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24 DAYS MELANESIA LUXURY EXPEDITION - LAUTOKA TO DARWIN

Venture deep into the South Pacific's wonders - where the Solomon Islands offer timeless traditions and bright blue seas. Admire the legendary land diving ritual of Pentecost Island, before leaping into PNG's tribes, tales and traditions. Witness the underwater glories and coral reefs of Njari and Dobu Island, and let fire dances, active volcanoes, and geothermal springs stir the soul ahead of Australian encounters with Indigenous heritage.



ITINERARY

Day 1 - Lautoka

It doesn't get much sweeter than arriving on the sun-soaked shores of the Sugar City. Fiji's second-biggest settlement opens up a world of blissful beaches and turquoise seascapes, while its dense jungle lures the adventurous deep into its embrace. Step ashore where the first Fijians landed, and you'll understand instantly why they chose to make this island paradise their



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heavenly home. Experience rich Fijian life, and see dramatic displays like warrior dances, and remarkable local practices like firewalks, which kick up burning embers into the night's sky. Legend says the city took its name after two chiefs faced each other in a duel. A spear pierced one of the chiefs, leading to the shout of 'lau-toka!' or 'spear hit!' Sugar is Lautoka's main trade, but its botanical gardens are a sweet insight into the tropical plant life that thrives here - from pearl white lilies to tall, fragrant orchids. Explore temples, charming cafes and mills - or barter for some of the juiciest mangoes you'll ever taste at the city's lively market. You'll only be able to resist the beaches for so long, and it doesn't get much more stunning than the Blue Lagoon - a heavenly blend of woven together turquoise shades. Remote, wild and unspoiled, these are some of the best tropical beaches in the world. There's more rejuvenating relaxation at the mineral-rich mud pools and spas, fuelled by the volcanic activity below. Savala Island is a teardrop of sand offshore, and another beautiful place to wander with the soft powder between your toes - along sandy spits that peter out into the water. Or swim and snorkel among its envied reefs, thronging with fish life.

Day 2 - Day at sea

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Day 3 - Ambrym Island

Unlike Espiritu Santo with its raised coral reefs and white sand, Ambrym is a volcanically active island with dark sand beaches. Ambrym is known as the island of magic and is the source of

five local languages that all evolved on Ambrym. This handful of languages contributes to the well over 100 languages of Vanuatu. Some of Ambrym's magic takes place in the lush greenery of the local community of Ranon. Here the people perform a very special and traditional 'Rom' dance. Participants prepare their masks and costumes in secrecy and the dance is reserved for special occasions.

Day 4 - Pentecost Island

Pentecost Island is a lush mountainous, tropical island stretching over 37 miles from north to south. It was named after the day on which the first European, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, sighted it on 22 May 1768. There are no towns on Pentecost - most of the islanders live in small villages and grow their own food in small gardens. Local traditions are strong, including the age-old ritual of land diving. This unique ritual was first given international exposure by David Attenborough in 1960. Later, in the 1980s, New Zealander AJ Hackett used the idea to invent bungee jumping. Every harvest season from April to June, the people of southern Pentecost construct the towers around a lopped tree, using saplings and branches held together with forest vines. It can take up to five weeks to complete. Each young man who jumps must carefully select his own liana vine. Men and boys as young as seven jump from platforms at different heights (between 30 and 90 feet) with only those vines attached to their ankles. The intention is to touch the ground with their heads or shoulders. This ceremony is believed to ensure a good yam harvest. It is also a fertility rite for men.

Day 5 - Champagne Beach

As world famous beaches go, Champagne Beach is one of the big hitters. In 2003, CNN ranked it number nine in its list of top



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100 beaches and independent travel specialists permanently include it on their list of 50 best beaches worldwide. It's one of the world's greatest natural beauties: picture-perfect beach white sand, turquoise water and nothing - save for the occasional cow or curious turtle - around. With only coconut plantations and a few friendly locals to keep you company, this might just be the island of your dreams. The glorious name "Champagne Beach" was given to the island in the 17th century, when Pedro de Quiros believed he had reached the famous unknown southern land or the "Tierra Australis Incognita" (or Australia as we now know it). He believed the effervescent bubbles of volcanic origin that bubble up from the crystal clear waters were reminiscent of the bubbles of Champagne. Additionally, the coastline is shaped like an art deco Champagne saucer, so the name stuck! The beach is located on the largest yet least populated island in the 40-island Vanuatu archipelago, near the village of Hog Harbor on Espiritu Santo Island. If you want to venture beyond the beach, then Espiritu Santu is also famed for its blue holes. The island is home to some of the clearest waters on Earth, benefiting from natural filtering from underground limestone caves.

Day 6 - Nendo Island

Nendo Island

Day 7 - Santa Ana

Port Mary is the name of the bay adjacent to Ghupuna, the main village in Santa Ana. A bright white sand beach with huge shade-giving trees runs along the shoreline in front of the tidy village. The houses here are made with local materials and most are built on stilts. Islanders generally welcome visitors with traditional songs and dances performed by members of the

three different villages on Santa Ana. Some local people will also set up stands offering souvenirs for purchase. The Solomons are best known for strings of traditional shell money and elegant carvings based on local stories and legends.

Day 8 - Day at sea

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Day 9 - Njari Island

Njari is a small island almost entirely covered in trees with just a small sand spit at its eastern end. A labyrinth of reefs and coral heads make an approach quite difficult. Recently a small wooden jetty has been built on the southern side. The small beaches invite one to relax, but swimming from the beach is almost impossible as the corals are too close. To enjoy the underwater world one has to enter the water from Zodiac snorkel platforms, a short distance from the shore, where an amazing array of fish and coral will be visible. Two hundred and seventy nine different fish species have been seen during a single dive; the fourth-highest fish count ever recorded. An indication of why this island is considered a top spot for snorkeling in the Solomon Islands.

Days 10 - 11 - Rabaul

If surreal and unique experiences are your thing, then the Papua New Guinean town of Rabaul should tick your travel boxes. Found on the north eastern tip of New Britain Island (the largest island off mainland PNG) Rabaul, the former provincial capital,



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has quite a remarkable location. The town is inside the flooded caldera of a giant volcano and several sub-vents are still quite active today! The lively city was almost entirely devastated by Mount Tavurvur in 1994, covering the city in ashfall, but thankfully costing no lives. Since then, thanks to Rabaul's deep-water port, commerce has been on the up, and a few shops and hotels have managed to find an audience. However, Rabaul's remote location together with the volcano still being one of the most active and dangerous in Papua New Guinea means tourism is not rife. Rabaul has an impressive WWII history which includes a 300-mile network of tunnels dug by Japanese POW designed to conceal munitions and stores. After the Pearl Harbour bombings, the Japanese used Rabaul as their South Pacific base for the last four years of WWII, and by 1943 there were about 110,000 Japanese troops based in Rabaul. Post war, the island was returned to Australia, before it was granted independence in 1975. It should be noted that patience is a virtue here. However, that is not all bad. The slow pace of transportation allows travellers to marvel at the quite astonishing landscape.

Day 12 - Jacquinot Bay

Jacquinot Bay is a large open bay on the eastern coast of the island of New Britain. It is a tranquil place with white sandy beaches and tropical palm trees all around. There is also a well-known beautiful waterfall that flows out of the mountainside with freezing cold water right onto the beach. But during WWII, however, it was not a quiet place. It was, in fact, an important base for the Australian Army who liberated it in November 1944. This base was used to support Australian operations near Rabaul which were conducted in early 1945 in conjunction with advances on the northern side of New Britain.

Day 13 - Kuiuwa Island

Kuiuwa (Kuyau) is one of the Trobriand Islands, the northernmost islands in the Milne Bay Province. Kuiuwa is found some 200 kilometers from the province's capital and to the southwest of Kiriwina, the largest and best known of the islands. The Trobriand Islands are of uplifted limestone and gardening is not that easy -but Trobriand Islanders are known for their magic to improve the growth of yam, a highly desired plant for ceremonial reasons and as food. Certain islands and villages have yam houses where the larger yams are stored and displayed. Houses are strung along the main road through the village and beach almond, casuarina and frangipani trees give shade. Trobriand Islanders are famous carvers and dancers and local groups and school classes love to compete dancing or playing their version of cricket, especially during harvest time.

Day 14 - Tufi

Tufi is located on the south-eastern peninsula of Cape Nelson in the Oro Province of Papua New Guinea. It is situated on a tropical fjord, which is the work of ancient volcanic activities and was not shaped by ice as the descriptive name might lead you to believe. Surrounded by uncharted coral reefs, the underwater world has attracted many divers wanting to see for themselves how the area earned the description of having more fish than water. Although Tufi has been the administrative centre of the region, traditional ceremonies are still very important with natives wearing tapa cloth made from the bark of mulberry trees found in the local forest. Dance is predominant in the culture and performers sport fanciful headdresses decked with bird-of-paradise plumes and a rainbow of iridescent feathers. Tufi's wide range of colourful birds and butterflies is well-known throughout Papua New Guinea, boasting several 'largest', 'biggest' and 'smallest' records.



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Day 15 - Dei Dei Hot Springs, Fergusson Island & Dobu Island, Papua New Guinea

Fergusson is one of the three biggest and mountainous islands in the Milne Bay Province, and part of the D'Entrecasteaux Islands. On Fergusson's south side are the famous Dei Dei geysers -- natural hot springs that periodically erupt with vapour steam next to mud pools and a warm stream. The hot springs are still used by locals to cook food in palm frond and pandanus leaf baskets placed into the boiling hot water. Birds in the area include Eclectus Parrots, Yellow-bellied Sunbirds and the endemic Curl-crested Manucode - a bird-of-paradise.

Dobu is a small island in the D'Entrecasteaux Group next to Fergusson Island and Normanby Island. The island was formerly feared because of black magic and the local "witch" doctors cursing the healthy or treating the sick. An anthropological study was done by Reo Fortune in the 1930s which resulted in the book "The Island of Sorcerers". The island is also part of the famous Kula ring. Participants in the exchange system pride themselves with mwali and soulava (armbands and necklaces) that are given and received still today and it is interesting to see how the traditional objects have been adorned with modern paraphernalia. A stroll through the main village on the northwestern tip will show the school and church and trails leading along the shore passing traditionally thatched houses and gardens.

Day 16 - Deka Deka Island

Shaped like a narrow arrowhead and nestled near to Logea Island off the southeastern tip of Papua New Guinea, Deka Deka Island is a tiny drop of tropical paradise. Emerging from the sparkling turquoise waters of the Louisiade Archipelago, Deka Deka Island is a captivating blend of lush greenery and pristine

sea. Truly tiny and remote, the island is uninhabited and essentially untouched, and only the most intrepid visitors make for its distant shores to revel in its serene setting. To the north, a gorgeous beach emerges from the dense jungle vegetation, and its heavenly sand juts out into the shallow, crystalline waters of the South Pacific. Dip into the waters to swim and refresh, or stap on your mask and snorkel to spot tropical fish darting below the surface. The Louisiade Archipelago is revered for its beauty, and Deka Deka Island is one of the finest examples of a secluded island paradise in the region. Whether you want to relax on the most tranquil beach of your life, live out desert island fantasies, or learn to spearfish below the surface, Deka Deka Island calls.

Day 17 - Day at sea

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Day 18 - Thursday Island & Cape York, Australia

Thursday Island - TI to locals or Kawrereg in Waiben dialect - is the ultimate Aussie retreat. Grab a cold beer, find a spot on a wooden pub deck overlooking turquoise blue seas and contemplate the remote beauty of the island. Whilst certainly not the biggest of the Torres Strait Islands, it is the most populated. That is not to say it's a bustling metropolis. At last count, there were fewer than 3,000 residents for its 3.5 km². The Torres Strait Islands is a 274-strong archipelago found scattered between the coasts of mainland Oz and Papua New Guinea. The origin of the name is unknown; what is certain



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however is that Captain Owen Stanley named neighbouring islands Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday when he visited in 1848, so it is a safe assumption that he named Thursday too. Thursday and Friday's names were swapped about 8 years later so they appeared in weekday order. Budding explorers should note that Monday, Saturday and Sunday have yet to be found, so perhaps this could be your lucky day. The island enjoyed a lucrative pearl and shell trade until WWII, and many Japanese pearl divers became residents. This worked out well for the islanders; Thursday Island was mercifully left alone by during the extensive WWII bombings, probably because it was thought that there were Japanese nationals still living there (there weren't). Superb and pristine example of the island's heritage still stand, and can be seen in the Green Hill Fort, the Thursday Island Customs House and the Gab Titui Cultural Centre.

Hit the dizzy heights of the very top of Australia. A sign here marks the northernmost point of the Australian continent, and only the truly adventurous make it this far. The reward is rich - to stand on top of the continent and survey the Torres Strait's island-pocked waters. The lurking crocodiles here add to the sense of wildness and achievement in reaching this exclusive spot. Dense rainforest of eucalyptus trees harbours thousands of plant varieties, including the flashy Cooktown orchid and the medicinal Pandanus palm, and Aussie animals, like the rainbow-hued finches and elusive tree kangaroos. The region's cultural heritage is no less rich and vibrant than the natural surroundings, and multiple Torres Strait Islander and Australian Aboriginal cultures have lived here for thousands of years. Learn about their traditions, art, and connection to the land at this northernmost point of tropical Queensland.

Day 19 - Day at sea

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Day 20 - Yirrkala

Yirrkala is an aboriginal community in northeastern Arnhem Land and has a population of roughly 800 residents. The Yolngu have been in the area for more than 40,000 years, but they only congregated here in larger numbers when the township was founded after a Methodist mission was started in 1935. This small coastal settlement became famous in the 1960s as the Yolngu opposed the opening of a bauxite mine on their land, writing (and sending) the Yirrkala Bark Petition to the Australian House of Representatives. Yirrkala is also one of the best-known locations of Aboriginal art -not only in the Northern Territories- and has the community controlled Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre and Museum. Just 10 kilometers south of Yirrkala is Wurrwurrwuy, an interesting arrangement of stones listed on the Australian National Heritage List. The stones have been set up in the mid-19th century and depict praus, canoes, sea cucumber boiling spots and houses. The arrangement of praus even indicate the division onboard the vessels, showing an excellent knowledge of non-aboriginal items connected with the Macassan sea cucumber trade.

Day 21 - Day at sea

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sea days are the perfect balance to busy days spent exploring shore side.

Day 22 - Victoria Settlement

Nestled into the highly indented and rainforest-cloaked coastline of the Cobourg Peninsula, about as far north as you can go in the Northern Territory, lie the historic ruins of Victoria Settlement. At first glance the remains of weathered brick chimneys suggest a civilisation hewed out of the wilderness, but as the story unfolds, they become a monument to the folly of colonial expansion in a remote and unforgiving setting.

The outpost was founded in 1838 to serve as a re-supply post for ships passing through the Torres Strait, and to strengthen British territorial claims. Now, as you walk around the various crumbling structures, it's difficult not to appreciate the vibrant jungle enclosing the site, yet this same beautiful environment must have been viewed differently by the pioneers. The suffocating climate and fever gradually weakened and whittled down the population. Isolation and infrequent visits from ships eroded the spirits of the survivors. Unappealing to reinforcements, Victoria was abandoned after 11 years.

The Cobourg Peninsula has since returned to its former glory under the alias Garig Gunak Barlu National Park. Its diverse wildlife list includes 6 species of marine turtle, dugong and wild banteng cattle (threatened in their native Indonesia). Even more notable is its recognition as an internationally important wetland habitat (under the Ramsar Convention). The park is administered jointly by the Parks and Wildlife Service and the traditional landowners, the Iwaidja speaking peoples.

Day 23 - Bathurst Island, Tiwi Islands

Known as the 'Island of Smiles,' a visit to Bathurst Island is a gleeful delight. Go off the grid and head across the Beagle Gulf to immerse yourself in the Tiwi Islands and their authentic Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal Australians have inhabited these islands for 40,000 years, and arts and traditions are woven deeply into the fabric of life here. Meet the artists who skillfully craft the unique textiles for which these islands are famous. Admire extraordinary designs featuring vivid colors and intricate patterns of dots and geometric shapes. Created from natural ochres, these beautiful textiles have been produced here for countless generations. Experience more of the local culture as you're welcomed with totem dances and smoke ceremonies or encounter the islanders' unique passion for Australian rules football, or 'footy'. It's estimated that as many as 35% of the population participates in this fast-paced sport, reflecting the community's shared enthusiasm. Miles of beautiful coastline offer sanctuary to a rich marine life--from gentle dugongs to playful dolphins and fearsome saltwater crocodiles. Echoes of World War II history linger, with secrets to uncover and tales of bombing raids that continue to captivate and inspire.

Day 24 - Darwin

"Australia's capital of the north is a uniquely tropical city, and a historically isolated outpost of this vast, diverse country. Reaching up towards the equator, a full 2,000 miles from Sydney and Melbourne, the city was named in honour of Charles Darwin by the British settlers who established a frontier outpost here. With a unique history, beautiful islands nearby, and a palette of sizzling Pacific flavours, colourful Darwin is an enchanting and exotic Australian destination. Crocodiles patrol the jungled waterways and tropical rainforests around Australia's gateway to the Top End. Explore via airboat to look down on the



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veiny waterways of the mist-laced Kakadu National Park. The sounds of chattering birdlife and the gentle splash of fountains and waterfalls will fill your ears in George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens. Soak it all in, before kicking back and relaxing with a picnic and a crackling barbecue. The sunshine and famous tropical pink sunsets mean many visitors naturally gravitate to the city's soft sands to relax at spots like pretty Mindil Beach, as evening approaches. The adjoining market is filled with souvenirs and crafts stands and is the perfect great place to enjoy some fiery Asian flavours. Stroll the stalls, grab some food, and crack open an ice-frosted beer as the sunset show begins. It may be remote, but Darwin found itself on the front line during the Pacific War, as the Japanese air force unloaded their bombs onto the city in 1942. This relaxed unassuming city has a deeply resilient backbone, however, and you can explore the museums to learn more of the war's impact on Darwin, as well as the devastating effects of one of Australia's worst natural disasters, Cyclone Tracy in 1973."

Please note:

Itineraries are subject to change.

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