



ESCAPING THOSE WINTER CHILLS

BY CAPTAIN ASPARAGUS



You know, some times you just have to get away. Kiwiland is a great place, sure, no doubt about it, but dammit it is COLD in the winter! Normally by this time of year I have abandoned our fair shores a couple of times for places more attuned to my own personal needs ... basically warmth, sunshine, clear water and scattered outbursts of bikinis. Regular readers may indeed have noticed this trend in recent years.

However, the Mighty Captain Asparagus, New Zealand's only registered Superhero has, in this last year, developed a bad case of hand brakes, in the form of two of the daughters of my good friends Joe and Lisa Entrikin of Zipolo Habu Resort in the Solomon Islands (see the advert at the bottom of the page) are now going to school here in Matamata, and my carefree lifestyle of a bachelor has been transmuted into that of a stay-at-home housedad ... much to my married mates', especially my brothers, enormous (even slightly vindictive) delight.

So, this year my only chance to flee the cold wastes of our Kiwi winter was to take the girls back to the Solomons for a mid-year visit home.

What can I say? I went. I fished. I had a ball.

As far as the fishing goes, to my mind, Zipolo Habu is pretty much the ideal spot to visit. As well as being a laid back slice of paradise, it is smack in the middle of one of the most diverse fishing environments I can imagine. Everything from jungle rivers for spot tail bass and mangrove jacks right out to fishing FADs (deep water rafts) in multi-kilometre deep waters for marlin, tuna and mahimahi. My favourite fishing though has to be just idling alongside the many miles of reefs in the area, casting poppers for giant trevallies and all sorts of other critters that bite anything that splashes on the surface.

We sure found plenty of fish to catch, that is for sure. For some reason, this year is back to normal for the tuna fishery in the Solomons ... offshore there are abundant schools of yellowfin and skipjack tuna, and man, this year they were just behind the island of the resort, only about 10 minutes run out from the jetty. The FADs too seem to be well loaded, with our best morning with only two hours trolling and jigging at the FAD bagging us 10 mahimahi, three yellowfin and three wahoo ... Reasonably fast paced action by any measure.

Every day though, heading out to the various fishing spots, you are struck, not just by the natural beauty of the area, but by the way the bulk of the people up here live. A large majority of the population live a far simpler life than ours, whether by necessity or choice, with far fewer of what we would consider "necessities", and yet it hardly seems to worry them. The standard mode of transport for pretty much everyone is the trusty old dug-out canoe; you can find these small toothpicks of wood miles from their home villages, sitting out in the middle of nowhere, fishing, or just stoically paddling away to

reach some far distant speck on the horizon. It is very scenic, very earth-mother-gaia-worshipping PC carbon footprint neutral and all that bollocks, but you have to wonder, are they sitting there thinking "... dammit, wish I had an outboard for the back of this thing ..."

Really, the clash between what we consider here in New Zealand to be needful, and what the folks up there make do with is really pretty humbling. The reason I have Joe and Lisa's two girls here in New Zealand now is that last January the girls gave me the guided tour of their school up there, Goldie College, one of the premier schools in the Solomon Islands. I was traumatised by what I saw.

For the 400-500 students, there were no modern facilities at all for toilets or showers, the "showers" for the girls being just a 4m square of concrete with a tap in the middle, surrounded by a "modesty barrier" of rusty, holey old corrugated iron. The toilets ... well, at least the girls HAD toilets, albeit a shed over the water with holes in the floor under the seats for "natural waste elimination" ... Environment Waikato would have a field-day over here, let me tell you.

The boys? Well, they just have spades, and, just like bears ... see them woods over there? I kid you not. As for the dormitories, the "kitchens"... sheeshhh, don't get me going ...

Yet this is all considered to be quite OK, quite normal. I cannot imagine any teenager from New Zealand coping with such appalling lack of facilities, I sure as heck would not have.

So it is that living in the sheltered and comfortable resort of Zipolo Habu gives you quite a feeling of being spoiled. The standard of living there is so far above that of the local villages, it is really quite thought provoking.

Life in the villages is much the same as it has been for ... well, fore-ever. There is no such thing as water reticulation or whatever you call having piped water to houses. Everything is carried into each house, and everything is carried back out again. The contrast with our nice comfortable resort bungalows with hot showers and drinking water from taps, electricity and so on, with that of the average Solomon Islanders house is, to say the least, striking. It is to try to improve the lot of some of the local villagers up there that I always make a point of buying a fair chunk of the local wood carvings every trip I take ... to the point now where my house is a borderline fire-risk, it has so many carved bits of wood scattered around it!

This habit of buying more carvings every trip (to the dismay of my housekeeper who has to dust the damn things all the time) is certainly eased by the fortunate fact that the Solomons carvers are probably the best in the South Pacific. Some of the carvings, with their ornate inlays of nautilus shell and various woods like ebony and vitex (black and white) make for some truly remarkable creations.

It all makes for money into the villages, and not just as charity either.

Probably the main income stream for most villages at the moment is forestry... chopping out the rainforest trees and selling them to places in Asia. Of course, this is devastating the environment in many places, muddying the streams, silting lagoons, and of course as good First Worldians, we deplore this destruction of virgin rainforests.

This is all very well for us I guess, but when you have a choice of food and schooling for your children for a few years by letting someone chop down some trees on your family plot of land, or preserving the rainforest for all its natural beauty, but starving and having kids sentenced to a life stuck in a village with no prospects ... well, I have to say, I have some sympathy for those who have allowed this logging to go ahead. Harvesting the native forests was, after all, a major source of funds for developing this country a century or so ago.

There are a few folks out there who are struggling in this field though ... another long-time Zipolo Habu visitor, ornithologist Dr Chris Filardi, has set up protected sanctuaries on nearby Kolombangara Island, where by arranging long term grants from charities in the US, he has "bought" the rights to keep forests un-felled on the steeper, more erosion-prone slopes of this mighty volcano.

Another academic who has turned from his original field, Dr Shankar Aswani, has moved from being a marine anthropologist (studying the history of the local people and their relationships to the sea) to, in the last few years, organising widespread marine protected areas (marine reserves) throughout the Vonavona and Marovo Lagoons. This is to protect the lagoons from rampant over-exploitation by the locals, whose habit of using fine-mesh nets, explosives and poisons to harvest every little fish that swims has been steadily wiping out the lagoons' huge biological resources.

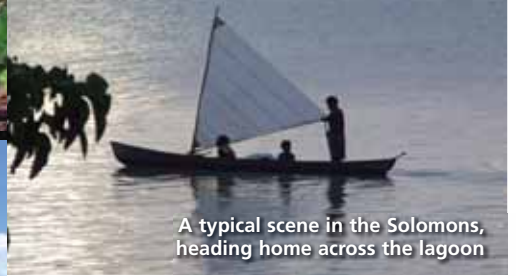
It is funny ... well, actually it isn't, but the islanders themselves largely have absolutely no concept of the idea of over exploitation of a resource. They will kill every last fish in a school, fish that have taken years to grow, and then wonder where all the fish have gone. You see this all the time up there ... locals are so used to just going out onto the sea and finding more fish, that when they finally destroy a fishery totally (as in many rivers and inner lagoon areas) they are totally amazed at the lack of fish. Explaining the idea of limiting your catch today, in order to catch more again tomorrow



LEFT: Yes, the Goldie College girls showers. Would you let your daughter use them?



The perfect picture sun, sand, fish and bikinis! Hooray!



A typical scene in the Solomons, heading home across the lagoon

is just totally alien to them. It seems in the tropics, long term planning is just something that happens to other people.

This is a pretty fatalistic approach to life, you see it a lot in the islands, you never worry about consequences, just deal with them when they happen. That is how you wind up, I guess, with 30 ft canoes loaded up with 30 or more people, something you see ALL the time up in the Solomons. It is kind of a running joke with tourists, trying to guess how many centimetres

of freeboard the boats passing them have left before they swamp. The MSA would have conniptions!

Actually such fatalism is worked into the business plans of some folks up there. Talking to the guy who makes one of the more popular aluminium boats in the area, and asking him why his boats have such lovely pointed ... almost bullet nosed ... bows, instead of a flared bow to help lift the nose and spray out the water, his reply amazed me ... apparently the nice pointed bow helped sales, as pretty much everyone who bought one of these boats (these are 8m x 1.5m "longboats" we are talking here) sooner or later overloaded it massively, like popping a couple of 200 litre drums of fuel in the middle, half a tonne of rice in the bow and 20 or so folks in the stern, and will merrily set off for a distant island somewhere ... and running at speed into the first decent set of swells, the nose just slips beautifully into the face of the wave, goes down and the boat turns into a torpedo. A couple of days later, when everyone has swum back to land, they come back to buy a new one. Talk about "built in obsolescence"!

But still ... there is something about the Solomons that gets to you. The beauty of the place is unquestionable, zapping across these gorgeous lagoons, sitting just gob-smacked at the limitless range of blues and greens of the lagoon waters and the verdant islets scattered everywhere is an abiding memory, and in our bleak, grey winter, it is a memory that calls to me ... Darn it, I wanna go back already!





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