


TRAVEL



Journeys
through
Marovo Lagoon

Text and Photographs by Patrick Pikacha



Above: Marovo Lagoon looking west from Gatokae Island.

Seghe, gateway to the Marovo Lagoon is a grass strip, which stretches all the way to the waters edge. Our twin otter touches down as the twin propelled engine roars to an abrupt halt, before veering round to taxi towards the terminal – a characteristic shabby old cabin-like structure with the words “Seghe Airport” splashed across a plywood board above the entrance. Yet, this terminal has a proud history of welcoming visitors from all over the world, to grace the world’s longest saltwater lagoon system, Marovo Lagoon.

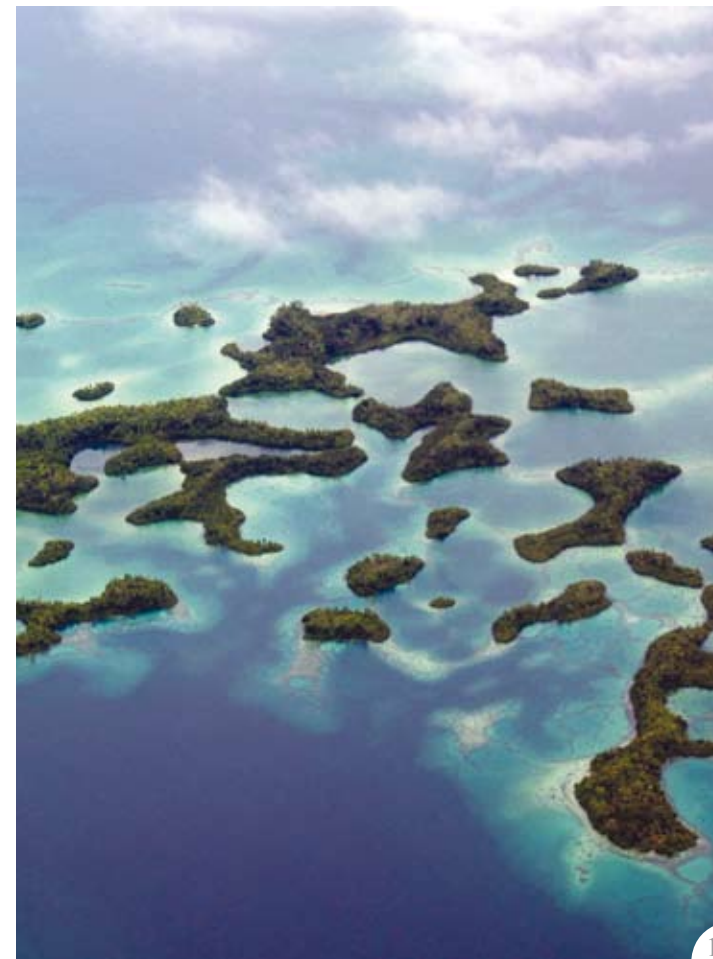
The Marovo Lagoon is well known for its waterways, islands and sandy islets, and especially its marine underworld. Leaving Seghe we navigate through the lagoon reefs and islets. Hundreds of islands spread throughout the 140km stretch of lagoon. In Midemide outside Buini Tusu island village for instance there’s a network of hundreds of small islands. Like a maze of islands separated by narrow and wide passages villagers unfamiliar with these waterways have been known to go missing here.

A storm appears ahead and we take a coastline passage to avoid the turbulent upsurge in the lagoon’s deepwater. The water is florescent blue in the shallows, and shine with a soft unsteady light reflecting the

colours of blue, greenish-blue and jade green as we skimmer eastward towards Central Marovo. To our right is Vangunu Island, a 540km² island of volcanic origin, the main island in the southeast chain that encompasses the New Georgian islands. The shoreline is blanketed in greenery, draped to the waters edge.

Just an hour by 25-horse powered boat ride from Seghe is the Bareke Peninsular of North Marovo, the mountains of the peninsular rising above the mangrove shores. The area has a long history of human occupation reaching back to the headhunting years and prehistoric times.

For wildlife enthusiasts many bird species may be seen, including gulls, Pacific Reef-Egrets, Blyth’s Hornbill, Brahminy Kite, Pacific swiftlet’s and the endemic Solomon-Sea eagle. As well as many other shore birds and rare forest birds. The cuscus (*Phalanger orientalis*) said to be prehistorically introduced as a food source 6000 years ago by migrating settlers in the archipelago is also abundant, but scarce in areas where hunting pressures are great. This nocturnal creature may be spotlighted foraging on fruit trees near human settlements. I was fortunate to spot them twice early on a Saturday night. Mammal endemism in the Solomons is rich. Large giant rats are also found in some islands of the



1 2
3 4



1. Islands of Minde Minde.
2. Beach kingfisher. (Photo: D Pikacha)
3. Dendrobium orchid.
4. Unidentified orchid.



Above: Locals of Marovo Lagoon. Far right: Soil erosion caused by logging entering the once pristine Marovo Lagoon.

Solomons; some with average weights greater than 1kg. There is also a host of bats species endemic to the archipelago. The rarest being the New Georgia Monkey-faced bat, listed as vulnerable by IUCN because of habitat loss.

A few backpackers accommodation are scattered throughout the lagoon. Your best bet would be with Uepi Island Resort about half an hour ride by boat from Seghe. And there are many low cost eco-lodges scatter throughout the archipelago. Bushwalks may be arranged with villages and landowners. There is no favoured approach as far as getting close to the wildlife. One would just have to get into the forest with a good binoculars and trusted guide to explore.

Panoramic views of the Marovo Lagoon may be seen from any high points on the main islands. I've had good views from Mt Belama and Mt Vonge. The later takes a day's hike to truly appreciate the view. And so far this has

been the most panoramic summit I've been to on the peninsular. All islands in the Solomon archipelago are quite mountainous.

The waterways of the Marovo Lagoon, with its double barrier islands, white sandy coves, and spectacular coral reefs allow for various recreational opportunities. A villager, and eco-tour operator, John Wayne of Telina Island remarked that many sea kayakers had passed through. Sea kayaking operations run from Uepi Island Resort. And there are day trips to more than a week's journey, paddling the lagoon. These expeditions allow kayakers to traverse the lagoon system, stopping over at various eco-lodges for the night, or alternatively camp on a remote island.

After a week the routine of village life takes a slow steady pace. Outside the water's calm as glass, it has been this way all week. The barrier islands seemingly float above a lake of fluvial blue. Today the MV Bilikiki a refurbished

live-aboard dive boat is due to anchor outside Telina Island. A mixture of curiosity and I guess an uncountable sense that things were indeed getting back to normal drove me to wake early. Although a little late, I still manage to join the rear of the local fleet of dugouts heading for the market. Paddling round mangroves strutting out of the shoreline bend, the boat comes into sight. MV Bilikiki's white colour stands out in the warm early morning sun against the islands green backdrop.

Market vendors were up early. Packing their carvings and preparing vegetables ready for sale. Marovo carvers are said to be the best in the Solomon's and dominate the carving industry. Indeed many Marovo carvings are exported and make their way to the tourist shops and hotels in Fiji and Vanuatu. I check out Poka's stall. A well known carver his artefacts include the 'Spirit of Solomon' – an intricately designed maze of fish, coral, and underwater replicas made from black ebony. Other carving figures depict the headhunting years in the past, a story in the rich history that decorates the landscape and people. There are bowls, ladies baskets, and other artefacts.

"Today was a good day," comments another carver. "Many people were able to sell their works of art." Bilikiki trips through the Marovo Lagoon begin at Gatokae bringing divers to explore the marine underworld. Its next trip some say is in March. People look forward to Bilikiki's journeys. Sellers come from the surrounding villages. Even as far as Gasini village to the east, and Sasagana village to the west. At a time when revenue-earning capacities are very low the Bilikiki is a welcome sight for many villagers. In the Marovo Lagoon tourism is still the best environmentally friendly way of earning a dollar. Commercial logging on the other hand has devastated many pristine areas and has also added social repercussions. Hence there's a resurgence of "conservation consciousness" if you may among the people. Indeed the urgency in addressing sustainable development issues and alternative development options for Marovo become apparent considering the wide logging concessions given to mainly Asian companies.

Stranded

On my final day the Seghe airline agent, Mr Levo, summed up (whilst communicating with a distant passenger) on the HF radio what so perfectly depicts the state of the airline schedules. "We live in a changing world, a dynamic world, things change, people change, and everything changes...flight changes occur. Better to be early than late." We laugh at his comments. Yet, shortly after realize that so simple and humorous though his words are, but so true! The plane overflies us to Munda.



Our airline agent is furious but helpless. We are stranded for the night! Nothing uncommon... but in a place like Marovo what's the rush? A friendly reminder to all itinerant travellers... it's always best to give ample time to return to Honiara before your international flight.

Visitors passing through often recall the grandeur and beauty of the place and the friendly people. Here at Seghe I meet up with Susanne, a German tourist from Munich. She had come all the way from Europe to visit the Solomon's. Ending up in the Western Province, she'd been island hopping from Gizo up through Munda then Marovo, diving, fishing, and immersing herself in the culture, as well as meeting new friends, and enjoying the laid-back island lifestyle. After spending a few nights on Uepi Island Resort it was of to Rapita lodge before we met at Seghe. Rapita lodge is situated on an isolated island. It appeared strange, having a whole island to myself, she recalls of Rapita. The quietness and slushing of the water over the sandy shore, renders up a hypnotic tune... kind of eerie she iterates. And I would think so especially for a European city dweller use to hearing the buzzing of cars, trumpeting car horns, sirens, and mad morning rush. Or just the press of the TV button to break the stillness! Here, well there's nothing of that sort. And an isolated island to oneself would feel kind of queer for city people. Maybe even a sense of uneasy remoteness.

More perfectly it is peaceful here...even serene, a world away from the madness caused by civilizations colossal monuments, and fast and expansive push. Still too much of this would be enough to drive someone insane. (Too much of anything good for that matter is not always desirable!) But the recuperative touch of isolation, pure air, sunshine, sand and sea is always welcoming.

A group of us exchange adventure stories, and browse through a few pictures. Susanne shares her adventures in Africa, North and South America, Asia and Borneo, and now the Solomon experience.

Next year she plans to return to the west. Visitors and especially 'diehard' divers that do come, tend to return. Some even regularly, or after a few years! Particularly with a special niche in the untapped underwater wilderness that's waiting to be explored in these islands it's luring. Dives here includes World War II wrecks, reef drop offs, shark dives, and passages where traffic of scaly and leather-like creatures pass in and out. And of course there are wonderful friendly people to meet.

Flying out of Seghe and Marovo Lagoon, the beauty of the place once again becomes visible. The grassy stripe sliced across the flatlands to the waters edge is apparent. To the left the winding lagoon, and the right, the forest, becoming more and more fragmented.

Desperate landscapes

The Marovo Lagoon today is perhaps the most threatened ecosystem in the entire Solomon Islands. Logging companies have plundered the forests of Gatokae, Vangunu and New Georgia Island adjacent to the lagoon. Mining companies are also soon to mine at Kele Bay.

Despite the heavy toll placed on the environment by 'developers', the lagoon system continues to lure divers and tourists.

Desperate landscapes, yet beautiful and intriguing! I wonder how long this ecosystem will sustain the rapidly fragmented biodiversity and the areas local human population before it too like everything else around it may die?