

July, 2007

Before this trip, several of you made comments to the effect of; "Most of your trips are a little rough for me, but Fiji; that would be fun!" If your vision was tropical drinks at the swim-up bar, you couldn't be more wrong. We were looking for and found an adventure.

The excitement started with our repeated unsuccessful attempts to fly Northwest from Detroit to Los Angeles. Eventually we made our connection for the 11½ hour Air New Zealand flight to Nadi (rhymes with "dandy"; Fijian pronunciation often calls for extra, randomly-inserted n's.) Air New Zealand service is no better than Northwest, and we arrived tired and hungry. We found it odd that the immigration form requires Fijians to declare their race upon arrival. Fortunately, the hospitality in this group of over 300 islands is much better than in the states. Fijians have a fairly recent history of cannibalism, and it's said that they are very accommodating to anyone who they don't wish to eat. We found the people to be very pleasant and welcoming. Everywhere we walked we were greeted with enthusiastic choruses of "Bula!" Bula is a multi-purpose word and one meaning is "Hello." The weather was perfect with high temperatures around 80 every day. The air is clean and the stars are bright. July is early winter and the dry season, so there were only a few sprinkles. Prices are lower than anywhere else in the South Pacific. Most tourists come from Australia or New Zealand, and we only met one other American.

After a day in Nadi to rest from the trip, we headed out on a 108-foot square-rigged sailing ship for a three-day tour of the out-islands with only seven other passengers and a crew of ten. It was a holiday week in both the USA and Australia, but there were only nine of us on a boat that normally carries 40 passengers. This seemed odd. The scenery was spectacular with the green, jagged mountains, endless sugar cane fields and palm lined beaches. The navigation was difficult as there are countless beautiful, but treacherous, unmarked coral reefs ready to wreck any less-than-vigilant sailors. Our experienced crew (and GPS) took us safely to a "resort" on Drawaqa Island. We don't think that we can pronounce "Drawaqa" correctly, but we're pretty sure that it has an extra "n" or two. "Resort" is a very kind description of our accommodations. We stayed in a thatched-roof bamboo hut 50 feet from the beach. There is no electricity, and our hut did not have a bathroom. There was a decent community outhouse a short walk away and an outdoor sink lit by tiki torches. Tom Hanks filmed "Castaway" on an island only ten miles from here, and the beach, vegetation and topography are very similar. The crew sang songs, cooked some bland and basic Fijian food, and showed us around the island. They also took us to several wonderful spots to snorkel. The water was clear and the coral bright. We had never before seen royal blue starfishes. Several eight-foot manta rays startled us when they swam below peacefully.

The next day we sailed to a small village on a nearby island. As the appointed chief of our group, Rich had to participate in a kava ceremony with the chief of the village. Kava is a peppery drink made from grinding a root and filtering it through an old rag until it looks like dirty dishwater. If you drink enough, it turns your face numb. Kava drinking seems to be a form of male bonding that can last for hours. The complicated protocol involves sitting cross-legged on bamboo woven mats, clapping on cue the appropriate number of times, some hearty choruses of "Bula!", and drinking kava from a shared coconut-shell-bowl with a smile. Apparently Rich passed the test of a chief, or the amount of money that the guide slipped him was sufficient. In either case, our group was allowed to tour the village and take pictures. Corrugated steel panels have replaced most of the bamboo siding and thatched roofs, but there is still no electricity or running water. The villagers rely mostly on subsistence agriculture and fishing. They seemed well-fed and happy in spite of the obvious lack of dentistry.

After we returned to the main island, we joined the locals on an antique bus for a two-hour trip down the bumpy road to our hotel on the Coral Coast. The Bedarra Inn is set in a spectacular quiet spot on the beach and would serve as the base of our explorations for the remainder of the

trip. One day we hiked for seven miles on a narrow-gauge sugar cane railway and climbed to an ancient Tongan hill fort. Sigatoka Town (add an "n" to pronounce it Singatoka) is an interesting place. Cheryll enjoyed the local souvenir and produce markets. The only vestiges of cannibalism that remained are assorted hand-carved war clubs, neck-breakers and cannibal forks being sold to the tourists. Today, the drums are silent, except when it's time to summon the tourists to Happy Hour. We walked for miles and miles on nearly deserted beaches. We climbed some sand dunes for incredible views of the coast and distant islands.

About 60 percent of Fijians are indigenous. Most of the rest are descendents of Indian indentured servants who came over a hundred years ago to work the sugar cane. Even today, they don't get along well. The Indians regard the Fijians as lazy, and the Fijians see the Indians as greedy. Most entrepreneurs are Indian, and they do most of the cash handling. Fijians tend to be in the position of employees as bus drivers, waiters and such. Most of the land is owned by Fijians. Indians can only lease it, and the lease may or may not be renewed. In any case, the constitution is patently racist. Everyone is required to vote or face a \$20 fine. Everyone votes by race, and the constitution assures that the Indians can never have enough seats in Parliament to control anything, regardless of their numbers. Many professional Indians have been emigrating to other countries as a result. One gentleman told us not to patronize the Indian shops; use the Fijian shops instead. But aren't the 3rd and 4th generation descendants of Indian immigrants also Fijian citizens?

Unlike most tropical islands with an abundance of iguanas and lizards, we saw none. At night along the Coral Coast, frogs come out of hiding; hopping along roads and even entering the restaurants. The roads may be littered with the remains of the slow ones, but we found that the survivors keep the area remarkably insect-free.

For some extra adventure, we spent one day in the capital of Suva. It's about two hours on the bus from the tourist area. We were a little nervous, having heard stories about last December's coup d'état. Did we fail to mention that there was a coup? So did the travel agent who sold us this package, but we had learned about it when we researched the trip and before we paid the deposit. Tourism is currently at less than half of the pre-coup levels with lots of cancellations. There are some good deals available, so we took a chance. Fiji gained its independence from Britain in 1970, and there have been four bloodless coups since then. We don't pretend to understand all of the politics, but from what we can determine, the head of the military (Bainimarama; pronounced like Bananarama, except we add some extra n's just to be sure) ran for office and lost. He then declared that the voters made the wrong choices, and had himself installed as the Interim Prime Minister. He looks a lot like Idi Amin, the former Ugandan thug. He claims to be planning new elections a few years down the road, but first needs some time in power to root out corruption. As a result, Fiji currently faces official sanctions from several countries and unofficial sanctions from hundreds of thousands of tourists who have decided to spend their money elsewhere. We expected to see a heavy military presence in Suva, but only found two guards outside the presidential palace. We walked right into the Supreme Court building unchallenged, and a man cheerfully pointed us to the Prime Minister's office. Suva is a pleasant, working city and we toured the seafront and National Museum. There was a group playing rugby on a field next to the government buildings. If you weren't reading the paper, you would have never known that something had happened.

The Fijians certainly have a frustrating democracy; mandatory voting, but the results nullified time and time again. The Indian people on the short end of the racist constitution are flourishing. What seems to really matter is that they live in an idyllic paradise, with a bountiful sea and fertile land. There are air connections to many other South Pacific destinations, and we may use Fiji as a base for future explorations.

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