Solomon Islands Snorkeling Expedition

Exploring the eastern corner of the Coral Triangle with marine biologists
Lee Goldman and Ethan Daniels

December 10 - 20, 2016
The Solomon Islands, like few other places in the world, are beautiful examples of quiet, unaffected island life. Many of the villages throughout the islands exist in semi-isolation but are full of vibrant activity. Fishing, the primary source of food is performed by the men while the women tend to the family and home. Smiles are easy to come by, especially from the tireless children. The charm of the people is engaging for sure, and is equal only to the magic of the sea that surrounds them.

The reefs around the Solomon Islands are some of the healthiest and diverse in the world. The islands define the entire eastern tip of the Coral Triangle, a geographic term to describe the area that possesses the world’s highest levels of marine biodiversity. Each island group showcases a wealth of habitats and the beauty of the islands only add to the pageantry of reef life below. Furthermore, because of its geographical location, the islands have a variety of endemic or range-restricted fishes. White bonnet anemonefish and hybrid butterflyfishes are often a treat to see amongst the thousands of varieties of reef fishes that are common within the Coral Triangle. There is no hesitation when we say that the Solomons Islands continue to wow us each and every time we visit. It is why we keep going back!

Another reason to keep going back is the M/V Bilikiki, our expedition liveaboard. She is the perfect combination of style and comfort. The overall length for this departure is 11 days; 10 days on the boat and does not include a hotel night on either end of the cruise. Historically, daily flights arrive and depart in afternoon, thus a night in Honiara is not required.
The Solomons are a group of over 900 islands that cover roughly two million square kilometers of ocean (28,000 sq km (11,000 sq mi) of land) and stretch from about 6 degrees to almost 13 degrees south of the equator. The largest island, Guadalcanal, is also home to the capital, Honiara. The largely volcanic islands have been occupied for thousands of years, and generally left alone until the mid 1500’s when the Spanish made first contact. In the mid 1800’s, the United Kingdom established a protectorate over the country. During World War II, the islands played an important role for both the Japanese and Allied strategies for controlling the South Pacific and, as such, the area was subjected to numerous land and sea battles over the course of the war. One such battle, the Battle of Guadalcanal, was a particularly important and bloody campaign that began the change in momentum from Japanese expansion into the Pacific to retraction against a stronger Allied force. After the war, the Solomon Islands remained as a protectorate of England, but was finally given its independence in 1975. Today the area receives outside attention in the form of tourism. Many of the villages around the Solomon Islands remain an example of quiet, unaffected island life. Bamboo and thatch are the primary construction materials for houses and water transportation is via dug-out canoes. Villagers engage in subsistence fishing and wood-carving, the latter which is sold as tourist and collector items.
Weather and Water Conditions

Our tour area (see map above) is about nine degrees south of the equator and generally has good weather throughout the year. Air temperatures are usually in the lower 30s C (upper 80s F) during the day without much of a difference at night. Given the tropical climate, rainfall can be expected. Rain clouds often develop quickly, dump intense amounts of rain, but last for only a short period of time (sometimes only a few minutes) before the sun is shining once again. Water temperatures during this time of year average around 29º C (84º F).

Our Expedition

What makes our Solomon Islands snorkeling expeditions so successful is our knowledge of the area combined with a bit of flexibility, an important element in adventure travel. The general itinerary includes areas that, historically, have always delivered the best snorkeling experiences. The flexibility of our itinerary allows us to incorporate local weather, tides, and currents into our design so that we can visit these areas at the best possible times. Furthermore, we seamlessly budget in time to explore a new area or visit areas we have recently discovered. This approach results in a solid, proven itinerary that not only delivers fantastic snorkeling opportunities, but also promotes a sense of adventure and uniqueness.

Route: The expedition begins and ends in Honiara, Guadancanal, Solomon Islands.

Day 1 (Dec 10, 2016): Arrive in Honiara and transfer to our expedition boat, the Bilikiki. After our boat orientation, we begin our cruise to the Russell Islands.

Day 2 (Dec 11): The Russell Islands consist of two main islands with dozens of smaller satellite islands. The reef types vary from sheltered, shallow coral gardens to exposed fringing reefs. All of the reef types have several things in common: an amazing diversity and abundance of coral and reef fish. Some of the patches of coral are a mesmerizing cobalt blue while others are electric yellow.

Day 3 (Dec 12): Mary Island. This tiny island, located in open ocean between the Russell Islands and New Georgia Islands (Morovo Lagoon), provides us with a great opportunity to snorkel over exposed seaward reefs. Though the island does not have a true barrier reef, the fringing reefs, in some places just a few meters from shore, plunge quickly into the depths forming vertical walls that are completely covered with marine life. The reefs will easily capture our attention as we search for tiny nudibranchs or special treats like a species of coral hermit crab (right) known only from the Solomon Islands or the red-spotted blenniella. Looking out into the blue, we will see large schools of bumphead parrotfish, barracudas, and snappers. Several different species of sharks are also common.

Day 4 – 6 (Dec 13 – 15): Morovo Lagoon, located in the southern part of the New Georgia Islands, is one of the largest salt water lagoons in the world. The double barrier reef system encompasses an area of about 700 square kilometers (270 sq mi). The deep, clear water lagoon supports a variety of reef habitats and picturesque tiny islands and islets. Our days in Morovo will be filled with snorkeling over shallow reefs and along steep drop-offs. One snorkel site, the 'aquarium', boasts some of the largest diversity of reef fishes in the Solomon Islands! Our anchor spot near Karanjou will also leave you breathless as we have the chance to snorkel with dozens of blacktip reef sharks. Many of the people in Morovo Lagoon are well known for their wood carving abilities. We plan to visit some of these wood carving villages and watch them practice their traditional techniques as well as have the chance to purchase (or barter) some of their works.
Day 7 (Dec 16): We are back to the Russells to spend the day snorkeling two areas that offer a unique setting to our activity. Leru Cut is located on a small limestone island. The cut is a fissure, forming a canyon-like feature in the island is about 2 meters (6 ft) wide, meanders into the island for about 40 meters (130 ft), and is about 15 meters (45 ft) deep. The jungle above filters sunlight that creates a surreal snorkeling environment. Some of the highlights are the abundance of lace corals at the entrance and cave-dwelling fish such as sweepers and cardinalfishes. Our other snorkel site is White Beach, a code name used by the US military during the war. The water in front of the beach contains a variety of military objects that were abandoned after the war. Though not easy identifiable as anything more than scrap, all of the items are encrusted with life. This is a great spot for invertebrates and unusual fish like pipefishes and scorpionfishes.

Day 8 – 10 (Dec 17 – 19): The Florida Islands are separated from Guadalcanal by Savo Sound, or Ironbottom Sound as it was called during the war because of the dozens of ships and planes that sank there during the Battle of Guadalcanal. The islands are stunning and the reefs, simply spectacular. We will spend at least one day around Maravaghi Bay where no less than six distinct marine habitats converge into one area. Mangroves, sand flats, coral reef flats, seaward reefs, fast moving channels, and a ship wreck. Sharks, rays, including the chance for manta rays, schools of tiny reef fish like anthias and damsels, cryptic critters like scorpionfishes, amazing coral coverage including all of the usual reef fish associates, and six different species of anemonefishes. Maybe a full day isn’t long enough? Some of the other areas we will also visit are postcard-worthy Anuha Island, Petrol Point, and Kombuana Island for a chance to snorkel in a lush sea grass community.

Day 11 (Dec 20): Disembark in the morning for our international flight connections.

What to Expect

Daily schedule
Our snorkeling tours are designed to provide you with a unique, educational, comfortable, safe, and exciting snorkeling experience and we strive to deliver on that promise the entire time. Our daily itinerary generally includes two snorkel sessions, a beach walk or dinghy tour, and a presentation before dinner. Our first snorkel session begins after breakfast and can last up until lunch. We generally budget for at least three hours of water time so its up to you! About an hour after lunch, we jump back in the water for another session. Beach walks or dinghy tours can happen either in the early morning (before breakfast) or in the late afternoon to take advantage of the cooler air temperatures and less intense sun (plus the birds are more active!). This schedule may change if we have special activities planned, such as visits to villages and cultural sites on specific islands.

Boat support
All of our snorkel activities are 100% boat supported. There are two inflatable dinghies, each with easy-to-use ladders. Our programs are designed so that you can stay in the water for as long or as short as you like. When you are ready to return to the expedition boat, simply signal the dinghy drivers to pick you up and take you back. Easy!

Water conditions
Water temperatures in the area average around 29º C (84º F), though cooler temperatures may be experienced. As such, please be prepared with exposure suits appropriate for cooler temperatures. Many of the reefs we will snorkel upon are subjected to currents associated with tide cycles that prevail in the area. While we often schedule our session during a time when
the currents are minimal, there may be planned drift snorkels. These types of snorkels take advantage of the water movement and allow us to float over the reef without having to actively swim. This activity usually becomes an instant favorite among our guests as it is very exciting and yet very passive at the same time! In some cases, however, the unpredictability of the tides may expose us to strong water movement. This may require a bit of effort though we will always have our dinghies standing by to help if needed.

**Land excursions**
There will be opportunities to visit beaches and villages within the island groups. In true expeditions style, we may take advantage of any opportunity to visit a village or hike on semi-established trails.

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**Costs (inclusions and exclusions)**

$7100 USD per person double occupancy  
$9600 USD per person single occupancy  

**Tour cost includes:**  
Accommodations on day 1 through day 11  
All meals on days 2 through 10 (lunch and dinner on day 1; breakfast on day 11)  
All internal transfers including international arrival and departure transfers  
Non-alcoholic beverages  
All snorkeling and park fees  
All gratuities  

**Tour cost does not include:**  
Round-trip international airfare  
Additional hotel accommodations and meals as a result of travel outside of the program dates  
Visa requirements including payments  
Alcoholic beverages  
International departure taxes  
Extra / overweight baggage fees  
Trip insurance (recommended; to learn more click [Travel Guard](#), [Travelex](#), [TravelSafe](#))  
[DAN insurance](#) (required unless personal insurance program has worldwide emergency evacuation services)  
Additional accommodations while on tour in the event of flight schedule changes or events of force majeure  

**Payment schedule:**  
Reservation deposit: $500 USD  
May 1, 2016: $3250 USD / single: $4500 USD  
Aug 1, 2016: $3350 USD / single: $4600 USD  

**Cancellation policy:**  
Notification of cancellation must be received in writing. Due to the nature of the absolute boat costs and the payment schedule dictated by the boat, we provide the following cancellation policy: On or before Dec 31, 2015: Full refund of deposit amount ($500 USD per person). Jan 1, 2016 to April 30, 2016: Forfeiture of $500 deposit. May 1, 2016 to Sept 1, 2016: Up to 50% of tour cost. After Sept 1, 2016: Up to 100% of tour cost. In the event of cancellations, we will
endeavor to find a replacement, in which case, arrangements can be made for partial refunds (amount to be determined as a case-by-case basis).

For further information, please visit our website and refer to our Terms and Conditions

**Further Documentation**

One month prior to our departure, we will send out departure notes that detail everything you will need to know about visas, arrival and departure transfers, equipment, clothing, gratuities, and special items you may need. We will also include vouchers for our group hotel/resorts and e-tickets for applicable internal flights.

**Boat Information**

In 1989 the steel hull MV Bilikiki sailed as the first full service luxury live aboard dive vessel in the Solomon Islands. She was also one of the first in the world to offer private showers and toilets in every cabin. MV Bilikiki has 10 deluxe cabins, all with a double bed below and single above. Her large size (38 m long x 7.3 m wide) and a hull that was built for South Pacific seas are two main reasons why guests from around the world still say that “the Bilikiki” is one of the most spacious and comfortable vessels that they have traveled on.
Lee Goldman grew up in Philadelphia and got his first taste of the underwater world on a SCUBA diving trip to the island of Bonaire, Netherland Antilles. A year after his return from the warm Caribbean waters he left to pursue his dream of working as a marine biologist for the beautiful but much colder waters of the Pacific Northwest. There he earned a degree in Marine Biology from Western Washington University. After graduating and upon completion of an underwater video called Sea Symphony a video he produced and filmed to showcase some of the beautiful marine life in the Pacific Northwest, he spent the next 10 years traveling around the world as a guide and biologist working in places such as the Florida Keys, Belize, Vancouver Island B.C., Palau, Guam, and the Philippines. In 2002 he left Palau to earn a Master’s Degree at the University of Guam where he investigated coral interactions and pioneered new techniques for culturing corals. During his time on Guam, he also was the principal investigator for the Department of Fisheries’ Sea Turtle Monitoring Project and helped develop a community-based sea turtle awareness program. Lee is a certified SCUBA Instructor, an avid birdwatcher, and conservationist. He now makes his home in the Philippines where he designs and guides snorkel tours in Southeast Asia, Philippines, Micronesia, Melanesia, Indonesia, and other destinations around the world. His has written two books, Snorkeler’s Guide to Marine Life of the Philippines, published in 2012, and his latest book written with Ethan Daniels, Marine Life and Natural History of the Coral Triangle. Both books are available through booksellers or can be purchased on Amazon.com. They can also be ordered directly from our website.

Ethan Daniels is a freelance marine photojournalist and dive guide currently based in Berkeley, California. Annual travels take him all over the planet, from the rich, temperate waters of the northern Atlantic and the eastern Pacific, to the warm, diverse Coral Triangle, Andaman Sea, and Caribbean. Having spent his youth on the shores of New England, Ethan became fascinated with the bizarre marine life that thrives beneath the water line. He studied biology at Bucknell University and completed his graduate work at the University of Guam Marine Laboratory in 1999, focusing on the behavioral ecology of reef fishes. Ethan spent most of a decade living in Micronesia, studying and photographing the region’s unique marine habitats, flora, and fauna. Favoring parts of the world that are off-the-beaten-track, he currently combines his passions for natural history and photography to guide, write, and promote the security of the world’s marine ecosystems. Ethan’s work can be found in Scuba Diving, Sport Diver, Scuba Diver Australasia, Asian Diver, Asian Geographic, Ocean Geographic, EZ Dive Magazine, Outside, Fifty Fathoms, Unterwasser, Tauchen, and other publications. His latest imagery found at OceanStockImages.com and his first book, Under Cape Cod Waters, published in 2010 by Union Park Press, is on bookshelves and available online. Coral Triangle Seascapes, published in 2012 can be found on the Asian Geographic website. His most recent book, written with Lee Goldman, titled Marine Life and Natural History of the Coral Triangle is available on Amazon.com or directly from our website.