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## Fiji brings back superyachts with 'bula bubble'

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**Travel** The tourism-dependent nation lures wealthy boat owners.

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More than 70 yachts have used a special provision to enter Fiji as part of its plans for a "bula bubble" to kick-start the country's tourism industry.

In June, Fiji's Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, announced a proposal under which "VIP tourists" could enter the country, which is heavily reliant on tourism.

It didn't really eventuate, and since then, the Pacific Island nation (population 883,500) has seriously upscaled its bubble.

In late September, Mr Bainimarama formally announced a "Blue Lane" for superyachts initiative that has seen a steady stream of vessels arrive into Fiji's waters – some with the ship's wealthy owners aboard.

"The majority are more traditional type yachts – very nice yachts but not strictly speaking SYs [superyachts]," a Tourism Fiji spokeswoman said diplomatically.

"However, there are nine SYs that have come in under the Blue Lane initiative so far, with four more SYs on stand by, pending approval to come in."

Under the plan, yachts enter Denarau Marina, at which point all those onboard undergo a \$300 per person COVID-19 test. Before entering the marina, they are required to have been at sea for 14 days with no contact with anyone outside of their yacht.

Crew and guests who have not been at sea for 14 days have to quarantine at a local hotel at their own cost, or on board in the confines of the marina, which is a short drive from Nadi International Airport.

Wealthy individual SY owners can fly in, but must enter the country with a negative COVID-19 test at least 72 hours before departure. They then undergo another test upon arrival.

Once all those on board a yacht have each returned a negative COVID-19 test, the yacht is then free to sail around Fiji and its passengers can go ashore as they wish.

A number of mainly American families have come in via the Blue Lane,

including the Coopers, an American family of four: "We spent about nine months in Fiji a year ago and we fell in love with the country. When Fiji opened their borders we didn't hesitate to start figuring out how to get ourselves back here to Fiji," Mr Cooper said.

The Wynns - from Texas - have been in Fiji since COVID hit, when they became stranded. They've done what any sensible family would do and just kept on sailing, enjoying paradise, since joining up with other friends who have now entered under the Blue Lane.

Wadigi has long been popular with celebrities, including the Google executives, led by Larry Page (who was often in Fiji with his family on extended yacht holidays before the pandemic hit), as well as American A-list stars such as Pink and Paris Hilton.

Like many resort operators, including Lang Walker of Kokomo Private Island, the Johnstons are waiting to reopen once Fiji opens its border.

Kokomo Private Island is also closed, but both Australian operators report strong bookings for 2021. "Our inventory is nearly full from March 2021 as people just want to travel," Mr Johnston said. "All our clients from 2020 have moved to 2021 and we've received many other bookings.

"We initially thought people would be loath to travel anywhere but this is seriously not the case. People just want to escape; they're fed up with being confined."

Fiji has been COVID-19 free for nearly five months and is considered one of the safest destinations in the world. Of the total 32 cases of COVID-19 recorded in Fiji, two people died.

"A lot of resorts are like us and using the closed down period to revamp, upgrade and improve our services for when tourism starts up again," Mr Johnston said.





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Life in the 'Blue Lane': the Wynn family's social media posts from sailing and diving in the waters around Fiji.