

SOLOMON ISLANDS



MV Bilikiki

**South Pacific Marine Wildlife Cruise
28 Oct to 7 Nov 2020
Led by Dr. Charles Anderson**

SOLOMON ISLANDS

A marine wildlife adventure, 28 Oct to 7 Nov 2020

SUMMARY

Join us for a 10-night / 11-day South Pacific cruise through the Solomon Islands in Oct-Nov 2017. On board our exclusively chartered live-aboard vessel, MV *Bilikiki*, we will voyage westwards from Honiara, passing rugged jungle-clad islands, watching out for dolphins and whales, and anchoring most nights in sheltered bays and lagoons. We will enjoy time out at sea each day, searching for and savouring the cetaceans. But there will be time for visits ashore for birding and other wildlife, and to visit traditional local villages. And there will definitely be time for snorkelling on the magnificent coral reefs.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOLOMONS

The Solomon Islands are an archipelago of over 900 islands, covering some 2 million square kilometers of ocean. They lie in the south-western tropical Pacific, northeast of Australia and immediately to the east of Papua New Guinea.

The larger islands themselves are rugged volcanic outcrops, carpeted with lush tropical rainforest. The forests support a rich birdlife, including many endemics, as well as a wealth of smaller creatures including birdwing butterflies and beautiful dragonflies. Many of the smaller islands are reef cays and raised reefs. And as for the reefs themselves, the Solomon Islands lie within the Coral Triangle, the centre of global marine biodiversity. The coral diversity is stupendous, and the reefs are thronged with colourful fishes: the snorkeling is world-class.

The local people are mostly Melanesian. While the capital, Honiara, is a bustling little metropolis, most locals live in traditional villages. Indeed, 85% of all land, and associated reef areas, have customary ownership by local villages, tribal and clan groupings. As a result, permission normally is required from village elders before going ashore or visiting the reefs. So island visits are an integral, and delightful, part of any cruise through the Solomons.

The Solomon Islands were a British colony, gaining independence in 1978. English remains the official language. During WW2 the Solomon Islands were the scene of fierce fighting. Battlefield sites near Honiara can be visited before or after the cruise. The sea immediately out from Honiara is still known as Iron Bottom Sound, in reference to the numerous ship and plane wrecks lying there. And we should have the opportunity to snorkel on at least one war wreck.

For more information on the Solomons, see:

www.visitsolomons.com.sb

DATES

The dates of our 2020 trip are:

Trip	Group size	Depart Honiara	Return Honiara	Nights	RRP from
Solomon Islands	18 max	28 Oct, Wed	7 Nov, Sat	10	£4599 pp

These dates are for *time on board*. Add on time at each end to include international flights. Our cruise starts and finishes at the capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal.

OUR BOAT

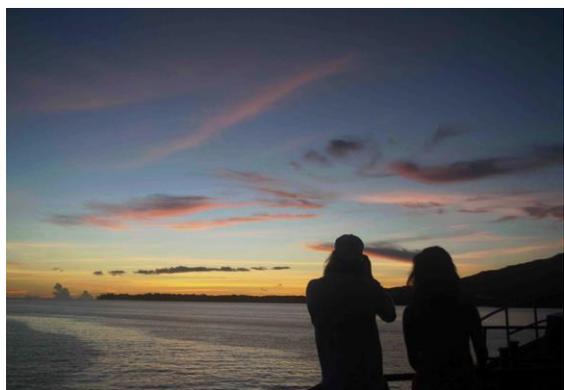
On this trip we travel through the Solomon Islands on board our exclusively chartered 38 m liveaboard vessel, **M.V. Bilikiki**. She is ideal for our needs and long-established in the islands. *Bilikiki* has a professional local crew of 12, including two experienced captains and three full-time cooks. There are 9 guest cabins; all are ensuite and air-conditioned.

Food on board is plentiful, and caters to a variety of tastes. Fresh fruits, vegetables and fish are purchased regularly from villagers who come alongside in canoes at some anchorages to sell their produce.

Snorkelling and shore excursions are carried out using the *Bilikiki's* two aluminium tenders (tinnies). While snorkelling, the tenders will stay on site and are ready to pick people up when they want. Note that *Bilikiki* is fully equipped for diving. It is therefore possible for anyone who is appropriately qualified to have a few dives during the course of this trip.

For more details of *Bilikiki*, see:

www.bilikiki.com



ITINERARY

Solomon Islands, 2020

Day 1. Wed 28 Oct. Start of cruise from Honiara. Board MV *Bilikiki* at Honiara port, in the afternoon. Depart and cruise through Iron Bottom Sound. After sunset tonight there will be an orientation talk, and on most other nights there will be a slide show. Note: You could arrive in Honiara today, but it is recommended that you arrive at least one day early.

Days 2-5. Thurs 29 Oct to Sun 1 Nov. Towards New Georgia. We will slowly work our way westwards, past the Russell Islands, out into the Solomon Sea, probably stopping at Mborukua Island (also known as Mary Island), and on towards the New Georgia Islands and Marovo Lagoon (the largest double barrier reef lagoon in the World). Along the way we will be constantly looking out for whales and dolphins, seabirds and other ocean life. There will be opportunities for snorkelling on the coral reefs most mornings and evenings, with shore excursions at some locations.

Day 6-10. Mon 2 to Fri 6 Nov. Towards Guadalcanal. We return towards Guadalcanal by a slightly different route to that taken heading out, with plenty more time for whale and dolphin watching. We will not use all the same anchorages, allowing us to snorkel on new reefs and perhaps also to visit different islands. We should arrive back near Honiara in the evening of our last full day.

Day 11. Sat 7 Nov. Disembark. After breakfast we will sadly have to disembark and transfer to accommodation ashore or to the International Airport for flights home.

Our itinerary while on board will be very flexible, to take account of local conditions and to make the most of cetacean encounters. In particular, because we have an exclusive charter we can take as much time as we like to investigate cetacean sightings, and do not have to rush to keep to a pre-defined schedule. The outline given above is therefore a guideline only, not a rigidly structured programme.

We will journey past far-flung islands, enjoying the scenery, and taking our time to watch dolphins, whales and seabirds. We will travel by day and anchor early most evenings in a sheltered spot. Depending on our location there should be opportunities for a snorkel or island visit at these times, using the *Bilikiki's* tenders. And after dark, far from city lights, the observation deck offers stunning views of the night sky. On some longer crossings we will make up time by cruising at night.

In summary, this promises to be a quite extraordinary wildlife cruise with cetacean encounters, magnificent coral reefs, lush tropical islands and warm, friendly local people.

NATURALIST

This trip will be led by Dr. Charles 'Chas' Anderson, a professional marine biologist who lives and works in the Maldives. He is an authority on both the cetaceans and fishes of the tropical Indo-pacific, and the pioneer of whale and dolphin watching in the region. In addition to cetaceans, Chas has a wide knowledge of other marine life including reef fishes and seabirds. Chas should be assisted by his wife Sue Anderson, who is a qualified nurse as well as an experienced and enthusiastic whale spotter, and is well known as a caring host.

The professional crew of the *Bilikiki* are Solomon Islanders who have a life-time's experience in these waters. They have an intimate knowledge of the reefs, currents and fishes of their country. Also onboard will be two dive guides who have a particular knowledge of local snorkelling sites and reef creatures.

CLIMATE

The Solomon Islands lie just south of the equator, so the climate is tropical. Local weather is dominated by the seasonal movements of the Equatorial Trough (or Intertropical Convergence Zone). October-November is a transition period, during which the Equatorial Trough passes over the Solomons, typically bringing calm and sunny conditions. However, the wind can occasionally pick up and bring showers. Temperatures typically reach 28-32°C during the day, dropping to about 24-26°C at night. Sea breezes make this quite comfortable, although when there is no wind it does feel humid. While snorkelling, sea temperatures are pleasantly warm (typically 27-28°C).

COST

Standard, ensuite twin/double cabin: £4599 per person sharing a cabin.

Includes: Accommodation and all meals on *MV Bilikiki*; teas and coffees; naturalist guide; transfers to boat from airport and nearby hotels and vice versa.

Does not include: International flights; any visa fees; insurance; bar bill; airport taxes; gratuities; personal items.

Payment schedule: To confirm your booking we will require a non-refundable deposit of £550 per person. The balance should be paid in two installments no later than seven and four months before departure. We reserve the right to impose a surcharge at cost in case of major fuel or foreign currency price increases.

SOLOMON ISLANDS WILDLIFE

Cetaceans

Although there has been relatively little cetacean research in the Solomon Islands, it has highlighted the splendid diversity and abundance of whale and dolphin species in and around the archipelago. Nevertheless, there is much still to be discovered. Two species that we will be looking out for especially are Omura's Whale (a little-known baleen whale which was only described in 2004, with the Solomon Islands being the type locality) and Deraniyagala's Beaked Whale (an even more elusive species, only recognized in 2014, with the first confirmed at-sea sighting during our 2017 Solomon Islands trip). Cetaceans we may see include:

Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>
Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Indo-pacific Bottlenose	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>
Fraser's dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>
Rough-toothed Dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>
Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>
Melon-headed whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>
Pygmy Killer Whale	<i>Feresa attenuata</i>
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Cuvier's beaked whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>
Longman's beaked whale	<i>Indopacetus pacificus</i>
Blainville's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>
Deraniyagala's beaked	<i>Mesoplodon hotaula</i>
Dwarf sperm whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>
Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>
Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
Omura's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera omurai</i>

Birds

While out with the whales and dolphins there will be plenty of opportunities for seabird watching. Many species have been recorded from the region. In addition to the expected tropical Terns, Boobies and Frigatebirds we will pay particular attention to the tubenoses, as there have been records of several rare species from this region.

As for land birds, there is a great diversity on the Solomon Islands, including many endemics and regional specialties. Among the more frequently sighted are Solomons Island Sea-eagle, Island Imperial-pigeon, Solomons Cockatoo, Cardinal Lory, Eclectus Parrot and Blyth's Hornbill.

Other Marine Life

While underway, in addition to whales and dolphins, we will undoubtedly see plenty of other marine life. Both flying fish and tuna are abundant and should be spotted regularly, as may Turtles. But a real highlight should be snorkelling on the magnificent coral reefs, which are alive with myriad colourful reef fishes.

VISAS

Nationals of the UK and several other countries do not require a visa for entry into the Solomon Islands. You will be issued with a permit on arrival, but you must be in possession of a passport valid for at least 6 more months; a return air-ticket; and sufficient funds for your stay. If you are not a UK citizen, see the website of the Solomon Islands Immigration Division to check visa requirements and application procedures:

http://www.commerce.gov.sb/Divisions/Immigration/Immigration_Requirements.htm

Depending on your route to the Solomons, you may be travelling via a country for which you require a visa. If you plan to travel through that country both outbound and return, you may require a multiple entry visa.

Australia: <http://www.border.gov.au/>

USA: <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/>

For all countries, do check the latest information. A useful place to start is:

UK FCO: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>



FLIGHT INFORMATION

You will need to arrange your own flights to Honiara in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands are on the other side of the World from the UK, so it is feasible to fly westward or eastward, or indeed to take a round-the-world flight. October is a moderately busy time for flights; do book early, especially for the best prices, and to secure a seat on the limited number of flights into Honiara.

The easiest way to reach the Solomon Islands is via Brisbane in Australia. From there it is a less-than 4-hour flight to Honiara. There are *many* options for flying to Brisbane. Scheduled airlines include **Qantas** (QF), **British Airways** (BA), **Singapore Airlines** (SQ), **Emirates** (EK), **Malaysian Airlines** (MH), **Thai Airways** (TG), **Cathay Pacific** (CX) and **Qatar Airways** (QR). There are flights from Brisbane to Honiara with **Solomon Airlines** (IE) currently on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, or with **Virgin Australia** (VA) on Monday, Tuesday and Friday.

If you are travelling from North America, there are flights to Honiara from Los Angeles via Brisbane or Fiji (Nadi International). From Fiji, **Solomon Airlines** has three flights a week, while **Fiji Airways** (FJ) offers a twice weekly service. There are also flights between Honiara and Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea.

We can board the *MV Bilikiki* from about 1600h on the first day. We should set sail soon after that. It is possible to arrive the day of departure, but I recommend arriving in Honiara at least one day early. That will allow time to recover from the flight, see something of the local area, and minimize the risk of arriving late and missing the boat.

We expect to return to Honiara port, during the evening of the penultimate day (6 Nov), possibly after dark. We will disembark after breakfast on the last day (7 Nov). Flights can be arranged for any time after about 10:00h that morning.

Airline timetables are available at:

www.flysolomons.com
www.virginaustralia.com
www.fijiairways.com

www.qantas.com.au
www.britishairways.com
www.singaporeair.com
www.malaysiaairlines.com
www.emirates.com
www.qatarairways.com
www.thaiairways.com
www.cathaypacific.com

The Solomon Islands are a long way from Europe, so if you have the time you might want to take advantage and enjoy one or more stopovers, either on the outward or return journey.