

2013

S P E C I A L I S S U E

# BOAT

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Voyage of a lifetime:  
*Exuma* in The  
Solomon Islands and  
Papua New Guinea





# in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea

*Soon after her launch in 2010, Exum  
embarked on a four-year round the  
world cruise, visiting islands selected for  
their uniqueness and remoteness.  
During the summer of 2012, she visited the  
Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.*



WORDS Eric Wittbeck

PHOTOGRAPHY: Eric Wittbeck & Amandine Breckpot



Soon after her launch in 2010, *Exuma* undertook an extraordinary round the world cruise which would take four years to complete while visiting islands painstakingly selected for their uniqueness and remoteness. Islands such as Fatu Hiva (Marquesas), Maupiti (Society Islands), Suvarrow (Cook Islands), Niuatoputapu (Tonga) and Fulaga (Lau, Fiji) are exceptional, but are not in the scope of this article. Only the stretch covered in the summer of 2012, which includes the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG), will be discussed and illustrated here.

### The Solomon Islands

Is it worthwhile to spend time in the Solomons when you move from the wonders of Vanuatu to those of Papua New Guinea? The answer to this question is not obvious at first glance. For a few reasons, the Solomons are less inviting as a cruising area than their neighbours.

Honiara, the capital city and main harbour, is appalling in every respect. The village is one of the filthiest in the Pacific, good lodging is unavailable, the harbour is an open roadstead... So we move across to Tulagi, and find more surprises.

We anchor in a large bay, south of Auki in Malaita. We soon find out that the three villages on this bay are not on speaking terms, and the representative of each one tries to collect from us a large mooring fee. An excited local lady threatens to call the police... everything calms down after we say that we would definitely welcome the police!

The Solomon Islanders tend to charge a substantial price for any service, proving to be consistently more greedy than any of their neighbours. I mention this as a tentative wake-up call for the authorities, because this attitude will end up disgusting visiting cruisers.

Welcome to the local 'Costa Concordia': a cruise ship aground on the beach of a village is still seeping oil and chemicals after 10 years. Nobody cares to do anything



*Exuma received a warm welcome from these happy-go-lucky local children in a dug out canoe*

Centuries-old local customs and rights form the very basis of Melanesian culture. When entering a village show your good intentions by your clothing and behaviour. Bring the chief a present





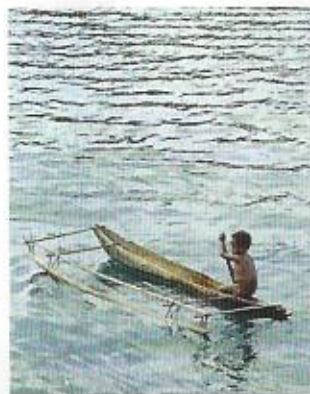




*Exuma anchored in a large bay south of Auki, which is curled around a wonderfully shaped bay and surrounded by jungle-clad hills – a delight to approach by sea. She received a warm welcome from these locals*



*The local 'Costa Concordia' is aground on the beach of a local village and is still seeping oil and chemicals after 10 years. Eric observes that nobody cares to do anything about it, so the village chief just charges a fee for snorkelling around the wreck...*



about it, so the village chief just charges a fee for snorkelling around the wreck.

However, moving to the New Georgia group brings improvement and some superb scenery, though not on a par with the best of Polynesia, Tonga or Fiji. The expansive Marovo Lagoon offers several days of quiet cruising. The smaller Vonavona Lagoon is lovely. Gizo is the base for some remarkable scuba-diving. Do not miss the F6F Hellcat fighter lying at -10 metres! You'll enjoy sitting in the pilot's seat.

Very few cruisers elect to make any calls in the Shortland Islands (close to the PNG border). You should think otherwise. This area is beautiful and surprisingly interesting. The now largely forgotten airport-island of Ballalae provides intriguing scenes of war relics to be discovered by chance while wandering in a captivating emerald green jungle.

## Papua New Guinea (PNG)

It may still be wise to avoid the centre of Bougainville Island; we therefore elect to clear into PNG at Buka, which proves to be a convenient port of entry and a good location to make any crew changes.

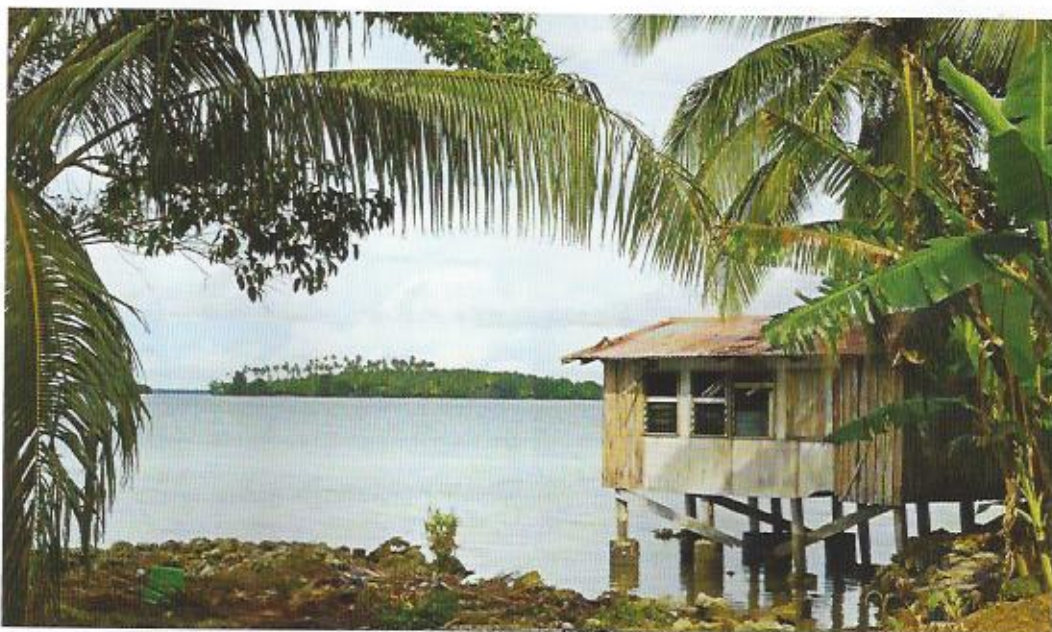
The large bay on Buka Island's west coast is very quiet. But Pinipel Island, 53 miles north, feels really out of the way. Rabaul is one of the weirdest landscapes of the Pacific. Most of this pretty and lively city was drowned in ash in 1994 by the two neighbouring volcanoes. The resulting 'moonscape' is moving and deserves a visit.

We call at Kavieng and Manus Island on our way to Hermit Island. The rarely visited Hermit and Ninigo Islands are quite appealing. The lagoons are beautiful. The well-organised villages are most welcoming, and manage to preserve a happy life with almost no outside provisioning. If something is really needed, it means a

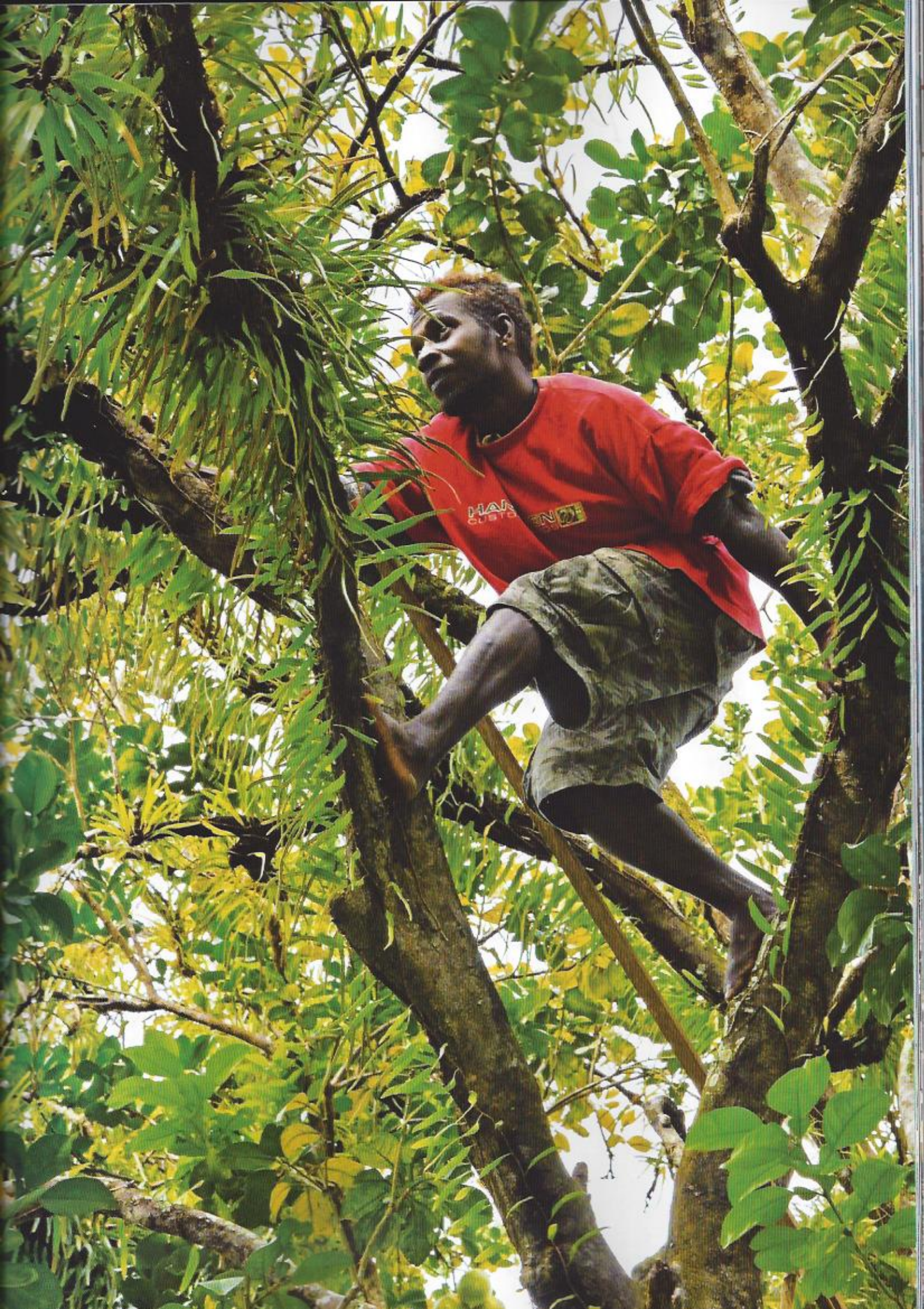


*Every piece of land, every tree, every fruit – even fallen on the ground – is private. It belongs to an individual, a family, a tribe. Technically, if you walk anywhere, you are trespassing; if you pick up a COCONUT, you are stealing. Some paths between villages are private...*

*Fishing and agriculture are the main industries in the Solomon Islands, and coconuts, cassava, sweet potatoes and especially taro feature in the local cuisine.*









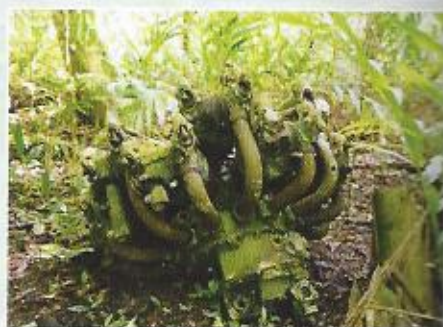
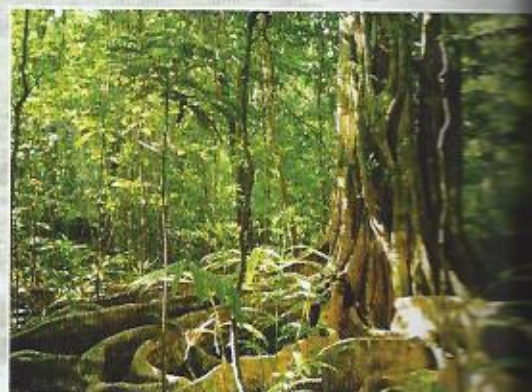
150- to 200-mile trip to Manus Island, and back, in open ocean with a small canoe.

Back on the mainland, east of Wewak, Manam volcano is impressive. We did not find in Hansa Bay any of the wrecks supposed to be prime diving sites. The locals keep mum. Our guess is that some of the Second World War relics were washed away, while others were stolen by Americans or Canadians. This has happened in other locations, such as Ballatae.

The best way by far to visit the famous Middle Sepik villages is by helicopter. It can be chartered in

Madang and asked to refuel in Wewak before and after your village hopping. Each village extends a most delightful welcome, such as in Kanganaman where dancing spirits will greet you and lead you to the sacred men's house. This Haus Tambaran is a National Monument of PNG. Another village nearby that cannot be missed is Palembang, with its two Haus Tambarans.

Last but not least, the Trobriand Islands are an exceptional entity in south-eastern PNG. Yam is more than the main crop. The largest yams are revered, displayed publicly or stored in elaborate Yam Houses.

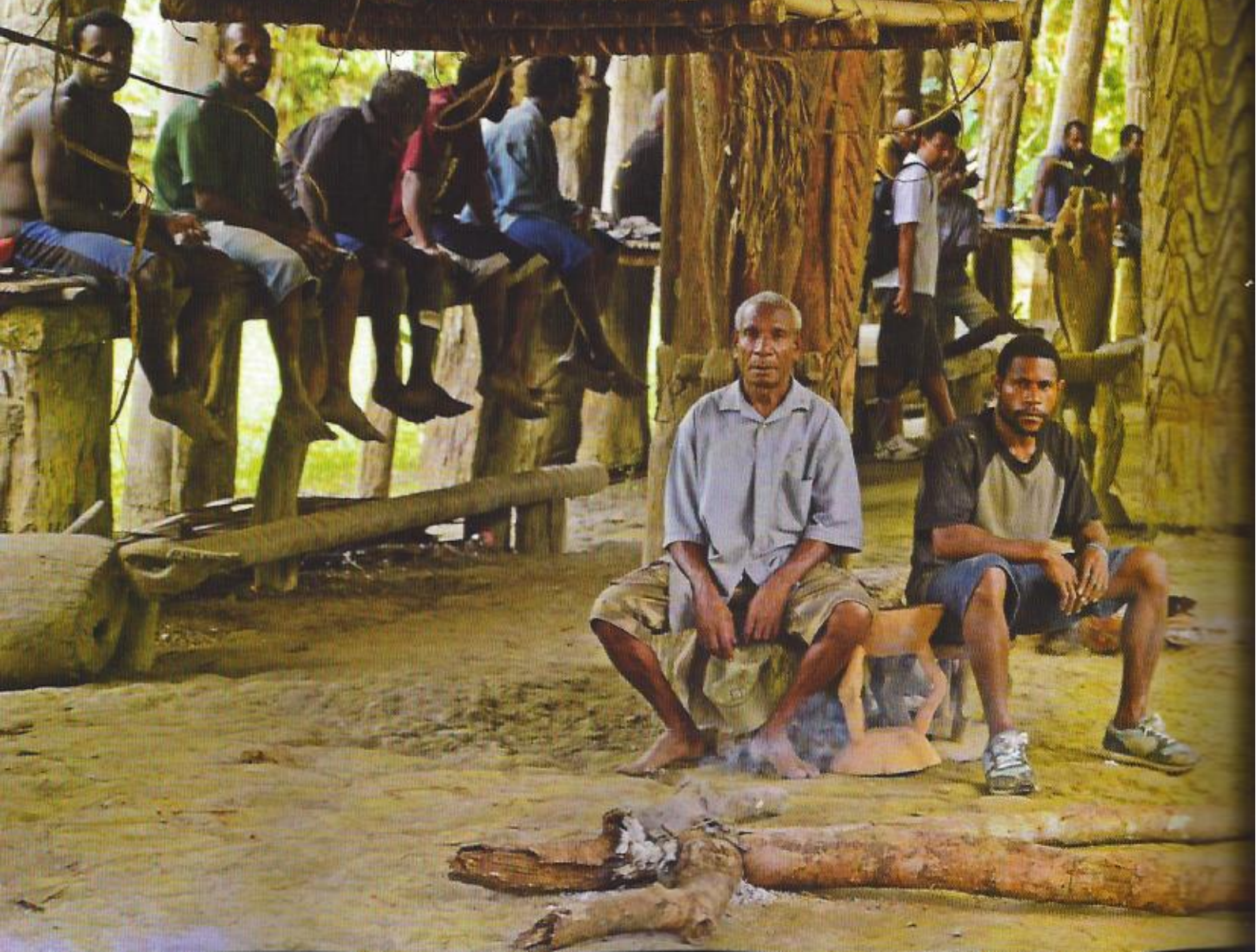


*Moving to the New Georgia group brought some superb scenery, though not on a par with the best of Polynesia, Tonga or Fiji, in Eric's view. The Marovo and Vonavona lagoons were a highlight, while Gizo was the base for some remarkable scuba-diving*



We call at *Kavieng* and *Manus Island* on our way to *Hermit Island*. The rarely visited *Hermit* and *Ninigo Islands* are quite appealing. The lagoons are *beautiful*. The villages are most *welcoming*, and manage to preserve a *happy life* with almost no outside provisioning

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*Haus Tambarans are places of ancestral worship to be found in Papua New Guinea. The Sepik people are renowned for their superb artistic ability in painting and carving, which is often exhibited in these religious structures. The village of Palembang has two carved Haus Tambarans, however, the most beautiful is in nearby Kanganaman*



Sculpted artefacts are sophisticated, maybe even too polished. Dances and costumes are amazing. But anchorages are rare and far from good.

### Some unexpected information...

Centuries-old local customs and rights form the very basis of the Melanesian culture. Some of the most important ones are totally ignored by Western visitors.

Every piece of land, every tree, every fruit even fallen on the ground is private. It belongs to an individual, a family, a tribe. Technically, if you walk anywhere, you are trespassing; if you pick up a coconut, you are stealing. Some paths between villages are private. When entering a village you are supposed to show your good intentions through accepted clothing and behaviour (in some cases,

do not wear sunglasses or carry anything!). Visit the chief first. Bring him a customary present.

Moreover, yachties must understand that the sea is not public property. Shallow water, reef, islets adjacent to land are part of that land. It is an extension of somebody's private garden. When you navigate or anchor inside a reef, you are often trespassing. Therefore, you should ideally identify the owner (not always feasible!) and ask for his permission to anchor or to step on his islet. This explains why the owner may ask for a fee.

Those who do respect these ancient customs will always be met with a smile and granted permission.

### ...and some more expected information

Clearing in and out takes time, with numerous officials, but always in an amiable way.



Provisioning is clearly a difficult exercise. You may have to order boxes to be flown in from New Zealand.

### Some useful tips

Malaria is widespread in the Solomons and the PNG lowlands.

Safety: no real problem in the Solomons, but PNG requires some precautions. The main cities and the highlands cannot be considered safe. Nearly all islands are safe, except the centre of Bougainville. **155**

**TOP:** Rabaul's proximity to active volcanoes led to its destruction in 1994. Before the eruption, it was a popular commercial and recreational boating destination, and is still well worth a look

Would you like to participate in Exuma's next adventures in South-East Asia? Exuma is available for charter through:

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## Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea

