

PAPA



For Marg and Pete Blanche, the first step in this journey began in the 1980s when they visited the Solomon Islands for the first time. They fell in love - not just with the stunning tropical landscapes, but with the warmth and genuine hospitality of the people. Over the years, their visits became more frequent, each trip fuelling their dream of finding an island of their own. But they weren't looking for just any island; they had a clear vision, and they knew it had to be just right.

Between them, they identified six essential criteria - six boxes that had to be ticked before they would commit. And despite the nearly 1,000 islands that make up the Solomons, finding one that met every requirement proved to be an immense challenge.

Some islands were remote but lacked fresh water. Others had pristine reefs but were too far from an airstrip. A few came close, but weren't quite right. The search continued for years, with each promising lead ultimately discarded for falling short of one crucial element in their plan. Their long search finally came to an end in 2007 when, while exploring Santa Isabel, they stumbled upon Papatura Island. It was everything they had been searching for. Not just beautiful, but practical. Not just remote, but accessible. And, most importantly, it met all six of their carefully defined criteria.

First, it had its own natural source of fresh water - a non-negotiable requirement for sustainable island living. Second, it was far removed from established tourism hubs, offering the untouched serenity they longed for. The third box was for waves, and Papatura delivered with consistent surf breaks. The fourth requirement - excellent snorkeling and diving - was fulfilled by the island's vibrant coral reefs and crystal-clear waters. ▶

Did you know?

The SBD Dauntless, nicknamed 'Scout Bomber Douglas' was the primary dive bomber for the US Navy and Marine Corps at the start of the Pacific War. The Dauntless is known for its role in the Battle of Midway, a landmark battle of World War Two.

It's a romantic notion most of us have, but very few realise... Find an island paradise, far from the modern world, and then transform it into a desert island dream and live off the grid, surrounded by nature. But where would you do it? And, more importantly, how? Don Silcock finds out

Photographs by Don Silcock

PAPATURA

a real gem...



Fifth, it was close enough to a local airstrip for convenient access. And finally, they found a welcoming local community eager to be involved in sustainable tourism. With excitement and determination, they knew they had found their place.

But finding the perfect island was only the beginning and a year of negotiations followed with discussions at the provincial government level, consultations with local chiefs, and careful planning to ensure their presence would be mutually beneficial. Finally, when all the agreements were signed, and a 50-year lease was secured, the real work began!

Hard yakka...

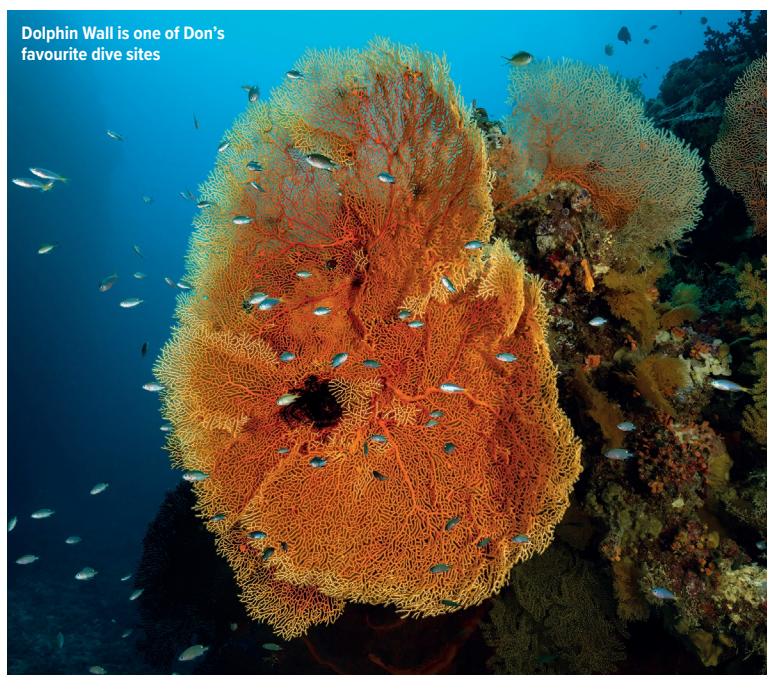
Pete Blanche was 68 at that point in time and, as a retired builder from the Gold Coast, was no stranger to hard work. But, transforming Papatuta into a sustainable, off-the-grid retreat was a challenge like no other he had faced. Everything would have to be built from scratch - accommodation, water systems, power sources - all while respecting the natural environment and integrating with the local culture.

It started with preparing and packing two shipping containers on the Gold Coast with 17 tonnes of resort equipment and essential supplies needed to build the private island retreat they had envisioned. This included everything from a generator for power to the tools necessary for construction. Getting those containers to Honiara was the easy part - transporting them from there to Papatuta and safely above the high-water mark on the beach was another matter entirely. The only way to achieve that was by barge from Honiara in good weather, followed by sheer manpower to get everything ashore. But they did it. Those containers, combined with strongly secured tarpaulins to keep the monsoonal rains at bay, served as the base camp and communal kitchen for several months as the retreat slowly but surely took shape.

It took over 12 months of relentless hard yakka – through rain, heat, and countless challenges – to bring Papatuta Island Retreat to life and turn Pete and Marg Blanche's dream into reality.



Turtle posing for a photograph



Dolphin Wall is one of Don's favourite dive sites



Boats ready to launch from the beach

Don Silcock

Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor Don is an Australian underwater photographer and photojournalist from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

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Getting there...

Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, is the only international gateway to the country and is served from Brisbane by both Solomon Airlines and Qantas. From Honiara, it's just over an hour's flight on Solomon Airlines to Suavanao airstrip, followed by a short, scenic five-minute boat ride to Papatura Lodge.

“ It was an absolute delight to watch their eyes light up as they answered my many questions and laid out the many twists and turns their adventure had taken ”

Diving Papatura

When it opened, Papatura primarily catered to surfers, fishing enthusiasts, and travellers seeking an authentic off-the-grid experience and over time, it developed a loyal following. As Pete and Marg decided to step back and enjoy their well-earned retirement, they handed over the reins to their son, Nick, and daughter, Kym, who now share the running of the resort between them.

Kym, a keen diver, saw an opportunity to expand Papatura's offerings to include diving. Recognizing the underwater potential of this part of the Solomon Islands, she pursued instructor training and led the resort's investment in a compressor, tanks, dive gear, and a dedicated dive boat.

With the necessary equipment in place, Kym trained some of the Papatura staff to dive and set off to explore the local reefs and nearby islands. The more she dived, the more convinced she became that the area had something truly special to offer. This is where I entered the story - when Kym invited Scuba Diver magazine to send someone to explore, photograph, and document the dive sites and wrecks she had discovered.

Papatura's reefs

Located as it is on the north-west coast of Santa Isabel Island in the central Solomons, Papatura is part of a group of islands that sit on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean.

And because they are just south of the equator, that location means those islands are swept by the equatorial currents and counter currents.

Rich with nutrients from the deep basins to the north-east, those currents have helped create extensive fringing reefs that form natural protective barriers around the islands and build diverse ecosystems. The shallow reefs provide a nursery for juvenile fish and thrive with hard and soft corals, anemones, and schooling snapper, fusiliers, and parrotfish.

The walls of the islands form dramatic drop-offs and those touched by the equatorial currents are richly coated in marine life, including black coral trees, sea whips and colourful sponges. And often patrolling those walls are reef sharks, eagle rays, schooling barracuda and trevally.

I was able to dive several of the main reefs around those islands and found them healthy and in good overall condition, with lots to see and photograph. Malole and Kym's Canyon stood out as exceptional dives, while Blanche's Coral Garden, located in the small bay right in front of Papatura Lodge, amazed me with its dense clusters of enormous sea fans – the kind you could spend hours exploring and photographing.

But, by far my favourite reef dive was Dolphin Wall and the large bommie at the end of that wall down in about 30m that sits to one side of the wall, out in the current. ►



“ Overall, the bommie reminded me of some of the magnificent ones to be found in the Misool area in the south of Raja Ampat – an area that I believe has the very best tropical diving in the world! ”

Located just five minutes from the lodge, Dolphin Wall is a standout dive in itself and is richly coated in dense marine growth, together with beautiful arrays of sponges and bright red sea whips which all add a wonderful touch of vibrant colour. But the bommie is truly next level and sits right in the path of those equatorial water flows, which have created a dense arrangement of superb sea fans, soft corals and huge elephant ear sponges.

Overall, the bommie reminded me of some of the magnificent ones to be found in the Misool area in the south of Raja Ampat – an area that I believe has the very best tropical diving in the world! I did several dives on the bommie and asked to go there so much that Kym suggested renaming it ‘Don’s Happy Place’.

Papatura’s wrecks

There are two known World War Two aircraft wrecks that are easily dived from Papatura and the first one, an RNZAF Hudson, is just five minutes from the lodge. Located in about 10m of water the distinctive main wing and engines of the plane are easy to spot and explore, but much of the fuselage was destroyed when the plane came down. Although it’s not a stellar wreck dive, it’s unusual shape and shallow depth make the Hudson a great choice for an afternoon dive.

On the other hand, if like me... you enjoy diving and experiencing World War Two aircraft wrecks, the Douglas SBD Dauntless is a must-do!! Located on the slope just off from a fringing reef about 25 minutes from Papatura, the plane sits upright and largely intact in around 30m of water.

The SBD (Scout Bomber Douglas) was the US Navy’s main carrier-based scout/dive bomber and is best remembered as the bomber that delivered the fatal blows to the Japanese carriers at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Those attacks earned the Dauntless its nickname ‘Slow But Deadly’ (SBD). The plane is believed to have come down on 17 October in 1942, but very little else is currently known about the plane, it’s pilot or the circumstances surrounding its watery grave.



Cockpit of the SBD Dauntless



Papatura Jetty

Papatura – in summary

The idea of going off the grid holds a romantic allure for many of us – but actually doing it, as Pete and Marg Blanche did, is a whole different story. I spent a very pleasant afternoon sat on the porch of their house just down the beach from the main lodge chatting to them about their incredible adventure. True blue Aussie to the core, they are both an inspiration and still full of life in their 80s!

It was an absolute delight to watch their eyes light up as they answered my many questions and laid out the many twists and turns their adventure had taken. That story, combined with exploring the remote, beautiful and yet largely untouched reefs and bommies of Papatura, are what stayed with me, along with Pete’s parting words on my last day - ‘When I go, I want someone to spread my ashes out there over the reef - I never want to leave this place’. If you are looking for somewhere interesting and different for your next dive adventure, you may just have found it! ■



Underneath the jetty is full of life

Topside is equally stunning

