

SPONSORED CONTENT

FIJI'S WOMEN KEEP NATION WARM WITH 'BULA SPIRIT'

It's not just the tropical waters and year-round sunshine that makes this beautiful group of islands one of the warmest places on earth. Meet six of the nation's most innovative women working hard to keep inspiring that famous Fijian spirit. While crystal-clear warm turquoise waters, multicoloured fish, gently swaying palms and laid-back holiday vibes are among the memories any lucky visitor to Fiji takes home with them, it's the irresistible friendliness of its people that lingers long after the tan has faded.

The sheer joy of an exuberant "Bula" greeting, delivered dozens of times a day, never fails to make you smile, and it's easy to see why Fiji is considered the happiest country on Earth. You'd be happy too if you enjoyed year-round sunshine, temperatures that rarely drop below 25°C, sparkling white-sand beaches and lush tropical islands so beautiful that you can't quite believe your eyes.

Fijians love nothing more than sharing their home and culture. But while international tourists have had to stay away over the past few months, six of Fiji's most inspiring women have found different avenues to keep the Bula Spirit alive. They've found other ways to share their innovative thinking and ensure happiness remains the number one priority for the Fijian people.



KEEPING THE CULTURE ALIVE JANET LOTAWA - DIRECTOR OF RISE BEYOND THE REEF

Combining her love for Fiji's culture, community and traditional design techniques, Janet Lotawa is behind non-profit organisation Rise Beyond the Reef which currently employs 400 women in remote villages making a range of products. Many resorts, including Six Senses Fiji, work with Rise Beyond the Reef for various interior design projects, which inspires many resort visitors to support the organisation. The most popular item being made at the moment? Face masks, which are being distributed both locally and internationally. **Janet's hidden Fiji gem:** "Vitu Levu's lush interior of mountains, bush and waterfalls. The natural landscape provides so much inspiration."

Risebeyondthereef.org



FINDING JOY THROUGH DANCE SACHIKO SORO - DIRECTOR OF VOU DANCE

Sachiko Soro founded Vou Dance as a place for local Fijians to grow, nurture and develop as contemporary artists, with the goal of reaching a global performance stage. Before the pandemic, her team were performing sold-out shows to crowds of international visitors just outside of Denarau. Now, they are travelling locally to inspire and educate Fijians on the country's cultural arts.

Sachiko's hidden Fiji gem: "Koro Island in Lomaiviti. It is the real Fiji — laid-back, community-focused, and everyone is intimately connected to the land and sea."

Voufiji.com

NATURE BABY DAWN SIMPSON - RESORT MANAGER AT DOLPHIN ISLAND

Long-standing resort manager Dawn Simpson is often the most memorable part of a guest's visit to private Dolphin Island — caring for others runs in her DNA. Dawn, who is working with locals in Rakiraki to make sure the natural environment remains pristine, says she often receives letters from previous Kiwi guests who are missing the resort. She uses the letters as motivation to inspire her team to make the island even more beautiful for when they can return. **Dawn's hidden Fiji gem:** "I love taking visitors to the Narara Waterfall, which is hidden within Rakiraki. It is a 20-foot natural cascading waterfall that has formed a heart-shaped rock pool you can swim in."

DolphinIslandfiji.com



CREATIVE IN THE KITCHEN CAROLINE OAKLEY - HEAD CHEF AT KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

Kokomo Private Island is fortunate to have a 2.2ha farm for its head chef Caroline Oakley to get creative with when she's creating her culinary masterpieces — her unique menu is entirely made using ingredients from the island. Caroline is currently driving Fiji's Dock to Dish movement — an initiative that supports local fishermen from the Kadavu region.

Caroline's hidden Fiji gem: "Kiwis need to check out the Great Astrolabe Reef. It is full of underwater hues of pinks, oranges, yellows and purples and frequently visited by our friendly manta rays."

KokomoIslandfiji.com



LOOKING AFTER THE YASAWAS JODIE BLY - DIVE MANAGER AT OCTOPUS RESORT

Jodie Bly's Hills2Ocean programme, created during the pandemic, is a way for the Octopus Resort dive manager to foster her passion for creating a bright future for both the local people on Waya Island and the natural environment of the remote Yasawa Islands. Through her programme, the island's locals are learning to dive, assisting with reef conservation projects and training to become dive instructors. They also host beach clean-ups, where the collected plastic is used to create crafts that are sold to raise funds for their diving memberships.

Jodie's hidden Fiji gem: "The house reef at Waya Island is one of the most lush eco-systems in Fiji. It's only a few steps from the sandy shores before you can explore this colourful underwater world."

OctopusResortfiji.com



Dream destination »

Memories of paradise

Good vibes, good memories, good grief, I want to go back, writes Juliette Sivertsen

When I close my eyes, I can still hear the strum of the guitars. It's been more than three years since I moved back to New Zealand after a stint living in Fiji, and — up until this year — I was successfully making a yearly return.

Fiji captured my soul. There's not just one thing that defines the island paradise. It's a combination of the vibrant tropical landscapes, the generous Fijian hospitality, the island vibes that instantly relax you, the warmth of the air absorbing all of life's stresses. Every time I return, the islands replenish a part of my wellbeing. Ironically, during a year when this is needed more than any other time of my life, I'm unable to visit.

I remember one particular trip to one of the Mamanuca Islands with a girlfriend visiting from New Zealand. Living in Fiji meant I was spoilt for choice for island day trips, and yet this trip always stands out. Two blonde besties with a shared desire for a good catch up, a bit of adventure and to soak up all the "vitamin sea" we could manage.

The set-up at Beachcomber Island is much the same as the dozens of other island day trips in Fiji, but I never grow tired of them. As the boat



The beach at Beachcomber Island and Juliette Sivertsen with friend Louisa Neike. Photos / Juliette Sivertsen; Supplied



slows and the sound of the water lapping the hull intensifies, so do the voices. The guitars. The harmonies. There's always a welcoming song when you approach the island, Fijian men and women singing, smiling and concluding with a giant "Bula!" as the men offer a hand to assist you off the boat.

Louisa and I found a hammock between two palm trees and laughed as we clumsily clambered into one to share, top to tail, swapping yarns until the netting imprinted on our skin. We ran into the water with snorkels and I helped Louisa learn to dive deeper to explore the tropical fish darting around their coral homes. We took cheesy under-

water selfies before hauling our sunburnt bodies back to the main hut for a barbecue feast for lunch.

With full tummies, we looked at the activities board and a sign pointing towards jet ski rides, looked at each other, and practically ran to the booth to sign up. I bunny-hopped along the ocean surface; Louisa was a speed demon and I clung to her waist as tightly as I could, both of us laughing with equal parts fear and freedom.

Three years on, both of us remember the trip fondly — even more so knowing we'd do nearly anything to be able to get on a plane right now to the South Pacific.

Sweet dreams are made of this

Adam Jacot de Boinod shares his memories of Fiji's natural beauty, amazing food, and infinite luxury

The last lines of the first verse of traditional Fijian farewell song *Isa Lei* perfectly sum up the longing we have right now for tropical island holidays.

"As the roses will miss the sun at dawn / Every moment my heart for you is yearning."

The song is Fiji's version of a Tongan love song, charmingly used by a visiting Fijian sergeant in 1915 to court the then-Princess he was guarding at the time. I heard it everywhere I went on my last trip to Fiji, followed, just as ubiquitously, by "Bula".

These small but vital consistent interactions gave a reassuring familiarity to my time in Fiji and fill my memories now, combined with thoughts of the nation's effortless providence for fish, fruit and endless kava; natural beauty, infinite luxury and cultural vitality.

On my Blue Lagoon cruise I found myself relishing the passive pleasure of viewing the shorelines as we passed gently by static land.

I went to the Yasawa and Mamanuca Islands, where I found green-topped mountains, crystalline waters and truly white sand.

They amount to more than 20 islands, are volcanic in origin and accessible only by boat. They're famous as the location for both versions of the *Blue Lagoon* films (1948, starring Jean Simmons and 1980, with Brooke Shields).

The advantage of the cruise being bespoke



Monuriki Island was used as the filming location for Tom Hanks' 2000 film *Cast Away*. Photo / Supplied

and boutique is that things are small enough to be informal.

On Blue Lagoon's private beach on Nanuya Island, the size of the vessel allowed us to get close enough to be tied up to a coconut tree. The rotund, jolly captain somehow maintained his authority, despite joking that "the more you eat, the more you float", while joining in a spontaneous swim ashore as we suddenly all felt a need to cool down.

At the end of this four-night tour, I stayed on to make more of my visit to Fiji.

First, at the wonderful Matamanoa, a deluxe island resort perfect for honeymooners and offering a delightful view of nearby Monuriki Island, the setting for Tom Hanks' *Cast Away*.

Happily I skipped to the delightful neighbouring island Taveuni, the "Garden of Fiji", rich in waterfalls and pineapple fields before a trip to Qamea — where Mel Gibson befriended a local chief — and on to Laucala resort.

Pronounced "Lauthala", it has its own very special mystique.

American entrepreneur and *Forbes* magazine founder Malcolm Forbes bought it originally as a hideaway but on his death, it was sold to Red Bull co-founder Dietrich Mateschitz.

I was sent on my way by a humbling turnout of staff to sing a final rendition of *Isa Lei*.

*Domoni dina na nomu yanuyanu,
Kena kau wale na salusalu,
Mocelolo, bua, na kukuwalu,
Lagakali, maba na rosi damu.*

*Over the ocean your island home is calling
Happy country where roses bloom and splendour,
Oh if I could but journey there beside you
Then forever my heart would sing in rapture.*

I shall dream forever of returning to Fiji.



Checklist FIJI

DETAILS
For more information, go to fiji.travel