

Travel

Solomons military tour accesses all areas

Group tours can mean great benefits, says **Richard Moore**

ONLY three hours north of Brisbane and Sydney is an extraordinary wonderland of military history for World War II buffs.

The Solomon Islands in 1942 and 1943 saw bitter fighting between Imperial Japanese forces and the US marines and navy sent to drive them out.

The name of the main island of Guadalcanal is now synonymous with brutality and deprivation, belying the friendliness of the locals and the warmth of their welcomes.

World War II sites of interest are everywhere across Guadalcanal: the US Memorial on the heights above the capital Honiara; an amazing collection of vegetation-claimed US Amtrak amphibious landing craft at Tetere Beach; a sunken freighter you can snorkel over at Bonegi Beach; or an open-air graveyard for wrecked aircraft at Vilu.

On my first trip to the Solomons I went with local guides to several key places.

They included the Ichiki Memorial at Alligator Creek, the Vilu Museum, the US Memorial on Skyline Ridge and the Tetere Beach Museum.

The visits were personal, just myself as part of a small band with two other journalists, and it was easy to ask questions on matters you wanted to clarify.

My second trip was mainly with Mat McLachlan's Battlefield Tours and I was one of 20 people visiting the sites at one time.

It made for an interesting dynamic because the party members were all pretty knowledgeable about the Pacific War and two had fathers who had fought at Guadalcanal — one in the US marines and the other in the US army.

That made the sites we visited much more personal for the group as a whole and we all became part of their experience. It was an eye-opening and



RAVAGES OF WAR: World War II sites are scattered all over Guadalcanal.



enriching addition to the trip.

There are several advantages to being on a large organised tour and having good, varied company is just one.

The main one is that tour groups usually have more resources so you can do things small operators can't deliver at an affordable rate. For example, a boat trip we took out to Tulagi and the Florida Islands.

It was a wonderful day on and around the waters of Iron Bottom Sound, renamed from Savo Sound because of the dozens of warships sunk there.

Being on a boat enabled us to visit Tulagi, the former Solomons capital, where the Americans had a torpedo boat base — of President John F Kennedy's PT109 fame — and explore its battle sites.

We also voyaged out to a Japanese seaplane base on the causeway-linked islands of Tanambogo and Gavutu, where the bombed concrete dock stood in stark contrast to tall palm

trees and enticingly clear sea.

From there we cruised on to Purvis Bay to see a beached bow section of a giant US Landing Tank Ship and then scooted around to Tokyo Bay for a close-up look at the remains of a Japanese destroyer.

For a small group the cost would be unmanageable for most people but by spreading it across 20 people it can be done.

Tours also have support staff who deal with administration — pick ups and meals — while the tour leader does his thing.

And Mat McLachlan knows his stuff.

He is an expert in the events on and around Guadalcanal during World War II and has a relaxed way of explaining both the strategic situation and the battles at a tactical level.

Mat also has a radar-guided eye for wartime relics. On many occasions over the battlegrounds he would abruptly

stop, bend down and pick up a button or a magazine clip.

Even with my keen photographic eye for detail all I managed to discover was the lid of a rusted tin can.

Members of the tour party were thrilled at how much they learned from Mat during the battleground visits.

Terry, an Australian whose American father fought with the US marines, said, "I've loved the tour. It was everything I expected and more."

Paul, an American whose dad fought on Guadalcanal with the US army, said: "The whole tour was put together so well. The people and the logistics are fantastic."

"There were moments of emotion. It's been inspirational."

It was also emotional for those guys' new found friends.

We watched as they visited where their dads battled the Japanese and, as Paul put it,

"put boots on the ground where my Dad was". On a special trip we went up to Hill 66 where his father and his comrades held off Japanese assaults.

I photographed Terry as he sat on the edge of a foxhole on Bloody Ridge that his dad could very well have dug or taken shelter in. He sat there silently, thinking back 73 years to before he was born and before his dad was badly wounded by shrapnel from a Japanese mortar round.

Charles would survive until 1963 but eventually, after four operations to remove the metal fragments, he would succumb to the damage done. Terry's dad would be only 39.

His was a story I wouldn't have known if not for being part of a tour group and is another benefit of having done so.

■ Richard Moore is the owner and editor of *The Napoleonic Guide*, a 3000-page online encyclopaedia of the Napoleonic Wars (napoleonguide.com)

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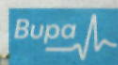
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