



Homestay is where the heart is

OUR WRITER CHECKS IN TO THE WOGASIA SPEAR FESTIVAL AND FINDS HER SOLOMON ISLANDS TRIBE ON SANTA CATALINA ISLAND.

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Warrior prepares for a spear fight.

I've never been much of a fan of homestay nor its more adventurous couch-surfing cousin. Bunking down in someone's home has always seemed an invasion of privacy, both for myself and my host.

So, after landing on the beach of Santa Catalina Island in the Solomon Islands, it's with some trepidation that I follow Greta's bare feet through Aorigi Village. I'm mortified to see her heave my 15kg duffle bag onto her shoulders. Restricted by a shoulder injury, I look around for someone to help. But Greta has already walked off, bag aloft, beckoning me to follow.

Shaded by coconut palms, the path winds past simple huts, their roof and walls woven from sun-parched palm fronds. Smoke billows out from a cookhouse outhouse so thickly that I wonder if the hut is actually on fire. Greta shrugs and smiles. 'It's okay,' she says in response to my look of alarm. Roosters and hens scatter, naked toddlers cling to shabbily-dressed mothers, older children watch curiously as we walk past. "Hello, hello, hello!" they shout in response to my greeting, giggling shyly behind their hands.

Greta points out fresh-cut branches stuck in the ground near a rock-lined well. She explains that it signifies that the well is not in use. Groundwater wells are the main water source, though recently installed rainwater tanks supplement this precious commodity. Toilet cisterns are another recent arrival, considered essential infrastructure as villagers dabble their toes in tourism – with homestay visits an integral part of the visitor experience. More importantly, homestays create income in a largely subsistence economy with few opportunities beyond the copra industry.

Arriving at Greta's house in Jerico Village, I meet husband Joash, daughter Janet and grandson Joash before she takes me inside to my room. A floor mat woven

from palm fronds and a raised platform with mattress completes the furnishings. Outside there's a toilet and a curtained-off area for bathing. To wash it's a matter of squatting down on the timber pallet floor and scooping water from a large bowl. The toilet is flushed by tossing water into the toilet bowl. I'm being given the royal treatment with these new ablutions installed in preparation for our groups' arrival. Joash is quite the builder. He's also ambitious, with plans to build a guesthouse to accommodate future visitors.

The three-day Wogasia Spear Festival is the centrepiece of Santa Catalina's fledgling tourism enterprise. The festival celebrates fertility and friendship, along with the promise and hope for the upcoming yam crop. It's also a sort of unofficial courting period when teenagers are encouraged to socialise with the opposite sex. Conch shells salvaged from the fringing reef play a symbolic role, with their distinctive honk creating the soundtrack for Wogasia.

Janet leads me up to the island's plateau to help with festival preparations. It's the women's job to collect yam and panna roots which have been stored in huts since harvesting. We spend many hours sitting on the forest floor tearing banana leaves into strips that will later be fashioned into costumes. The younger women lead songs giving thanks for prosperity before they collapse into laughter. Others are climbing trees to collect betel leaves or returning to the village with baskets of yams balanced on their heads. Janet and her friends chew betel nut while they chat, their lips and teeth stained a deep red. Women are also tasked with collecting palm fronds which are hacked into ceremonial batons. Later, they'll be used to beat the ground by villagers driving out evil spirits, running around dodging smouldering coconut husks, offal and vile liquid concoctions tossed by those with a score to settle. ►



And the Spear Festival begins!

Meanwhile, the men are preparing for the first of two spear fights, ostensibly as a means for settling past grievances. The first fight takes place on the beach at dawn the following day with warriors aligned according to tribal allegiances. Spears fly through the air in varying degrees of aggression, bouncing off shoulders and shields. Before any real damage is done Chief Michael calls time, spears are downed and good humour returns.

Warriors increase the intensity during the second spear fight later in the day. It's their final chance for redemption and much pride is at stake. It's also a cue for unmarried men to impress, displaying their virility and strength to potential wives. As festivities reach a climax, the village is whipped into a frenzy as men and boys, their bodies adorned with war paint, march towards the beach. The haunting honk of conch shells marks their progress, increasing in fervour before spears are tossed into the sea, taking evil spirits with them on the outgoing tide.

Greta has barely left my side during the festivities, explaining tribal customs,

ensuring I'm appropriately dressed and helping me to avoid taboo 'men only' areas like the Kastom House.

We're similar ages yet our lives couldn't be more different. Greta's face bears the faint scarification of Fari Sege, traditional tattooing inflicted on her as a young girl. Now the mother of three sons and a daughter, she tells me she was 28 years old when she married Joash. "He chose me!" she says proudly, her bright smile lighting up her face. She left her island home a few years ago to visit the capital Honiara for the first time. She says, "When my mother was sick I took her to Honiara. But the doctors told me they couldn't do anything, so she came home to the village. She passed last year."

My eyes well with tears as I'm reminded of my own mother. She's recently had heart surgery and is scheduled for more. Enjoying lifelong good health, it breaks my heart to know her ageing body is breaking down. The cardiologist has offered a number of treatment options in one of Perth's best private hospitals. It's a stark contrast to the healthcare options

for Solomon Islanders. I don't tell Greta any of this. Instead I grasp her hand and tell her I'm sorry for her loss.

Despite my initial homestay misgivings, I'm converted, only reinforced by Joash's parting words. "Thank you for staying with us, you are our first guest and you are now part of our family. Your friends are our family too when they come for Wogasia." I like that.

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