

Towards a history of tourism in Solomon Islands

The first instalment

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Abstract

Researchers of tourism histories have mainly focused on documenting the process as it has happened in the Western world. It is suggested that this is because the academic study of tourism has traditionally been a Western discipline. This paper initiates the documentation of the historical development of tourism in Solomon Islands, a small island country in the Southwest Pacific. The British colonial experience and the proximity of Solomon Islands to Australia have both been strong influences on the directions tourism has taken throughout the last century—for better and for worse. The construction of this tourism history indicates the diversity of sources that researchers must consult in order to pull together the disparate threads of the story.

Keywords Solomon Islands, tourism history, Melanesia, Burns Philp

Introduction

Towner and Wall (1991: 72–3) claim that historians try to understand changes through time and this is their distinctive contribution to the tourism discipline. Constructing tourism histories can be a challenge because of the diverse, often obscure, nature of the sources that must be consulted. Descriptions of facilities, modes of transport, sites seen, entertainment undertaken, visitor motivations and host participation in and reaction to tourism are often recorded simply as casual observations in publications with quite a different purpose. Scholarly discussions on the various ways histories can be constructed are ongoing (for example Dean, 1994; Pickering, 1997). Proponents of presentism theory try to understand the past from the moment of interpretation. Advocates of objectivity present only what actually took place, while highlighting the conditions and contexts through which these past events must be interpreted. Lowenthal's challenging work, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), is based on the concept that the past, once thought indistinguishable from the present, has increasingly become a foreign realm, yet one increasingly suffused by the present (xix). He states that what historians actually do 'depends on the present views of what history ought to be about. If only to be understood, historians rewrite the past from the standpoint of the present, in the process rearranging data and altering conclusions' (xxiii).

It is suggested here that when constructing histories of tourism destinations, historians should first devise an initial framework of tangible, industry-specific developments. Into this can then be threaded the wider social, political and economic environments that may have influenced tourism's development. The end result should be a comprehensive and well-rounded view of how, when, where and why tourism happened in this chosen location, albeit from the author's cultural and knowledge-based perspective. The re-interpretation of histories is happening, particularly in postcolonial regions and societies where indigenous peoples are empowered to reconstruct their own pasts. Eventually, many histories may well be totally reconstructed, making it increasingly important for the reader to know something of the author's mindset in order to understand the position taken.

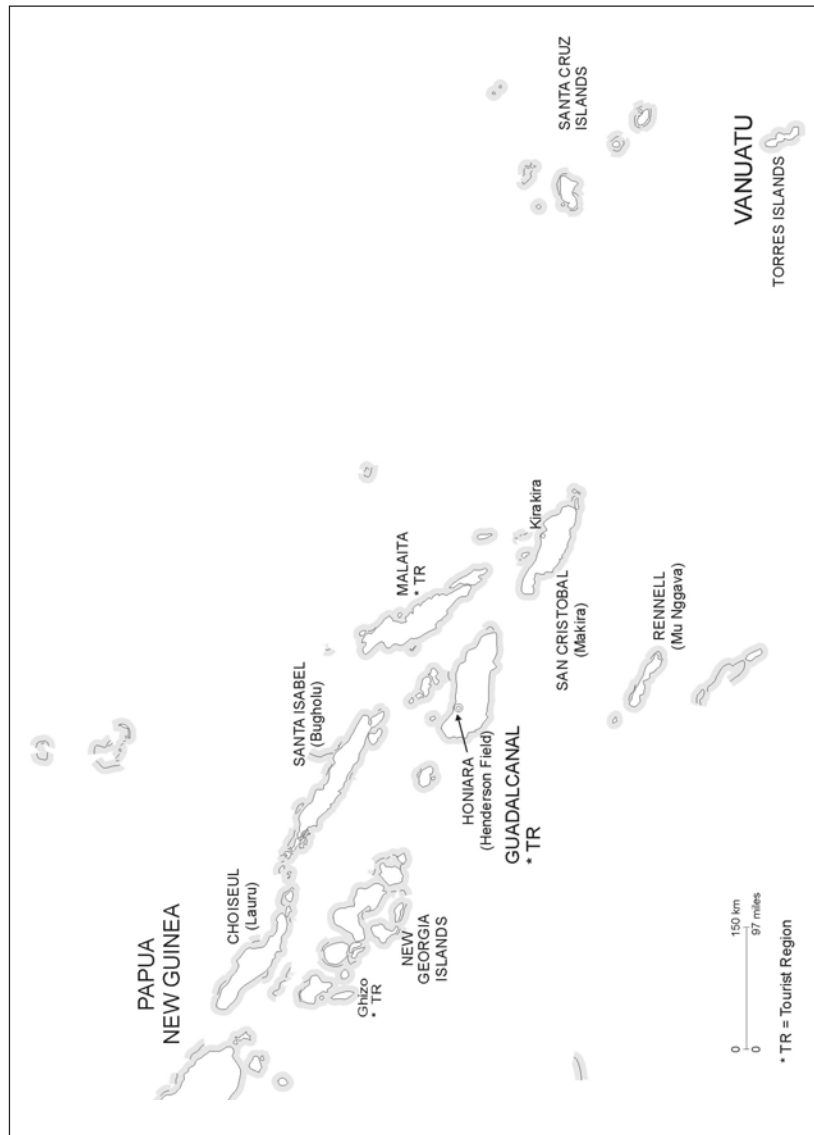
Constructing an initial historical framework requires patience, diligence and lateral thinking. The first two attributes are necessary if

there are vast amounts of material to be sifted for a single piece of information deemed relevant in the author's perspective. The third is essential for the researcher to break out of the confines of archival work. Studying people's holiday snaps and reviewing their souvenir collections can provide a wealth of information. Material once regarded as ephemera can help weave together a story: menus, tickets, labels, posters, brochures, newsletters, even drink coasters, for example. And recording oral reminiscences can be another very rewarding source.

Tourism histories published to date have, for the most part, focused on the countries and institutions of the West. Students of tourism can readily access material on the touristic exploits of the Romans, the medieval pilgrimages, the Grand Tours of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the development of spas, the growth of Victorian seaside resorts and the international consequences of Thomas Cook. The increase in the number of publications devoted to these topics can be partly explained by the availability of secondary data, which are easy to reinterpret. Another explanatory factor for the bias is that the academic study of tourism has been a Western development and many researchers are more comfortable working within their own cultural heritage. Few studies have attempted to construct the history of tourism in countries outside Europe and the USA. There are exceptions (Richardson, 1999, Douglas & Douglas, 1999; Douglas, 1996; Cribb, 1995; and Saunders, 1993) but histories of Pacific islands have generally focused on European arrival, trade, religion, labour, land, colonialism and politics, and few make more than a fleeting reference, if any, to tourism. It is hoped that a new wave of histories centred on postcolonial societies will pay more attention to the impacts of tourism, especially in destinations where tourism has become a major feature of economic development.

This paper is directed at outlining the initial framework of the historical development of tourism in Solomon Islands, a small country in the Southwest Pacific. It concentrates on the period up to the Second World War and does not claim to be comprehensive. Indeed, a primary aim is to encourage others to weave in the wider social, political and economic environments according to their own interpretation. A further aim is to direct those interested in developing tourism histories of other destinations towards diverse and often obscure sources, which nevertheless provide valuable insights into the range of activities incorporated into the phenomenon of tourism. Postcolonial country names are used except in direct quotations.

Figure 1 Solomon Islands



The country

Solomon Islands is an independent state and a member of the Commonwealth. It comprises six large islands and numerous small ones and is located between five and 12° S latitude and 155 and 170° E longitude (see figure 1).

The total land area is 29,800 sq km, and the terrain is rugged and scattered with dormant volcanoes. High rainfall and tropical temperatures make for dense rainforest vegetation, and birds, butterflies and reptiles abound. The seas are rich in marine life. Guadalcanal, at 5650 sq km, is the largest island and location of the capital, Honiara. Ninety-five per cent of the population of 352,000 is Melanesian, and the balance is divided between Europeans, Chinese, Polynesians and Micronesians (mainly from Kiribati to the northeast). Ninety-five per cent of the population is also Christian, as the nineteenth century missionaries effectively banished the practice of custom religions. The people follow a subsistence lifestyle, and only about 10 per cent live in the urban areas. However, as elsewhere, there is an increasing rural–urban drift by young people seeking the enticing promises of jobs and entertainment that towns seem to offer. But reality is different, and Honiara in particular has high unemployment and many associated social problems. Indeed, the burdens of families already living in towns are increased when they are expected to support their unemployed relatives in the traditional Melanesian manner. Timber, fish, palm oil and copra have been the mainstays of the latter-day colonial and postcolonial economy, although there is a heavy dependence on the public sector for formal employment.

As Bennett indicates (1987), rural–urban movement in Solomon Islands started in the colonial period and was a major factor in increasing poverty and unemployment, and in exacerbating competition for scarce resources, including land. At the end of 1999, longstanding hostilities erupted into the violent confrontation of two groups of Solomon Islanders on the main island, those from Malaita and those from Guadalcanal. Throughout 2000 there was widespread killing and hostage taking, and businesses in both the private and public sectors were destroyed. Expatriates were evacuated, the international media latched on to the devastation, and the business of tourism stopped completely. Indeed, in April 2001 the government was still reported as being in a ‘state of paralysis’ (Keith-Reid, 2001: 27). [By 2003, the situation had improved so little that Australian intervention and military presence (RAMSI) were considered necessary.]

A tourism snapshot

Tourism has always been regarded with some suspicion in Solomon Islands, and this attitude continues into the 21st century. For much of the 1990s, total annual arrivals hovered at around 14,000, with somewhere around a half to a third classified as visiting for purposes of leisure, pleasure and recreation. At one time, projections for tourist arrivals in 2000 were more than 70,000 visitors, as indicated in table 1. They were based on an annual growth rate of 22 per cent. As table 2 indicates, the reality was somewhat different, and annual arrivals in 2001 were only a few thousand.

Table 1 Medium projections of visitor arrivals, 1991–2000

Year	1991	1993	1995	1997	1998	1999	2000
Market Area							
Australia	4,300	5,900	8,600	13,100	14,900	16,400	1,800
New Zealand	1,400	1,900	2,700	4,000	4,500	4,800	5,000
Pacific	2,500	3,400	4,900	7,500	8,900	10,300	11,500
North America	1,000	1,500	2,500	4,400	5,700	8,500	10,000
Europe	900	1,300	2,000	3,600	5,000	6,700	8,700
Japan	600	1,000	1,700	3,200	5,200	7,300	10,200
Other countries	800	1,300	2,200	3,900	5,500	6,600	8,700
TOTAL	11,500	16,300	24,600	39,700	49,700	60,600	72,100

Source Solomon Islands Tourism Authority, 1990.

Table 2 Solomon Islands visitor arrival statistics, 1997–2001

Visitor arrivals	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
5,072	4,161	4,161	2,474	5,753	3,418

Source South Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2002.

Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Japan are the main tourist generating areas and diving is the primary reason for their visits. The seas around the Solomons are rich in all the things divers seek, including war wreckage in great abundance. Indeed, until the early 1990s, war veterans from both sides in the Second World War made the pilgrimage to revisit the traumatic sites of their youth. This market is subject to natural decline, but families of veterans still occasionally arrive. Accommodation facilities are

generally of moderate standard and mainly near Honiara, with a few smaller dive resorts scattered elsewhere around the other island groups. Air access is possible from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Zealand. In addition, cruise ships call at Honiara two or three times a year, but it is a popular port of call only among passengers who are diving or war relic enthusiasts. The wharf and the town environs are dilapidated and rubbish-strewn. There are no swimming beaches within reasonably accessible distance of the town, and shopping facilities are non-existent.

The arrival of outsiders

In 1568 the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña was the first European to leave a written record of having reached these islands. He called them the Islands of Solomon in the mistaken belief that he had found the lost riches of King Solomon (Bennett, 1987: 1). The name and its associated reputation was thought to appeal to potential settlers as early as 1595, when Mendana returned from Peru with four ships of hopeful, but doomed, colonists (Douglas & Douglas, 1994: 603). It is pertinent, perhaps, to mention that Bougainville, a French explorer who also visited the Solomons, is credited with first labelling the Pacific Islands as 'paradise', after his reportedly rapturous arrival in Tahiti in 1768, thus giving rise to what has become the most misinformed concept in Pacific islands' tourism marketing.

Until the mid-twentieth century, British administration of Solomon Islands was notable for its indifference. Unlike the case of Papua New Guinea, very little information about the country appeared in the international media, so it did not attract a regular flow of Europeans, whether prompted by curiosity or acquisitiveness. However, Solomon Islanders, so studiously ignored by the decision-makers of the secular world, proved pliable and profitable to the sacred leaders. Roman Catholics and Anglicans so competed in offering salvation gilded with health clinics and schools that provision of these essential services was left entirely to the churches, thus freeing the administration from such tedious responsibilities. While growth in the plantation economy was sluggish, the churches prospered but Solomon Islands remained, in every respect, a backwater of the British Empire.

Bloody Pirates establish the transport

In February 1884 James Burns and Robert Philp, two enterprising Scotsmen in the Australian and South Pacific shipping business, identified a new form

of potentially profitable cargo—tourists. They placed an advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* inviting passengers to join the *Elsea*, which sailed regularly to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The trip was a success, and a further advertisement in September promised that a trip on the comfortable clipper yacht offered ‘capital shooting and fishing and intending passengers should take rifles and fishing tackle’ (*SMH*, 1884). South Pacific cruising had been launched. The company name of Burns Philp was shortened to ‘BPs’ by the expatriate populations throughout Melanesia and, in turn, became ‘Bloody Pirates’, a sobriquet reflecting how customers felt about the company’s trading terms!

In 1886 BP began publishing guidebooks about the places they visited. A glowing account of a cruise on the *SS Victory*—‘a right little, tight little craft of about a hundred tons capacity’—included descriptions of the sort of people to whom this travel adventure might appeal, predating by some 100 years tourist typologies suggested by tourism academics.

Nowadays, when every ’Arry has done what not so many years ago was known as the ‘Grand Tour’, when alligator shooting on the Nile, lion hunting in Nubia, or tiger potting in the Punjab can be done by contract with Cook’s tickets; when the Holy Land, Mecca or Khiva are all accessible to tourists; when every mountain in the Alps has been scaled, and even the Himalayas made the scene of mountaineering triumphs, when shooting buffaloes in the ‘Rockies’ is almost as common as potting grouse on the moors; it comes almost with a sense of relief to visit a country really new, about which but little is known—a country of real cannibals and genuine savages . (Burns Philp, 1886)

Burns Philp established shipping connections with the Solomon Islands in 1894 and within a few months was planning new cruises:

HOLIDAY TRIP TO THE ISLANDS

Messrs Burns Philp and Company Limited have arranged for a special trip to the Solomons and the New Hebrides. A steamer is to leave at the end of the month or early in January. The trip will take about five weeks and the steamer is to call at all trading stations in the Solomon Islands and principal ports in the New Hebrides . . . Captain Williams in charge. (*SMH*, 1894)

By the 1930s, BP had a steamer departing Sydney every six weeks for Solomon Islands. Passengers expected a certain luxury. The fittings of the BP vessel, *Macdhui*, were typical of the time (Wilkinson & Willson 1981: 122–3). There was accommodation for 138 persons in two-, three- and four-berth cabins with each berth having a private locker and wardrobe, reading lamp and Thermos bottle for iced water. The public rooms boasted oak panelling, mahogany fittings and fine upholstery in muted pastel tones. The promenade deck was spacious enough for deck games—‘even cricket’ (Wilkinson & Willson, 1981: 123). As the most modern ‘Punkah Louvre’ mechanical ventilation system changed and cooled the air, and ‘cinema apparatus’ had been installed for entertainment, it was style and comfort all the way.

Not everyone could be satisfied; not every trip was comfortable. In 1935, anthropologist Hugo Bernatzik, described his experiences on ‘a small Australian steamer which maintained communications between the plantations’ (Bernatzik 1935: 62). He claimed it was leaky, rusty and totally unsuitable to tropical conditions, having been built some 60 years earlier as a whaler in polar seas. Ventilation was non-existent; dirt, coal dust and engine grease covered everything; water and electricity were rationed to the most stringent requirements. The ultimate insult came when

they demanded for this sort of conveyance the same fare that one would have paid first class on an up-to-date ocean liner! The monopoly, which is in the hands of an Australian shipping company, seems to be a tidy business in spite of all economic crises. (Bernatzik, 1935: 64)

The company can only have been the ‘Bloody Pirates’.

On another trip from Sydney, Bernatzik described a ‘crowd’ of tourists on board, “‘round trip people’” as the ship’s officers contemptuously called them’, whose main aim was to see ‘real wild cannibals’. At one port, while they were loading copra, a fight broke out between some Island labourers. At first Bernatzik thought BPs had staged a cannibal fight for the ‘round trip people’, but when the ship’s purser waded in to break it up he acknowledged that it was too realistic to have been contrived. The tourists were apparently delighted, and talked of the attack with great enthusiasm for the rest of the voyage, convinced that they had at last seen ‘real wild cannibals’ (Bernatzik, 1935: 73). The company withdrew its Solomon Islands service in November 1970, when the *Marsina* sailed from Honiara for the last time (BSIP, 1970).

Although by the early twentieth century pleasure passengers doing the round trip were probably few—company records do not show passenger numbers by purpose—the potential of the tourist market had been recognised by BP. It published several guidebooks, advertised its services in the most prominent papers and, by acting as a shipping agent, had established connections with numerous international shipping lines. By 1910, James Burns was advocating the production of a new company handbook, aimed specifically at ‘people who would be likely to travel’ (James Burns, letter 1910). Ten thousand copies of the first edition of *Picturesque Travels* were printed in 1911. Further editions came out in 1913, 1914 (possibly not a good year for international pleasure travel), 1920, 1921 and 1925. The 1914 volume announced the establishment of the Burns Philp Tourist Department, a move seen by James Burns as a natural outcome of the steady expansion of the company’s business (Burns Philp, 1914). Personally conducted tours were a speciality, and included visits to Solomon Islands on the *SS Morinda*. Publication of *Picturesque Travels* ceased in 1925, but in 1925 was succeeded by *The BP Magazine*, which continued as a quarterly until 1941, when war again interrupted shipping schedules. It must be remembered, however, that tourism was still a minor component of BP’s business, the backbone of which was Australian government mail contracts and regional trade. Tourists were just another cargo.

Other ships—big and small

The British were also interested. By 1934, P & O had full-page advertisements in *The BP Magazine* for pleasure cruises to the area on the *Narkunda* and the *Strathnaver* (Douglas & Douglas, 1996). The *Narkunda*, a one-class ship accommodating 500 passengers, was pressed into the post–World War I emigration business, while the *Strathnaver*, launched in 1931, was specifically designed to bring to passenger shipping a degree of energy, speed and beauty never before attempted. She was a two-class ship and less wealthy passengers were no longer described as ‘second class’, but as ‘tourist class’ (Howarth & Howarth, 1986). These short cruises were programmed between the more profitable line and emigrant voyages to Australia. P & O’s interest in the Pacific was also furthered through its substantial shareholding in the Orient Line, and such ships as the *Oronsay* occasionally went to the Far East, calling at Solomon Islands en route. Indeed,

by the 1970s, P & O had come to dominate the Pacific cruise market out of Australia (Douglas & Douglas, 1996).

In the 1930s, private yachts were common in the Western Pacific. Many were on scientific voyages of discovery, but others were used only for pleasure cruises. As indicated below, Count Tolna, for example, could be described as a nineteenth century 'yachtie', and in 1908 author Jack London, with his wife Charmian, visited the region during their world cruise on the 45-foot yacht *Snark*. During their long cruise, numerous people joined as crew, including cinematographer Martin Johnson.

Although London was a prolific writer, catering primarily for north American audiences, and his yarns and stories contributed to the myths and images of the South Pacific, his description of Solomon Islands in *Cruise of the Snark* hardly encouraged potential travellers to venture this way. Recording the incidence of horrible diseases and sores, accidents on land and at sea, and frightening encounters with natives, he asserted:

If I were a king, the worst punishment I could inflict on my enemies would be to banish them to the Solomons. On second thought, king or no king, I don't think I'd have the heart to do it. (London, 1971: 282-3)

The early travel imagery of the Solomons

We had come in contact with many wild people but none of them were quite wild enough. (Martin Johnson, 1922)

Photographic stills of Solomon Islands were produced at least as early as 1899 when Hungarian Count Rudolphe de Tolna spent eight years cruising the area with his wife on his yacht, *Tolna*. The portraits of Melanesian women show near-naked beauties, draped languidly over chairs with feather fans fluttering in their fingers. By contrast, those of males conform to nineteenth century popular notions of 'savages' and 'cannibals'. Referring to the contextual development of the 'exotic', the 'savage', the 'heathen' and the 'hybrid' representations of Pacific islanders during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Thomas notes that Polynesians were depicted in ways that reinforced a positive European response to their physical, societal and political attributes. By contrast, Melanesian portraits have an ethnographic rather than an eroticised character (Thomas, 1993: 49).

Others also took photographs. In 1909, for example, Tasmanian J.W. Beattie produced a large catalogue of photographs of Solomon Islands. A few years later, Thomas J. McMahon, an Australian writer and photographer, travelled on Burns Philp (BP) mail boats through the island group and took hundreds of pictures. His illustrated writings appeared in at least eight Australian and overseas popular magazines (e.g. McMahon, 1918, 1922).

Between 1910 and 1920, American cinematographers Martin and Osa Johnson journeyed to the South Seas, 'thrilled at the thought of facing danger in the haunts of savage men' (Johnson, 1922: 2). Their films were shown in New York, London and Paris, 'transporting audiences back to the stone age'. The 'naked savages' so shocked cosmopolitan audiences that some of their best film was unsaleable, so on a subsequent visit they persuaded the 'savages' to wear G-strings or loincloths and aprons of leaves. On their travels in Melanesia, the Johnsons shot some 25,000 feet of film and 1,000 stills, funding each new adventure with illustrated lectures on their journey wherever they could find an audience. Osa's narration on the films included such observations as 'This [headwrapping] doesn't seem to affect their intelligence in any way. As a matter of fact they haven't got any intelligence to start with' (Johnson & Johnson, 1917-1919).

Generally, the travelogue was a popular nineteenth century entertainment. Between 1885 and 1897, for example, some 30 illustrated travelogues had been given at the monthly meetings of the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland, and most were about Melanesia, which included Solomon Islands (*Queensland Geographical Journal*, 1985). By the 1920s, as a result of the reported experiences of such travellers, readily devoured by an interested public, there was a plethora of images on Solomon Islands, depicting features both to attract and repel potential visitors.

Building the accommodation

Formal accommodation for travellers in Solomon Islands in the early twentieth century was non-existent. New arrivals, be they intending settlers, travelling salesmen, government officials or incidental tourists, availed themselves of the hospitality of established planters, traders, mission stations and government officers. Nebulous references to hotels in any print material give little information. In the early 1920s, for example, at Tulagi, the

first administrative centre, a Mr Elkington had opened a small hotel. Recorded one visitor: 'We mounted the 43 shell strewn steps to the hotel—the only one in the group—and there we found a jolly crowd of men exchanging news and yarns' (Collinson 1926: 21). Other oblique references (such as 'we found him at a hotel') are scattered throughout journals and diaries of the period. However, Elkington's establishment must have met the criteria of the founder of the *Pacific Islands Yearbook (PIY)*, because it is mentioned in its first edition of 1932, not by name or appointments, but merely through the note that 'hotel accommodation is available for tourists only at Tulagi'. Founded by R.W. Robson in 1930 and published until 2000, the *Pacific Islands Monthly (PIM)* reported in June 1935 that while seven Tulagi establishments were licensed to sell liquor, only Elkington's had any sort of accommodation—and even then there were no arrangements to cater for travellers (*PIM*, June 1935: 30). Unfortunately for travellers, Elkington's hotel had actually burned down in 1934, shortly before the article was published.

When the Allied troops left Solomon Islands after the Second World War, they left behind the foundations of a tourism industry. These included roads, bridges, port facilities and airfields, as well as telecommunications systems, refrigeration plants, water pumping stations and buildings. In 1948, in Honiara, the new capital, Kenneth Dalrymple Hay, an enterprising expatriate, took over some officers' facilities and in the following year opened them as the nine-room Woodford Hotel (which in 1958 was to be renamed the Mendana Hotel). The opening was performed with a hatchet, the licensee having lost the key (*PIM*, June 1949: 64). In Chinatown, there was a small hotel, of sorts, which eventually became the Honiara Hotel. Even in later years, the only other hotel of real substance was Blum's Hometel, opened by Arthur Blum in 1966 (later to become the Hibiscus Hotel).

To digress slightly, Blum was an ex-Marine who had served in Solomon Islands during the war. Returning in 1954 to promote the Bahai faith, he was appalled to discover that indigenous people from the Pacific were not allowed to stay at the Mendana. In fact, Hay's racist attitudes were well known, and his hotel was the last in the Pacific to bar non-white people (Douglas, 1996: 120). In his own words:

You run a hotel as a business, not to please people who might have ideas. I keep out the Solomon Islanders because I don't want to lower my standards. They accuse me of discrimination, but that's rubbish. Solomon Islanders can't stay at my hotel because they are not all at the stage where they are fit to stay here. Certainly some of them are, but if I let some in but kept most of them out, then that would be discrimination. (*PIM*, 1966)

What the tourists saw

By the early 1930s, tourists could sail to or around Solomon Islands on comfortable steamships, find some sort of accommodation in the administrative centre, take escorted package tours, and prepare themselves by reading numerous publications aimed at tourists. Descriptions of the scenery dominate. Swaying coconut palms, dense, brooding jungles, iridescent blue waters, frame every literary image. Balmy tropical breezes and star-filled night skies are described in long detail. For the occasional tourist from the dreary, industrialised northern hemisphere, or from rapidly urbanising neighbouring Australia, these features alone may have held considerable appeal but for many, the chance of seeing 'gaily-dressed, laughter-loving [primitive] natives' (Burns Philp 1920: 26) must also have been a major attraction.

For resident expatriates, 'boat day' was awaited with great anticipation. Not only did it mean fresh supplies, but it was also an opportunity to see new faces and receive news from home. According to planter Norman Sandford, the 'rumour would spread that there was a bevy of lady school teachers on each boat . . . There never [or at least very rarely] ever was, but there was always the excitement of the possibility' (cited in Nelson 1982: 70).

The trading and other activities at ports of call kept passengers occupied. Copra loading, the offloading of stores for plantations and trading posts, the comings and goings of planters, missionaries, administrative staff and other settlers all contributed to making each stop buzz with action. Sightseeing might also include a visit to a mission village but unlike in villages elsewhere in the Pacific, particularly in Polynesia, no dance performances were staged to entertain tourists. However, they were invited to visit the village gardens and could perhaps be persuaded to buy a few artefacts and curios.

In Tulagi, it was possible to be invited to the British Resident Commissioner's house for tea, and other expatriates also entertained tourists, not always with great satisfaction. When the cruise ship *Oronsay* called at Tulagi in September 1934, for example, residents erected a temporary bar and arranged for anyone with a small boat to ferry the passengers on sightseeing trips around the harbour. Caterers prepared lunch and the trade stores awaited a rush of souvenir hunters. The day was a disappointment. The passengers purchased little and the caterers lost much money because passengers brought packed lunches ashore in paper bags (*PIM*, October 1934: 44).

Who were the tourists?

Approximately £41 could buy a four and a half week round tour from Sydney to Solomon Islands on the *Mataram*, which is exactly what school teacher Miss Eleanor Barker purchased. She and her sister joined a cruise with 50 others, of whom about thirty were school teachers (Barker 1933: 2). Most were female, and Miss Barker comments on how this pleased the bachelors in each port.

About thirty of the tourists were school teachers who had made up little parties of twos and threes, each party unknown to the other, but all determined to forget there was such a thing as school for at least a month . . . Everywhere we called at after the first port we were greeted with— 'We hear there's a party of thirty teachers onboard. Is that so?' Of course, the pursers were blamed for divulging the contents of the papers, but it came out afterwards that the news was sent around the islands from Tulagi itself, by whom I know not. (Barker 1933: 3)

The first port of call was Makambo, BP's headquarters. On the hill behind, someone had carved 'welcome' in the rock. Each evening there was a dance on board with young men coming from miles around, resplendent in white evening clothes with little black tie, the regulation evening wear. The rest of the cruise was a series of visits to copra plantations and the larger church missions, and visitors were greeted with great enthusiasm, passing the time at tea parties, dinner dances, lunching, swimming and generally socialising. 'Really the Islanders are most hospitable', declared Miss

Barker—referring, of course, to the expatriates rather than the indigenes (who were inevitably described as ‘friendly natives’ or ‘wild cannibals’).

Miss Lottie Dingienan was another woman who found the Solomons fascinating. ‘Why did I not know sooner about this place?’ she demanded in April 1932, describing her recent voyage on the *Mataram*. Lottie earnestly declared if more information on these islands was available outside of Australia, they would attract ‘thousands of Americans looking for something new’ (*PIM*, May, 1932: 31). The editor of the *Pacific Islands Monthly* could not have agreed more. Robson wrote that while Burns Philp was successfully promoting the ‘sunshine and colour, unusualness and romance’ of the South Seas within Australia, the ‘older world’, that is Britain and Europe, knew nothing about the region. He encouraged everybody interested in South Seas tourism to organise a centrally located bureau to promote the region, especially in the valuable tourist generating area of the older world, once the depression of the time was over. It was to be another 50 years before his advice was seriously heeded in Melanesia.

Advice for tourists

The most accessible sources with information for tourists during the 1920s and 1930s were the BP publications and the *Pacific Islands Yearbook* or the smaller publications it spawned, such as *Handbook of the Western Pacific* (1933), which was devoted entirely to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. However, readers of Robson’s ‘Guide for Pacific Travellers’ in the 1935 edition of the *Pacific Islands Yearbook* might have thought twice before choosing the Solomons.

The Islanders range from the light-skinned, cleanly, merry and intelligent Tahitians and Samoans, to the black, malodorous savages of untamed Melanesia. The climate ranges from the fairly cool, sub-tropical islands of southern Polynesia, where there is no fever, to hot steamy, malarial places like the Solomons and northern New Guinea. (*PIY*, 1935–36: 11–15)

It is a wonder BP did any round trip business at all. Those who did decide to go, probably despite Robson’s descriptions rather than because of them, received varied advice on what to wear. Women were dismissed in two short sentences. They should wear what they wore in Sydney or Brisbane in midsummer and add a solar topi (sun helmet). ‘It usually looks tropical and

attractive', added Robson (*PIY*, 1935–36: ii). The advice to men was extensive. 'For men', he began, 'the subject is of considerably more importance'. The abundance of 'wash-boys' meant that men could feel free to change their clothes at least twice a day. 'Shorts', he advised, 'should be tailor made and fairly roomy, and should reach to just below the knee-cap when the wearer is standing upright' (*PIY*, 1935–36: ii).

Round trippers, unless they want to carry a couple of dozen white suits, may wear on the steamer the usual white or grey flannels, with white or brown shoes. The latter costume, with a sun helmet and light sports jacket, is quite suitable for quick trips ashore. Whites are more suitable, but most suitable of all is the shorts outfit described [shorts, tunic shirt, golf stockings, brown shoes and solar topi]. The round tripper . . . should also carry . . . flannels, light silk shirts, white shoes and three or four white or khaki suits . . . For evening wear in the tropics, whether on the ship or ashore, the traveller should have at least a couple of white mess jackets . . . usually worn with black mess trousers . . . or white, nicely laundered drill trousers. Many men . . . use white or silk shirts and collars with dress ties; and, if they are not strictly a la mode, they looked dressed and comfortable . . . and when dancing in the heavy heat are not troubled with a crumpling shirt and an entirely collapsed collar. (*PIY*, 1935–36: ii)

Shortly after this advice was offered, the world of the Solomon Islanders was to change forever. War and (later) the policy shift in favour of independence sooner rather than later were to result in new directions for the country. Solomon Islanders no longer accepted the role as tourist 'attractions' and, despite the ambivalent attitudes to tourism held by colonial administrators and the new independent government (Douglas, 1996), they slowly became involved in the tourism industry.

In general, entrepreneurial activity and other direct participation in tourism occur when both the investment capital required and the physical size of the necessary infrastructure are small, and when the required organisational and operational skills are straightforward. Like other Pacific islanders, Solomon Islanders are often disadvantaged because of the complexities imposed by international and expatriate developers who preceded them (De Kadt, 1979; Choy, 1984). In Melanesia generally, financial participation has remained especially low, and it is only as holders of

inalienable land that islanders have been (usually passively) involved, and then not always successfully.

In Solomon Islands in the immediate post-war period, the rise of indigenous entrepreneurship coincided with the appearance of such micronationalist movements as the Maasina Rule and Moro Custom Group in the Moli district of Guadalcanal (Steinbauer, 1979; Douglas, 1996). The first documented financial participation of Solomon Islanders in a tourism venture is recorded in 1949. Through government insistence on local participation, local people owned eight per cent of the shares in Tambae Resort, 40km from Honiara and run by Dalice and Olle Torling (Douglas, 1996: 186). Another successful venture appeared somewhat later, when Bruce and Kitty Saunders involved Solomon Islanders in their Lausali Adventure Tours, in which the people's cultural rather than financial capital was reflected in their holdings.

During this early period, joint ventures of some kind (and not necessarily with a 50–50 partnership) were the most accessible way for indigenous people to move into tourist operations. It was some time before ventures run *solely* by Solomon Islanders were to emerge, and Fred Kona's small war relic museum, established in 1972, was one of the first.

Conclusion

In its first fifty years in Solomon Islands, tourism emerged more by default than design. Because Burns Philp needed to service their ever-increasing numbers of trade stores and plantation contacts, they instigated a regular shipping service. Taking on passengers who primarily wanted to see the islands, rather than do business of some kind, was a strategic move to capitalise on 'cargo' rather than a deliberate strategy to enter the tourism business. However, BP quickly capitalised on the growing interest in travel to the region, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the company was taking tourism very seriously. Until the late 1940s, however, tourism development was by people of European origin for people of European origin. Solomon Islanders were mere curiosities, to be seen occasionally, preferably from a safe distance, between jolly rounds of expatriate social activities. Indeed, the style and focus of colonial records and publications of the period, and the ways that brief encounters between hosts and guests are

presented, reflect the experiences of the expatriate ruling class. As a consequence, it is virtually impossible to find descriptions of less superficial interaction of indigenous host and European guest. These emerge only in the post-war period.

The Solomon Islands' tourism story is a lively one incorporating all the elements of a first class novel—'pirates', cannibals, tropical settings and romance. Current promoters of tourism development must still deal with absence of necessary basic infrastructure, fragile governments, violent inter-clan rivalry, poor international media exposure, rampant malaria and administrative indifference. The continuing chapter for this destination is still to be written. It is hoped that other destinations, particularly in the more peripheral tourism regions of the world, will document their own tourism histories to add to the often overlooked and underrated contribution of history to the discipline of tourism.

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