

island escape

# Coast to Coast on foot

*An exhausting but spectacular trek from the Kuma to Gold Ridge takes Keri Algar over the mountain chain that divides the Solomons' Guadalcanal Island in more ways than one.*

I'm freezing, in a country where I never thought I could be this cold. Yet here I am puffing out steam, soaked to the skin and shivering. This is not the Solomon Islands I know.

We're standing on the outskirts of a rag tag mountain village, dog-tired. From the Weathercoast we've weaved uphill for 9 hours, waded across the mighty Kuma River at over 25 places and slipped down more than I care to count. After a final steep climb we've reached Chimulava; but, met with a few forlorn huts on stilts, our three guides hesitate as if unsure of our welcome. Around us grey clouds condense and cloak the village in a wet blanket. I squat in the mud, uneasy and exhausted. This is not picturesque; this is not a tropical scene on a screen saver.

For a year I've looked at these mountains from the other side, from Gold Ridge where I've been working at the country's only commercial gold mine. Each dawn and dusk from the mining camp I've gazed into the jungle-clad valleys and wondered what lies beyond the ranges. Now, stretching stiff calves and sore knees, I recognise a romantic imagination.

Salvatore, our small and sinewy leader, speaks to a man nearby. He's working out which family might wish to welcome us for the night. After a few minutes of softly spoken negotiations we're led through the community. No one smiles. Instead of running out to meet us children hide behind wobbly wooden doors, looking more suspicious than cheeky. There's not a lot of greenery to admire, like the typical village ground covering of pretty clover, vegetable gardens or flowering shrubs. So with nothing to keep the soil in place we skid along muddy rivulets before coming to rest on a hut balcony.

Which looks worse, I wonder, the hut or I? My waterlogged boots hang heavy over the balcony's dirty edge. Underneath us a drove of gigantic pigs root in the mud, nipping any growth in the bud. It's dank, almost dark, but we gratefully assume this is home for the night, pigs and all.

"You sleep here," confirms a smiling Mara. "Betty and I will sleep here with you."

## Untouched natural beauty

Mara, Salvatore and Billy are our guides and personal porters. Betty has joined our troupe to transport a sack of betel nut she intends to sell at Gold Ridge, hoping to get a premium price from the mining community. There's nothing official about the walk or our guides, who are villagers from Kuma. It's a case of do-it-yourself. I've enlisted the help of Fred Navi and David Pacha MP, both Weathercoast natives now living near Gold Ridge and Honiara. Fred owns a tidy homestay at Kuma, while David, in an initiative to encourage tourism in his constituency, has hired a group of local workers to clear a path through the jungle using machetes. Only a handful of foreign expats have made the walk so far. Yet it has great potential. Untouched natural beauty in a culturally fascinating country could stack up strongly against the Kokoda Trail – worth over AU\$15 million to the PNG economy in 2011.

For us though, the drawback is precisely a lack of development.

Starting with the Weathercoast. It's a wild place to arrive at. On Guadalcanal's southern side the ranges fall steeply into the Pacific, known locally as Tasi Mauri, or active sea. Without the protection of a fringing reef the ocean is a deep navy and the coastline is rugged, switching between barren cliffs and black beaches. But raw beauty makes for harsh living. Families subsist by what little produce is grown in gardens built on sheer slopes and with remittances from family in Honiara. Earthquakes, cyclones and landslides are constant challengers.

The extreme geography has resulted in a gross lack of infrastructure, isolating communities from development on the northern side of the island. There are no roads, no safe harbours and shipping services are unreliable and expensive.

Nor has history been kind to the coast. From the 1790s to 1890s headhunters from the west were drawn to Guadalcanal to do business with European whalers and traders. Hunting raids from the north and west pushed survivors southwards.

PICTURES: Keri Algar



A Chimiulava boy chewing taro peers (above) . Crossing the Sutakiki River (below).





Looking towards the central ranges from the Kuma Rivermouth at Kuma on the Weathercoast (above)





Then a burst of post-WWII expansion and the establishment of a new capital in the north, Honiara, further disenfranchised communities both politically and economically. More recently – in painful living memory – is the fall-out from civil tensions in the early 2000s. Intense fear swept through communities as allegiances were tested, villages razed and people murdered. Fearing for their lives families fled into the mountains.

No wonder our welcome at Chimiulava feels uncertain. They've been living on the edge of the world for a long time.

Over a simple supper of tinned tuna and noodles – provisions we've walked in with – Mara fills us in. "Chimiulava is different," she whispers in a conspiratorial tone, Mara is from Kuma after all, a better-connected village. "It is too far from Gold Ridge. There is little money, no development."

Too remote to benefit from coastal trade or the mine's commercial spin offs, Chimiulava has instead chosen to capitalise on its organic assets: culture and tradition. "You see lots of pigs here because it is kastom. These are very traditional people," she explains. Pigs are an esteemed possession in Solomon culture and in Guadalcanal they are offered as gifts for reconciliation between communities still healing from the tensions.

"Some children live with relatives in Kuma for school, but many children do not go to school. This is how they learn customary ways and keep traditional life. This is what the villagers want."

My travel companion, Adam, asks Mara if pregnant women walk to Honiara to give birth.

"Sometimes yes, or no. Tomorrow we go to Nanala. Last week a woman died there having a baby. She has left behind six pikinini and a new baby and her husband. Yes, this sometimes happens."

There are too many mouths for the widower to feed. Mara says she will offer to take one or two of his children with her back to Kuma, where she will raise them as her own. This is how the extended family network works, through shared responsibility and reciprocal obligations. It is the wantok system.

From the darkness appears a middle-aged woman with a steaming bowl of baked taro and sweet potato for us. Mara takes it with a nod and a smile and the woman slips away again into the night. Even in these estranged parts, Solomon hospitality is unquestionable. We eat, share jokes, laugh and chat until exhaustion beats conversation. Silently I thank lax Solomon pharmacies with their over-the-counter muscle relaxants and anti-inflammatories. Not even the scurrying of rats around our heads or the grubby mattress wakes us.



Opposite page, from left: Patchwork houses of wood are overgrown by jungle at the very traditional Chimiulava village; Wild and free on the Weathercoast (middle); dawn's flattering rays on cooking pots at the village kitchen.



Chimiulava's enormous pigs are on familiar terms with their owners.

### *Salvatore's iron grip*

In the morning the village is lit with dawn's golden light. Last night's fog has vanished and returned to Chimiulava its view of immovable mountains. As the sun filters through fawn coloured huts the village looks a little quaint, even charming. Without mucking about we give our thanks to the owner of the hut and are off back down the hill to the main path.

Most of the cross-island trail follows major rivers that cut gorges through the mountains like thick throats. We've left Kuma River behind and are now tracking alongside the Sutakama River, crossing back and forth dozens of times. Salvatore's iron grip makes sure I don't get swept away and Mara is always right behind, guiding me along gently. "Easy here," she murmurs, when she wants me to be extra careful. Meanwhile, a childlike Bettie skips barefoot across big copper coloured boulders, in spite of the betel nut sack placed squarely on her head. And Adam does an enviable job of keeping up behind her in sneakers. Billy looks back to make sure we're on track, his toothy grin red from chewing Betty's betel nut. But I, devoid of balance or grace, scuttle on all fours over the boulders like a crab.

Where the riverside leaves no room for walking we scale cliffs and traverse through jungle. Sunlight trickles through its leafy awning and every colour and shade of green is here. At

ever-present forest streams we refill drink bottles and rest. "This one tastes like lemon," says Mara, able to distinguish subtle changes in flavour from brook to brook. After taking a long drink, she sticks a baby fern behind her ear: the perfect forest pixie.

Five hours later the valley opens into a wide gorge where the Sutakama and Sutakiki Rivers meet. Salvatore signals to where the village of Valembaimbai used to be. In 1986 almost 40 villagers were swept away in floods caused by a tropical cyclone. The survivors abandoned the village and moved to a nearby mountaintop, creating the village of Nanala. He points to the sky: "Lucky, no rain."

After hours of grueling boulder bashing the climb to Nanala requires herculean effort. It's unforgivably steep and I pop a couple of anti-inflammatories in anticipation. We push upwards along a sheer path, panting past wild banana trees and giant mangoes. Salvatore points to a flax leaf which has been tied in a knot.

"We make this to keep the sun in the sky for longer. From Kuma we walk to Gold Ridge in one day," he boasts, grinning at my shocked expression. It's taking Adam and I three full days, and would be more comfortably walked in four. I look down at Salvatore's bare feet and admire the splayed toes: island feet.



Nimble and her barefooted Bettie bears her sack of betel nut across the river.

An hour and a half later we reach the first hut. Sweaty and smiling we shake hands and look down at our feet. Far below us the Sutakiki winds into the distance like a spindly wisp of grey smoke, disappearing into a valley. To the west the prominent peak of the Solomons' highest mountain, Mount Popomanaseu (2,335m), juts out like the head of a stubborn turtle. Behind it clouds march in towards us and promptly steal the world-class view.

Before the rain hits we're invited into Salvatore's uncle's hut for the night. Potatoes are boiling over two hearths, warming the kitchen-cum-bedroom. It's smoky, gloomy and crowded with people. Nanala is only a few hours walk from Gold Ridge and its villagers are better acquainted with the world beyond these mountains. We're not completely out of the ordinary here and people pile into the room for a chinwag. So does the village chief, wondering who we are and what on earth has brought us. But we're not the main attraction. Betty is enjoying a roaring trade and Billy is doing just as well selling small packets of powered lime that is chewed with the nut. We bring tuna and noodles to the floor mat and in return we're offered taro and sweet potato, heavenly carbohydrates! With full bellies and smoky hair we take ourselves off to an adjoining room for another exhausted sleep.

### *Better than any screensaver*

The continuing downpour has enlivened the forest and our descent to Gold Ridge is wet and noisy. Fat raindrops smash into the canopy's leaves and the deep purr of a wood pigeon follows us. In the valley beside us a flock of hornbills swoop in circles, their wing beats heavy and loud.

Adam and I are also chatty as we reflect on the experience. Even in the prettiest places it's Solomon culture that stands out brightest. The acute isolation at Chimiulava has been eye opening, especially the villager's grip on traditional life.

Bettie has bewitched us both: her petite frame and mischievous grin belies a hard, labour intensive life as a betel nut farmer. I have a soft spot for Mara, who is my age exactly, yet who has mothered me over the mountains. And of course, Salvatore and Billy, our steadfast leaders who have kept us safe, on track and found homes for us to sleep in.

When we reach the muddy mining pits of Gold Ridge I look back at the ranges and forget the aches and pains. I'm admiring a scene too extraordinary for any screen saver.

For more information on Solomons excursions, tours go to the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau at Mendana Ave and accommodation enue in Honiara, call +677 22442 or check their website at: [www.visitsolomons.com.sb](http://www.visitsolomons.com.sb).