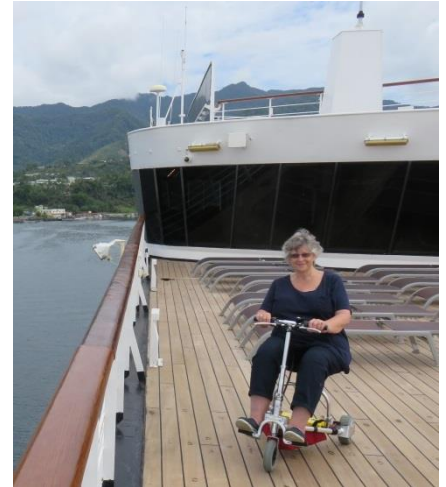


## October 2017 – North Queensland, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

### Have Wheels – Will Travel

**Introduction:** As many of you may know by now, we have not travelled since February 2015 – the longest we have ever gone without a trip. This hiatus was not from choice but life-changing circumstances. Briefly, a routine hip replacement operation I underwent in October 2015 resulted in unforeseen complications. Three further, unsuccessful, operations as well as lengthy and tedious physiotherapy sessions improved matters somewhat as I am no longer in pain, but I have been left permanently unable to stand for more than a few minutes or walk more than a few paces. The excellent New Zealand support system has provided all the assistance, mobility and other equipment including a very snazzy, lightweight 3-wheel electric mobility scooter – Travelscoot – see right ([Travelscoot.com](http://Travelscoot.com)) and alterations to the house that I need and now, two years on, we felt able to resume travelling... though not without some trepidation.



We decided to 'go for broke' and booked a three part trip: a week in Port Douglas, North Queensland, with our family; a cruise from, and back to, Cairns (an hour's drive from Port Douglas) visiting ports in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and finally a couple of days in Cairns and Kuranda. I had researched and written an article on the subject of travelling with a disability some years ago ... little did we know I would one day be taking my own advice! We were reasonably well prepared, but still learnt a few lessons along the way.

**The flight:** We flew by Air New Zealand direct from Auckland to Cairns on a new Dreamliner. We had made sure that we were aware of all the regulations around flying with extra baggage (Travelscoot, stroller and crutches) as well as the help available, of which there was lots. The most important matter was that although I could take the Travelscoot to the door of the plane, upon boarding we had to remove the battery and carry it in the cabin; the frame was put in the hold without having to be folded. We were made aware that the lithium-ion battery which powers the Travelscoot could not, under air transport safety rules, be rated at more than 300 kilowatt hours (mine is 274.4), and I was asked several times to reconfirm this, even though it was on all the documents and we had shown proof that it came within the permitted range. There was no excess baggage charge for the mobility aids and we were able to take the heavy battery (about 5kg) in addition to the normal cabin baggage allowance.

The Travelscoot was waiting at the door of the plane when we disembarked at Cairns and a staff member escorted us through all the passport and immigration formalities in double- quick time. We were somewhat embarrassed to be by-passing all our fellow passengers forced to wait in line but very grateful to be spared the hassle.

Our car rental company, Apex, had been alerted to our circumstances and the courtesy bus was equipped to handle all the paraphernalia, which the driver very helpfully stowed. We had ordered a car the same as our own, a Mitsubishi Outlander, as we knew that everything would fit comfortably, and it was ready and waiting for us as promised.

## Port Douglas (North Queensland)

So far everything had gone without a hitch and so we were disappointed, upon arrival at our resort hotel, Oaks Lagoons, to find that the apartment was not accessible. It was necessary to climb four steps to the front door. I was able to do this with crutches but it would not have been suitable for anyone who was totally wheel-chair bound. Once inside, however, everything was on one level and was very spacious. Ironically, the family's unit was fully accessible, with no steps at all. In addition, although there are sufficient spaces, the units don't have allocated car parks so we could not always find a gap close to ours. Although we had checked by phone that our rooms would be accessible and there would be ample parking, we now know to stress the point when booking. Also, it's important to check parking arrangements and get confirmation of both in writing.



A feature of the hotel, and the main reason we chose it, is the swim-out-from-your-room option. We then discovered that I was unable to use the pools as the ladders were unsuitable. They were vertical, with very narrow treads, and the bottom rung was only just below the surface of the water. Even the stronger guests had to use quite a lot of effort to haul themselves on to the bottom rung. Fortunately we discovered this before I ventured in and so we were spared an

ungainly and embarrassing attempt at exiting, to say nothing of the very real danger of my hip dislocating. So that's something else to check before booking!

On the plus side, the Ramada hotel, right next door, had an arrangement with Oaks Lagoons that the guests could use each other's facilities. We discovered that they had a beautiful swimming pool, designed like a water hole in the jungle, and, better yet, it had easy steps into the water, so I was able to wear my flash new swimsuit after all! They also had a good restaurant and cocktail bar so between the better rooms at our hotel and their more sophisticated food and beverage service (we only had barbecue facilities but no bar or restaurant) we were very happy.



Port Douglas is a fun town and we had no problem accessing all the attractions. The Wildlife Habitat was particularly impressive. From the variety of animals and their habitats, the interactive experiences like Breakfast with the Birds, which was Charlie's 9th birthday treat, and the informative feeding-time shows, to the excellent café and complete accessibility, this attraction deserves a gold star in every respect. We got a 5-day ticket and used it every day. All the creatures are native to Australia and they are accommodated in various 'zones' which replicate their natural habitat, many of them allowed to roam free. We

became well acquainted with them all, though some more closely than others – fortunately crocs and snakes, for example, were exceptions to the free-range rule!



Actually, I really shouldn't joke about free-range crocodiles as the whole area is home to them and there are warnings everywhere to keep away from unpatrolled beaches, rivers and mangroves. Sadly, while we were in Port Douglas a poor soul with dementia wandered off from her rest home and stumbled across a crocodile, with tragic but predictable results. One hears these stories, or reads about them in books, but this was far too close to home and we were all somewhat sobered by it. The only small consolation might be that she would not have understood what was happening and that it would have been very quick, small comfort though that will be for her family.



The town itself is a mix of nice shops, bars, cafes and restaurants, almost all of which were easily accessed and those that weren't went out of their way to accommodate us. Pavements on different levels presented a bit of a poser until we realised that there were ramp detours and the kerbs on every corner were lowered to allow wheelchairs and scooters to cross safely. Top marks for that. Every Sunday there is a very colourful and lively market, which draws stall-holders and shoppers from far and wide. We enjoyed looking at the variety of crafts and foodstuffs available, particularly seeing the sugar-cane drink being squeezed through steel rollers, the power driving them being a standard pedal bike. One young lady challenged the 'cyclor' – a rather handsome young man - to have a go at squeezing her own drink, which he gladly allowed. We didn't notice if she had to pay or if he felt she had earned it but, in any case, I thought that the introduction to 'Adonis' was more the point of the exchange than a sticky drink!

We took a river trip on the Lady Douglas paddle steamer partly because she is such a lovely old vessel but mainly because they were able to accommodate the Travelscoot and she is moored on the Marina jetty. Many of the river cruises are in smaller, more open, electric boats, mostly tying up on the river bank and requiring a scramble to get on board and off again. The Lady Douglas is not particularly quiet, though we could hear the commentary very well, and we did wonder if we would spot any crocodiles, as the electric boats make a big feature of their near-silence meaning they would be more likely to encounter wildlife. In the event, we spotted three crocodiles of various sizes, as well as lots of birds. It seems that the most likely time to spot crocs is at low tide and we hit it just right. The complimentary bubbly, wine, beer or soft drinks and finger-food snacks were also a nice touch .... We were made very welcome by the Skipper and his Mate, who also produced the food and we couldn't have had a more enjoyable trip.



We then had lunch at The Tin Shed, which is actually the Combined Services Club (a bit like the British Legion or Veterans' Association) where we had amazing food at ridiculous prices. Sallie ordered the whole baby barramundi (a delicious local fish) and it tasted as good as it looked in this photo. She enjoyed it so much that they went back the next day for another!

### **P&O Cruises 'Pacific Eden'**

Sadly, the family then had to return home as the school holidays had come to an end. We carried on to the next part of our holiday, the cruise on P&O Cruises Australia's 'Pacific Eden' (once the Holland America ship, 'Statendam', on which we had sailed in the past).

The Ship: We boarded 'Pacific Eden' easily and there was no trouble getting into the cabin as the door was (just) wide enough. P&O have a very helpful leaflet which gives all the information about door widths on all their ships as well as accessible options on the ships and at all their ports. It would have been even more helpful if they'd sent it several weeks (months?) earlier, rather than leaving it in the cabin halfway through the cruise!



We soon found our way about as the main features hadn't changed (dining rooms etc.) however the décor which, while modern was not garish, was very different from the rather traditional, 'clubby' feel of Holland America. To our initial dismay, the lovely, well-stocked library and reading room had been converted into a bar and coffee lounge. We came to love it, however, and had our pre-dinner cocktails and post-dinner coffee there every evening, enjoying the excellent resident jazz band. We still think it is a shame that libraries are disappearing from cruise ships, but with the advent of e-readers it is possible to carry as many books as one needs so it's not such a great loss as it would have been in days of yore.



Getting about the ship on the Travelscoot was fine, although the thick carpeting throughout was hard work for the battery. We had to make sure we re-charged it every night. The lifts were easy and our cabin was quite near the lift lobby which was handy. The room was larger than we remembered and there was plenty of room for all the extra paraphernalia, which was a relief as we had been a bit apprehensive about that.

The Travelscoot attracted a lot of attention and much envy; I handed out at least a dozen of the company's business cards which I had requested from the NZ agent as I guessed that might be the case. I can't go anywhere locally without being stopped and asked about it so thought that travellers would be even more interested.

As for the dining options, we had good meals in The Waterfront main restaurant, where the head waiter fell in love with the Travelscoot and even went so far as to jettison all pretence at dignity and hijacked it one night to do lap of honour around the bustling dining room right in the middle of the dinner service; next evening the head waitress repeated the stunt and ever after that there was much giggling over the adventure! We loved Angelo's, the Italian restaurant, and ate there several times with another couple whom we met in there the first time. The Dragon Lady Asian-themed restaurant was something of a disappointment as it was a bit too 'fusion' with none of the dishes having much character or distinctive flavour and all being a bit too clever: how can you have satay without a peanut sauce? A few crushed peanuts sprinkled over a pile of chopped spring onions isn't the same thing at all! There were no Chinese dishes on the menu, in spite of some of the blurb we'd read. Maybe they change the menu and we just struck it on the wrong night? To be fair, other diners loved it and re-booked several times; the couple we shared a table with, however, found it similarly disappointing, so it wasn't just us.

The casual cafeteria-style option, The Pantry, offered varied food from around the world, and we had breakfast and lunch there most days. An irritation was that there were no trays and everything was scattered around – cutlery here, condiments there, napkins somewhere else – which made collecting and transporting one's meal something of a juggling act; then the search for a table added to the difficulty. We were somewhat surprised that there were no wait persons to assist in carrying food to tables, as there have been on every other cruise we have been on. In the past this wouldn't have been a problem but now that we need a little extra help, a willing pair of hands and feet would have been a boon. As it was, Martin would do the rounds with me as I chose my food, carry it and the necessary tools etc. to a table and then return to the fray to repeat the process for himself. This meant we either ate separately or I had cold food ... not ideal, but this really would count as a 'First World Problem' and really not something that could spoil the holiday!

Martin managed plenty of swims but unfortunately I could not as the pool ladders, although slightly angled and so better than the hotel ones, finished too far off the bottom for me to get on to the bottom rung. We thought of taking the folding step down (which has been useful getting on and off minivans) but when the ship was moving the water sloshed too much and it wouldn't stay still. We discovered that the spa pools were fine, however, as they don't slosh, and it was quite enjoyable to soak in those after a hot and sticky day of sightseeing.



## Papua New Guinea

**Alotau:** This sleepy, dusty, chaotic town is capital of the Milne Bay province. This town and the coast on either side played a vital role in the Battle of Milne Bay during WW II. There are some relics of the war to be seen in the area, including the Australian War Memorial market which is aimed at tourists with colourful sarongs and shell or raffia artefacts on display. The main market sells some souvenirs but primarily fish from the boats moored at the adjacent quay, vegetables of every variety and succulent tropical pawpaw (papaya), several types of bananas for cooking or eating and juicy, aromatic pineapples.

Most of the architecture is reminiscent of the rest of the Pacific, but we were interested to see that a number of buildings have boat shaped roofs, which we thought were very similar to those in some India Ocean islands.

As there was no particular point of interest we wanted to visit in Alotau, since we would be visiting other wartime sites later, we took a cooking lesson tour at a local hotel. We reached the hotel via a drive through the town and a lookout point, where local children were dressed in traditional tribal costumes and who invited visitors to take their photographs.



Upon arrival at the hotel where the cooking lesson was to take place we were met by sturdy steel gates and armed guards, the norm in this part of the world where 'rascals' (robbers) are a common danger. Everyone was so friendly and accommodating that it is hard to believe that under the surface, PNG is actually one of the most dangerous places to visit.

We were told we would be cooking 'Claypot', a traditional staple meal. During the lesson we learned about different vegetables like cassava, taro, yams and several new-to-us leaves, and their uses. We also discovered (not the hard way, fortunately) that you mustn't wash a certain type of taro while holding it as the water will cause severe itching of the skin on hands and arms. The variety of bananas was greater than many of us had realised and the equally large variety of uses to which they were put was enlightening. The most extraordinary is the mixture of red banana with sago and coconut water which then changes the nature of the sago from frog spawn-like balls to a very dense, sticky gel which looks quite revolting but tastes delicious, though somewhat labour-intensive to chew. We thought it might make an excellent substitute for super glue!



Once we had prepared all the vegetables, as well as chopped onions, garlic, ginger and tomatoes, everything was layered in earthenware pots together with freshly grated coconut, courtesy of Martin and Steve, the only men in the group. A tight-fitting lid of large leaves, which looked like the taro leaves we have in our garden, completed the preparations. The pots would traditionally be buried under a designated tree, in the village fire pit, for several hours. As our ship would be sailing long before that they were put in a conventional oven for an hour or so while we enjoyed relaxing in the hotel's beautiful gardens and by the pool. The fruits of our labours were served on beautifully starched white table cloths laid with sparkling silverware and exquisite arrangements of exotic flowers. Our vegetable hotpots were augmented by chicken drumsticks and some rather unattractive fatty pieces of pork, also cooked in coconut milk, as well as platters of coconut rice. It might not have been such a successful meal had one not cared for coconut but luckily we love it! Dessert was huge platters of pawpaw (a.k.a. papaya), small sweet bananas and pineapple.



The hotel cooks, all lovely, round, ladies (the pretty young apprentice was not round but one suspects soon will be), were filled with mirth and jollity but took their cooking very seriously and were anxious we should understand all about the food and how and why it was important. I was lucky enough to be working with the head cook, Maureen, and we found ourselves swapping hints on how we prepared various foods and each learned a thing or two from the other, which I enjoyed and hope she did too. As alluded to earlier, Martin and Steve were put to work grating coconut on traditional small stools fitted with lethal, razor sharp scrapers; it was hard labour and they were slow to produce the required amount. Much teasing ensued, followed by the real coconut-grater-

man appearing with a huge mound of 'some he made earlier' – no doubt on an electric machine in the kitchen!

The cooks also showed us how to take a handful of the freshly grated coconut and rub it on our skin (we just did our hands and arms as modesty forbade the recommended all-over rub) and the oils came out of the coconut leaving our skin soft and smooth and fragrant - just like an expensive Pure Fiji treatment! The local women do it all the time and it explains their beautiful soft and glowing skin, which is unusual to see in people who have such a hard-working, peasant life style.

**Kitava (Trobiand Islands):** Still in Milne Bay Province, this is a very small island in the Trobiand group. Life remains very much as it was thousands of years ago as there has been very little influence from the outside world. The island, in a sea of every shade of blue, green and turquoise, is surrounded by stunning white sand beaches lined with natural shade-trees and just offshore there is a perfect sand atoll, Nuratu Island.



Sadly it was pouring with rain while we were at these beautiful coral-ringed islands so we did not see them at their best. In spite of the rain, we could see patches of the almost iridescent blue and turquoise in the water so could easily imagine how spectacular the colours must be in sunshine. As it was a tender-port we decided not to venture ashore as it would have been very slippery getting on and off the boats and my lack of agility would have made it very risky. Martin is not a great devotee of rainy walks so he also decided to stay on board, which was no hardship at all. We watched as a number of

attractive small 'banana' boats with colourful sails took the more adventurous passengers on trips. Though their usual employment is fishing, we suspect the tourist trade provides a better return.

**Rabaul (New Britain):** We arrived to beautiful sunshine and blue skies, 75% humidity and 32C temperature – very comfortable. A church male voice choir serenaded us with hymns from the dockside and the wide, red betel nut juice-stained smiles of the various dock workers, tour guides and officials also warmed the welcome.



Rabaul harbour is in a spectacular setting surrounded by the calderas and volcanoes which have shaped this regions history (<https://www.volcanodiscovery.com/rabaul-tavurvur.html>). As the massive volcanic eruptions of 1994 had been so catastrophic, totally burying the original city of Rabaul, we had expected a rather austere, grey aspect. Instead, we saw lush, tropical greenery everywhere we looked; the jungle can hold its own against any foe, including volcanic ash, it seems.

As well as the violent and dramatic geological history, Rabaul has an inescapable and harrowing past dating from the 20th century's two World Wars, traces of which are in evidence everywhere around Rabaul and the fast-growing town of Kokopo, which grew up as a result of the exodus from Rabaul following the 1994 eruptions.



With so much to see, we had arranged a private tour (through Paivu Tours) and were glad we had as we were able to cover far more than would have been possible in a large group. We met our guide Essie and driver Michael on the quayside and we were soon underway in our minibus. Our first call was at the Japanese Barge Tunnels, about which we had read, but for the scale of which we were quite unprepared. There are three steel barges in the entrance to the tunnel and we were able to view them and marvel at the feats of engineering that the excavation of the tunnels, and the manufacture of the barges

represented. The work was done by Indian, Australian and indigenous prisoners of war, at great cost of lives. The barges were used to re-supply the Japanese fleet with ammunition and they ran on rails under the mountains to the various harbours where the fleet found anchorage, out of sight of allied land and air forces.



As we found at every attraction we visited, the local people set up colourful markets selling similar wares to those found in Alotau and Kitava. We are not normally tempted by the articles on display but a speciality of this region seems to be hand-made bracelets of tiny beads in a variety of designs. We were steered towards a certain section of the market by Essie and discovered that two of the stall holders were her sisters, Flora and Dora. Flora's bracelets were particularly attractive and one of them found its way home with us! Flora and Dora were just the first of Essie's sisters, brothers and sisters-in-law whom we

met, together with sundry nieces and nephews, all of whom were charming and sported the typical huge, red grins we encountered everywhere we went.



We travelled towards Kokopo, the new main town of the region, passing the wreck of a large floating crane. This huge crane was captured from the British by the Japanese in Singapore and floated to Rabaul, where it was pressed into service by its captors. Sadly, it was abandoned after the war and all that remains is a rusted, graffiti-covered tangle of steel, leaning against the sea wall, albeit still recognisable for what it once was. Just a little further along the road from the crane is a viewpoint (Blue Lagoon Lookout) which gave a beautiful panorama of the bay, surrounded by volcanoes, and our ship.

We arrived in Kokopo town and passed lots of new(ish) buildings – supermarkets, tyre companies and all the usual commercial and industrial concerns of a modern city. Less modern and, to us, most interesting, was the large town market. Here, there were various sections devoted to the sale of fruit, vegetables, cooked food, household goods and artefacts and so on. We spent most time in the fruit section, where we spotted every variety with which we were familiar as well as some we had never seen before; it was all very colourful and busy and all the stall holders (and their children) had happy smiles and a greeting for us even though they knew we were not customers.





We were puzzled how so many stalls all selling the same thing (notably peanuts in their shells, both boiled and un-boiled) could possibly all make a living but Essie explained that as well as the local housewives buying for their tables, many of the customers had come down from the remote villages in the mountainous hinterland and were buying supplies to take home and sell on to their neighbours. Essie called it a black market but we felt it was more like free enterprise and that they had earned the right to make a profit on the goods since they had made the effort to go into town. Some of these

onward-sellers had walked for many hours to get to town and faced the same walk home... but uphill and carrying their purchases.

We drove on through villages of poor shanty houses with coconut and banana palm filled gardens, many also having make-shift bamboo stalls on the roadside with glistening silver and red fish hanging up for sale. We wondered how fresh it would be by the time it was all sold but when we returned by the same route a couple of hours later it had all been sold so clearly that was not an issue. Essie told us they ate fish and vegetable for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, the vegetables mostly home-grown and the fish caught by the men of the family in the coastal villages, or else bought from the stalls we had seen by those living inland. Children start to fish when they are as young as 4 or 5; they work with their fathers until they are about 8 or 9 and are then given their own canoe and expected to help feed the family, including those too elderly or frail to fend for themselves... all this either early in the morning, before school, or after they get home around 3 in the afternoon. I wonder what our grandchildren would make of having to do that?



We were taken to the Australian-administered Commonwealth War Graves Commission Bita Paka cemetery, where the lives of the thousands of souls of many nationalities but particularly Australian, Indian and the many indigenous people of Papua New Guinea, who were lost in this theatre during the world wars, are commemorated. The setting was tranquil and beautifully maintained, with huge shade trees, every variety of tropical plant and smooth green lawns providing a serene final

resting place for those whose bodies are buried here, and a garden of remembrance for the many, many more whose remains will never be found or identified. Neither the beauty nor the tranquillity can take one's mind away from the reason for the garden and it is impossible not to come away deeply saddened at the terrible loss of so many, mostly very young, people and the consequent waste of human potential... to say nothing of the deep grief of their families.

A longish drive on very bumpy roads got us up to the vulcanology centre and observatory, where the vulcanologist was very informative and interesting. The location also afforded spectacular views from here over Rabaul, the volcanoes and harbour. Unfortunately the path was very uneven and there were steps to negotiate so I was unable to take advantage of the visit but Martin was glad to have been able to do so. I stayed in the van with Michael and we listened to local radio – some old standards like 'Can't help falling in love with you' but sung in Pijin to a very insistent rap beat ... quite interesting but I don't think I'll buy the album!







Here a word about the roads might be helpful. They are paved in parts but very roughly and pot holes are deep and frequent. It is easy to see by looking at the verges that they have been formed by simply bull-dozing through the, sometimes metres-deep, volcanic ash which covers the whole region. In part the surface has washed away entirely, following the floods which inundated Rabaul and its suburbs two years ago – nature really does seem to have got it in for these poor people. Essie kept apologising for the bumpy ride and we

reassured her we were fine and used to poor roads at home, but in reality even the worst of our Far North roads are ribbons of silk in comparison (don't tell NZTA or we'll never get them improved!).

Admiral Yamamoto's bunker and the Rabaul Historical Society Museum were next on the itinerary and we wished our aviation-mad grandson, Toby, had been with us as the museum featured two very mangled but still recognisable Japanese planes, with the Rising Sun decals still clearly visible. We were somewhat amused by the means chosen to display one of the planes – three ordinary dining chairs placed under each wing and the tail were all that supported it, but it worked and so why not? The other exhibits were mostly photographs and various documents drawing-



pinned to boards around the room. Sadly, many were so faded and dusty as to be almost illegible but there were some interesting notices from Government House which had survived. My favourites were the one that forbade the shooting of pheasants in G.H. grounds, presumably because they had been imported for the sport of the Guv and his chums and not for the dining tables of *hoi polloi*, and another which decreed that wives of members of the gubernatorial staff who gave birth would be given five shillings when the child reached 6 months of age.



I was unable to descend into the bunker but Martin examined the Spartan, low-ceilinged, white painted rooms with their map showing plans for world-domination on the ceiling and Japanese writing on the walls. Michael accompanied him and he was impressed and amazed by what he saw; Martin got the impression that it was the first time he has seen the place, in spite of it being so much a part of his people's history. While the others were in the bunker, I sat with a group of village people and their children and exchanged stories of our respective homes and way of life (not all that different when you

get down to basics, as we find so often all over the world). The children are as engaging, mischievous, cheeky, shy and inquisitive as children are everywhere and their elders as embarrassed and amused by their antics and lack of inhibition, as adults are everywhere.

Following the visit to the bunker and museum we drove over ash fields (over the old town) to some hot springs at the foot of the still very active volcano Mt Tavurvur. It was very reminiscent of parts of Iceland (but hotter ... so much hotter!) and there was an almost surreal feel to it as we were made aware that we were driving over the rooftops of old Rabaul (pre-1994 eruption). Just as we arrived at the hot springs a sheet of rain swept across the ash field, having crept up behind the mountain, but it was warm rain and just added another dimension to this desolate place. The springs bubble up at very high temperatures (about 80C) so there is definitely no basking in the healing waters here.



We had thought that was to be the end of the tour but a bonus had been arranged for us – a short display of singing and dancing by some village men and half a dozen young lads from the village school. The orchestra consisted of a number of men seated on the ground with long bamboo poles in front of them, which they beat rhythmically with two sticks each. The position on the bamboo pole seemed to dictate the

tone and it all worked well as a beat for the dancing, if not particularly tuneful. There was a rather endearing hiatus at the beginning when the children obviously anticipated their cue and came on early, rushing off again in confusion when they realised their mistake. One of the elders gave an exasperated sigh and went behind the shed, where they were hiding, to tell them their fortunes! After that, they performed like little champions, proud of their traditional white 'war paint' and grass skirts.

The paint depicted skeletons but one lad of about 8 or 9 (clearly the class clown) was not sure the skeletons were scary enough and he had painted a pair of spectacles on himself, which he probably thought made him look very grown up and menacing but which amused us enormously. Another lad must have been very relieved he was wearing shorts under his skirt as it slipped more and more as the dance progressed and eventually he was reduced to trying to haul it back up over his bottom at the same time as remembering to do all the various hand and arm movements the dance required. This show was put on in a large open-sided shed which called itself the Rabaul Yacht Club, though it bore little resemblance to the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron, the rightful home of the Americas Cup!



We arrived back at the ship after a most enjoyable and informative five hour tour – we had booked only four – during which we had been made welcome everywhere we went, had been given so many extra opportunities and not been asked even once for any favours or money, with or without menaces; it taught us not to listen to scare-mongers who would have you believe that such unpleasantness was inevitable in this part of the world. Admittedly we did, several times, experience young men waving machetes at us ... but only in friendly greeting as we drove past!

A perfect day was rounded off nicely with cocktails and dinner in the Italian restaurant with our new ship-mate friends from Mackay in Queensland.

## Solomon Islands

**Gizo (Ghizo Island):** This island is a typical small tropical island paradise and the town, Gizo, both pronounced the same, is the second "city" of the Solomon Islands (population around 7,000). Also a popular tourist destination, it's known for its excellent diving and snorkelling amid the reefs which surround the main island as well as the many small satellite islands which come within its administration. Perhaps its greatest claim to fame, however, is that a certain famous naval officer, later President of the United States, one John Fitzgerald Kennedy, served here and there are many opportunities to follow his service career for those interested in American wartime history. There is even an island named after him, off which his torpedo boat was rammed by a Japanese naval vessel.



A colourful market, similar to those throughout the region, offered myriad fruit and vegetable varieties as well as a lot of fish. Some souvenirs were also on offer, but they were by no means in the forefront.

A troupe of male dancers wearing only white 'war paint' and the briefest of loincloths performed a spirited dance for the benefit of the visitors but more entertaining than the dance was the behaviour of the group of local ladies watching. Presumably they were the

dancers' wives, who clearly had no illusions about their men being the 'noble savages' they were portraying and hysterical laughter rather than reverence or admiration was their reaction!



**Honiara (Guadalcanal Island):** On the largest of the Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal, and the capital of the Solomon Islands, this large and very busy town – even on a Saturday the roads were gridlocked with traffic – has seen more than its share of conflict both during the war and, later, following independence ... and it shows.

First impressions are not favourable for the whole place is very run down and in great need of investment in basic infrastructure. A number of the better buildings proclaim themselves to be the offices of this or that project or development agency but there is precious little evidence of any of it. Given the enormous sums in overseas aid directed to this benighted country, one can only come to the conclusion that the money is making its way into private pockets and not where it is supposed to go. Indeed, some countries are now refusing to provide money but are insisting on conducting the works themselves so there is hope that progress will now be made on improving the lot of the people of the nation.

While discussing the negative aspects of this otherwise beautiful country of mountains, flowers and smiling people, it is impossible to ignore not just the abject poverty but also the almost unimaginable squalor in which so many of them live. Although one might suppose that poverty and squalor go hand-in-hand, we have seen many impoverished peoples who still take pride in their environment and keep their villages immaculately clean and tidy. We have travelled extensively in India and China and thought we had seen the worst but Honiara certainly matches them for the filth in the residential area, roadsides, rivers and ditches. To see people swimming and playing amid the floating island of refuse at the river mouth and the women washing pots in the foetid ditches was shocking in the extreme. There are reasons for this lack of basic civic amenities, primarily the almost non-existent income from rates, or property taxes, which would normally fund such things as refuse collection. Because of land ownership disputes, very few of the villagers pay rates and the wealthier home and business owners, who do pay, resent any money being spent on other areas. The history of the Solomon Islands has been a chequered one, since Independence in 1978 right through to the ending of the RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands - essentially police and advisory services provided by Australia, New Zealand and other South Pacific nations) in July this year and it would take a whole other feature to discuss it, but you can visit the Sydney Morning Herald (<http://www.smh.com.au/world/as-ramsi-ends-solomon-islanders-look-to-the-future-20170621-gww2g1.html>) to learn more.

The people of the Solomon Islands, like those of Papua New Guinea, are Melanesian with dark complexions, the Solomon Islanders being an even deeper shade of almost ebony black than those of PNG but, in common with them, they display a genetic anomaly which means a significant number of them are blond(e) headed, though still having the typical tightly curled hair. Indeed, we saw several fully albino people and it appears that there are proportionately more albinos in this part of the world than anywhere else.



Our private tour (arranged through Destination Solomons and again with our own minibus, driver and guide Martina) was mostly concerned with the earlier history of the country and its involvement in the war in the Pacific from 1942 to 1946. There can be few who have not heard of the great battles of the Guadalcanal campaign but how many of us, who were not brought up in the Pacific region, have any idea of the scope and scale of the action and unimaginable number of casualties? We, who were brought up with our parents' stories of the horrors of the European theatre, were certainly shocked to learn of the magnitude and viciousness of this campaign.



The first site we visited was the memorial to the Coast-watchers, whose clandestine work did so much to protect the allies and provide an early-warning of approaching enemy vessels. Sadly, countless numbers of these brave people, both local Solomon Islanders, without whom the work could not have been carried out, and the allied personnel both military and civilian, were captured and executed by the Japanese.



On a lighter note, a short visit to the Central Market introduced yet more varieties of fruit, vegetables and fish. Unusually for this part of the world, but reminiscent of markets in Tahiti, there was a large, riotously colourful flower section where ornate arrangements as well as bouquets and individual blooms could be purchased. We noticed that in many, if not most, of the gardens in the villages, even the poorest ones, flowers were planted and nurtured among the vegetables – the only place we have seen this use of such precious

ground space; the Islanders must set great store by beauty as well as practicality. Fragrant frangipani trees abound, with the typical white flower being the most common but also many with every permutation of pink, purple and yellow and it was as common to see men as to see women sporting a fallen bloom behind one ear or in their hair.

Perhaps most interesting section, though, was the 'builders' yard' where bamboo poles and pre-fabricated siding and roofing panels of palm- and bamboo leaves were on sale. There was an inordinate number of men standing around apparently with nothing to do while a lady of mature years and very small stature single-handedly lifted each of the panels, inspected them closely and piled them up on the other side of the yard. Any not meeting the required standard were hurled onto a heap at the feet of the loitering men, who ignored them. One wonders if this is because it was a mere woman making the judgement. We had been told that the two subways running under the four-lane main road, and footbridge over it, were closed for about a decade after they were first built as, traditionally, no Solomon Island man would tolerate the discourtesy of a mere female passing above his head! This particular 'kastom' has now been discontinued but the general lack of respect by men for women is, sadly, still very much a part of the culture.

The drive along the main road took us past a large casino, 'pokie' clubs (one-armed bandits or slot machines for our European and American friends) as well as numerous bottle shops (liquor stores), which were also a feature of every village we passed through. Apparently these concerns add nothing to the general coffers and one wonders where the money comes from to keep them going. Many of the gambling joints, as well as the majority of shops, belong to Chinese businessmen and it would appear that most of the profits might go offshore; it all seems shrouded in mystery and the only certainty is that very little is paid to the tax man.

Next on the itinerary was the US War Memorial, which was very informative, giving refreshingly open accounts of the various battles, both won and lost, and listing the various military units, ships and flights who participated. Although the allies finally prevailed it was not without fierce opposition from the Japanese and great loss of life on both sides.



Henderson Field, a Japanese airfield in 1942 and now the international and domestic airport, was the site of another horrific battle and there is a touching memorial garden to the US forces and their allies, with each of the graves protected by its own specially planted shade tree. A rusting Japanese anti-aircraft gun has been left in-situ as a reminder that the war was fought not just at sea and on the land but in the air too. Close by are the skeletal remains of the war-time air traffic control tower, inaccessible behind chain-link fencing but in any case too fragile to climb now. Somehow, the chain-link fence made the tower seem very menacing and reminiscent of a prison camp watch tower.

Our next stop was at the appropriately named Bloody Ridge memorial, also colloquially known as Edson's Ridge where Col. Merritt Edson led his Edson's Raiders in an ultimately unsuccessful, but undoubtedly courageous, bid to capture the airfield from the Japanese. It is a very small, ill-kept memorial stone that honours the 2000 or so Japanese killed during the battles for Henderson Field, and we were a little sad that it was not maintained in the careful and respectful manner of the other memorials we visited; it is not clear why.



High on Mt Austen, the Solomon Peace Memorial Park is a very tranquil monument, built by Japanese war veterans in 1981 to commemorate those who died in the Guadalcanal campaign. It is touching that the memorial, although built by the Japanese, is dedicated to *all* those, of whatever nationality, who gave their lives. The stark, white pillars, positioned to be open to the four winds, and the formal, stone and gravel square gardens, together with the lush, tropical foliage of the

borders, encapsulate both the formality of Japan and the Japanese culture and the less controlled, more exuberant nature of a tropical island and its people. In contrast to the Bloody Ridge memorial, this Park is beautifully kept and the custodians, local people, not Japanese, thanked us for visiting; they gave us to understand that the place really mattered to them. Sadly, very few visitors seem to know about it or make the drive out to it – we saw only one other couple while we were there and none of the ship's organised tours included it, yet we would not have wanted to miss it and found it the most meaningful of all the memorials we saw. We got the impression that this was the first visit for our driver and guide, although both are seasoned hosts.



A possible explanation for the lack of visitors to the Park and some of the other sites may be the dreadful roads (easily a match for Rabaul but without the excuse of volcanic eruptions) and the geography of the terrain. What appeared to be a short drive between points did not take into account the fact that Honiara and its environs are built on a series of high hills (mountains, even) and a kilometre as the crow flies translated into several more by the time one had bumped down one hillside into the valley and up the other side to the next site! We had wondered why we were told, by the company with whom we had booked our car and guide, that it was not

feasible to visit a 'graveyard' of tanks, planes, ships and other detritus of the war to the west of Honiara if we were to see those sites which we had also requested but we soon understood as, after clearing the grid-locked traffic in the city, we were lucky to exceed 40kph on the ordinary roads.

Our final visit was to the National Museum where we saw lots of artefacts of daily life, apparently primitive but many still in use in the back country. Also featured were documents and other artefacts relating to recent history both just before and following Independence and the RAMSI years. In the courtyard are several ornate carved figures or pillars, which reminded us of the Pou back home in New Zealand. Our guide told us that these represent the nine provinces but she didn't seem particularly proud of them or engaged by their history or significance, unlike our Maori compatriots, for whom their Pou hold a special significance.



Our guide Martina is a primary school teacher in 'real life' and I was glad the ship was there on a Saturday or she would not have been able to guide us. It was interesting to hear about the education system and the difficulty in engaging families with their children's learning. Education is not free and it surprised me that, having made the sacrifices necessary to send their children to school, very few parents take any further interest in their progress, instead just expecting the teachers to do it all and simply present them with someone capable of earning a better living than they had managed at the end of it. On reflection, this attitude is, sadly, not restricted to this part of the world. Unlike in Papua New Guinea, education is not even nominally compulsory and therefore there is no legal start or finish date to a child's school days. Unlike in PNG, however, medicine is free both at local clinics and the main Referral Hospital. Clinics are likely to be staffed by nurses rather than doctors, of which the country is very short, and it is only if a patient is referred to hospital that they might see a doctor. Most people go through their whole lives never seeing one of these august and highly respected practitioners.

We returned to the ship and embarked upon the voyage back to Cairns, having learnt more about the countries we visited and the culture of the people than we would have thought possible in such a short time. Although appalled at the corruption, we were filled with admiration for the hard work, positivity and remarkable good humour of the people struggling against such abject poverty. One can only hope that the future will bring them the development they deserve.

And now, as they say, for something completely different ...

### **Cairns & Kuranda (North Queensland)**

**Cairns:** Nothing and nowhere could present a more marked contrast to the places we had spent the previous 10 days visiting.

On our first day, straight from the ship, we checked in to the Rydges Plaza Hotel for two nights and went shopping for one or two things we couldn't find in Auckland (there isn't much but have you noticed how other countries always have temptations not available at home?).

We enjoyed a leisurely stroll from the swimming lagoon (safe from sharks and crocodiles!) along the Esplanade, watching the antics of the pelicans and admiring the beautiful sculpture.







We then had a very early dinner at an amazing seafood place called 'Prawn Star'; we had been warned you have to get there early as it is very popular, so went for 6pm and it was already bustling. The premises are two old fishing boats tied to opposite sides of a finger pier at the end of the boardwalk and all they serve is raw or steamed seafood: oysters, prawns, cray or Moreton Bay bugs, red or white wine or beer. Full stop!

There was a slight hitch when we found I couldn't climb up onto the boats but the enthusiastic young staff immediately said "No problem" and out came 4 beer kegs and the polystyrene lid off a large cool box, voila! a table and two seats set up on the pier (we later realised all the 'tables' were the same) and the seat kegs did have wooden tops so we weren't sitting on the rims. We had the large platter of the freshest bugs (like a cross between a cray and slipper lobster) and prawns and couldn't believe the quantity - enough for all of us if you had been there but as you weren't we had to eat them all ourselves, which we did with enormous enjoyment - all for \$60 for the lot. A couple of glasses of nice Shiraz each left us feeling very mellow and that we had just had one of the most memorable meals ever - it was a perfect evening, the staff were brilliant and I said to Martin that it was the first time since my mobility difficulties that I haven't felt I was a nuisance or in the way, even though I must have been both. We walked (rode) back to the town centre and stopped for coffee and gelato. We were back at the hotel before 8 so Martin went for a swim and we were asleep not long after 9pm - record-breakingly early for us.



### Kuranda Scenic Railway



Next morning we were picked up at 7.10 at our hotel for the ride to the station at Freshwater for the train up to Kuranda, high up on the Tablelands. There was a bit of drama getting the Travelscoot on the bus as the driver couldn't get it through the back door so he simply hefted it onto the front row of passenger seats. Luckily we were the first pick up so those seats hadn't been taken and he wasn't bothered about the seat covers! We got to the station in good time for a coffee and scone breakfast and when the train arrived were escorted into the very

comfortable handicapped carriage (me and my Travelscoot being lifted in on a lift-cum-forklift contraption!) which we had to ourselves. The scenery was quite breath-taking and the rail bridges were incredible; how on earth did they engineer such a marvel?

**Kuranda:** We wandered through the Kuranda township and looked in several shops but avoided buying anything and then had a lovely lunch at a restaurant in the Heritage Market offering Sri Lankan crocodile and green apple curry. Needless to say we didn't look any further down the menu and ordered that (small portions were on offer so we took those as we had plans for dinner that night). Balti-dish sized bowls arrived, complete with naan, rice and raita, all for \$9.50. It was really delicious.



An added attraction to the restaurant was (were?) the large lizards (Water Dragons running about - one of which took up residence beside the table next to ours. This freaked out one of the women sitting there but amused us enormously!



### **Skyrail**



We caught the Skyrail back down, getting off and exploring all the trails at each stop. We had the gondolas to ourselves and my Travelscoot travelled in the one ahead so the staff had it unloaded and ready when we got off. It has certainly caused a lot of interest, both on the ship and today, and I've given away over a dozen cards. Again, everyone was so helpful and kind that it made the day even more enjoyable. I am not the world's greatest fan of that particular mode of transport and was a bit nervous to start with but after a while was so

captivated by the views I almost forgot my phobia ... and when we rattled over the links on the pylons, reminded myself that the trees were dense enough to break our fall if that flimsy bit of string we were suspended from should break. We did not, I hasten to add, pay extra to travel Diamond Class, with a glass floor (though the Travelscoot did for one of the stages!). When we got to the bottom, the driver of the bus had 'had words' about the difficulties that morning and Skyrail had booked an accessible maxi-taxi to get us back to the hotel.

### **Cairns**

That night we had a wander through the night market and then had dinner at the RSL (Returned Services League – The Australian version of the British Legion, Veterans Association or Returned Services Association) on the Esplanade - not quite up to Port Douglas (no baby barramundi!) but still an excellent meal at about 2/3rds what it would have cost in a regular restaurant and massive portions. After another wander through the town we stopped for more gelato and coffee at the same place as before, though only had two scoops between us instead of three this time. Both here and at the RSL we had pavement side tables and watched the parade of all manner of humanity ... and aren't there some specimens?

After a leisurely breakfast next morning we presented ourselves at Cairns Airport and enjoyed a very easy check-in, flight and safe arrival in Auckland. It was too late to drive back up north so we had a night in the hotel where we had left the car and an uneventful drive home next day.