

Whale watching in the Solomon Islands, South Pacific

A marine wildlife adventure in a whale-rich paradise!

17-27 November & 27 November-7 December 2023 (dates on the boat)

with renowned whale experts Mark Carwardine and Chas Anderson



About our trip

For most of us, the Solomon Islands conjures up images of a South Pacific utopia, somewhere so beautiful but so remote that we can only dream of ever getting there. Now you can, by joining Mark for a 10-night magical cruise on our exclusively chartered live-aboard boat. The Solomon Islands are a hotspot for some of the most fascinating whales and dolphins on the planet, as well as world-class coral reefs.

We will voyage westwards from the islands' capital, Honiara, passing lush, coral-fringed tropical islands, watching out for dolphins and whales, and other marine wildlife. Anchoring most nights in sheltered bays and lagoons, we will enjoy being at sea each day. There will also be opportunities to go ashore to explore the wildlife-rich jungle islands, to visit traditional local villages and, of course, to snorkel on the magnificent coral reefs.

Highlights

- Travel past far-flung tropical islands, enjoying the scenery, and taking our time to watch dolphins, whales and seabirds.
- Fabulous chance of seeing a wide variety of cetaceans such as Bryde's, sperm and dwarf sperm whales; pilot, pygmy killer, melon-headed, false killer and killer whales; Cuvier's, Longman's and Blainville's beaked whales; rough-toothed, Fraser's, Risso's, Indo-Pacific bottlenose, spinner, spotted and striped dolphins.

- A **very special and exciting** highlight is the chance of seeing the rare Omura's (*above*) and Deraniyagala's beaked whales, which occur in very few locations.
- Snorkelling on some of the world's most spectacular reefs, with opportunities to scuba dive.
- A small group of just 16 passengers.
- An exclusively chartered boat, the *MV Bilikiki* (all cabins are ensuite and air-conditioned) with highly experienced crew. Because we have an exclusive charter, we can take as much time as we like to investigate wildlife sightings and enjoy a flexible itinerary. We are in no rush!
- Lots of species of seabirds and land birds, including many endemics and regional specialities – everything from boobies and frigatebirds to Solomon Island sea eagle and eclectus parrot.



Omura's whale: one of the most recently described species of baleen whale (2003)



Deraniyagala's beaked whale: a new species described in 2014



Itinerary

DAY 1: Fly from Brisbane to Honiara and transfer straight to *MV Bilikiki*. We set off to cruise through Iron Bottom Sound. After sunset listen to an orientation talk (on most nights there will be a slide show).

DAYS 2-6: We will slowly work our way westwards, past the Russell Islands, out into the Solomon Sea, probably stopping at Mborukua Island (also known as Mary Island), and on towards the New Georgia Islands and Marovo Lagoon (the largest double-barrier reef lagoon in the world). Along the way we will constantly look out for whales and dolphins, seabirds and other ocean

views of the night sky. On some longer crossings we will make up time by cruising at night.

DAYS 7-11: We return towards Guadalcanal by a slightly different route to the one heading out, with plenty more time for whale and dolphin watching. We will not use all the same anchorages, allowing us to snorkel on new reefs and perhaps also visit another island. We should arrive back near Honiara in the evening of our last full day.

DAY 12: Disembark after breakfast and transfer to a hotel in Honiara.

DAY 13: Transfer to airport and fly home.

Weather

The Solomon Islands lie just south of the equator, so the climate is tropical. Local weather is dominated by the seasonal movements of the Equatorial Trough (or Intertropical Convergence Zone). October/November is a transition period, during which the Equatorial Trough passes over the Solomons, typically bringing calm and sunny conditions. The wind can occasionally pick up and bring showers. Temperatures typically reach 28-32°C during the day, dropping to about 24-26°C at night. Sea breezes make this quite comfortable, although when there is no wind it does feel humid. Sea temperatures are delightfully warm (27-28°C).



life (or just daydream while watching all the flying fish). There will be opportunities for snorkelling on the coral reefs most mornings and evenings, with shore excursions at one or two locations. And after dark, far from city lights, the upper deck offers stunning





Number on board

16 passengers, plus 2 leaders and 12 crew including two captains (so we can travel through the night if needed).

About the boat

We have exclusively chartered the 38m live-aboard vessel, the *MV Bilikiki*. She has a professional local crew of 12, including two experienced captains, two international dive guides and three full-time cooks. They have a lifetime's experience in these waters. There are eight guest cabins, all ensuite and air-conditioned (no portholes/windows).

Food on board is plentiful and delicious. Fresh fruits, vegetables and fish are purchased regularly from villagers who come alongside in canoes to sell their produce.

We go ashore using the *Bilikiki*'s two aluminium tenders ('tinnies'). While snorkelling, the tenders will stay nearby to pick people up when they

want. The *Bilikiki* is fully equipped for diving, and so anyone who is appropriately qualified can have a few dives during the course of this trip, as well.

About the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands comprises an archipelago of more than 900 islands, covering some 2 million square kilometres of ocean. They lie in the south-western tropical Pacific, northeast of Australia and east of Papua New Guinea.

The larger islands are rugged volcanic outcrops, carpeted with lush, tropical rainforest. Many of the

smaller islands are reef cays and raised reefs. The Solomon Islands lie within the Coral Triangle, which is the centre of global marine biodiversity. The coral diversity is stupendous, and the reefs are teeming with colourful fishes: the snorkelling is world class.

The local people are mostly Melanesian. While the capital, Honiara, is a bustling little metropolis, most locals live in traditional villages. Indeed, 85% of all land, and associated reef areas, have customary ownership by local villages, tribal and clan groupings. As a result, permission is normally required from village elders before going ashore or visiting the reefs. So island visits are an integral, and delightful, part of any cruise through the Solomons.

The islands were a British colony, gaining independence in 1978. English remains the official language. In WW2, they were the scene of fierce fighting. Battlefield sites near Honiara can be visited before or after the cruise. The sea immediately out from Honiara is still known as Iron Bottom Sound, in reference to the ship and plane wrecks lying there.

Leaders

Mark will be leading with Dr Charles 'Chas' Anderson, a professional marine biologist who is an authority on the area's cetaceans, other marine life and seabirds (and is a pioneer of whale watching in the area).



How to get there

You will need to arrange your own flights to Honiara International Airport (airport code HIR). The Solomon Islands are on the other side of the World from the UK, so it is feasible to fly westward or eastward, or indeed to take a round-the-world flight.

The easiest way to reach the Solomon Islands is via Brisbane in Australia. From there it takes about three hours to fly to Honiara.

There are flights from Brisbane to Honiara with Solomon Airlines (IE).

Visas

Nationals of the UK and several other countries do not require a visa for entry into the Solomon Islands. You will be issued with a permit on arrival, but you must be in possession of a passport valid for at least 6 more months; a return air-ticket; and sufficient

funds for your stay. If you are not a UK citizen, see the website of the Solomon Islands Immigration Division to check visa requirements and application procedures:

<https://www.commerce.gov.sb/departments-units/immigration/about-the-division.html>

Depending on your route to the Solomons, you may be travelling via a country for which you require a visa.

**To book
(and for more information)**
Contact Rachel Ashton,
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Price

£6,995 per person sharing on boat (excluding flights); single supplement in Honiara hotel, £120.

Price includes: 10 nights' accommodation in cabin with en suite facilities; all meals and some drinks (including water, teas and coffees) on *Bilikiki*; 1 night's bed and breakfast in hotel with private facilities in Honiara (first trip, 27th November; second trip 7th December); all excursions as described in the itinerary; Solomon Islands permits and fees; transfers between airport/hotel to boat; guide services of Mark Carwardine and Charles Anderson whilst on boat; information pack; evening talks/slideshows; link to slideshow of the trip; weights, weight belts and tanks for scuba divers.

Price does not include: flights; airport departure taxes; travel insurance; visas; meals on shore; alcoholic drinks and canned sodas on board; crew gratuities aboard vessel (we suggest about US\$200 per passenger); hotel accommodation other than last night in Honiara; laundry and phone calls, personal items; scuba diving gear rental (except for weights and tanks).

Payment schedule

- Non-refundable deposit on booking: £500pp
- First-stage payment six months prior to departure
- Final balance (and single supplement if applicable) 90 days prior to departure

