

Journey Through a War-Torn Paradise

Voyaging the South Pacific in the Wake of the Mighty Navies

M/Y Beluga's Expedition to the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea

I often think of adventure. Don't you? The idea of adventure is everywhere.

However, what really is adventure? What does it mean to seek it? Where do you find it?

The simple fact is, you can find adventure at your doorstep. If you have never been sailing before, and you decide to learn how to sail on your local harbour, that is an adventure. If you have never hiked and camped overnight, that is an adventure.

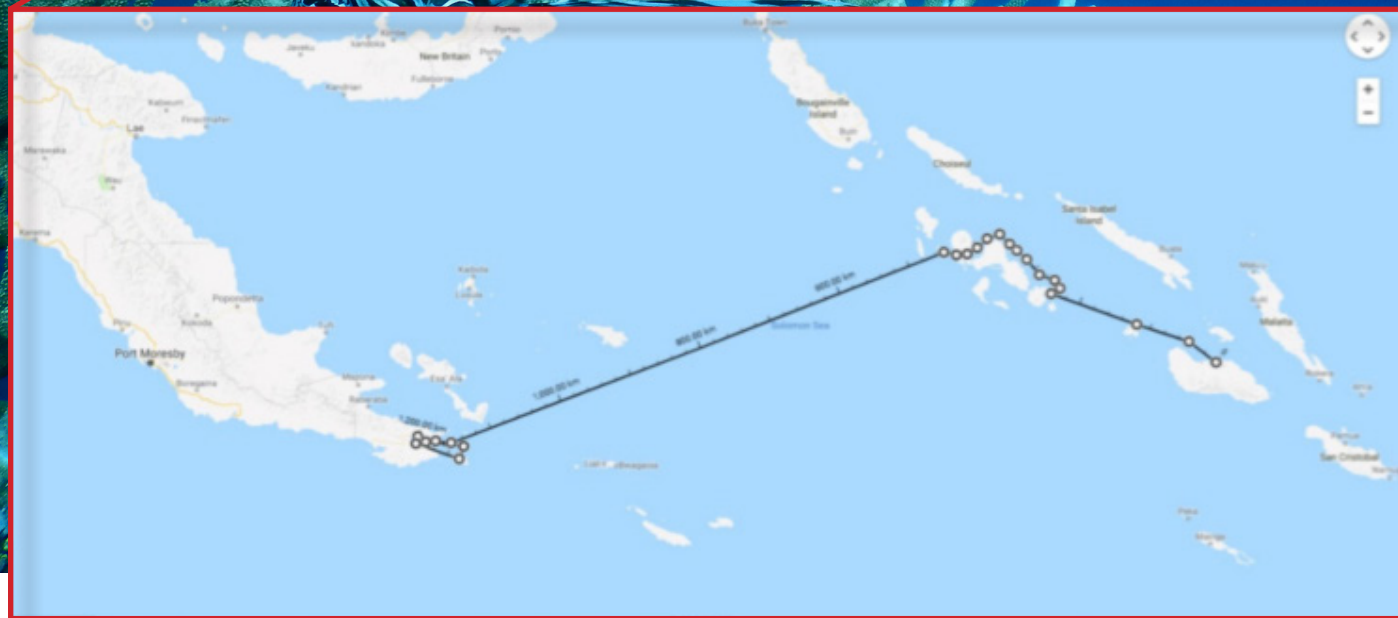
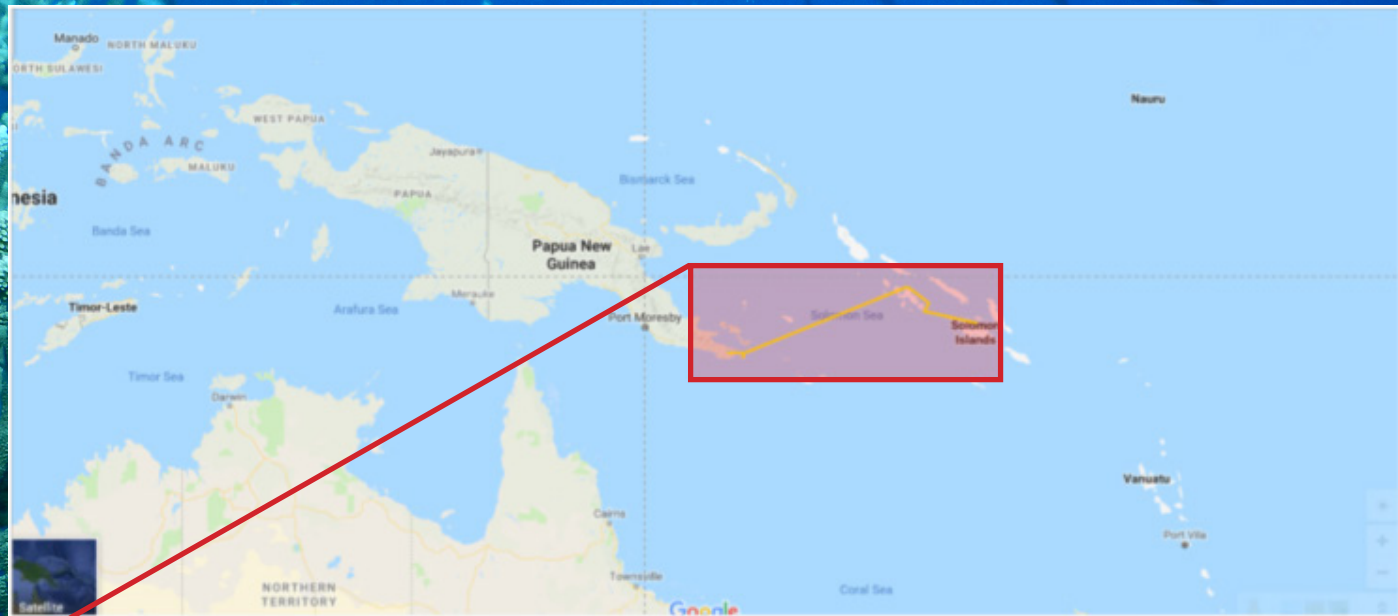
Any new activity that takes you to a new place and challenges you to do something that you have never done before, is an adventure.

So it was without hesitation that I said "Yes" when I was invited by Chris Ellis, the owner of the super yacht *M/Y Beluga*, to join him, other invited guests, and his crew on an expedition to the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.



The Voyage

Total Distance 1,800 Km



SOLOMON ISLANDS is one of the most fascinating places that the world generally still has yet to discover. Ask anyone, “*Where is the Solomon Islands?*” Most will have no idea.

Solomon Islands in Oceania, lies to the east of Papua New Guinea and northwest of Vanuatu, and covers a land area of 28,400 square

kilometres. This sovereign country consists of six major islands and over 900 smaller islands; Choiseul, the Shortland Islands; the New Georgia Islands; Santa Isabel; the Russell Islands; Nggela (the Florida Islands); Malaita; Guadalcanal; Sikaiana; Maramasike; Ulawa; Uki; Makira (San Cristobal); Santa Ana; Rennell and Bellona; the Santa Cruz Islands and the remote, tiny outliers, Tikopia, Anuta, Fatutaka and Falkie Atoll¹.

The islands’ ocean-equatorial climate is extremely humid throughout the year, with a mean temperature of 26.5 °C (79.7 °F).

It is believed that Papuan-speaking settlers began to arrive in the Solomon Islands around 30,000 BC, followed by the Polynesians from 1,200, and the Lapita people from the Bismarck Archipelago in 800 BC, with their characteristic ceramics.

European discovery was by the Spanish navigator Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira, who came from Peru in 1568. The people of Solomon Islands were notorious for headhunting and cannibalism before the arrival of the Europeans and Missionaries in the mid-19th century.



The Last Outpost of Adventure: The Solomons and Papua New Guinea

It was mid June 2018 as I stared out of the window of our plane to witness an idyllic vista of sparkling blue water and rugged green islands rimmed with white beaches and coral reef.

After a short three-hour flight from Brisbane Australia, we lined up for our final approach into Honiara, the closest thing that The Solomon Islands has to a city. The plane dipped its wing toward the harbour where I caught a glimpse of the mighty *M/Y Beluga* far below. Even with her towering mast and grand crows nest, the super yacht looked like a bath toy. The wheels touched down at Henderson International Airport, which was known in 1942 as the famous “Henderson Field”, and was the key trigger that motivated allied forces of the United states, Australia and New Zealand to fast track their plans and launch the first major land offensive of the Pacific War.

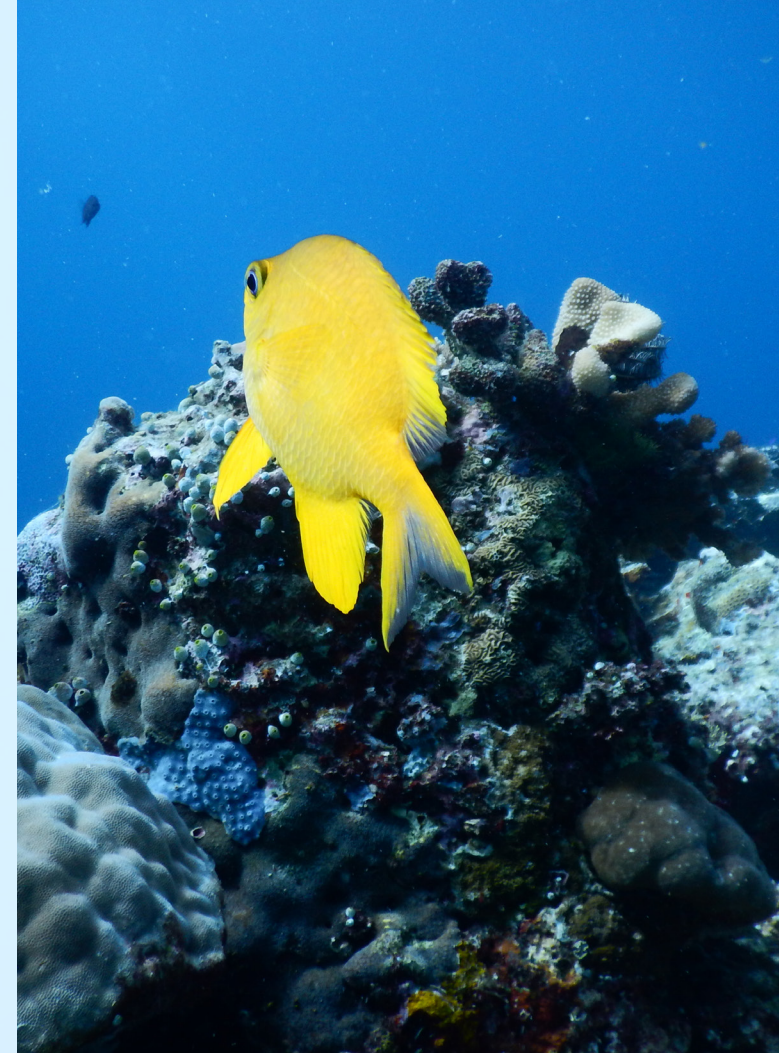
Leaving the airport we began the half hour trip to the Port of Honiara. I was first here in 1992, 26 years ago when Honiara was a sleepy little South Pacific town. Back then it was the kind of place someone would go to if they wanted to disappear. Now, as our mini bus bounced its way through the outskirts of the CBD, I witnessed the signs of a development boom. Everywhere I could see, new roads were being built, footpaths were being created, and buildings were on the rise, all at a pace that seemed much faster than the usual “Solomon Islands time”. This was in stark contrast to 1992, when I witnessed a sleepy coastal town with hundreds of people milling around the central square, doing absolutely nothing. Now, with its vibrant markets, active seaport and sprawling public works, Honiara is shambolic with progress. Everyone seemed busy, getting on with whatever it was they had to do.

Our private bus arrived at the busy sea port of Honiara. People were everywhere, boarding or disembarking from a fleet of rustic inter-island ferries. With no trains or roads to connect their island nation, the sea port was the equivalent of their Grand Central Station. This fleet of inter-island ferries was the equivalent of their nation’s trains, buses and trucks. Appearing barely seaworthy, and seemingly overloaded and unbalanced, these trusted ferries are the main means of transportation between the six major islands and nine provinces.

We boarded *Beluga* at the Port of Honiara and were warmly welcomed by our old friends, the crew, who had already been on quite an adventure. Three weeks earlier they had travelled all the way from Port Douglas in north east Australia across the Coral Sea to the Solomon Islands – over 1,400 nautical miles across an open ocean crossing. Additionally, *Beluga* and her fast tender *Minke* had already catered for two private charters around the Solomons. She had entertained guests from Brazil and the United Kingdom and spent her time exploring the islands, game fishing and diving. She had even been host to a wedding on a deserted tropical beach.

Now into her third charter in the Solomons, *Beluga* was hosting familiar guests, including her owner Chris Ellis, Sandrina Postorino, Richard

and Hinke Butt, Lucas Handley and Hannah Thomson, Steve Baxter and me.



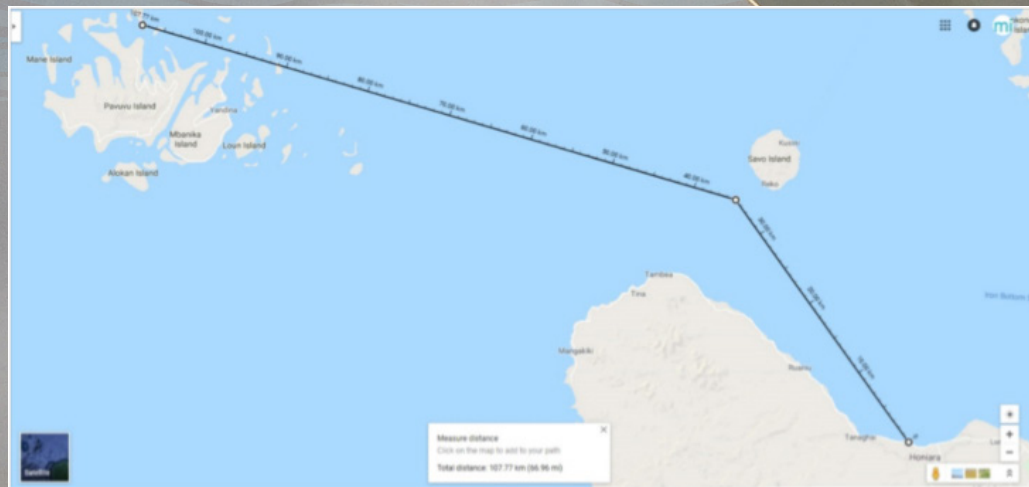
M/Y Beluga is a 114-foot-long superyacht. She is a long range, luxurious expedition ship with an ice-strengthened hull. Beluga is diving enabled, equipped with jet ski, SEABOBs, and can provide water skiing from her fast tender. Beluga is designed to carry 10–12 passengers in luxurious comfort and has a crew of seven.



Minke is a brand new, 40ft, Assegai custom-built chase boat that also serves as an ideal platform for diving and game fishing. She has a crew of two.

A Hallowed Passage Through Sacred Waters

19 June 2018 | 108 Km – Honiara to Russel Islands



WE SETTLED in with welcome cocktails and cruised along the north west coast of Guadalcanal. Honiara quickly faded into the distance, bracketed by a blazing setting sun. In the twilight to our left, you could see the dramatic mountains of the northern end of Guadalcanal beginning to taper off into the sea. Ahead and 30 degrees to starboard you could see Savo Islands' distinctive volcanic contour, an unmistakable shape that the Japanese, American, Australian and New Zealand sailors who fought in these waters recalled most vividly. *Beluga* and *Minke* were now cruising through historically significant waters more commonly known as *Iron Bottom Sound*.



Mapping the Ghost Fleet of Iron Bottom Sound



The name, *Iron Bottom Sound* was earned on August 8th, 1942, when the United States and her Allies suffered the worst blue water defeat in American naval history. It was here that one of the epic struggles of World War 2 was waged, and the whole course of the Pacific conflict seemed to hang in the balance. While Pearl Harbour was a stunning victory for the Japanese, and The Battle of Midway was the first Victory for the United States, it was here at Guadalcanal that both these naval giants went head to head in a series of epic battles. Below us was the graveyard of nearly fifty ships involved².

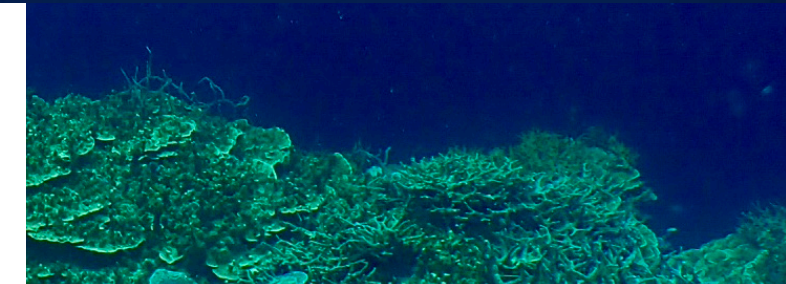


Friday the 13th the Battle

In the first of these naval battles, known as The Battle of Savo Island, the superior forces of America and her Allied Navies were clearly outclassed by a battle-hardened Japanese task force that was experienced in night fighting. By the end of the first night of battle, the Japanese losses were minimal with minor damage to the Japanese cruisers Chokai and Tenryu. The Allies had lost a total of 1,077 men, with 700 wounded².

Allied ships that went to the bottom that first night included the Jarvis (Destroyer), the Quincy (Cruiser), the Chicago (Cruiser), the Vincennes (Cruiser), the Astoria (Heavy Cruiser) and the Australian Flagship the HMAS Canberra (Heavy Cruiser)².

As we stared into the setting sun, we considered the sacrifices of greater men from the past. Battles fought by these brave men have granted us a freedom today that we must never take for granted. We saluted these brave men as we watched the tranquil evening fade from the back deck of *Beluga*.



2000 feet below us, their mighty warships lay restlessly. Many revealed with guns still aimed high. Their ghosts still trying to target their enemy, never having accepted defeat. For these warships the battle still rages in the depths of *Iron Bottom Sound*.

That night we travelled 108 Kilometres to the Russell Island Group.

Russell Island Group

20 June 2018



As the sun rose on our first morning, we found ourselves anchored in the picturesque and calm waters of Pipisola Bay in The Russell Island Group. The Russell Island Group, more colloquially known as “The Russells”, are two small islands (Pavuvu and Mbanika), as well as several islets of volcanic origin, in the Central Province of Solomon Islands. An unknown gem of The Solomons, the Russell Island Group is partially covered in coconut plantations.

A Cut Above The Best



OUR FIRST DIVE of the expedition was at the Solomon Island's most unique dive site, the *Leru Cut*, on Leru Island.

The Leru Cut is a long vertical passage that penetrates deep inside the island. The passage is about as wide as a bus with dramatic walls that flank divers on both sides. The walls begin at the sandy bottom and extend 15 meters vertically, where upon they break the surface and continue ascending into the jungle. It is like someone cut a very narrow slice out of a cake.

As a diver, it is a pristine and tranquil experience to be suspended mid-way in *The Cut*, with sunlight gently filtering down, lighting your way through crystal clear water.

You can surface at any time and relax to the echoing sounds of water gently lapping on the walls and the sounds of nature in the jungle above.

Outside the *Leru Cut* is a pristine dive site in its own right. There are large sea fans and colourful coral, massive gorgonians, and a plethora of little critters, such as popcorn and anemone shrimp to round out this fascinating dive.

At the end of the dive, we surfaced and were greeted by a welcoming committee of two traditional dugout canoes, full of kids from a local village on the southern end of Leru Island. The kids, aged from three to 10 years old, had paddled around specially to greet us. Each one of them had a paddle proportionately matched to their body size. Lucas and I floated in the water around their canoes, playing with them, and rocking their little boats from side to side. They laughed at our antics and wanted more. The big wide smiles on their faces told us that our interaction made their day.

It was time to say good-bye, so we departed on *Minke*, our fast 40 ft. long Agassi chase boat that had been towed by *Beluga* all the way from Port Douglas in north west Australia to the Solomons. Now that she was here, she was in her element – serving as a great diving platform and game fishing boat during our entire adventure in the Solomons.

Back aboard *Beluga* we enjoyed lunch before heading out for two more dives inside Pisasola Bay, the last of which was to be a spectacular wall dive.

As we prepared to depart later that day, the local children paddled out in their canoes to see us off. We spent some more time with them, gifting them with coloured pencils, writing material, and spoilt them with limited sweets. *Beluga* weighed anchor and we departed with a setting sun at our stern, chased by kids in canoes who had enjoyed our company as much as we had enjoyed theirs.

That night we travelled 112 Kilometres to Marovo Lagoon.



Magnificent Marovo; the Eighth Wonder of the World

21 June 2018 | 112 Km – Russel Islands to Marovo Lagoon



ON THE MORNING of 21st June we found ourselves on one of the jewels of the Pacific. As you first lay eyes on Marovo Lagoon you are immediately in awe of her beauty. The intensity of colours is outstanding. The green of the more than one hundred small and mostly uninhabited islands, the blue of the deeper parts of the sea, and the white of the shallow coral reefs, gives you an understanding of where the colours come from on the Solomon Islands’ flag³.

Marovo Lagoon is a double barrier reef enclosed lagoon, which in practice means a chain of coral reefs and islands that encircle the big Vangunu Island. Due to her remoteness, Marovo Lagoon is seldom visited by tourists. Much of the lagoon is almost as untouched as it was in 1946 when American author James A. Michener described it as the eighth wonder of the world in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Tales from the South Pacific*³.

Marovo Lagoon is a key site within a region known as The Coral Triangle, which also includes the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Timor-Leste. The area boasts the highest marine biodiversity in the world, with 605 species of corals and 2,228 species of reef fish. Sightings of Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin have been confirmed in the lagoon.

Our first dive in Marovo Lagoon was off Mbulo Island at a magical dive site known as *The Cathedral*. Based at the foot of Mbulo Island, *The Cathedral* is a multitude of mystical underwater caves that open into wide cathedral like caverns – hence the name. After taking in the grandeur, you start to explore the corners of the caverns until inevitably your torchlight spots an entrance to a previously unseen hidden passageway. The passageways are tight, twisting and turning. Some lead to a dead-end, others open into a new hidden cave system.

The lighting in *The Cathedral* is awe-inspiring. The sun sends shafts of natural light that penetrate the larger caverns, creating a surreal, almost religious experience.

It is a shallow dive, so you can take your time wandering from cave to cave. I lost count of the number of caves I explored.

That afternoon we were invited to meet the locals who had set up a market just for us on a nearby Island. We arrived in our RIB and were warmly greeted by local villagers of all ages.

There were at least 20 traders and each of them presented their wares on large mats on the ground. On offer were a multitude of woodcarvings,



from small replica dugout canoes, to incredibly intricate figureheads. The ancient tradition of woodcarving with shell inlay is deep-rooted in the Solomon Islands and the beautifully carved products are renowned throughout the world. The wood commonly used by the carvers includes Ebony, Rosewood, Kou or Kerosene wood⁴.

Sir David Attenborough describes the woodcarvings of the Solomon Island people beautifully. “I visited the Solomons and brought objects back from the islands. They reveal a people who delighted in visual beauty and who presented a decorative style that demands one of the most time-consuming techniques imaginable - lines of tiny pearly plates, taken from the nautilus shell and carefully cut into rings, stars and zigzags. The islanders used it to embellish all the things most valued - their feast bowls, their ceremonial clubs, the statues of their gods and, perhaps most memorably of all, the small figureheads that they tied to the bows of their war canoes to detect hidden reefs and guide them through treacherous waters.”

Also on offer was a wide variety of jewellery and weavings as well as polished shells of many varieties, including the most sought after – the Nautilus Shell. Apart from the shells, everything was hand made by the villagers. Both the guests and crew bought a large variety of carvings and shells. We tried to spread our purchases around as many traders as possible.

Out here, cash is not always king. The locals happily bartered and accepted hard-to-get goods, especially sand paper, wide chisels, and clothes in exchange for their intricate carvings.

While we were on the island, the villagers challenged us to a coconut opening competition. Each of us was lined up in front of a green coconut and provided with one basic tool – a sharpened wooden stake

that had been driven into the ground next to our coconut. No instructions were given. What followed were a hilarious 10 minutes as we, the tourists, humiliated ourselves trying to work out how to remove the husk and open a coconut with a wooden stake. Most of us made a complete mess of our coconuts, much to the delight and laughter of the villagers witnessing us. They were perplexed by the struggle we had with such a rudimentary task for them.

For the record I did manage to open my coconut. I took it back on-board Beluga where our hostess used it to make me a special Rum cocktail.





Fish on! Game On!

23 June 2018

During our afternoon on Marovo Lagoon we decided to try our luck at game fishing. *Minke* was perfectly set up for the task.

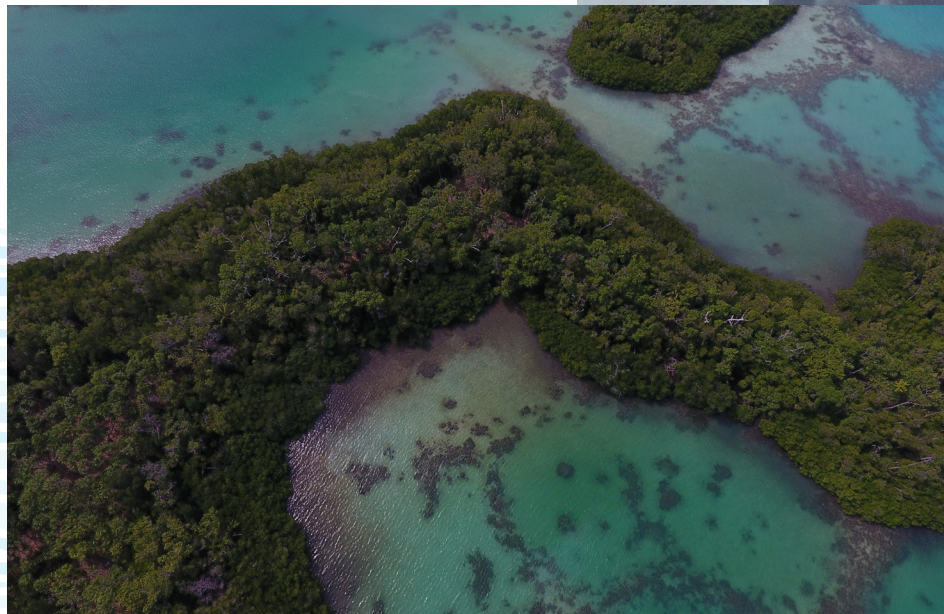
We set out with the crew of *Minke* for what we thought would be a leisurely afternoon, trolling and enjoying cold beers.

What happened next is best described by *Minke's* skipper:

“Shortly after leaving the Bay, and only moments after putting the lures in, we saw what we were all looking for. Suddenly, a medium sized Black Marlin was up behind the lure. The great animal’s head and shoulders were out of the water, and we were hooked up. The Marlin performed some spectacular jumps, out to the port, back to the starboard, cleared the gear, and gave us a good fight for 15 minutes. Then she went down deep and we had to fight her out for another 20 minutes. We brought her alongside, took some photos. She lit up a beautiful iridescent blue, and then we quickly cut her off and let her go.”

This was one of many fishing excursions we had on *Minke*. On most days, following our morning dive excursion and lunch, *Minke* would depart with her owner, Chris Ellis, on a game fishing expedition. Chris’s true passion is exploratory game fishing. He was looking for new, hot reefs and fishing grounds. Essentially, we looked at our marine depth sounder and, upon seeing a bommie, a drop off, or the scattered digital signs of prolific sea life, the skilled crew of *Minke* would have the trolling lures out in an instant and a game fisherman strapped into the chair.

We weren’t just game fishing. We were also fishing for fresh catch that our master chef on Beluga eagerly awaited to turn into a culinary delight.



The Wreck on the Edge of Oblivion

24 June 2018

TODAY WE HAD a mission. We had to locate and dive one of the most unique wreck dives in the world – the *Taiyo Fishing Boat*. With *Minke* fully loaded with dive gear, we departed Beluga and travelled at high speed through the lagoon, cruised past the provincial town centre of *Seghe*, and continued South West to Nono Lagoon.

The Taiyo was a brand new 120-foot-long Pole and Line tuna fishing boat. In 2005, on her maiden voyage she was run aground on the reef around Nono Lagoon. They tried to salvage her, but this failed and she sank by the stern.

As we pulled into the reef just off Nono Lagoon, Lucas jumped into the water on snorkel to look for the *Taiyo*. Meanwhile, his partner Hannah perched herself high in the mast of *Minke*, and spotted the ghostly bow of the *Taiyo* hiding just one metre below the surface. We donned our scuba gear and jumped in to investigate this unique wreck.

As soon as I laid eyes on the wreck, I could see why she is considered to be one of the most unique dives in the world. *The Taiyo* had indeed sunk stern first. However, she somehow came to rest on an even keel, in a vertical standing position. Her stern is wedged deep at 37 metres, teetering on the edge of two rocky outcrops, blocking her from a 2-kilometre vertical fall to oblivion. Her entire superstructure is intact, so on a clear day, like the day we had, she looks quite surreal, wedged precariously there on an underwater cliff face.

The *Taiyo* was brand new when she sank on her maiden voyage, and is still in great condition today. As such, she remains a truly spectacular sight. I descended deep on scuba and went under her stern at 40 metres to inspect her props. Moving higher, *The Taiyo* is penetrable, but it is a squeeze.

While I had a ball diving with scuba on *The Taiyo*, it was an absolute playground for free divers Lucas and Hannah. I witnessed them calmly descend all the way down the superstructure to the stern at 40 metres on a single breath of air, then return to the surface at a leisurely pace. The vertical nature of this wreck enhanced their experience even more as they were on the dive sight the whole way down and back up to the surface.

That night we completed a 205km voyage from Marovo Lagoon to Gizo.



Bombed and Ablaze: The Toa Maru's Desperate Fight for Survival

24 June 2018 | 105 Km – Marovo Lagoon to Gizo



ON THE MORNING of 25th June, *Beluga* and *Minke* were moored off the township of Gizo.

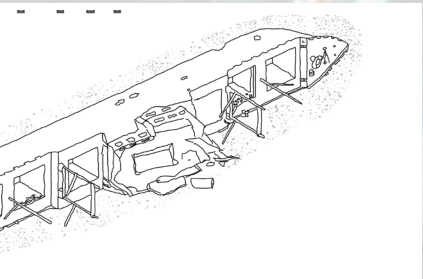
Gizo is the capital of the Western Province of the Solomon Islands and with just over 6,000 inhabitants, this is the second largest town in the country. Today Gizo has developed into a remote tourism centre with diving and surfing being popular activities. However, in the past, it had an infamous history of headhunting. The Gizo tribe were notorious for this activity – so much so that the surrounding local tribes took the unusual step of making an alliance to obliterate them. After the bloody retribution, the only survivors were a Gizo woman and her son⁶.

In more recent history, the islands were occupied by Imperial Japanese troops in 1942. On 2 April 2007, Gizo was hit by a ten-metre-high tsunami caused by an 8.1 magnitude earthquake, which centred only 25 miles from the town and killed 52 people.

The reason for our visit to Gizo was to dive a very special World War 2 shipwreck, the *Toa Maru No2*.

The *Toa Maru No 2* was a Japanese merchant navy cargo ship. Launched on 8 December 1938, the ship was 133.8 metres long, just under 18 metres wide and displaced 6,732 tons.

On 31 January 1943, the *Toa Maru* was in Marovo Lagoon, carrying equipment and supplies to Vila Harbour on the south-eastern corner of Kolombangara Island where there was a Japanese supply base. The *Toa Maru* had previously been spotted by coast watchers and so, on this day, an American squadron of Douglas TBF Dauntless torpedo bombers, Douglas SBD 5 Dauntless dive-bombers and Grumman F4F-4 Wildcats left Henderson Airfield on Guadalcanal on a search and destroy mission.



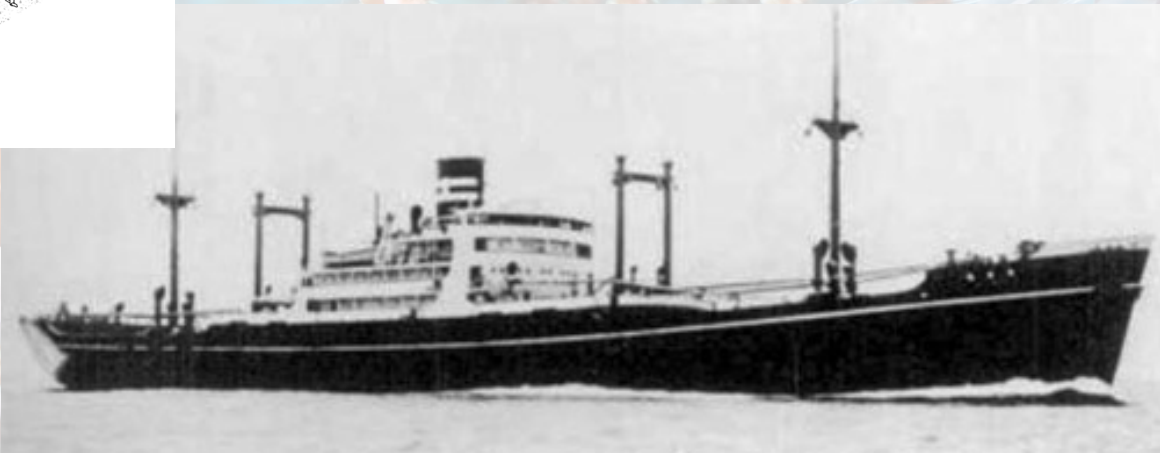
The America Squadron made their attack on the *Toa Maru*. Two



bombs found their target, exploded and opened the bottom of her hull to the sea. After relentless strafing runs, the *Toa Maru* burst into flames. With her holds rapidly filling with water, and her superstructure in flames, her captain made a desperate attempt to beach her on Sepo Kokiti Island.

The *Toa Maru* sank on the northern side of Sepo Kokiti Island, just north of Gizo Township. Now, 75 years later, she is considered to be one of the top 20 wreck dives in the world and she wasn't hard to find. She lay on her starboard side with the highest point of her hull in seven metres and her stern in 37 metres.

The *Toa Maru* is a very entertaining wreck and in great condition overall, although the main superstructure above the hull collapsed after the 2007 tsunami. Apart from the collapsed superstructure, almost all of the wreck is accessible, so you can easily spend many dives exploring all she has to offer. Inside, and spilling out from her holds, you'll find a two man tank, a motor cycle, a truck, bags of hardened cement, thousands of beer



bottles, steel girders and ammunition, and parts of a large field gun. But perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this wreck is the vibrant reef that has developed on the port side of the hull that faces the sun. It is an established city of healthy corals that support an effervescent sea life with many species of fish now calling this wreck home.

Almost every piece of the *Toa Maru* that is exposed to the sun has been colonised by hard and soft corals. Everywhere you look life is thriving. Clown fish indignantly protect their anemone homes, Lionfish proudly deter close contact with bristling spines. Parrotfish, Surgeonfish and the sex changing Coral Trout cruise around feeding on the algae that grows on this artificial reef.

The America President, Plum Pudding Island and the Coconut

We returned on *Minke* to *Beluga*, which was now moored just off Plum Pudding Island in the Ferguson Passage. The name *Plum Pudding Island* was vaguely familiar to me and so I did some research to jog my memory. Yes, this was the Island upon which the late United States President, John F. Kennedy, and his surviving crew sought refuge after a Japanese destroyer rammed their PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat.

Lieutenant John F. Kennedy's encounter with a Japanese destroyer on the night of August 1, 1943 may be the most famous small-craft engagement in naval history, and it was an unmitigated disaster.

Lieutenant John F. Kennedy and his crew of PT 109 were on the front line of World War 2 in the Pacific, lurking in Blackett Strait off Kolombangara Island on that fateful moonless, starless night.

It was profoundly dark and the PT-109 stood at her station, one of fifteen PT boats that had set out to engage, damage, and maybe even turn back a Japanese Naval task force they knew as the Tokyo Express.

When the patrol eventually came into contact with the Tokyo Express – four Japanese destroyers – the encounter did not go well. Thirty torpedoes were fired without damaging the Japanese ships.

Still armed with live torpedos, Kennedy's PT 109 searched for a target in the inky blackness. At about 2:30 in the morning, a shape loomed out of the darkness off her starboard bow. Kennedy attempted to turn to starboard to bring his torpedoes to bear. But there was not enough time.

The destroyer, later identified as the Amagiri, struck PT 109 just forward of the forward starboard torpedo tube, ripping away the starboard aft side of the boat. The impact tossed Kennedy around the cockpit. Most of the crew were thrown into the water. What remained of their boat soon sank.

There were no signs of other boats or ships in the area and the men, floundering in the water, were afraid to fire their flare gun for fear of attracting the attention of the Japanese who were on the islands on all sides⁷.



Kennedy and his crew struck out for a small islet three and a half miles away. He arrived first at Plum Pudding Island, collapsed and waited for the rest of his men.

Over the next few days, Kennedy made many marathon swims to neighbouring islands looking to try to make contact with PT Boats, and to search for fresh food and water, and his crew. Every time he risked being spotted by scouting Japanese patrols.

Eventually two islanders, working for the Allies as scouts – Biuku Gasa and Eroni Kumana – discovered Kennedy and his crew. To initiate a rescue, Gasa showed Kennedy how to scratch a message on to a husk of a green coconut. The message said

NAURO ISL
COMMANDER . . . NATIVE KNOWS
POST . . . HE CAN PILOT . . . 11 ALIVE
NEED SMALL BOAT . . . KENNEDY

Gasa and Kumana left with the coconut message on a mission to make contact with the Allies.

They were successful. Kennedy and his crew were soon in contact with a local Allied coast watcher, Lieutenant A. Reginald Evans then evacuated by PT 157 in a daring rescue mission deep behind enemy lines.

For his courage and leadership, Kennedy was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, and injuries suffered during the incident also qualified him for a Purple Heart.

Kennedy kept the coconut on his desk in the oval office during his Presidency.



25 to 27 June 2018 | 757 Km –
Gizo (Solomon Islands) to Alatau
(Papua New Guinea)



IT WAS NOW time to make the long crossing from Gizo in the Solomon Islands all the way to Alatau in Papua New Guinea. We settled in for two days of cruising and happily passed the time sun bathing, reading and watching movies in the grand saloon of Beluga, which happens to be the biggest, most luxurious, and the most unused room on this action ship of adventure.

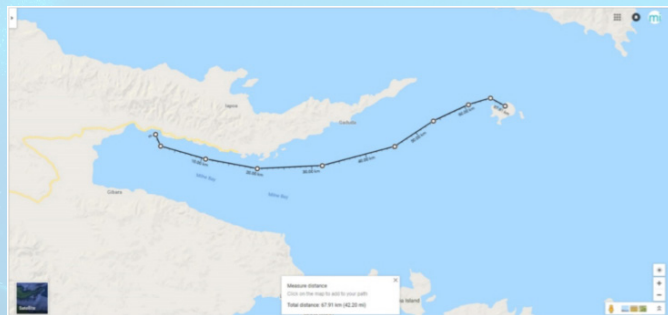
All the while, the crew of Beluga pampered us with cocktails, fresh popcorn (when we were watching movies), and little culinary delights baked by our chef.

Two days of cruising also gave us a great opportunity to catch up on emails and reading. There are so many comfortable private nooks on Beluga to relax with a good book, and if you need to connect with the office, complimentary satellite internet is available throughout the ship.

At 7pm on the 27th June, after an almost 800-kilometre crossing, Beluga pulled into the harbour of Alatau in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea. Craig de Witt, one of the most knowledgeable and connected dive guides in Milne Bay, came on board. He had been planning for our trip and he knew we wanted adventure. He also knew exactly where to take us.

Skull Island and the big smiles of the friendly natives

27 June 2018 | 68 Km



Haliwa Una Bay village on Nuakata Island is just off Milne Bay in PNG and totally isolated. It can only be accessed by boat.

We were invited to shore by the village ambassador, Efam, who wanted to show us something special.

Efam met us at the beach with his young family. He was not the village chief as such, but the appointed village ambassador – probably because of his vibrant, outgoing personality and his eloquent command of English. With a beaming wide smile, that revealed teeth stained blood red with betel nut, he proudly introduced us to his doting young daughters Josephine, Marida, Janette and Lucette.

Efam escorted us from his village and along a small coastal track before heading up a steep hill at the base of a sheer mountain. Before us stood a wide cave entrance, which descended into a cave that opened up into a limestone cavern.



Before us, around us, everywhere, were human skulls. There would have been hundreds of them, piled neatly on top of each other. Each skull seemed to offer the same cause of death, a hard blow to the forehead with a blunt instrument. Some were so old they had formed into the limestone stalagmites.

We were of course looking at evidence from the days of head hunting. Head hunting and cannibalism, though not prolific in PNG, had been part of its culture for thousands of years, and the practice continued to thrive in some areas into the 1920s. It was the influence of missionaries that put an end to it.

Back in those early days, some villagers choose not live in open huts – they felt too vulnerable. Instead, they preferred to live in caves, which were higher up and more defensible.

This is likely because island populations considered people from other islands to be their enemies and they believed it best to kill them, before being killed themselves.

Neighbours within an island were your allies, as they would help defend the community.

Warring parties travelled from islands as far as 20 miles away in sailing war canoes to attack villages they considered vulnerable. These sailing war canoes would not sneak up and ambush a village. Instead, they would stay just off shore and in a menacing way, signal their intentions. This was considered the rule of engagement and served as a tool of intimidation.

Once the war party was on land, the slaughter began.

However, who was being slaughtered – the war party or the defenders – depended on the war.

Defending warriors would proudly display their kill, in the form of piles of skulls at the front of their dwellings. The more skulls, the more formidable the warrior, causing would-be attackers to have second thoughts and perhaps move on to the next village.

The successful attacker would kill and eat his adversaries, and then I'm told, as victor, inherit all the village's wives and children to do with them as he pleased.

Efam told us the cave we were in had been used as a sacred place to keep skulls for hundreds of years. This is not the only skull cave in the area. There are, in fact, many caves at the base of the mountain that serve as homes for skulls.

After appreciating the grandeur of the skull cave we backtracked to the village where we played a communal game of volleyball. Teams were of all ages and a mix of villagers, Beluga guests and crew. We all played except Sandrina, who busied herself feeding oven roasted crispy bacon to two skinny village puppies. They'd never tasted anything so good and gobbled up the treats.

That afternoon most guests elected to go on the game fishing boat Minke for what turned out to be a highly fruitful fishing trip. Our guide Craig, Sandrina, Beluga's chef Danielle, and I went for a dive on a sight that Craig new to be special.

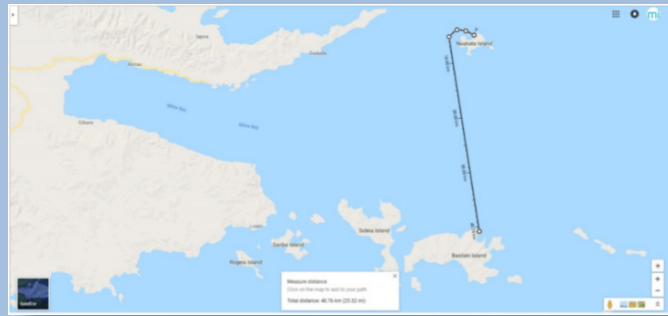
And Craig delivered. The dive site, known as Barracuda Point, was a dramatic wall, with plenty of caves and swim throughs to explore. There were huge schools of fish, sea snakes and turtles. But the cream of it all was a solitary fully-grown Hammerhead shark.

This magnificent creature transformed from a ghostly shape in the distance into a vivid beast before us. Three and a half metres in length, she rippled with muscles as she moved with purpose, confidence and control through her environment. I think we all caught each other by surprise as the Hammerhead Shark did a 360 to have a second look at us, then as swiftly as she emerged, faded into the distance.



Brace for Impact

1 July 2018 | 41 Km – Nuakata Island to Basilaki Island



OVERNIGHT WE journeyed a short distance south to Basilaki Island.

We were here to dive a fully intact P38 Lightning, one of the most effective allied fighter planes in World War 2.

What happened on that day is best described by our local guide Craig De Witt.

“The P38 Lightning went down on November 27, 1943 while on a mission from Dobodura Airfield. It was one of seven P38 Lightnings commissioned to do a raid on Salamaua and Finschhafen, she'd had engine troubles, and so the pilot, Alex Illnicki, had pulled out of formation. While attempting to return to Dobodura, he broke out of the clouds above Misima Island and realised he was off track.”

“The Illnicki then turned directly west and got as far in as Basilaki Island before running out of fuel”.

“Illnicki ditched the P38, 150 yards off Basilaki Island's north coast, landed unhurt and deployed his life raft. He reached the shore and was returned to duty”.

38 years later on December 1st, 1981, renowned scuba diver Bob Halstead located this aircraft at 258° from North Point and about 150 yards offshore. During another dive during April to May 1982, Bob Halstead confirmed the serial number by locating the radio data plate affixed to the instrument panel. The P38 remains in situ and intact on the sandy bottom.



This World War 2 fighter is in remarkably good condition. Being made from aluminium, she has relatively little growth on her and no rust. Apart from her props being dislodged, she is not broken up in any way and she looks airworthy and strong, even after 75 years underwater.

We descended and found her resting at 29 metres underwater. Feeling daring, I removed my fins, BCD and tank, but was careful to keep connected to my air supply. This allowed me to be small enough to sit inside the cockpit of this World War 2 fighter plane. A party trick I know, but we got some great photos!

This was a great last dive for our expedition.



24 June 2018 | 105 Km – Marovo Lagoon to Gizo



At Journey's End

With our last dive completed we began a leisurely cruise back to Alutua, from where we would fly home the next day. Beluga and Minke would then depart on a return ocean voyage, back to Port Douglas in Queensland Australia.

Once again Beluga and her owner had given us the opportunity to experience a completely new adventure, and a new frontier in the world of expedition cruising. Since leaving Honiara in the Solomons two weeks before, we had travelled over 1800km in luxury aboard Beluga. We explored a part of the world that most people don't know exists. We dived pristine reefs, and tropical islands, met local villagers who shared their culture with us, and dove into the rich history of sunken world war two wrecks.



Todd Tai *CHAIR*
The Australia and New Zealand
Chapter of The Explorers Club

In 2002 Todd created the Australian Geographic Society Members Expedition Program which enabled members to participate in unique adventures, scientific research, art and photographic workshops. In the field Todd has led many successful desert expeditions, organised marine research expeditions, photographic skills and wilderness/landscape art painting workshops, and managed remote scientific research camps.

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