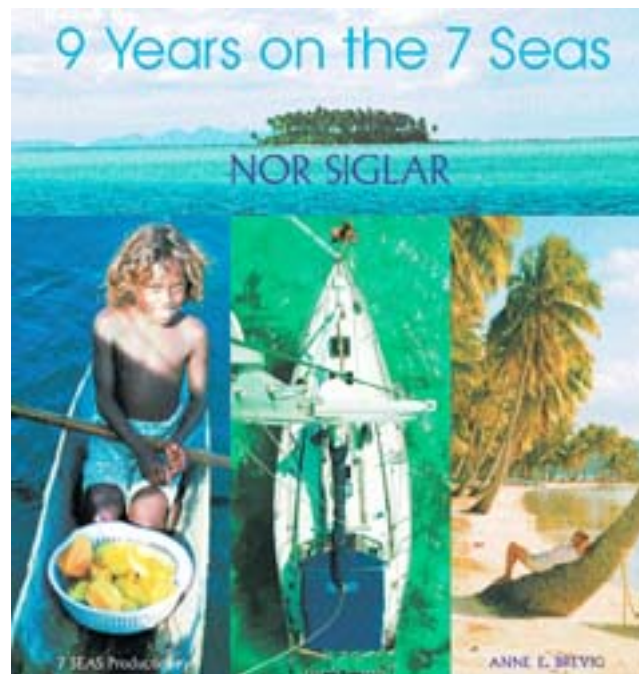


Anne E. Brevig

9 Years on the 7 Seas

NOR SIGLAR

Sample Chapter: Solomon Islands



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SOLOMON ISLANDS

THE BEST-KEPT SECRET IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC



*The delightful children
of the Happy Isles.*

We were anchored in Pelekula Bay, a remote cove on the east side of Espiritu Santo waiting for customs to clear us out of Vanuatu. We had just settled down in the cockpit after a frightening experience. Before taking Nor Siglar in through the maze of corals and sandbanks, we had been out in the dinghy taking soundings to find a safe passage. Suddenly, Martin leapt to his feet. “There!” he shouted. “Look there, Anne!” A fin was piercing through the water in our direction. It was a shark! I just caught sight of it before it disappeared. “Oh my God!” I gasped. “What if it tips us over? Or even worse...” I whispered. Knees trembling, we remained calm as could be waiting for the next move. It seemed like an eternity. But that was the end of it.

Closer to shore, two men were standing in a small outrigger throwing a circular fishnet – much the same way their forefathers must have done it for centuries. They were at it all day. “Are they ever patient,” I thought. In the evening, the fishermen grilled their catch on the beach. It looked like tiny sardines. They offered us a taste. It was delicious.

The scene was magic, the atmosphere peaceful. Well, not quite. Early the next morning, a couple of noisy Hercules aircraft came roaring in across the bay to land at the airport nearby. They were from New Zealand and on their way to the Solomon Islands with troops and equipment. We tuned in to BBC who announced that a state of emergency had been declared in the capital, Honiara on the main island of Guadalcanal. Australia was calling its citizens home. Clearly, it was not a good time to go north. Cruiser friends changed their plans and headed for New Caledonia instead. We were devastated. We had been looking forward to these remote islands for so long. We definitely did not want to miss them.

So we were overjoyed when we happened to make contact with a Canadian sailboat in the New Georgia Group who reported that conditions were calm in the entire Western Province. *Repose* had sailed in the area for 15 years. The couple loved it there. “Just come!” they urged. “As long as you stay away from Guadalcanal and Malaita, the islands at the centre of the crisis, you’ll be fine.” The problem

was that we had to check in to Honiara first, the official port of clearance in the Solomons. “No worries! Just carry on to Gizo and do it there! Nobody can force you to stop in Honiara under these circumstances.”

Tom and Jean offered to keep in touch while we were underway on the daily Comedy Net, a maritime mobile net where sailors in the area reported their positions, discussed weather and exchanged information. This way, they could keep us posted on the developments. It gave us a comforting feeling. The decision was made. Solomon Islands next!

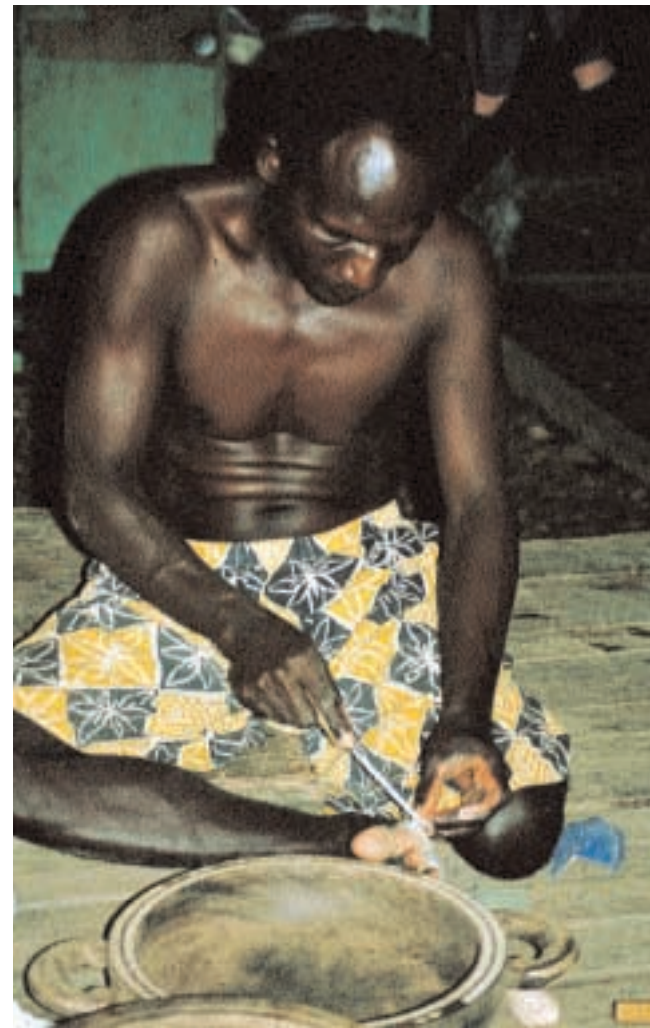
But what was this? Murphy must be lurking onboard. After having sorted through a pile of charts, we discovered that we were missing the most important ones: The New Georgia Group! While planning, we must have decided to bypass them. “No problem!” Tom declared. “Take Blanchard Channel to Rendova Bay. We’ll meet you at the entrance and escort you in. You can have our charts while you are here.” Unbelievable! How could total strangers be so nice and trusting? We were reminded of another time when an American cruiser gave

us a hundred charts in Sicily. We had never met him before either. He was done with sailing and didn't need them any more. So the moral of the story is: it's not necessary to spend a fortune on charts before leaving home.

The 725 nautical mile passage was one of the quickest we have experienced. Running before the wind in strong south-easterlies, Nor Siglar was surfing along at record speeds. Still, our agile lady rarely took any water into the cockpit. It was a challenging crossing dominated by tropical squalls, which left us little time for relaxation. "Maybe we should put another reef in the main?" we thought when the first black cloud appeared on the horizon. But we let it be. And as we know only too well by now, we should have done it the minute we thought of it. For when the first raindrops hit the deck, it is too late. And so it was. In a matter of seconds, the wind piped up to 50 knots accompanied by a torrential downpour, thunder and lightning. There was only one thing to do: get the main sail down. By now, the routine is automatic: Martin in the cockpit at the helm handling the mainsheet and halyard; me on deck working the preventer, topping lift and reefing lines. Normally, the operation is done in a couple of minutes. But not this time.

"Easy does it," I thought as I fastened my safety harness to the jack line and crawled up on deck on all fours, positioning myself within the safety of the granny bars at the mast. "What a wonderful support," I thought as the boat took a sudden lurch and I was thrown off balance backwards against the solid bars. Martin was having trouble keeping the boat into the wind. It was truly the mother of all squalls. The sail was flogging so wildly that the battens got caught in the lazy jacks and my sunglasses were swept right off my face into the foaming sea. "I bet we'll tear it," I thought as I struggled away, yanking and pulling at it like mad while holding on to the swinging boom for dear life. Miraculously, I got it down without a tear and securely lashed around the boom. After that incident, we changed to two poled out foresails, which are much easier to handle than the main.

When it was all over, we breathed a sigh of relief. For the first time ever Martin admitted that he was getting tired of sailing. "Time to go home!" he exclaimed. "Tough luck," I countered. "We're not even halfway yet!" But from that moment on, we started the countdown of the longer passages. We also began talking about what we were going to do when we come home. "I am dying to get back to my woodlot," Martin said, his eyes glazing over.



The carvers of Marovo Lagoon are reputed to be the best in the South Pacific.

Mother and child resting in the midday heat.

A woodcarver shows us a giant ebony tree.



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“Just think how quiet and peaceful it is there.”

Slowly but surely, we were closing in on the equator again, latitudes decreasing from 15° S to 8° S. The temperature kept rising. It became terribly hot and humid. About halfway, we crossed an active underwater volcano. The last eruption was 45 years ago. “Hold off a little longer for the next one,” we prayed keeping our fingers crossed.

Three days later, *Repose* met us at the head of the bay as promised and escorted us in through the reefs and shallows. After all the radio contacts we felt like old friends. We hit it off right away, something that is not at all unusual among fellow hams. Not only did we get the charts we needed but lots of useful information too about the area where they had been so long. The next day we continued to Gizo where the authorities were both understanding and forthcoming and checked us into the country without any hassle. “What’s the reason for the unrest?” we asked. “Ethnic squabbles,” the immigration officer replied. “The Melanesians on Guadalcanal want the Malaitans, who are of Polynesian origin, and who are settling down on Guadalcanal, to go back to Malaita where they belong. But you don’t need to worry. This is our problem. Nothing will happen to you.”

The first European to “discover” the Solomon Islands was the Spanish explorer, Alvaro de Mendaña de Neyra. He came from Peru in 1568 in search of an elusive El Dorado, which, according to Inca legend, was located 600 leagues west of Peru. But his expedition did not find any gold. Still, the conquistador gave the islands their exotic name, implying that they might be the source of King Solomon’s legendary gold mines, which supplied the gold for the temple in Jerusalem.

The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have much in common. Like Vanuatu, the Solomons were “rediscovered” by French and British explorers and subsequently colonized. They also had similar periods involving sandalwood and slave traders, whalers and missionaries. Like the *ni-Vanuatu*, the Solomon islanders were exploited and almost exterminated by the white man. No wonder the natives were not particularly friendly towards these intruders, which earned them a reputation of being extremely dangerous.

Unlike Vanuatu, several islands in the Solomons were occupied by Japanese troops during WWII. The archipelago was in the midst of the battlefield and played a central role in the war between Japan and USA. Today, diver enthusiasts from afar come to explore the many aircrafts and shipwrecks scat-

tered on the bottom of the sea from this tragic era.

We had barely settled down in Gizo Harbour when a fellow, black as the ace of spades came paddling out to us with his bare hands in his tiny dugout canoe. “Hello!” he called. “My name is Bill! Do you know JFK?” Without waiting for a reply, he continued: “My grandfather rescued President Kennedy when his torpedo boat was cut in half and sunk by a Japanese destroyer during the war!” Then the man held up a magnificent mask. It became our first acquisition in the Solomon Islands. Imagine owning a carving made by the grandson of the man who rescued JFK!

We didn’t really know what to believe. But one thing was sure: Bill was a fabulous carver. So this encounter became the first of many, many trading sessions in these islands where people were obviously much more vain than their neighbours to the south. Carefully, Bill chose some of Martin’s old Nike shorts, a pair of runners, a couple of T-shirts and a baseball cap. “Do you have a mirror?” he asked as he was dicker over a pair of sunglasses. He wanted to make sure he looked good before making his choice. All I could find was a cracked pocket mirror. Bill studied himself thoroughly. “Me very happy!” he exclaimed visibly pleased. “You happy?” “Yes, we happy too,” we smiled. “Good! Everybody happy!” Bill chuckled with delight as he gathered his things. “May I have the mirror too?” he asked with a sheepish grin. “Yes, of course! But it’s broken,” I said. “No problem! My wife will be very happy! It’s better than nothing!” He offered us a miniature dolphin for the lousy mirror. “No,” we laughed. “That’s a gift.” Bill was ecstatic when he loaded his canoe and paddled away to show off the loot he had traded with the newly arrived *gringos*. We had obviously been far too generous.

We did not feel entirely happy with the malaria expertise we had received in Vanuatu and decided to seek advice in Gizo as well, the second largest town in the islands with a population of 5,000. “Vegemite!” the native doctor recommended, laughing out loud. “Two teaspoons a day! Mosquitoes don’t like the smell. My family takes vegemite every day. When you live in the malaria belt, you cannot keep taking malaria pills all the time. Extended use may produce severe side effects, even death. Whatever you do, don’t take doxycycline, which so many offshore sailors do. Used over a long period of time they can make you immune to antibiotics. Chloroquin is still the best prevention.” Church bells sounded in the distance. “No, there is no service today,” the affable doctor



Hardly a day went by without a visit from the charming children of the Solomon Islands.



declared. “Here, we use church bells for all sorts of things: to announce meetings, deaths and the arrival of important visitors – even as an alarm clock to get people up in the morning and the children off to school on time!”

Since we had set a date to join a group of boats in Gove for our onwards sail to Indonesia, we could only spend three weeks in the Happy Isles. Again, we had to make a choice. We decided on Marovo Lagoon, a jewel of its kind nominated for Unesco World Heritage Site status. Scattered inside an enormous semicircular reef we found a multitude of densely forested lush green islands and uninhabited palm clad islets nestled in a pristine landscape of unparalleled beauty. The dazzling water was teeming with tropical fish and a spectacular underwater flora, a truly unique marine ecosystem that attracts divers and underwater photographers from afar. And best of all: No tourists apart from the occasional offshore sailor and super keen diver!

Marovo Lagoon is known for its excellent carvers. In fact, the carvers from the little village of Telima are reputed to be the best in the whole South Pacific. Here, we received the most touching welcome. No sooner was the anchor down before two sweet little girls approached us in their tiny dugout canoe with a lovely bouquet of flowers. Hovering at a safe distance studying us for a while, they were clearly summoning courage for the encounter. Ever so slowly, they closed in on us. Then, handing us the flowers over the railing, they whispered barely audibly: “Welcome to Telima!”

This was our first meeting with the adorable children of the Solomon Islands who were going to give us so much pleasure and become the highlight of our stay. They were all smiles, shrieking with delight as they raced their small canoes splashing each other with water or diving in their birthday suits from rickety bamboo docks and impressing us with their water skills. Not one day passed without a visit from the wonderful youngsters who always brought us a handful of something or other. When we reciprocated throwing candy in the water, they went wild with delight. And we went equally wild with the camera. They were soooo charming!

It did not take long for the carvers of Telima to discover that they had a new visitor in the anchorage. Soon, we were surrounded by half a dozen canoes packed with trinkets and treasures. The typical outrigger of the South Seas was nowhere to be seen. Here, a much sturdier long and narrow canoe was the norm. Waiting their turn in an orderly fashion, they approached us one by one asking permission to come aboard to show us their creations.



A carver reveals a red betel smile. Betel is a popular substitute for alcohol and cigarettes in this strictly religious society.

The carvings were of exceptional workmanship, quality and design. The material was black ebony and a brown-streaked kerosene wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl from the beautiful nautilus shell. We went berserk trading everything from distinctive *Nguzu-nguzu* canoe figureheads, traditional masks and model canoes to turtles, sharks and dolphins and intricate sculptures inspired by motives from the sea.

Living far off the beaten track, people were keen to trade. That was fine with us. At this point, we had lived onboard for 14 years and had lots of things we wanted to get rid of. Although they had seen better days, they were still of use to the locals. The most popular items were laundry soap, shampoo and towels, bed sheets, clothing and tennis shoes, flashlights, batteries and tools, glue, sandpaper and toys, crayons, paper and pens, fish hooks, fishing line and foodstuffs. There was never any question about alcohol or cigarettes. Most people in the lagoon were Seventh-day Adventists and did not drink or smoke.

We put the items we wanted to trade in a big basket, which we placed in the cockpit for the natives to pick and chose. It was interesting to watch them sort the things into piles. They were quite excited. After a while they stopped and announced

that that was enough. Then it was up to us to start the negotiations and to determine whether they had taken too much. But first an amount of money had to be agreed upon. For half the trade had to be in cash. The trading sessions, which could last for hours on end were tiring but entertaining. Going on from early morning till late at night, we hardly had time to break for lunch before the next lot arrived.

After a few days of this we were so worn out that we fled to Chea, a peaceful little village where the population was exclusively Seventh-day Adventists. It was Saturday and their day of rest, so we knew we would be left alone. For they were neither allowed to work nor trade on their Sabbath. The following day, fairly recuperated, we went ashore to explore. As usual, a bunch of excited kids came running to greet us. Some had fair, almost blondish hair, a common feature in these isles where complexions differ from the almost blue-black Papuans to chocolate coloured Melanesians, bronze skinned Micronesians and relatively fair Polynesians.

The main road, which was nothing but a path of crushed shells and corals, was lined with rows of straw huts on stilts. In the shade beneath, men were carving and chipping away at their artefacts. Young boys in charge of the finishing were polishing the items with fine sandpaper. All day long. It was incredible to observe the technique of the carvers at close range and to see how they could create such beautiful things with such simple tools. The women attended to their household chores, washing clothes or sitting on the ground weaving pandanus mats, palm strands for thatched roofs and *Bukaware* from long, stiff vines. No wonder their hands were rough. The women seemed to avoid us looking the other way when we approached. They did not want to talk to us. At first, we thought they were shy. However, they were subject to a myriad of taboos, one being not to talk to strangers. They could only communicate through a man. That was *kastom*.

During our stay in Chea, we were taken care of by a spokesman with a bright red smile. Oxley was chewing *betel*, a widespread practice in the western part of the Pacific. Betel chewing produces bright red saliva, the unpleasant evidence of which can be seen on the ground all over the place in this paradise. In the olden days, red lips and black teeth were considered a sign of beauty, especially in females. Today, young and old, men and women chew the mixture, which consists of three ingredients: the nut of the areca palm, leaves of the fruit of the betel pepper and lime. Betel, which has a calming effect,

SOLOMON ISLANDS



Coordinates:	08°00' S, 159°00' E
Location:	Archipelago in the South Pacific east of Papua New Guinea
Government:	Parliamentary democracy tending toward anarchy
Area:	28,450 sq. km
Coastline:	5,313 km
Population:	509,190 (2003) Melanesian 93%, Polynesian 4%, Micronesian 1.5%, European, Chinese and other 1.5%
Capital:	Honiara
Languages:	Melanesian pidgin; English (official, spoken by 1%-2%), 120 indigenous languages
Religions:	Anglican 45%, Roman Catholic 18%, Methodist/Presbyterian 12%, Baptist 9%, Seventh-Day Adventist 7%, other Protestant 5%, indigenous beliefs 4%
Currency:	Solomon Islands dollar (SBD)
Industries:	Fish (tuna), mining, timber
Agriculture:	Cocoa beans, coconuts, palm kernels, rice, potatoes, vegetables, fruit, cattle, pigs, tim- ber, fish
Exports:	Timber, fish, copra, palm oil, cocoa



Grateful couple happy to be able to read their Bible and hymnbook again.

An old woman finds a pair to match her outfit.

is a popular substitute for cigarettes and alcohol. So there were many red lips and ugly teeth to be seen in this archipelago, whose feared ancestors were the vicious headhunters. Oxley took us to a sacred cave in the jungle where evidence of their bygone activities was kept and guarded: a big pile of human skulls.

Today's descendants have a much calmer disposition. In fact, it was easy to become close to these friendly people. So we decided to donate some eye glasses in the well-organized village. The Chief posted a note at the community hall. Soon half the village was gathered around a long rectangular table where we put the glasses for everyone to try. The likelihood of obtaining glasses in these remote islands is small. Besides, people couldn't afford them anyway. There is not much cash in a society where people live in harmony with nature tending

their family plots basically surviving on subsistence agriculture and fishing alone.

It was not easy to leave such an idyllic spot where we had had so many wonderful people experiences. But our time was up. While preparing for our departure, we noticed a suspicious sound. Could it be the transmission? Martin was not keen to take it apart. But we couldn't count on local expertise either. Could it be something else? The noise reminded us of a previous incident when the zinc ring had come loose and was rattling on the propeller shaft. "Hopefully, that's what's happening now too," Martin said. "You're not going down in these waters!" I cried. "What about sharks and crocodiles?" "If kids swim here, so can I," he said and jumped over the side. Sure enough: the anode was loose. But while trying to tighten it, the ring slipped off the shaft and disappeared into the



deep blue sea. We did not have a spare onboard.

Back in Gizo to check out, we met a sailor who was an engineer. He assured us that the permanent zinc at the end of the propeller shaft would prevent electrolysis. We were not convinced. Yet, we hoped the replacement could wait till Gove.

While sailing or at anchor, usually all by ourselves in the New Georgia Group, we never noticed any of the problems that had been reported before we left Vanuatu. To the contrary. The visit turned out to be a wonderful experience. We were glad we took the chance and didn't allow ourselves to be discouraged by either malaria or unrest. In fact, we would have loved to stay much longer. However, Australia was calling. It was time to make another move on the chessboard of the ocean.



Descendants of the feared head-hunters reveal relics from the past.

Scouting for the narrow passage through the reef to Marovo Lagoon.

