

Solomon Islands



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1978
Population:	523,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	-1.3% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 123
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT plus 11hr
Currency:	Solomon Islands dollar (SI\$)

Geography

Area:	28,370 sq km
Coastline:	5,310km
Capital:	Honiara

Solomon Islands, an archipelago in the south-west Pacific, consists of a double chain of rocky islands and some small coral islands. The major islands are Guadalcanal, Choiseul, Santa Isabel, New Georgia, Malaita and Makira (or San Cristobal). Vanuatu is the nearest neighbour to the south-east where the archipelago tapers off into a series of smaller islands. Its nearest neighbour to the west is Papua New Guinea. The country comprises nine provinces.

Main towns: Honiara (capital, pop. 66,800 in 2009) on Guadalcanal, Gizo (6,600) on Gizo in the New Georgia Islands, Auki (4,500) on Malaita, Buala (2,900) on Santa Isabel, Tulagi (1,700) on Nggela Sule, Kirakira (1,200) on Makira and Lata (620) on Ndeni in the Santa Cruz Islands.

Topography: The islands are remarkable for their steep rugged mountains, of which Makarakomburu (on Guadalcanal Island) is the highest at 2,293m. There are also several atolls and reef islands, plus several dormant and two active volcanoes. The rivers are fast-flowing and not navigable.

Climate: Equatorial; hot and humid. During the rainy season (November to April), there are fierce tropical storms – for example, Cyclone Zoë in December 2002, which devastated the isolated islands of Tikopia and Anuta.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are deforestation, soil erosion, and that much of the surrounding coral reef is dead or dying.

Vegetation: Forest covers 78% of the land, with dense tropical rainforest occurring on most islands. There are large tracts of rough grass on the northern side of Guadalcanal and Nggela Sule. Parts of the coast are swampy, supporting extensive mangrove forests. Elsewhere, the coast is dominated by coconut palms. Hardwoods now grown for timber include mahogany, acacia and teak.

did you know?

The Commonwealth Youth Programme's South Pacific Centre is based in Honiara.

The country is an archipelago consisting of a double chain of rocky islands and some small coral islands; the rocky islands are remarkable for their steep rugged mountains, of which the highest, Makarakomburu, on Guadalcanal Island, rises to 2,293m. Almost 78% of Solomon Islands is covered by forest, though this area declined at 1.7% p.a. 2000–05.

Wildlife: Indigenous mammals are small and include opossums, bats and mice. There are crocodiles in the mangrove swamps and sea turtles nest on the shores from November to February. Birdlife (more than 150 species) includes many species of parrot and incubator bird.

Transport: There are 1,390km of roads (mainly on Guadalcanal and Malaita), 2.4% paved, with some 470km of main roads, the rest private rural-access roads. The terrain is mountainous and there is heavy rainfall making road conditions unpredictable.

The international ports are Honiara (on Guadalcanal) and Yandina (on Rennell Island); other significant ports are Gizo and Noro (on New Georgia). Ferries ply between the islands. The international airport is at Henderson Field, 13km east of Honiara.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 18
Life expectancy: 67 years
Net primary enrolment: 67%

Population: 523,000 (2009); 18% lives in urban areas; growth 2.9% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 30 per 1,000 people (46 in 1970); life expectancy 67 years (54 in 1970).

About 95% of the people are Melanesian, 3% Polynesian and 1% Micronesian (1999 census). There is a small expatriate population.

Language: The official language is English; an English-based Creole, Pidgin, is the most widely spoken language. There are more than 80 indigenous languages.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Church of Melanesia 33%, Roman Catholics 19%, South Seas Evangelicals 17%, Seventh Day Adventists 11%, United Church 10%; 1999 census).

Media: *Solomon Star* is a daily newspaper, and *Solomon Times* and *Solomons Voice* are weekly.

Radio is the main source of information for most people. Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation provides a national radio service.

There are 46 personal computers (2005) and 19 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: There are six years of primary education and seven years of secondary. The school year starts in January.

Solomon Islands College of Higher Education offers teacher-training, finance, nursing and secretarial studies, and a range of technical subjects related to Solomon Islands' economy such as marine and fisheries studies, forestry and agriculture. The college also gives some first-year university courses. Solomon Islands is a partner in the regional University of the South Pacific, which has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, and a campus in Honiara, Solomon Islands.

The years of conflict during the early 2000s severely damaged and depleted the education system. In many parts of the country there was little or no access to educational facilities, as some schools were forced to contract or close. Following the restoration of order in 2003, the government set about rehabilitating and reforming the country's education system. With assistance from the

governments of Australia and New Zealand, the government has been able to rehabilitate infrastructure, re-establish in-service training and provide teaching materials to primary schools.

Health: The government runs six hospitals, as well as clinics and clinical aid posts. The churches run two hospitals as well as clinics. 70% of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 32% have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2006). Infant mortality was 30 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (120 in 1960). Malaria remains the main health problem.

Communications: Country code 677; internet domain '.sb'. Mobile phone coverage is limited to Honiara, Gizo and Munda. There are a few internet cafes in Honiara and Gizo.

There are 16 main telephone lines and 57 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Queen's Official Birthday (June), Independence Day (7 July), Christmas Day and National Day of Thanksgiving (26 December). Each province has its own holiday, some of which continue for several days.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday, Easter Monday and Whit Monday.

Economy

KEY FACTS 2009

GNI: US\$477m
GNI p.c.: US\$910
GDP growth: 5.5% p.a. 2005–09
Inflation: 7.5% p.a. 2005–09

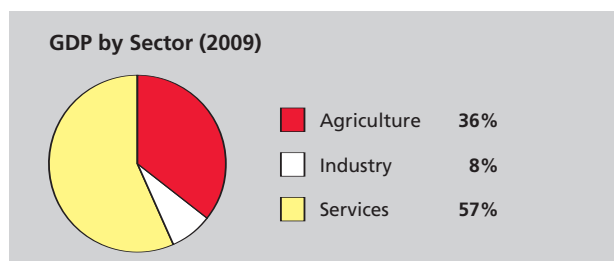
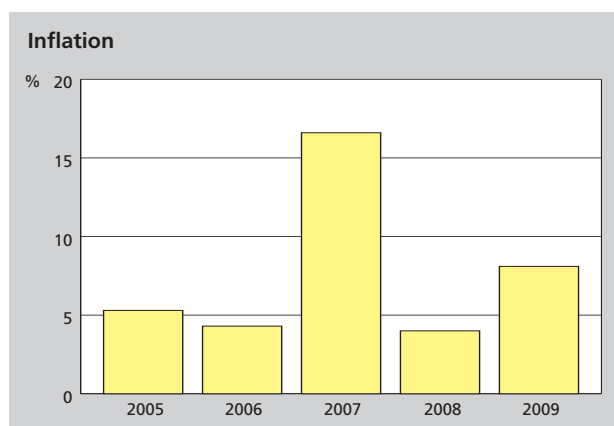
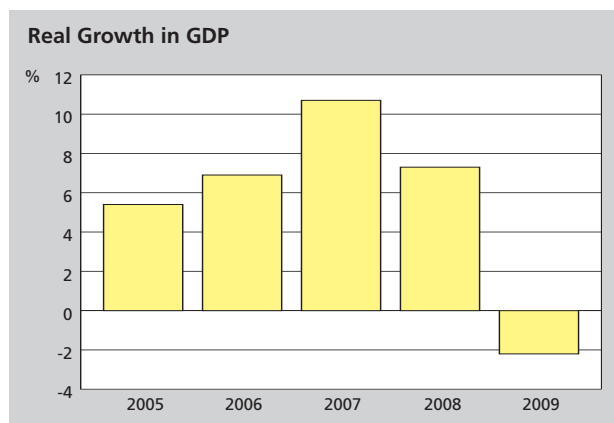
Overview: Solomon Islands' economy is based on agriculture, forestry and fisheries, which together account for around 40% of GDP and provide employment for the majority of the population. GDP grew by 6.4% p.a. 1979–89.

Agricultural resources are limited; only 35% of the land is suitable for cultivation and pressure on land is leading to soil impoverishment. Production can be affected by tropical storms.

During the 1990s fishing was a developing industry, encouraged by the declaration of a 320-km exclusive maritime zone. Forestry also contributed strongly, providing the dominant export product. The government was working with export partners and CDC Capital Partners to halt the depletion of forests.

Although public expenditure remained high, resulting in budget deficits and growth of public debt, economic growth was consistently good in the 1980s and 1990s until 1997 when the economy went into recession, due largely to the impact of the Asian economic downturn and consequent falls in export revenues. An economic reform programme was launched in early 1998 with the emphasis on public-spending cuts.

Recovery began in 1998–99, but was soon reversed as political unrest intensified: plant and equipment, along with infrastructure, were damaged; the gold mine at Gold Ridge was closed; and the economy collapsed, shrinking by 14% in 2000, 9% in 2001 and 2.4% in 2002, when the government was depending on aid to finance both the peace agreement (including economic development of the island of Malaita) and the budget.



After six years of recession the economy returned to vigorous growth in 2003. Strong growth continued in 2004–08, averaging 7.3% p.a. But the economy remains relatively small and undiversified and very dependent on exports of timber and logs. In 2008, aid constituted 37.5% of GNI, the highest proportion in the Commonwealth; and during the 2000s logging has reportedly been pursued at an unsustainable rate. The strong growth of 2004–08 was halted in the world economic downturn of 2008–09, falling from 7.3% in 2008 to a contraction of 2.2% in 2009, recovering to an annual rate of over 3% in 2010.

Trade: Main exports are timber and logs, fish and fish products, palm oil, cocoa and copra.

Constitution

Status: Monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II
Legislature: National Parliament
Independence: 7 July 1978

Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. The Queen is represented by a governor-general, who must be a citizen of the country and is elected by parliament. The National Parliament is unicameral, with 50 seats. Elections are held every four years on the basis of universal adult suffrage. The prime minister, who is chosen by parliament, must be an MP; the cabinet is chosen by the prime minister and holds executive power. Honiara has a town council for local government, and there are provincial administrations in the nine provinces.

Politics

Last elections: August 2010
Next elections: 2014
Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by governor-general, Sir Frank Ofagioro Kabui (2009–)
Head of government: Prime Minister Danny Philip
Ruling party: coalition led by Solomon Islands Reform and Democratic Party

Solomon Islands' politics has been characterised by fluid coalitions of parties and independents. Until 1997, the predominant governing coalitions were the Solomon Islands National Unity, Reconciliation and Progressive Party (SINURP) led by Solomon Mamaloni, and the National Coalition Partners (NCP) under Francis Billy Hilly.

At the 1993 elections, the NCP coalition came to power under the leadership of Hilly, who became prime minister. However, he resigned in November 1994 when he was no longer able to command a majority and was succeeded by Mamaloni.

During this period of Mamaloni's leadership, the economy remained precarious, despite good growth in exports. At the next general election in August 1997, his main challenge came from Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, leading a new group, the Alliance for Change, comprising several small parties and independents. The new coalition won, and Ulufa'alu became prime minister on 27 August 1997.

In July 1998, while parliament was in recess, Ulufa'alu dismissed Finance Minister Manasseh Sogavare and brought two members of the opposition Group for National Security and Advancement into the cabinet. Sogavare then led a group of six MPs to join the opposition, and though he could barely command a majority in parliament, Ulufa'alu appeared determined to continue in government.

In the latter part of 1998, growing intercommunal tensions in Guadalcanal Province erupted into violence. The indigenous people of Guadalcanal were concerned about continuing settlement on the island of large numbers of Solomon Islanders from other islands and especially from Malaita, who dominated the national public service and the private sector in the capital, Honiara, located in Guadalcanal.

During 1999 the violence intensified and many thousands of Malaitans (including many long-standing residents of Guadalcanal) were driven to take refuge in Honiara or return to Malaita. In June a state of emergency was declared and, at the government's request, the Commonwealth Secretary-General sent Sitiveni

Rabuka, former prime minister of Fiji, to broker a peace deal. Agreement was reached on restoring peace and on the longer-term achievement of a more equitable ethnic balance in the national public service and the police force. A Commonwealth peace-monitoring group was to be provided.

Following further unrest, in August 1999 Rabuka brokered a new peace agreement (known as the Panatina Agreement) which included a reduction in police presence in Guadalcanal Province with effect from mid-August. In September 1999 the state of emergency was ended and in October a Commonwealth peace-monitoring group began supervision of the handover of arms by the militants.

However, ethnic unrest continued into 2000, led by opposing militia – Malaita Eagle Force and Isatabu Freedom Movement. In June 2000 Malaita Eagle Force took the prime minister and governor-general captive and compelled the prime minister to resign. When it was able to convene a quorum of members on an Australian warship, parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare as prime minister and he formed a new government.

With the support of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, the warring militia and the national and provincial governments engaged in a peace process leading in October 2000 to the signing of a peace agreement in Townsville, Australia. This provided for a general amnesty for all members and former members of the militia on the condition that they hand in their arms within a given timeframe, and economic development of the island of Malaita. Former militia members were to be involved in the collection of arms and the return of law and order, and an international monitoring team was to supervise the handover of arms.

Sporadic outbreaks of violence continued. Another peace agreement was concluded in February 2001 but still there were armed militia at large and many weapons remained in the hands of former militia members. Though it had to be postponed from August to December 2001, a general election was nevertheless held and the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) was heavily defeated, retaining only three seats, and only 19 members of the previous parliament held their seats. The People's Alliance Party, led by former deputy prime minister Sir Allan Kemakeza, won 20 seats and the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) 12. Kemakeza formed a coalition with the Association of Independent Members (AIM) led by Snyder Rini (finance minister in the PPP government), and Kemakeza was elected prime minister by parliament.

In June 2003 Kemakeza, with the unanimous approval of parliament and the support of regional leaders, accepted Australia's offer to lead an international intervention force to restore law and order. The force of some 2,200 soldiers and police from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, began operations in July 2003. Its first priority was to disarm the various militias and restore order. By 2005 the force had been reduced to a few hundred.

In the April 2006 election, with a Commonwealth observer group present, 16 members of the government lost their seats. Kemakeza retained his seat but his People's Alliance Party was much reduced while Snyder Rini's AIM did well, with 13 newly elected members. Rini was subsequently elected prime minister by the new parliament. Rioting then broke out and a large portion of Chinatown in Honiara was destroyed by fire. In the same month Rini stood down when he no longer had the support of the majority of members of parliament and early in May 2006



History

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Solomon Islands have been inhabited since 1000 BC. European penetration began in 1568 when the Spaniard Alvaro de Mendana, exploring from South America, spent half a year in the islands. Believing that gold was present, he gave them the name of Solomon's Islands, after the legendary King Solomon's mines. During the 18th century a few European explorers visited the Islands, but made little impression on the inhabitants who lived in small isolated communities, often at war with one another.

In the next century, as Europe's penetration of the Pacific advanced, naval ships began to call, and missionaries and traders arrived. From 1870, the islands were subjected to 'blackbirding' (attacks little different from slave raids), when kidnapers from Queensland and Fiji abducted Solomon Islanders as labour for the sugar plantations. The Solomon Islanders fought back fiercely, leading to slaughter on both sides.

In 1893 Britain made the South Solomons (Guadalcanal, Savo, Malaita, San Cristobal, the New Georgia group) a Protectorate, to which the Santa Cruz group was added in 1898 and 1899. In 1900 Germany ceded to Britain the Shortlands group, Santa Isabel, Choiseul and Ontong Java. With the establishment of the copra industry in 1908, and the spread of Christianity throughout the islands, raiding and fighting as a way of life began to die out, and mission schools provided a basic educational system.

The Solomon Islands were occupied by the Japanese army during the Second World War, and counter-invaded by American and Allied troops. There was almost continuous fighting from 1941 to 1943, and Guadalcanal was the scene of a six-month battle which was crucial to the outcome of the war in the Pacific. The Solomon Islanders fought on the side of the Allies, achieving renown for their courage in battle, and several were subsequently decorated.

After the war, the movement for self-determination gathered strength. There was political unrest in Malaita and elsewhere, which was eased by the setting up, from 1952 onwards, of local government councils, elected by universal adult suffrage.

In 1974 the governing council approved a constitution that provided for a governor and a legislative assembly of 24 elected members. In 1975 the name 'British Solomon Islands Protectorate' was formally changed to the present name. On 2 January 1976 the country became internally self-governing, proceeding to full independence on 7 July 1978.

Solomon Islands came to independence under the leadership of Peter Kenilorea (later knighted), who had three periods in office, the first two consecutive. He was succeeded by his deputy Ezekiel Alebua in 1986. Other prime ministers since independence include Solomon Mamaloni (1981–84, 1989–93 and 1994–97) and Francis Billy Hilly (1993–94).

parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare (leader of the Social Credit Party) as prime minister.

Sogavare was ousted in December 2007 in a parliamentary vote of no confidence, which was precipitated by the defection in November of nine government ministers. The leader of the recently established Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement, and education minister in the Sogavare administration, Derek Sikua, became prime minister.

In the fourth round of voting, in June 2009, parliament elected Sir Frank Kabui to succeed Sir Nathaniel Waena as governor-general with effect from July.

In the election on 4 August 2010 the Solomon Islands Democratic Party, led by Steven Abana, secured 14 of the 50 seats in the National Parliament; the numerous other parties won 19 seats; and independents, the rest. The Commonwealth observer group present at the election reported that the people had freely exercised their democratic right.

In the parliamentary vote that followed the general election, Danny Philip, leader of the Solomon Islands Reform and Democratic Party (a coalition of parties and independent members), was chosen as prime minister, polling 26 votes; his only rival, Steven Abana, won the support of 23 members.

International relations

Solomon Islands is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: There is no tipping in Solomon Islands and visitors should honour this custom. Drug use or possession is illegal and can lead to imprisonment. Women visitors should not enter areas exclusively reserved for men. Swearing is a crime, and those caught may face a fine or jail sentence. Crossing private land may incur a fee to the landowner.

Dress is generally casual but modest, particularly for women. For business meetings ties are not required. English and French are widely spoken in business circles, and the best time to visit on business is from May to October. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1200 and 1300–1630; Sat 0730–1200.

Immigration and customs: All passports must be valid for six months from date of entry. Visas are not needed by most nationals but visa requirements should be checked well in advance of travel.

It is prohibited to import weapons and offensive literature. Only fruit and vegetables from New Zealand can be brought into the country.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required by all those arriving from infected areas.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left and visitors can use their national driving licence. Car hire is available through hotels in Honiara.

Travel to other islands is by domestic scheduled or charter flights and there are also ferry services. The more remote islands are serviced by small, motorised 'canoes'.

There is a limited bus network, and taxis are only available in Auki and Honiara. Fares should be agreed before travel.

Travel health: Visitors should ensure they have comprehensive medical insurance and should carry a basic medical kit when travelling to the more remote areas. Malaria is endemic, and insect repellent and suitable clothing should be taken to protect against mosquito bites.

All water for drinking or making ice should first be boiled or sterilised. Milk is unpasteurised and should be boiled before use.

Money: Automated foreign exchange machines are available in Honiara. Travellers cheques can be exchanged at most banks, and major credit cards are accepted in hotels and tourist resorts. Honiara has three ATMs. Banking hours are Mon–Fri 0830–1500.

There were 9,400 tourist arrivals in 2005.

Further information

Solomon Islands Government Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labour and Immigration: www.commerce.gov.sb

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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