



AKAMA REPORT 23

7 May 2004

We left Simbo Island well rested and set out for Gizo, about a 20-mile trip. Gizo (8-5S x 156-50E) is the Solomon Islands' second largest settlement; so we thought it would be quite large. It is basically a one-road town. Still, it has a vibrant market, which we used to advantage to restock with fresh food. To our great surprise, one of the local tackle shops is owned by a Canadian; he gave us a few tips on things to see. The officials here were the most officious so far; there was tons of paperwork and each of them had a fee that needed paying. The good news was that they all came to the boat at the same time; so we did not have to chase after them. The owners of the only other yacht in the harbour, SPIRIT OF KALAHARI, were most helpful, as they had spend a number of weeks here already; they gave us a short tutorial on where to go and what to see.

From Gizo we went only five miles north to Konggulavata Bay, with SPIRIT of KALAHARI, MUSCAT and SELKIE. This is handy to a site where a big Japanese ship, the TOA MARU, was sunk in WW-II (8-2S x 156-49E). It is hard to find as the buoy that marks it is very small and encrusted with growth. We snorkelled on it and Maurice went down with the hookah rig. You can see where the shells entered and sunk her. There is some cargo on the seabed, including a tank and some trucks, that is reachable with hookah or SCUBA. The coral was not that good, and the fishes were only fair.

The next day we went by dinghy to a World Wildlife Federation (WWF) site called Grand Central (8-0.83S x 156-45.45E), about three miles away. This was easier to find as the WWF has a prominent buoy there. This was a super snorkelling spot and a nice wall dive, with good coral and many fishes, including some we had never seen before.

Our next anchorage was in a very well sheltered lagoon on Liapari Island (7-56S x 156-43E). We were surprised to see that there is a small boat yard here, mostly used for repairing the Solomon Islands' fleet of fishing boats, which are all Japanese-built steel trawlers. The island, formerly a coconut plantation, is very well kept by the boat yard owner and nice to stroll around.

On Vella Lavella Island we anchored on a good sand bottom in Paraso Bay (7-37S x 156-40E). The attraction was a volcano that produces hot springs and mud. We understood this to be an easy jungle walk. First we had to go up river by dinghy until we reached small rapids. Then we climbed the bank and slogged it through the jungle, along the river, for a couple of miles. It had rained the night before, so at times we were up to our calves in gooey mud. We had to forge a couple of small streams, so we at least got to wash the stuff off now and again. Usually, though we no sooner got clean than we had to mount the opposite bank and we again became muddy. The tour was well worth it though. We entered what appeared to be a plain in the centre of a volcano. Hills rose in a circle several miles away all around us, except for on the area where we entered and the river exited. There were bubbling mud pools, mounds of sulphur and red ochre everywhere. We could feel the heat coming off of the mud pools as we walked by them. The mud was far too hot to bathe in and probably very dangerous. Several times, our guides were very attentive about where we walked. On the way back, some of the yachties with us jumped off a 10-metre cliff into a river pool below. We swam in the river and it was an odd

sensation; while the water was cool, the mud below was hot in spots, due to volcanic activity. There were places where it was so hot that it was uncomfortable to walk. The children here were delightful and uninhibited, perhaps a little too much so; we were constantly "canoed". We threw balloons, whistles and a plastic recorder out into the bay and they all paddled furiously to win a prize. The kid that retrieved the recorder was playing 'Mary Had A Little Lamb', by the time we left. We bought some megapode (bush turkey) eggs. Megapodes lay their eggs in holes in the ground. The natives put twigs around the holes and when a twig is disturbed they know that a megapode has laid an egg in the hole, very clever.

About 20-miles to the Southeast we visited the island of Kolombangara. This island has a sustainable logging industry and it shows. The first thing that one notices is that there are fewer leaf huts and more timber buildings, including residences. We anchored first at Mongga (7-54S x 156-57E), the site of an agricultural college. There are four catholic brothers here, four teachers, about twenty local staff and 160 students from all around the Solomon Islands. They learn English, mechanics, animal husbandry and garden growing. We toured the facility led by one of the students, and we bought some veggies. This is a terrific anchorage, safe, well sheltered and away from large villages. The only downside is that there is often no cooling breeze.

The next night we anchored at Ringgi (8-06 S x 157-07E), a beautiful multi-bay cove. There is no village here and few huts, the only development being a logging wharf. We watched a Chinese ship being heavily overloaded with logs. The actual town of Ringgi is about an hour's walk down the road. The jungle drums work well here. We were seen entering Ringgi Cove and the next morning a carver arrived from the adjacent island; we bought a jewellery box. Just as we were about to leave a guide arrived and convinced us to stay another day; it turns out that the guide is the carver's brother and neither knew the other was coming to see us. We used the rest of the day to roam around the cove, running up a river in the dinghy. We saw the remains of a Japanese patrol boat; about all that's left is a steel beam and what looks like a curved shield from a deck gun. The river was nice and cool and we had a swim. SELKIE caught up to us at Ringgi, and that evening we had sundowners on MUSCAT, complete with appetizers of mud crab. Gary on MUSCAT had caught one and had bought three from a local fisherman. One of them was a two kilo brute about the size of a dinner plate.

The next day we set out to see the WW-II relics with our guide, Mr. Rinna Billy. It turned out that he was not quite the expert that he claimed to be. We passed by the supposed site of the downed Hellcat aircraft. Phil on SELKIE motored over the spot, but saw nothing. Next, we went to the spot where the Japanese submarine was supposed to be laying, in shallow water. The person that owned the kastom rights was not around, so we could not dive on it. But, Rinna allowed that the "submarine" was only about 45-feet long and well...maybe it was really a sunken landing craft. Next were the caves that were supposed to be a Japanese hospital. The caves were indeed there although some had collapsed, but there is no way they were a hospital. More likely they were storage caves for supplies, medicine and munitions. We saw broken bottles, bits of metal, a few cartridges for rifles and a helmet. While we ate lunch, Phil went to a place nearby to see some Japanese guns and a searchlight; we gave it a miss, as we had seen several such gun emplacements in PNG. The last relic we saw was a US tank, the best preserved WW-II relic that we have seen so far. It was a small tank, with an air-cooled, radial engine that ran on gasoline. The turret has a small cannon and a machine gun, and there is another machine gun facing forward. The inside was quite a mess; it appears that several armour-piercing shells entered the front armour plate and caused an explosion.

We ended the day with a white-knuckle entrance to the recommended anchorage at Noro (8-13.6S x 157-11.7E). This required entering a narrow and shallow blasted cut in a reef, and then negotiating our

way through shallow reefs, none of which we could see. MUSCAT went hard aground once and touched once; we were luckier and had no problems. Noro is dominated by the fish canning plant. Indeed, if it were not for the plant there would be no Noro. The industry was built by the Japanese, including the plant, the ships, a large residence for about 200 women, and the Noro lodge. We did not go to the Noro lodge, and learned later that we did not miss anything. We stayed only long enough to exchange some money, buy a few supplies and fuel up. Noro has duty-free fuel for boats over 35 net registered tons. This makes it easily the cheapest fuel in the area, so we filled to the brim. The two sailboats with us gave us about 30 jerry cans to fill as well.

The next day, we went south about five miles to Lola (8-18S x 157-10E), a resort island. Getting there required us to navigate through a poorly-charted area that was littered with reefs. Fortunately, we had a mud map (a rough, unofficial chart drawn by other yachties). Upon arrival at Lola Island we were shocked to find that we had no drinking water, despite the fact that we'd been running our water maker on the way down and for several hours the day before. A hose coupling broke while we were underway and we did not notice it until our pressure pump had pumped nearly all of our fresh water overboard. We really should have an over-run alarm on that pump (and on others). Lola Island has a nice little dive and fishing resort (Zipolo@Solomon.com.sb), which is nearly deserted and a terrific restaurant. We've heard the same story in many places in PNG and The Solomon Islands...the joint was jumping until the western embassies and media blew out of proportion the personal safety problems of the area a few years ago. Then business slowed to an uneconomic trickle or dried up altogether. It is sad, because in most of the places we have visited there is and never was elevated danger to foreigners, except in a few big cities. Indeed, in most places even the locals, who are supposedly slaughtering each other by the score according to the media, are peaceful. Of course, there are sporadic incidents, such as robberies, but what place does not have a bit of crime?

Well, that's all for now.