

Gizo, the main town and regional capital in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, is located near the western end of New Georgia Island. Though it's the third largest town in the country, with a population of around 7,300, it's hardly what you'd call a metropolis.

The town itself is situated on Ghizo Island, which lies at the centre of a group of six islands forming the western tip of New Georgia. The surrounding waters are enriched by the nutrient-laden currents of the Slot (New Georgia Sound) to the north, and the deep basins and trenches of the Solomon Sea to the south, nourishing the area's vibrant reefs and walls.

Add in the numerous World War Two ship and aircraft wrecks, and it's easy to see why Gizo is such a popular destination for scuba divers, and in May this year I made my way there for eight days of intensive diving with Danny Kennedy and Dive Gizo.

The reefs of Gizo

My introduction to Gizo's reefs began at a site known for having the highest concentration of fish species in the Solomons. Discovered by Danny Kennedy during his early exploration, he named it Grand Central Station because it reminded him of the bustling crowd of Manhattan's morning commute.

Situated at the tip of Njari Island, roughly 15km northwest of Gizo, the site is perfectly positioned to benefit from the rich waters flowing into the Vella Gulf from New Georgia Sound to the north and the Solomon Sea through the nearby Wilson Strait.

Danny recognized the site's special significance and went to great lengths to document its biodiversity and secure its protection. In 2002, he obtained a 75-year lease on the island from the landowner – an elder from the Gilbert (Kiribati) and Ellice (Tuvalu) islands, relocated there by the British Government in the late 1950s because of drought on their home islands.

In 2004, Danny supported a Rapid Ecological Assessment (REA) conducted by The Nature Conservancy and guided by renowned Perth-based ichthyologist Gerry Allen, who used his unique one-tank, one-dive methodology of identifying ▶



DIVING GIZO

Don Silcock returns to the Solomon Islands to explore the reefs and wrecks around Gizo, in the Western Province of the archipelago

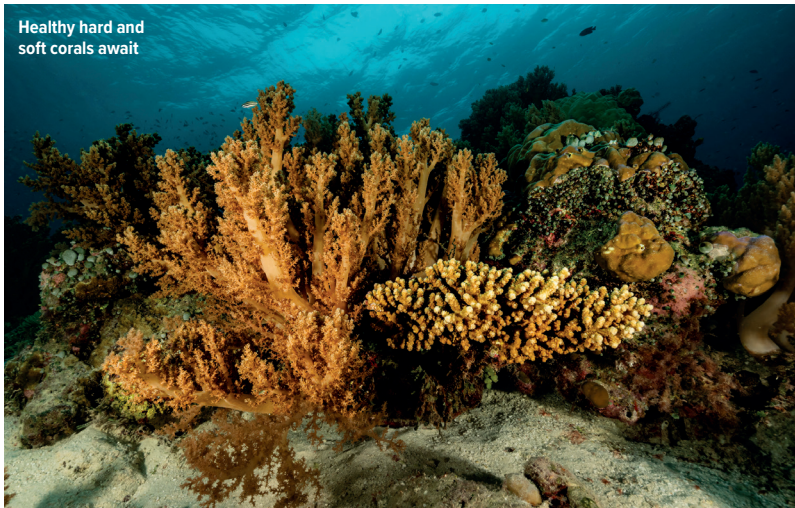
Photographs by Don Silcock

Did you know?

Gizo is the capital of the Western Province and is the second largest town in the Solomon Islands. There is a small landing strip on the nearby island of Nusatupe, making it relatively developed compared to other nearby settlements.



Healthy hard and soft corals await



key species and established supporting data to extrapolate the total. The REA identified an estimated 279 fish species at Grand Central, earning it the distinction of having the world's fourth-highest fish count among surveyed dive sites.

Tragically, Grand Central suffered significant damage in April 2007 when a tsunami hit Ghizo Island, with massive 10-12 metre waves killing at least 55 people and causing widespread destruction, including the loss of 80% of Dive Gizo's assets. Despite this setback, Danny and his wife Kerrie dedicated themselves to rebuilding Dive Gizo and leading coral restoration efforts at Njari Island, while actively protecting the area from destructive fishing practices.

Now, 17 years after the tsunami, the results are impressive. Although it may not fully match the magnificence Danny first encountered, it very much remains a must-dive site in Gizo. Gizo offers 14-16 additional reef sites, mainly to the east and southeast, all accessible within 20-30 minutes from Dive Gizo. Site selection is typically based on the tides and currents of the day.

During my stay, I explored several, with Secret Spot standing out for its vibrant sea whips and sea fans, while The Gap provided an exhilarating drift dive along Naru Island's rich outer wall, teeming with schooling fish, barracuda, big-eyed trevally, and reef sharks, before ending in the calm waters of Gizo Lagoon.



Anemonefish



Dive boat at anchor



Gizo back story

The island of Ghizo indeed has a unique and somewhat turbulent history. In the early 1900s, it was home to a native tribe notorious for headhunting. This fierce reputation ultimately led to a coalition of surrounding tribes banding together to eliminate the head-hunters. This led to the central government stepping in to restore order. With no surviving traditional landowners, the government opened up the island for settlers, setting the stage for the town of Gizo to develop into the commercial hub of what is now the Western Province.



The Hellcat wreckage is well preserved

“ Another must-do wreck in Gizo is the Hellcat, a remarkably intact World War Two fighter plane sitting upright in just 12m of water ”

The Toa Maru



Don Silcock

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Massive gorgonian sea fans

The wrecks of Gizo

I knew Gizo had its share of World War Two wrecks, but I wasn't prepared for just how massive one of them would be - the largest and arguably the most impressive recreational wreck dive in the Solomons, the Toa Maru!

The ship is a 140-metre-long transport vessel, launched in December 1938 in Nagasaki and entering military service in 1941, where it played a key role in transporting soldiers and equipment to Japanese bases across the Pacific. In late-January 1943, the Toa Maru was carrying supplies to Japanese forces in the Gizo area, when it was spotted by Coastwatchers and subsequently attacked by 12 Douglas Dauntless torpedo bombers dispatched from Henderson Airfield on Guadalcanal.

The Toa Maru sank sometime after being run aground on the northern side of Sepo Kokiti Island, about 7km north of Gizo township. It lays on its starboard side on a sandy bottom, with the bow in 7m and the stern down in about 37m. ►

The wreck is largely intact, but was stripped of its propeller and other valuable metals during the salvage era of the late-1960s and early 1970s. While always sad to see wrecks being scavenged, the salvage work did open up the interior, making it safer for penetration.

There's much to explore on the Toa Maru, from the ship's cargo holds to various artefacts scattered around. One of the highlights is a two-man tank, sitting upside down at the entrance to Hold #2, with the turret and small gun barrel clearly visible.

In Holds #2 and #3, Danny's guides have stashed a collection of artefacts salvaged from the wreck, which they reveal to divers during the tour. These include large medicine ampoules, bottles of pills, and other intriguing items that add to the wreck's mystique.

Overall, the Toa Maru is an outstanding wreck dive - easy to penetrate and full of fascinating details that make it worth multiple ►

Did you know?

The Toa Maru wreck is 140 metres long and lies on its starboard side in 37m of water less than 100 metres offshore.

Gizo logistics

Gizo has a small landing strip on the nearby island of Nusatupe to the northeast of the town, and there are regular flights from Honiara with Solomon Airlines by Dash-8 and Twin Otters. Dive Gizo is the only dive operator but does not offer accommodation. There is a hotel and guesthouse in Gizo itself and a few resorts on local islands – the most popular being Fatboys, which enjoys a loyal following.

“ Overall, the Toa Maru is an outstanding wreck dive - easy to penetrate and full of fascinating details that make it worth multiple dives ”

Established in 1985, Dive Gizo offers the most diverse diving in the world.

A 140m 7000 tonne WWII Japanese transport ship wreck, 4 WWII Fighter planes, pinnacles, action packed drift dives, macro mania & Grand Central Station, the 4th highest fish count (279 different species) on the planet for a single tank dive.

Be part of our next adventure!

+677 60253 ✉ DiveGizo@solomon.com.sb
www.divegizo.com

Maidenway, Chinatown West, Gizo Town,
Solomon Islands



Hard corals and crinoids

dives. I did six dives on it and enjoyed every single one!

Another must-do wreck in Gizo is the Hellcat, a remarkably intact World War Two fighter plane sitting upright in just 12m of water. Discovered by Danny Kennedy in 1985, the Hellcat was apparently shot down by friendly fire in September 1943. The shallow depth and abundant light make it highly photogenic, with the cockpit open and the starboard wing partially buried in coral, creating a dramatic scene for underwater photography.

The Hellcat's story includes a fortunate escape for the pilot, Dick Moore, who survived the crash. He was quickly rescued by local islanders who took him to a nearby island, where an Australian Coastwatcher arranged his transport to Munda overnight, followed by a return to Guadalcanal the next day.

Another interesting wreck in Gizo is the Japanese Zero that seems to have been dumped in the harbour near the main market. It sits in 9m of none-too-clear waters and is surrounded by numerous beer bottles and cans... but it's well worth diving!

Danny Kennedy

No story about Gizo would be complete without a mention of Danny Kennedy, as he has truly become synonymous with the area. Originally from Florida, Danny first arrived in the Solomons in 1985 as a backpacker in search of an off-the-grid adventure and eventually found



what he was looking when he got to Gizo and made his first dives. He went on to start Dive Gizo, one of the very first diving operations in the Solomon Islands and over 30 years later, it is still going strong.

Together with his wife Kerrie, Danny has faced and overcome an extraordinary range of challenges that would have deterred many others. From civil unrest that verged on civil war to a devastating tsunami, the global financial crisis, recurring local conflicts, and the recent pandemic, the Kennedys have navigated it all while continuing to grow their dive business and invest in Gizo's future.

Along the way Danny discovered almost all the dive sites and wrecks, led the conservation initiative for Njari Island, became a Solomon Islands citizen and then was elected as the local member for the Western Provincial assembly – serving three terms!

When asked how he did all this, Danny smiles and said 'you need to understand I am of Irish-German descent and am very stubborn, so I don't give up!'

Diving Gizo – in summary

Located as it is at the western end of New Georgia island and flushed by the nutrient-rich waters of the Slot to the north and the Solomon Sea to the south, it's easy to understand why the reefs of Gizo are so biodiverse.

Add in the World War Two aircraft and shipwrecks and all the ingredients are in place for the tremendous diving possible in Gizo, and it's high on my list for a return visit and some more exploration! ■

