

# UEPI

Don Silcock waxes lyrical about the diving opportunities that exist around Uepi Island in the Marovo Lagoon

Photographs by Don Silcock

# ISLAND



## Don Silcock

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**L**ike a series of random punctuation marks, the many islands of the Solomon archipelago are scattered along the southern arc of the Pacific Ring of Fire, nestled between Papua New Guinea to the north and Vanuatu to the south.

An independent country since 1976, the Solomon Islands are a unique blend of Pacific Island Melanesian culture, infused with elements of Polynesia and shaped by powerful tectonic forces. Those forces created a chain of mountainous islands rich in native rainforests, spectacular volcanoes, and stunning lagoons.

The archipelago comprises over 900 islands, organized into nine provinces plus the capital territory of Honiara, located on the northwest coast of Guadalcanal.

Underwater there are rich reef systems and an amazing variety of marine life together with one of the highest concentrations of World War Two wrecks in the Pacific.

### The Coral Triangle

The Solomon Islands, together with Papua New Guinea, form the eastern lobe of the famed Coral Triangle - the richest known area of marine biodiversity in the world.

But unlike PNG, which owes its biodiversity to a combination of regional and equatorial currents, the Solomons derives its rich ecological diversity primarily from those equatorial water flows. That diversity includes around 500 species of coral and over 1,000 species of reef fish. The waters of the Western Province, centred around the large island of New Georgia, boast an overall fish species diversity second only to that of Indonesia's Raja Ampat.

### Diving the Solomons

The Solomons can be dived both by liveaboard, and from a few select land-based locations, both of which have their advantages and in this series of articles we will cover those options. In the initial article we covered diving the World War Two wrecks in and around 'Iron Bottom Sound' from the Solomons Master, which operates from the capital Honiara. And later we will cover one of the extended 11-day itineraries of the very popular Bilikiki liveaboard, which also operates from Honiara.

But for this second article, we will focus on the diving in the north-east of New Georgia from the delightful island of Uepi in the spectacular Marovo Lagoon.

### Getting there...

The journey to Uepi offers a perfect introduction to this part of the Solomons, with the small town of Seghe, and its recently upgraded all-weather airfield, serving as the key stopping-off point.

The brief, one-hour flight from Honiara takes you northwest over the scenic Russell Islands toward New Georgia. As you pass over one rainforest-covered island ▶

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after another, each encircled by the crystal-clear waters of the Solomon Sea, you catch your first true glimpse of the country's breathtaking beauty.

Then, as the plane descends over Marovo Lagoon toward Seghe, the outer barrier islands come into view revealing what is, in fact, the largest saltwater lagoon in the world, and an appreciation forms for its sheer magnitude!

From Seghe, it's a 30-minute boat ride north through the lagoon to Uepi and the other barrier islands that form the northern boundary of the Marovo Lagoon.

### The Marova Lagoon

Covering an area of over 700 square kilometres, Marovo Lagoon is formed around the three large volcanic islands of New Georgia, Vangunu and Gatokae, and is bordered by a unique double chain of raised outer barrier reefs.

The lagoon is renowned for its ecologically diverse environment, dominated by extensive, healthy coral reef systems on the seaward side of the barrier reefs.

Like a natural breadbasket, that biodiversity has always provided the Marovo area with all its sustenance needs. Approximately 20,000 people live in and around the lagoon, forming tight-knit, interlinked communities that adhere strongly to hereditary sustainable practices in fishing,

agriculture, and resource gathering. The people of Marovo recognize the vital importance of maintaining the health of the lagoon's ecosystems and learned long ago how to ensure its continued vitality.

### Uepi Island – The backstory...

Imagine a young couple arriving in Honiara with their three-month-old baby and a vague dream to find an island (one of 900...) they might one day be part of. That's exactly what Jill and Grant Kelly did in 1982. After spending two months in Honiara, diving the local sites every day, they finally received word that the island they were interested in visiting was ready for them. There was only one way to get there - the very basic weekly boat service to Seghe and further west. Their journey didn't end until midnight, as they crossed the lagoon in a small canoe sent to collect them.

The outer barrier reef island was Uepi (pronounced 'you-pee'), located in the central section of Marovo. Measuring about 2.5 km long by 300 metres wide and covered with rainforest, it was the perfect tropical island the Kellys had been dreaming of. As fate would have it, the owners were looking for assistance to develop a dive resort and by 1987, Uepi Island Resort was operating under the Kellys' leadership. Jill and Grant had found their North Star...

“ you'll witness the underwater world as Mother Nature intended... with beautiful soft corals, huge sea fans filtering nutrients, and a full spectrum of marine life ”



The Main Lodge

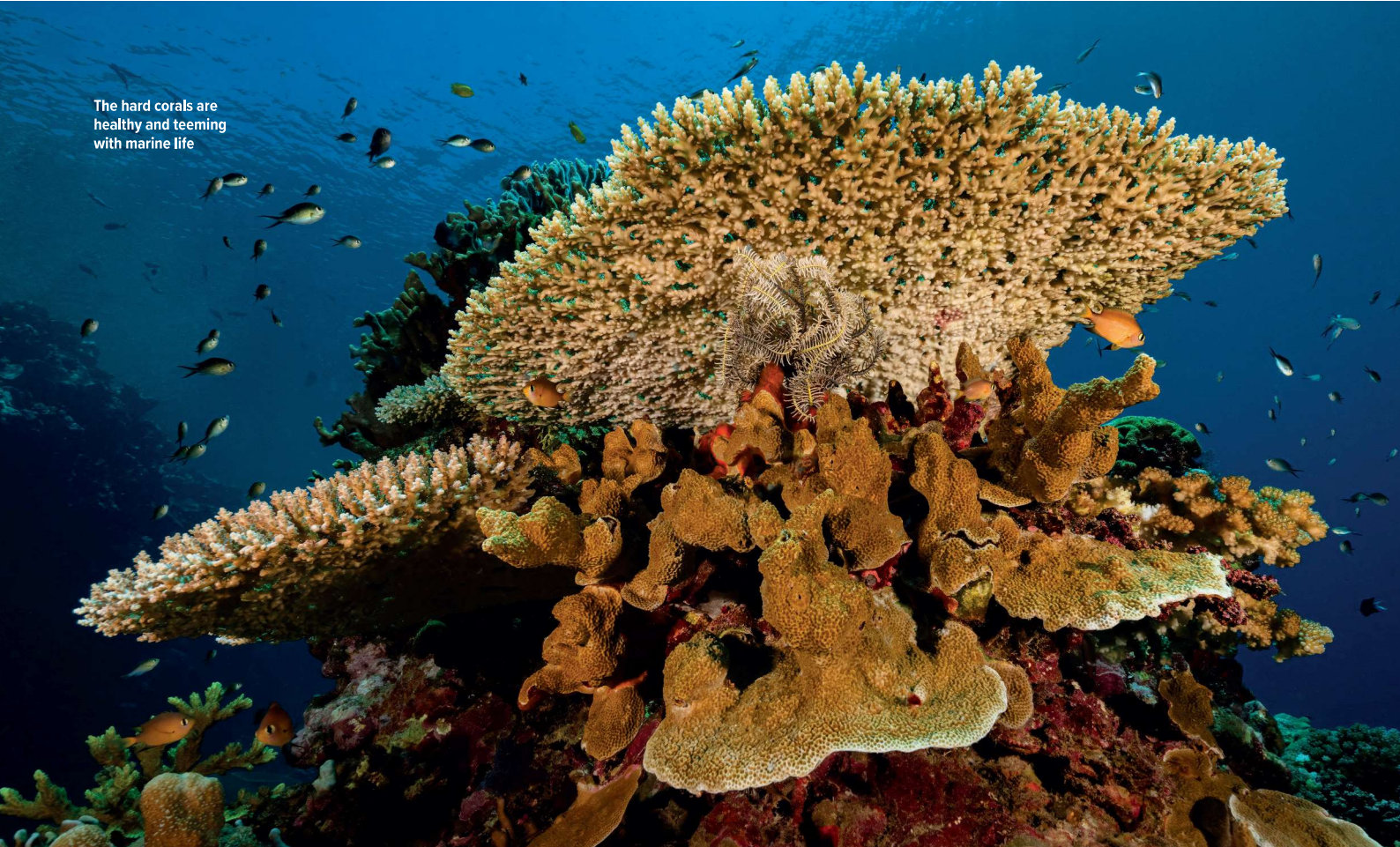


Crocodilefish



Split shot of Uepi Island and Resort

The hard corals are healthy and teeming with marine life



Sea whips and colourful fans



Sharks of the Marovo Lagoon



## Diving the Marovo Lagoon

Uepi Island is almost perfectly positioned to access some of the best dive sites in the Marovo Lagoon, because the large channel in front of the main lodge is one of the main passageways for water to flow into the lagoon from New Georgia Sound to the north.

The Sound, a vast body of water running through the heart of the Solomons, separates the two main island chains that form the country. During World War Two, the Allies dubbed it 'the Slot' when it became the route for the infamous 'Tokyo Express' - blacked-out Japanese destroyers racing through the night to avoid Allied attacks while resupplying their base on Guadalcanal.

New Georgia Sound is actually a series of deep-water basins surrounded by the central Solomon Islands, all encircled by the region's remarkably deep trenches and troughs. Those unique geological features generate strong nutrient flows, supporting an abundance of marine life, including a thriving shark population.

Diving on the Slot side of Marovo Lagoon is an exhilarating experience, with sloping walls that plunge into the abyss, clear blue waters, and the chance to randomly encounter large pelagic species. And the 'points' where geological fault lines have uplifted the islands and created those passages into the lagoon host rich coral garden ecosystems nourished by the nutrient-laden currents.

At these points - like Uepi Point at the tip of the island - you'll witness the underwater world as Mother Nature intended... with beautiful soft corals, huge sea fans filtering nutrients, and a full spectrum of marine life.

On the other side of Uepi channel, Charapoanna Point offers a similarly intense dive experience, where powerful currents concentrate marine life along the ridge as they sweep around the corner. ▶

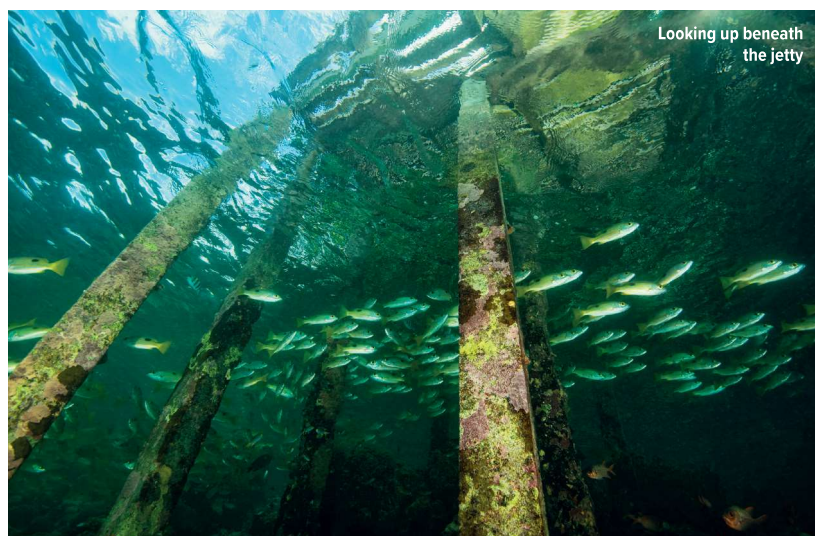
## Uepi Welcome Jetty

No visit to Uepi would be complete without experiencing the resident school of Marovo Lagoon grey reef sharks at the Welcome Jetty.

Located on the edge of the main channel, the jetty is best dived on an incoming tide and the trick is to position yourself in front of the jetty at about 5m and wait. As the sharks are used to divers and quite curious, if you are patient, they will come in and check you out.

The Kellys have been diving and snorkelling with the sharks of the Marovo for nearly 30 years and say they have never felt threatened by them. In fact, the way Jill described it, the sharks are comfortable and curious around divers because they have never been threatened by them!

A group of divers entering the split



Looking up beneath the jetty

## Putting back...

Jill and Grant Kelly are very passionate about Uepi Island, which is much more to them than a business – it's their home, and they are fiercely proud of it. They have worked incredibly hard for many years to build their resort into what it has become, a journey that has meant overcoming nightmare logistics, civil war and occasional dangerous weather as they pushed on through, true to their country Australian roots!

There are many things that are special about Uepi, but for me what stands out most is how the operation of the resort has been woven into the Marovo's cultural fabric, with the complete staff of Uepi drawn from the villages of the lagoon and personally trained by the Kellys - from the cooks in the kitchen to the dive staff!

The Kellys also run their own not-for-profit organization, Solutions pa Morovo, which is focused on improving the quality of life of the people of the Marovo Lagoon – specifically in the areas of education and health.

Students supported in early secondary school are now graduating from university and absolute wonders have been achieved in community-wide healthcare – including (believe it or not...) building and equipping a complete operating theatre at Seghe's local hospital.

## Conclusion

Diving Uepi Island offers an almost perfect way to get a real taste and feel of the Solomon Islands, its culture and its biodiversity. It's relatively easy to get to from Australia through the direct flight from Brisbane to Honiara and then the short but scenic flight to Seghe. From there, it's a quick transfer to the island where you can immerse yourself in the great diving and the wonderful Kelly family hospitality!

Plus, you can be absolutely certain that a generous part of your overall bill will make its way into the local Morovo Lagoon community, where it makes a real difference! ■

Black spotted bull ray



Sunrise on the Marovo Lagoon

