

The Bula beat

There's fun for one and all across the Fijian islands

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Setting the scene: The Fijian archipelago comprises nine groups and more than 330 islands, of which 110 are inhabited, plus a swag of islets totalling about 18,300sq km. Ninety per cent of that territory is water, home to about 4 per cent of the world's coral reefs and well over 100 species of marine life. The independent nation severed colonial ties with Britain in 1970 and became a parliamentary democracy in 2014 after weathering a series of coups and other political upheavals. Although well-known as a flop-and-drop beach holiday destination, Fiji's culture and customs run deep and strong. A truly memorable experience here is a sum of many parts, not least for forging genuine local connections and relishing the ease of feeling instantly welcome. And don't forget you only need one all-purpose word to forge a connection: Bula!

Getting there: Fiji Airways flies to Nadi from Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and Cairns, with onward connections to Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Dallas-Fort Worth, plus Tokyo (Narita). Qantas flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth to Nadi; Sydney to Suva services are also available. Cruise lines with seasonal itineraries ex Aus-

tralia featuring ports in Fiji include Carnival, Celebrity, Princess and Holland America Line.

Nadi Airport tips: Local chaps in floral shirts and sulu skirt-wraps play ukuleles and welcome disembarking passengers. There are usually plenty of immigration officials on duty, queues move quickly and the entry process is typically easy. Australian passport holders don't require visas. Baggage carousels can be a bit chaotic, with suitcases and even surfboards being flung about, and ditto the open-sided arrivals area where guides wait with signs for travellers who've booked transfers. Taxis in the official cab queue are plentiful and inexpensive but beware of touts offering tours or discount deals that seem too good to be true. Upon departing Fiji, Prouds and Tappoo duty-free stores are well stocked but not all goods are actually free of taxes; locally made and beautifully fragrant Pure Fiji skincare products, for example, are about the same cost as at town stores or resort boutiques but here they'll be firmly sealed to take aboard as hand-carry.

Seasonal variations: Cyclone season from November to April can cause flooding and disrupt services.





Clockwise from left: Kokomo Private Island Resort; Fijian local; coral reef; Tokoriki Island; Kokoda (raw fish salad); Kava ceremony



Australian school holiday periods are always busy. The wettest month usually is March; the driest is July.

Precautions: Ensure travel insurance covers medical emergencies and cancellations. There are high fines and potential prison sentences for possessing illegal drugs, even small amounts for recreational use. Woven and wooden goods brought back into Australia may be inspected for "insect activity" by Customs at airports and shipping terminals.

Main chance: The two principal islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, comprise 87 per cent of the nation's land area. Viti Levu, home to the capital of Suva in the south-east, and the gateway city of Nadi on the west coast, used to play second-fiddle to resorts on smaller islands. But the latter has emerged as a viable contender for tourism dollars, thanks to dozens of accommodation developments along the southern Coral Coast towards Pacific Harbour and the Port Denarau resort hub near the international airport, where Sofitel, Hilton, The Westin, Radisson and Sheraton are represented. But most holidaymakers try at least one small resort isle or hop between several, either on daytrips for water sports, sailing and village visits, or overnight stays.

Getting around: Port Denarau Marina is the base for Captain Cook Cruises, which is a popular option for diving and snorkelling packages, and sunset excursions on sailing catamaran Fiji One with buffet dinner aboard and a cultural show. Also operating from the marina are Malolo Cat Line, South Sea Cruises (scheduled catamaran services to various island resorts), Whale's Tale and Blue Lagoon Cruises. A further option is a cruise aboard South Sea Sailing's new 23m catamaran Sabre

out to the Mamanuca group, with snorkelling gear provided and stops at deserted sand cays and reefs. There's a heliport and domestic terminal a short drive from Nadi international airport where pre-booked resort transfers or flightseeing tours take off, as well as scheduled services to outer islands.

Couples only: Honeymooners should consider resorts that are either completely adults-only, allow children specifically in school holiday periods, or have separate enclaves for couples and families. Kokomo Island Resort to the northeast of the Kadavu group is a standout, even offering multi-bedroom residences for family groups or wedding parties. The all-inclusive COMO Laucala Island is a celebrity hangout and has its own farm and golf course, while privately owned Vatuvara in the northwest Lau group, is a leader in marine stewardship and environmental management and, quite possibly, a shoo-in for episodes of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Other lovely options include Wakaya Island Resort in the Lomaiviti archipelago and Likuliku Lagoon Resort in the Mamanuca group, which features thatched overwater bungalows. Also worth considering is Lomani Island Resort & Spa on Mololo Lailai, which is popular with honeymooners and not too flashy, but deeply comfortable, its bures (some with dipping pools) ranged beside a long, sunset-facing beach.

Good sports: I was at Kokomo Island Resort in 2023 when the Fiji national rugby team qualified for the quarterfinals of the World Cup. I was lifted aloft by several strapping waiters and we all hooted and yelled like mad in a ragged congo lime. Rugby is a passion across the islands, and Fiji holds the record for most titles at the Hong Kong Sevens. There are matches and warm-ups at just about every oval on Viti Levu, with spectators more than welcome. Fiji also has a national cricket team and, while hardly a real sport, crab races along sandy stretches at many resorts and beach restaurants are madly enjoyable.

Food and beverage: It used to be said that no one goes to Fiji for the cuisine but such dismissiveness is ridiculous these days. Australian and NZ chefs dominate at leading resorts but it's fun, too, to visit neighbourhood haunts, particularly in Nadi Town near Denarau and the airport, where the tri-cultural Fijian mix of local, Indian and Chinese races is evident in home-style cafes, garden restaurants and hole-in-the-wall eateries. Port

Denarau Marina is home to the very good Indigo restaurant, which serves Indian fare, plus Mexican-style Cantina Bar & Grill, while the nearby Crowne Plaza Fiji Nadi Bay boasts La Bottega, an Italian eatery with loads of atmosphere plus excellent pasta and pizzas. Be prepared to sit cross-legged on the ground for kava ceremonies and take the opportunity to try delicious kokoda, a coconut milk-laced version of ceviche. Fiji Bitter and Fiji Gold are the most popular beers; wine is imported and substantially marked up, but spirits such as Plantation Rum are gaining popularity. The Distillery Co Fiji makes an international award-winning Blue Turtle Gin and delicious freshly frothed fruit juices are on offer almost everywhere.

Feels like home: Airbnb Fiji has a wide range of private villas and holiday homes on its books plus more modest dwellings. One of my favourite small, family-run choices is The Fiji Orchid at Lautoka near Nadi airport, with free shuttle. Operating since 2008, it has tent-style bures, pool, restaurant, abundant gardens and was once the holiday home of Raymond Burr.

Cultural sensitivities: Fiji is a religious country, with Methodists forming the largest denomination of Christians. Most Indo-Fijian residents are Hindu, with a smaller Muslim community. Some resorts have a chapel where guests can join staff for Sunday services while those at bigger hotels are popular for weddings. The one at InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort and Spa is particularly lovely.

Pack it all in: Lay out your planned holiday wardrobe and then halve it. Thongs and sandals, shorts and loose dresses, a good shady hat and plenty of SPF sunscreen is about all you need. In cooler seasons, a light jacket or shawl is recommended. But I do have a clear memory of an unexpected cold snap at a resort in the Yasawa group and several guests arriving for dinner at the open-sided restaurant with bed quilts wrapped around their shoulders. We all clapped at such inventiveness and the band (I think they were called the Bula Boys) struck up a version of Let it Snow as a waiter the size of a rugby forward crooned in a remarkable imitation of Bing Crosby. Oh, Fiji, how I love you.

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Associate editor Susan Kurosawa has visited Fiji more than 20 times.

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