



Village life

STAYING AFLOAT: Overloaded, but the dugout canoe is definitely popular.

Island folk armed with spears and axes turn out to be a friendly bunch, writes **Richard Moore**

APPROACHING the village of Saeragi it was hard to focus on anything other than the shoreline's magnificent trees and impressive native buildings — unless it was the extraordinary colour of the water, a rich green-blue that called for me to dive in on a hot, humid Solomon Islands day.

Saeragi is on the northern tip of Gizo Island in the Western Province.

We had gone by boat around coasts of palm trees and jungle, steering between small, verdant islands. Rounding the final corner, we exchanged friendly waves with villagers.

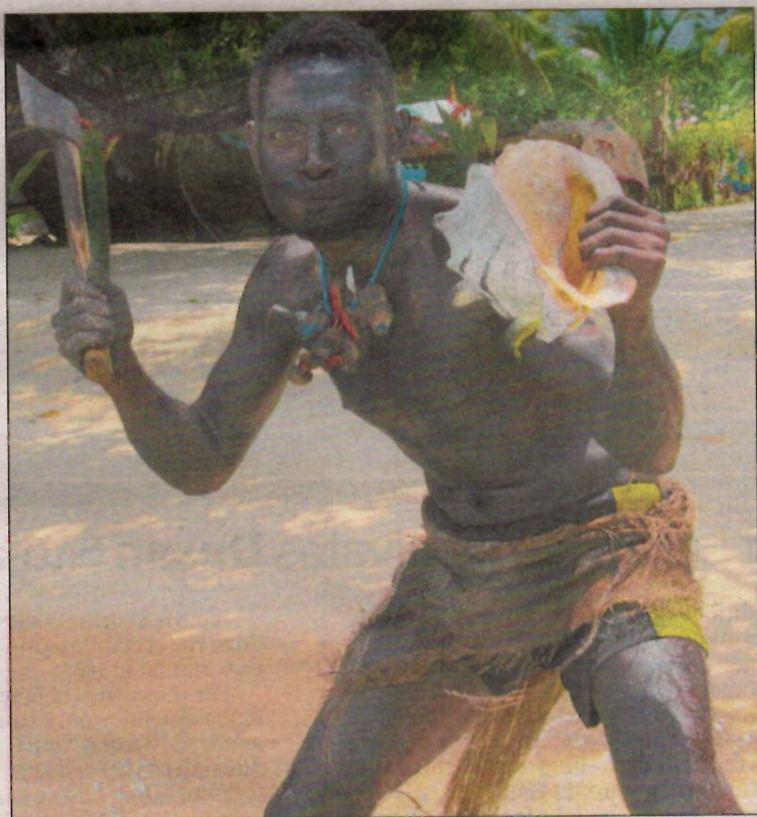
My focus was entirely on framing shots within my viewfinder. Someone said a conch sounded. I hadn't noticed, but the cries of my female colleagues alerted me to something out of the ordinary so I stood and started shooting — images that is.

We were being rushed by black-painted islanders armed with spears, axes and carrying small shields. One held a large conch shell like a shield.

They were yelling, presumably a challenge, and charging our boat.

It was surprising and exciting and had it been a real attack we would have been very quickly at a disadvantage and, in times long gone, we might have been featured on the menu.

Though in the past they were headhunters, to call today's villagers of Saeragi friendly is to



PLAYTIME: After a surprise welcome by the villagers the visitors cooled off in the wonderful waters near Saeragi village.

PHOTOS / RICHARD MOORE

"In times long gone, we might have been featured on the menu."

do them a disservice — they are delightfully welcoming. Once ashore we were given crowns of fragrant flowers before being treated to some refreshing coconut water.

The leader of the young warriors explained what would happen during our visit to his village. Though fearsome with axe in hand he was new to the speeches game, but his presentation was well done.

We had the various woven — and very attractive — baskets

explained to us and we all commented on how their swirling construction differed so elegantly from the usual interlocked weaving from other parts of the world.

Suddenly there was another commotion as some of the local children reacted with excitement as one of our group showed them images of themselves on an iPad.

Then it was back to official proceedings. First we were shown how the villagers started fire by rubbing sticks and then using coconut husk to accept the heat and start the flame. Hard, skilled work that doesn't come easy to First World hands.

It's even less easy in front of laughing little ones who clearly expect visitors to be as good as villagers in the fire-starting business.

Next came a demonstration of how to de-husk a coconut with a

sharpened stake. Easy when you have done it many times, not so much for newbies.

Mind you, if you end up like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away* it could be a lifesaver.

I'm a bit of a dab hand at opening coconuts with the back of a blade — having learned it in the Cook Islands — but my skills were never called upon at Saeragi. My ability to eat, however, was called on — after an interesting lesson in how Solomon Islanders cook using a heated rock oven covered in leaves.

Then we were treated to three dances: a welcome, party dance, a best mates knees-up and a tribal effort that warriors would do before setting off on a head-hunting raid.

That was both fascinating and a little bit scary. Possibly more worrying than I will admit to with intimidating noises and

cadence as well as a snake-like choreography. After our very tasty lunch we took five minutes — well, five island minutes — to cool off at a pier in front of what we took to be an open-air school.

The kids there were delighted the foreigners were ready to swim with them and we all really enjoyed the opportunity.

They were driven to peals of laughter by the big white guy landing two spectacular bombs. After 30 minutes in the water with the kids it was time to return to Gizo and we did so reluctantly after what was a really enjoyable time with the villagers of Saeragi.

Richard Moore stayed in Gizo, an hour's flight from the Solomon Islands' capital of Honiara, courtesy of the Gizo Hotel and the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. Flights were provided by Solomon Airlines. visitsolomons.com.sb

