

# Solomon Sea Islands Cruise on the Pacific Explorer. June 2023

## 9 June To Gold Coast

Andrea Grigg has been staying with us while visiting her father Ross Davison for his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday. Andrea took us to the airport and we flew Jetstar to Coolangatta on the Gold Coast. We were met by Geoff, Andrea's husband and taken to their place. Dinner was a takeaway roast with Geoff and Hayley. House swapping!

## 10 June. Gold Coast

Geoff's father, Fred, is very sick and the family began to gather. Jackson, Melika and the children stayed the night. Kathy cooked a lovely meal for the big group!

## 11 June. Pirate Ship playground, Palm Beach, Gold Coast

We met up with Scott, Kathy's nephew, and his wife Michelle and children, Mikayla and Stanley. The kids had a great time at the playground and we enjoyed exploring around Palm Beach. In the evening we met quite a number of the Grigg family and heard that Geoff had cancelled his trip to NZ to stay at our place, and that Andrea was returning home in the morning.



## 12 June. Nimbin

We drove 77km in Hayley's car to Nimbin, the hippie capital of Australia. In Nimbin we met up with Kathy's cousin Poppy (Adele) and her son Domany. Kathy and Poppy are similar ages and had not seen each other for about 60 years. We had a wonderful time sharing family memories and what has happened during our lives. It was especially wonderful for Poppy as she had not felt connected to the family of her childhood since she became a hippie in the 60s. This was a very special family time, and well worth the long drive through the bush, over pretty rough roads. We were greeted by Andrea when we got back to Griggs!



### 13 June. To Cairns.

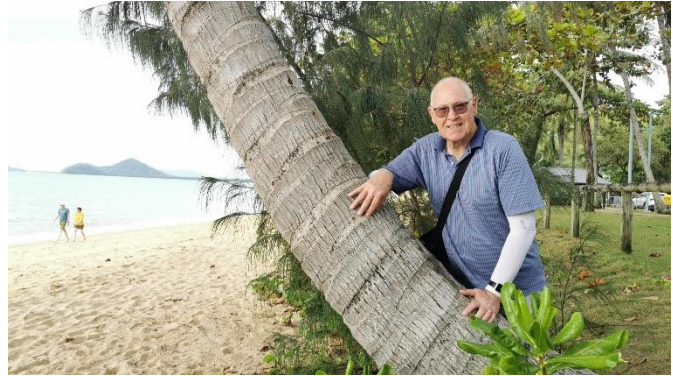
Andrea took us to the airport at 5.30am, and on the way we heard that Geoff's father had passed away. We flew Jetstar to Cairns and took a shuttle to the Comfort Inn. We walked down to Cairns to find the cruise terminal and see how the city has changed since we were there 20 years ago. Immediately two couples recognised us from our cruise videos! We booked a tour for the 24<sup>th</sup> when we get back to Cairns, and checked out the familiar marina where the boats leave to explore the Great Barrier Reef, and the lagoon on the Esplanade.



In the evening we went to the Cairns Night Market and had dinner at the food court.

### 14 June. Cairns

In the morning we caught the local bus to Palm Cove – a lovely tourist beach. Back in Cairns we walked to Cairns Central, a big mall and then caught the bus back to our hotel to collect our bags. We then walked along the Esplanade and through the city centre to the cruise terminal.



We boarded P&O's Pacific Explorer quite smoothly, having proved we had been vaccinated and were Covid free. The ship is ex Dawn Princess and carries about 2000 passengers. We found our way to 10171, our balcony cabin on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor and we're pleasantly surprised. The cabin has 2 beds but can be set up with 4. It is in very good condition, although quite small. After unpacking and having a quick explore of the ship, we had dinner in the Pantry -a self service food court. We left Cairns at 6pm and have 2 days at sea before our first stop – Honiara in the Solomon Islands.



### 15 June. At sea.

After breakfast at the Pantry we explored the ship then went to a presentation about the places we are to visit. We made our dinner reservations for the rest of the cruise, rotating between The Waterfront (Australian), Angelo's (Italian), and the Dragon Lady (Asian). We also booked a shore tour for Honiara (expensive) and decided to sort out what to do in the other places once we get on shore. In the afternoon we read, rested, exercised and did more exploring. Dinner at the Waterfront was excellent and was followed by the show Seven – singing and dancing about the 7 deadly sins. A typical sea day!

### 16 June. At sea.

After breakfast we went to a cooking demonstration, and then to a very interesting lecture on the history of the Solomon Islands. In the afternoon we had a read; went to the gym, then had a swim in the Oasis – adults only. Dinner was at the complimentary Italian restaurant, Angelo's. OK, but nothing like as good as the Waterfront. The evening show was by Robert Pearson, a blend of comedy, song, puppetry and magic. Not one of the great cruise ship entertainers!



So far we have had people come up to us every day, who have recognised us from our YouTube videos. It's a bit strange being celebrities!

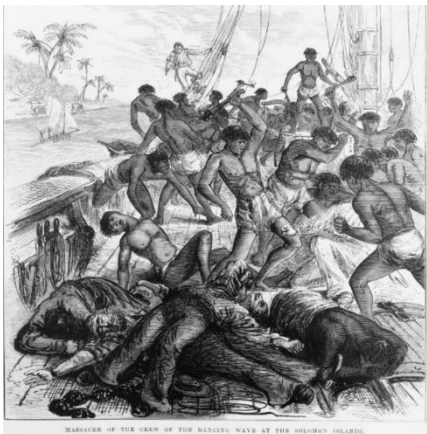
### June 17. Honiara. Solomon Islands

Honiara, a city of about 100,000, is the capital of the Solomon Islands. It is on the island of Guadalcanal and was a very important battle site during WW2. After breakfast we took a tour to see some of the local sites: the Henderson Field memorial (commemorating the 3-month battle between the Japanese and the United States to gain control of the Henderson Field airport in 1942); the Bloody Ridge battle site where 6000 died in 3 days of fighting, and the US Memorial that tells the story of the Guadalcanal campaign. It was salutary to realize that the American victory halted the Japanese advance into the south Pacific after Pearl Harbor, and was a major contribution towards victory in WW2.





We also remembered and honoured Kathy's great, great, great uncle, Thomas Sandison, who was massacred (and probably eaten) when his ship, the Dancing Wave was taken over by natives in 1876. We then had a wander around the city centre in the heat. The Solomon islanders are mainly Melanesian and have a pretty primitive lifestyle. Their houses and roads are very basic!



Back on board we had a lovely dinner at the Dragon Lady (Asian) and then went to the show by singer and impersonator, Grant Galea.

**18 June. At sea.**

After breakfast we went to an interesting lecture on Rabaul and its volcanic and WW2 history. We had lunch at the Waterfront with friends Chris and Val and had a quiet afternoon reading and working on our video. Dinner at the Waterfront was followed by the show 'Misbehaving' and the Gatsby party. We are looking forward to visiting Rabaul tomorrow – we enjoyed it so much when we were here in 2018.

## 19 June. Rabaul.

Rabaul is on PNG's northeastern tip, in the East New Britain province. It is blessed with great natural beauty but has a very troubled past. It was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1937, then during WW2 it was occupied by the Japanese and regularly attacked by American, Australia and New Zealand forces. It was all but destroyed in the Battle of Rabaul in November 1943 and was rebuilt after the war. It was destroyed again in 1994 when nearby Mount Tavurvur erupted and wiped out the entire area. The commercial centre was relocated 20 kilometres away to Kokopo, and around 2,000 residents have returned to the old Rabaul area, and the port is now a bustling township of around 30,000 people.

We docked close to the town and took a local Ralolo Tour to see the main historic and volcanic sights. Our friends Chris and Val came on the tour. Our tour guide was Rachel, who proved to be excellent. Cost for the tour including entrances and tips was \$75 each, compared to \$200 each for tours organized by the ship (and they didn't see as much as we did!).

We started by visiting some of the tunnels that the Japanese constructed in WW2 (using prisoners of war and forced local labour). The tunnels were used to hold barges which brought in supplies for those living in the tunnels. The Japanese made over 500km of underground tunnels and pathways and used them to store supplies, munitions and to protect themselves and their hospitals. No mean feat! We stopped at the base of Mt Vulcan which destroyed Rabaul in 1937 then visited the Volcanological Observatory on Tovanumbatir, which monitors 14 active and 23 dormant volcanoes in the region. It gave us fantastic views across the caldera that was created in the 1400s and of the town of Rabaul and its surrounding volcanoes. Next we visited the area where Rabaul used to be situated, which is now just ash covered wasteland. We saw the old New Guinea Club which is now a museum; Admiral Yamamoto's bunker where he controlled the Japanese war efforts, and the site of the Japanese airstrip. Next we visited the base of Mount Tavurvur which so violently erupted in 1994, and saw the beautifully coloured hot springs. Our tour finished in the bustling "Rabaul Page Park Markets" where locals sell their produce and handicrafts (and betel nuts!). Once again it was fascinating to see so many of the locals going about their normal lives. An excellent tour of a most interesting place!



In the evening we had dinner at the Pantry and then watched a show by the excellent Swedish singer, Isabel Oluffson.

## **20 June. Kiriwina Island, Trobriand Islands.**

Kiriwina Island is the largest of the Trobriand Islands, and has a population of just over 12,000 people. It has one of the world's most primitive island cultures and its people live on one of the most beautiful islands you will ever find. The people retain much of their ancient lifestyle, living in family villages where the houses are made from simple materials like flax and the roofs are covered with palm leaves, or other simple materials. The people have their own language, called "Kilivila" and are very polite and extremely friendly. The island has few external influences as the locals prefer to live their natural life style. The Trobriand Islands are known for a game that resembles cricket which can last for a number of days. The game helps reduce tension between island communities.

Sam and Becky had been recommended as local guides, and we quickly found them. Becky first led us through a long line of handcrafts where the children said "hello" and beckoned us to buy. The whole population seemed to be there welcoming us cruise ship passengers and hoping to get us to part with some kina. Becky showed us around her village and we met a number of her family. Becky had a baby 2 months ago which was being nursed by her sister who had a baby 2 days ago! She wanted us to name her baby and we suggested Joshua. The villagers keep to themselves and children don't play with children from other villages, even if they are right next door. The kitchen is an open fire and everyone gardens and fishes and supports the whole community. We were able to look around the garden and see the big sharks that had been caught in the day's fishing. The children's singing was delightful. We then looked around the school which was pretty basic. No-one knew what the internet was, and when we showed people photos or videos of themselves, they were amazed. They had never seen themselves before!



After lunch back on board we returned to the beach and chatted with the locals. The swimming was great but not the snorkelling. It was such a privilege to visit this wonderful island and to see its primitive culture and happy people. We can learn a lot from the uncomplicated way that they live.

After dinner at the Dragon Lady we went to an average magic show by Johnny Balance.

## 21 June. Panasesa Island - Conflict Islands.

The Conflict Islands are a coral atoll of 21 separate islands. The islands were first charted in 1886 and are named after HMS Conflict, a British Naval vessel based in Sydney. Today, the Conflict Islands are privately owned and P&O have an arrangement with the owner, Ian Gowrie-Smith so their cruise ships can visit one of the islands: Panasesa. There is a deep channel through the outer reef that allows ships to enter the atoll. The first ship visited in 2016.

Panasesa Island is gorgeous! The sea is a deep blue, surrounded by a mixture of pale blue to aqua blue, and pure white sand beaches with palm trees which encircle the island. No-one lives there but a small staff helps tourists whenever ships visit. There is a welcome centre, an airstrip, and many lovely walking tracks. A special feature is the turtle nursery.

We walked right round the island, did some great snorkelling (beautiful coral and lots of colourful fish), and then had to return to the ship as the wind was making it dangerous for the tenders. The Pacific Explorer then left the atoll to spend the night at sea. Panasesa is a fabulous tropical Island! We had dinner at the Waterfront and then watched a girl band show by the Cover Girls.



## 22 June. Conflict Islands.

After breakfast we took the tender into Panasesa and did some more snorkelling. We then had a quiet afternoon reading and editing our video. Dinner was at Angelo's (nice) and we didn't go to the evening show. R18 stand up isn't our scene. We have sore throats so hope they don't develop into something worse.

## 23 June. At sea.

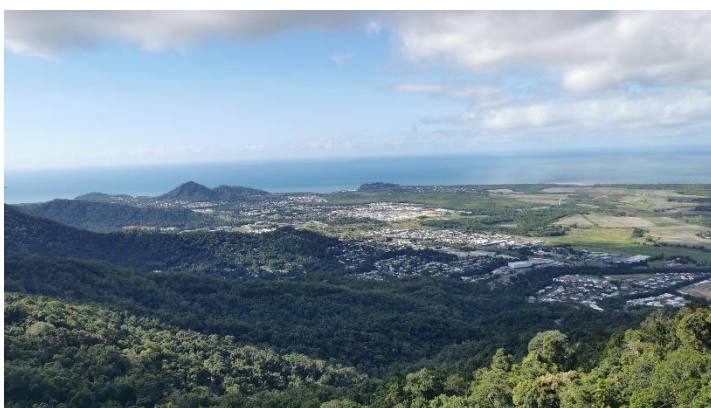
A quiet day, reading, resting and editing. We went to a lecture on PNG, had dinner at the Dragon Lady, and went to a Rock Anthems show. Too noisy and dark for us!

I have come to realize that for us cruising is primarily about the destination places we visit. It's nice to be pampered and eat the lovely food and enjoy the great entertainment. Many go on cruises just for these things. What is memorable for us, though, is the different history, culture and way of life in all of the countries, cities and towns we have been able to explore.

## 24 June. Cairns

Most of the Australian passengers disembarked at Cairns, and were replaced by Kiwis heading for NZ on the next leg of the cruise. We have 3 sea days, a day on Norfolk Island, another sea day then we disembark in Auckland.

We took a local tour to Kuranda, a delightful town deep in the rainforest above Cairns. We went on the Kuranda Scenic Railway, climbing up from Freshwater Station, past Stoney Creek Falls, Barron Falls, Barron Gorge to Kuranda. A really lovely train ride. After looking around the markets in Kuranda we went for a walk through the rainforest – just gorgeous. We returned to Cairns via the Skyrail, the longest cableway in the world. We had done this tour 20 years ago and it was just as worthwhile. A truly great tourist experience.





Back on the ship we had dinner at the Waterfront and settled in for the next (more relaxing?) part of our cruise.

### 25 June. At sea

In the morning we went to seminars on arthritis and Norfolk Island. In the afternoon we chatted with Chris and Val, read, and edited our video. Dinner was at Angelo's with Chris and Val. A pleasant, quiet day at sea.

### 26 June. At sea

Another quiet day at sea. We went to a craft workshop and made a paper rose, had dinner at the Waterfront, and went to a magic show by Jarred Fell.

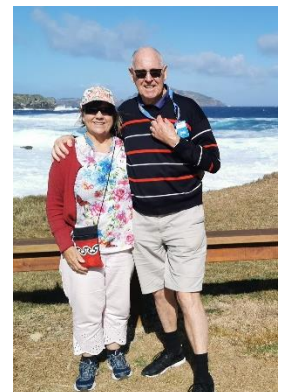
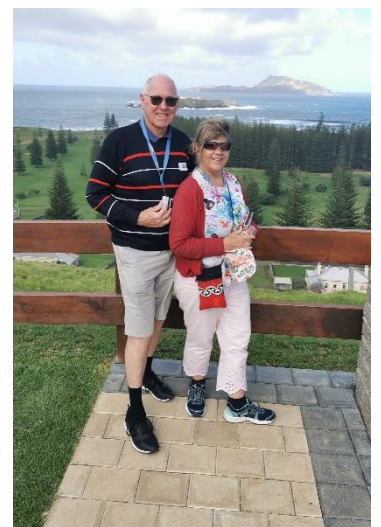
### 27 June. At sea

Another quiet day. We went to a Musical Murder Mystery and had dinner at the Dragon Lady with Chris and Val. After having flat seas all the way thus far, the sea has turned quite rough and the ship is tossing around.

### 28 June, Norfolk Island

Norfolk is a small Australian territory, with a population of about 2000. It was discovered by Captain Cook in 1774, and named after the Duchess of Norfolk. A prison colony was established there in 1788 but was soon abandoned. A much harsher colony was established in 1825 for the worst criminals and the Kingston prison was built. It lasted for 30 years then the prisoners were sent to Tasmania. In 1856 Norfolk was settled by descendants of the Bounty mutineers from Pitcairn Island. Even today many people have surnames like Fletcher, Christian, Adams, McCoy and Quintal.

Only about 1 in 5 cruise ships are able to land on Norfolk as the weather is variable and the tendering tricky. We took the ship's 'Snapshot of Norfolk' tour and it proved to be excellent. We visited Kingston and saw the remains of the penal colony, marvelled at the rugged coastline, and stopped in the main town, Burnt Pine. Through the tour we got a pretty good overview of the history of the island and of what life is like for its people.



After dinner at the Pantry we went to an excellent show by violinist Vov Dylan.

### **29 June. At sea.**

The final day of our cruise! We packed our bags, went to a musical show, went to the gym and had dinner at the Dragon Lady (our favourite?)

### **Reflections of the cruise**

Our 16-day cruise on the Pacific Explorer was thoroughly enjoyable. The ship has lots going on for all ages, and the food is excellent with three included restaurants, plus the buffet style Pantry. (As with most of our cruises we were getting sick of eating towards the end). The music and shows were a bit disappointing, often being very loud or a bit raunchy for our taste. The balcony cabin was small but totally fine, and the staff, as usual, friendly and attentive. The port stops were what made this cruise stand out. We just loved our first visits to Honiara and Norfolk Island, and our return visits to Rabaul, Kiriwina and the Conflict Islands. We learned that you don't have to take the ship's expensive tours and could often get just as good or better at the port. It was wonderful learning about the history of these unique places, and getting to see their main sights so easily. And it was great sharing some of the excursions with Chris and Val. We really loved our first cruise to PNG and this one was just as good, especially as we visited places that were new for us.

Cruise no 21 was just great! (We will be on the Pacific Explorer for cruise no 22 later in the year).

### **30 June. Auckland to home**

We disembarked smoothly in Auckland and caught the train out to Manukau, where we had coffee with friend Gay Dawson. We then caught the bus to the airport and flew Jetstar to Wellington. We were picked up by Michael and taken to see Sarah and Michael's newly finished house, and to catch up with Blake and Isla. Very impressed. The house is great. Michael then took us home in the flash new EV MG.

When we got home we tested for Covid and found we were both positive!! We have had sore throats and a bit of a cough but haven't felt unwell. There were quite a few people coughing on the ship so perhaps we caught it about a week ago when we had those sore throats. Thankfully this didn't affect our holiday in any way.

Overall, this was a really wonderful trip. Highly recommended.