbrella springs, dug up World War II ammunition and shot each other. Up to 200 people were killed. A domestic flight was hijacked and the plane destroyed. No tourists were ever harmed, but the Foreign Office warned people not to visit. Now, after much negotiation, peace agreements have been signed. There is an international peace-monitoring team; guns are being handed in. There is the souvenir T-shirt. On the ship, 'Ethnic tension survivor '98–2000' is emblazoned across a fellow passenger's chest. I ask him his name. 'Fadrick' he says, his teeth stained from chewing betel nut. He asks my name. 'Fall?' he queries. I realise, that in fact, his name is Patrick and he speaks with the Guadalcanal accent, which transposes p's and f's.

'Solomon hem peaceful bak nao [Solomons is peaceful again now],' he says in the lingua franca of Pijin, as we sit on the roof of the ship watching the tree-lined shore glow in the golden evening

sun. To escape the fighting, his family fled from their village on the coast to live in the interior where they survived on wild yams, opossums and edible ferns.

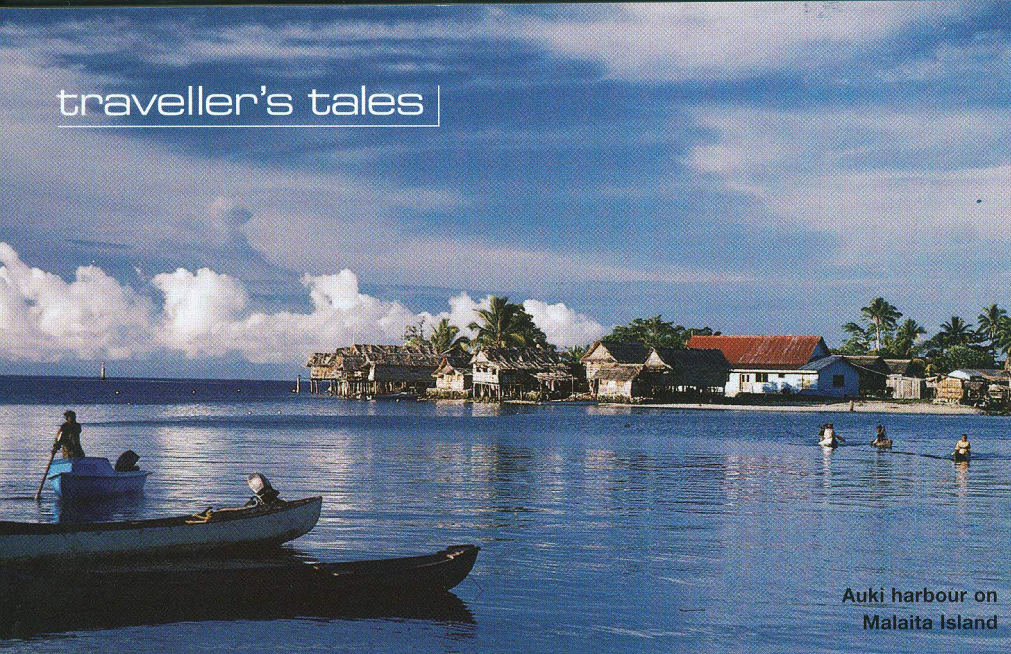
'*Hem gud tumas iu kam visitim Solomon* [It's very good you've come to visit Solomon Islands],' says Patrick. '*Mifala laikem tumas olgeta turist. Hem gud fo mitim olgeta ovasis pipol* [We really like tourists. It's good to meet overseas people],' he says, offering me a betel nut which I decline. He tells me that the islanders used to sell fish, vegetables and the baskets they made to tourists. '*Iu mas talem olgeta fren blong iu fo kam visit tu* [You must tell your friends to come and visit too],' he implores.

As well as Tavanipupu, with its colonial elegance, there are several locally owned and run lodges around the islands. Solomon Islanders have been surprised to learn that tourists prefer a leaf house to a tin roof. Sometimes, with the assistance of overseas aid projects, families have gone into the tourism business. One such 'resort' is Maravagi, a two-hour ride in an outboard-motor-powered, fibre-glass boat from Honiara. If you're lucky, as the sun paints the morning clouds orange, the sea will be as flat as a sheet of polythene, punctured only by flying fish shooting out of the water and dolphins swimming in the bow wave. If you're unlucky, spumy

monsters will be crashing against the canoe and you will be fearing for your life.

Although the chalets at Maravagi do have leaf roofs, unfortunately no one gave Joyce and Mathias Sake, the local couple who built the place, any other advice. No one told them that tourists like a veranda on their chalet from which to sit and look at the beautifully blue sea, or that tourists don't care for strip-lighting, lino floors and hand basins too small to use. Still, the flowery plastic tablecloths and Sacred Heart clock could pass as fashionable kitsch. Maravagi is the place where people go to escape the scruffiness of Honiara, rather than to luxuriate in chic surroundings. Accommodation aside, it is the beauty and tranquillity of the small island, with its sea-gardens of fluorescent soft corals shaped like old ladies' flowery swimming caps, that is the main attraction. That and the charm and hospitality of your hosts who tell stories of the continuing hunt by hi-tech treasure-seekers for wartime bullion supposedly buried on a nearby island. Apt, then, that Solomon Islands was so called because its European 'discoverer' – the Spaniard Alvaro de Mendaña – thought the country so beautiful it must be the source of King Solomon's mines, and came looking for gold.

For unadulterated village style (with verandahs) there are many small lodges in Marovo Lagoon – at over 100km, the longest lagoon in the world. Marovo has been a hotbed of activity for environmental organisations working with local the people to protect against international companies who want to cut down the rainforest. Small-scale tourism has been one way in which people have been able to earn an income and conserve the land. For work and pleasure, I have visited nearly every lodge around the volcanic ►



Auki harbour on
Malaita Island

Malaita Island is one area of the country where belief in tradition and magic is particularly strong and people have resisted Christianity

► forested islands of Marovo. Several are built on stilts over the clear water of the lagoon. At night, the phosphorescence looks as if all the constellations in the inky sky have fallen into the deep. Sleep comes easily as you listen to the sea lapping under your chalet and a silky warm breeze blows through the sago-leaf shutters. There is the sound of waves breaking on the distant reef, the rustle of wind in the coconut palms and the flapping of flying foxes in the mango trees. I'd never seen the moon rise or noticed that a sunrise does sometimes project cartoon-like sunbeams across the sky until I'd been to Marovo Lagoon.

Days pass in adventure, paddling in dugout canoes or hiking through the rainforest with a guide from the village who points out leaves used to poison fish, or to make a maiden love you, and roots to enlarge your manhood.

The medicinal and magical properties of the forest are undisputed. During my most recent visit, there was a story in the sports pages of the national paper, the *Solomon Star*. It concerned the half-marathon held in Honiara. The contestant who had come second had been seen by more than one witness getting on a bus during the race, which he denied. His explanation for the amazing burst of speed that propelled him to second place? He simply stopped to eat a magic leaf that made him disappear. He then reappeared near the finishing line. The article did not ridicule his version of events and, as far as I know, he kept his trophy.

One area of the country where belief in tradition and magic is particularly strong

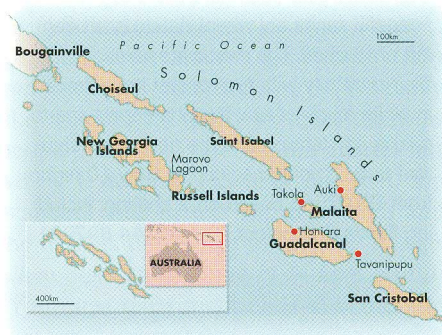
and people have resisted Christianity is Malaita Island. A young man, Ronnie Butala, has built a small lodge in the bush so it is possible to stay there as a tourist.

A few years ago I had, 'for the experience', chosen to go by boat – a six-hour crossing on a grubby ship – to Malaita's capital, a Wild West kind of town called Auki. From there it was a further eight hours or so bumping along on the back of a truck, under a full moon, squashed up

with other passengers balancing on sacks of rice. Finally, at the end of the road, a motorised canoe took us to Ronnie's village of Sinaraggu, from where we would walk for an hour up to the lodge. Built from wood and sago leaves, it is small and very basic but has splendid views over the tops of coconut trees to the lagoon.

The local Kwaio people still wear loincloths; the women are bare-breasted and smoke homemade pipes. Pigs are prized possessions and live with villagers in their dark, smoky, bamboo-and-leaf houses. But traditional culture is tough on women who are regarded as 'unclean' and able to contaminate anything from a house to a water supply. 'I have to sacrifice a pig if a woman pees in the village or if a girl who has a period comes here,' said an old man in Maburu, half-an-hour's steep walk above Ronnie's lodge. Women, including tourists, have to take off all their clothes before going to the pit toilet outside the village.

Solomon Islands is not somewhere to go if all you want is style and comfort, or sometimes even basic facilities, but it is a magical place. A place where men can disappear, women give birth to sharks and there truly is gold in the hills. There are as many stories to tell as there are islands. ①



GETTING TO SOLOMON ISLANDS

British Airways (0845 773 3377) flies twice a week from Heathrow to Brisbane, via Singapore, and to Honiara on Solomon Airlines, from £1,275 inclusive in February

Where to stay

Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel (00 677 20071; fax: 23942; e-mail: kitano@mendana.com.sb) is the only seafront hotel in Honiara. It has air conditioning and satellite TV. Doubles from 385 Solomon Islands dollars (about £55)

Tavanipupu (reservations through GTS, see Tour operators). Doubles from about £50

Maravagi (00 677 29065; e-mail: maravagi@solomon.com.sb). Doubles from about £50

Yandina Plantation Resort (00 677 21779; fax: 21785; e-mail: yandinaresort@bigpond.com.au) is the newest dive resort in the largely uninhabited Russell Islands. It also offers village tours. Doubles from about £80

Village Lodges No-frills accommodation, bookable at the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (see below) from about £10 with meals.

Tour operators

Trans Pacific Holidays (01293 567722) offers a 12-night package, with return flights from Heathrow via Fiji, four nights at Tavanipupu, two at Maravagi and five in Marovo Lagoon, for £1,990 per person based on two sharing.

GTS (00 262 677 22587; fax: 26184; e-mail: gts@welkam.solomon.com.sb) can arrange stays at Tavanipupu.

Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (visitors@welkam.solomon.com.sb) organises accommodation and transport to Maravagi and other village lodges.

Useful information

For general information, contact

South Pacific Tourism Organisation (020 8741 6082; www.spto.org). Malaria is endemic so get advice from your GP. Take a good first-aid kit, sun-block, a hat and sandals to avoid cuts from coral.