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## The smiles are waiting

New Zealand Herald, Auckland

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# *The smiles are waiting*

Fiji and Vanuatu, largely untouched by Covid-19, want and need Kiwis to return,

writes **Stephanie Holmes**

**W**hile we've been fighting Covid-19 at home in New Zealand, the impact on our own tourism industry has played heavy on our minds. But what about other countries around the world whose economies rely heavily on travel and tourism?

We've talked to some industry experts to get an insight into how coronavirus has affected popular destinations for Kiwi tourists. This week, we look at our Pacific Island neighbours, Fiji and Vanuatu.

### FIJI

"Tourism is one of the most important economic drivers for Fiji, making up nearly 40 per cent of the nation's GDP," says Tourism Fiji CEO Matthew Stoeckel, who also notes an estimated one-third of job opportunities are in some way related to tourism.

In 2019, visitor numbers outstripped population — with more than 894,000 inbound tourists, compared to around 880,000 residents.

Kiwis have always been a huge contributor to the tourism industry, Stoeckel says. "New Zealand makes up 23 per cent of total inbound visitor arrivals." Last year, Fiji was the third most popular destination in the world for Kiwi travelers, behind only Australia and America.

Thanks to early border closures, Fiji has seen effective containment of the spread of the virus. As at May 4, there were only 18 recorded cases — 14 of which had recovered — and no deaths.

However, international travel restrictions in response to the coronavirus have resulted in essentially a temporary shutdown of the inter-

national tourism industry.

Stoeckel says the sector is coming together to focus on the future.

"Fiji is world-renowned for its 'Bula Spirit'," he says. "The tourism industry is working together to turn things around, includ-

ing supporting local communities. For example, Ecotrax is using their electric bicycles to deliver essential goods to remote villages and The Pearl Hotel is accommodating essential service workers who need to remain isolated from their family."

There are a range of other tourism operators also using their existing resources for sustainability initiatives, he says. These include Captain Cook Cruise's reef regeneration project at Tivua Island, Volivoli Beach Resort's diving certification programme for local Fijians, certifying them to assist with marine biology research in the Bligh Water, and Kokomo Private Island Fiji's Adopt a Manta Programme, which allows people anywhere to name their own manta ray, with funds raised going to conservation efforts.

Although there are no international flights operating to or from Fiji at present, Stoeckel believes Kiwi holidaymakers will return, "when the time is right".

Until then, he says, the most important thing we can do to help the Fijian tourism industry

is to keep dreaming and planning.

"For the many Kiwis whose trip to Fiji has been disrupted by Covid-19, we encourage them to take advantage of the flexible booking terms and conditions and schedule a Fijian holiday for when international travel resumes.

"The sandbanks, sea caves, rainforests, sand dunes, coral reefs, waterfalls, rivers and dense ocean life . . . it will all still be here waiting for Kiwis to ex-



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plore. And the Fijian people, they too will be waiting to welcome Kiwis back to their home away from home.”

### VANUATU

Kiwi visitor numbers to Vanuatu are much lower than those to Fiji, but tourism still makes a huge direct contribution to the national economy — an estimated 30 per cent of Vanuatu’s GDP.

Stats provided by the Vanuatu Tourism Office show that in 2019, about 16,250 Kiwis visited Vanuatu, and on average, they spent \$3045 each per visit, for an estimated total contribution of \$49 million. New Zealand visitation in 2019 grew by 13.3 per cent year-on-year, and that growth was expected to continue into 2020. Coronavirus had other plans.

Vanuatu has had no recorded cases of Covid-19, but the closure of borders has had a huge impact on the tourism industry there. Vanuatu Tourism Office says 53 per cent of tourism businesses remain open, catering to domestic tourists. But tourism operators — accommodation providers, tour operators and 200 part-time employees have lost their jobs, or about 40 per cent of the total tourism workforce.

“The economic effects have been cushioned somewhat by the Vanuatu Government’s financial stimulus measures, which include an employment stabilisation payment paid to employers, equivalent to NZ\$400 per month, per full-time employee,” says Nick Howlett, communications manager from the Vanuatu Tourism Office. “This payment has meant that many businesses have been able to rehire or retain staff they would have otherwise had to let go. Banks have also helped, deferring interest payments on business loans.”

Howlett says that overall, those working in the tourism industry remain “mostly positive”.

“The uncertainty about how and when the pandemic will end is proving to be the most difficult part to plan for, but Vanuatu’s tourism businesses are doing their best to adapt to this new environment,” he says. “With international tourists temporarily absent, businesses are turning to the domestic market to generate revenue, and they are banding together to find collective solutions.

“For example, the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s Business Resilience Council has put together resources to help businesses with continuity planning, while the Vanuatu Chefs and Food Handler’s Association is using social media to boost restaurant and cafe patronage by advertising deals and specials from local eateries.”

A new consumer campaign was launched in response to the pandemic, promising to keep Vanuatu beautiful for when visitors are able to return. But its tourism office is cautious about making predictions for the future.

“It is clear that the tourism industry is likely to be transformed by this pandemic, and consumer behaviour is probably going to be a bit different — where people want to go, how long they stay, the kinds of activities they want to do will change,” Howlett says. But he knows they are in a good position for when Kiwi tourists do start to consider their future holiday options.

“Vanuatu is a Covid-free country, so NZ travellers will be able to come and enjoy a well-earned Vanuatu holiday without having to worry about [the virus],” he says.

“Hopefully we will be able to open our borders to Kiwis very soon. Whenever that happens, our tourism industry is busy keeping Vanuatu beautiful and we’ll be here ready to welcome NZ travellers back with our famous warm, friendly smiles.”



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Above: Fiji's Kokomo Private Island.  
Photos / Getty Images



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## Expanding our bubble?

Kiwi and Australian government and industry leaders are investigating the possibility of a transtasman bubble, allowing safe, closely-monitored international travel between the two countries to help reignite both economies.

But some industry experts would like to see this bubble expanded further.

“Scanning through possible international travel destinations to first open up, there’s a clear winner and that’s our Pacific Island neighbours,” says Rick Felderhof, managing director of Auckland travel agency Our Pacific.

“Most Pacific Islands managed to close their borders before Covid-19 made it to their shores – there are limited cases, which are under control in Fiji, New Caledonia and Tahiti, with minimal new cases.

“New Zealand and the Pacific Islands are island nations that can secure their borders and once Covid-19 has been entirely eliminated from their shores, and provided we can collectively maintain our Covid-19 free status, then travel within our bubble should be 100 per cent safe.”

Felderhof says this would, of course, require existing members to maintain their coronavirus-free status, keeping border restrictions in place to eliminate risk from the rest of the world.

“The Pacific Islands are recognised as New Zealand’s most well-known, much-loved, generally affordable and sought-after holiday destinations,” he says.

“Hotels and resorts in the Pacific Islands are sitting empty, various Pacific airlines and Air New Zealand are sitting there with aircraft on the ground, and our airports are largely empty.

“A Covid-19-free New Zealand and Pacific Islands Travel Bubble, is without doubt the safest, quickest, and best opportunity to get tourism business flowing again, saving jobs here and there, and generating income for our Pacific Island neighbours.”



Top: A dugout tour on Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu; above, Fiji believes Kiwis will return “when the time is right”. Photos / Getty Images