



Tranquility as usual

With over 330 islands scattered across 518,000 square kilometres of glistening Pacific Ocean, Fiji has long been a haven for those seeking exotic beaches and world class diving. However, the recent peaceful coup has left a degree of uncertainty about travelling there. Sian and Lucy, two of our Fiji specialists, went to investigate the true impact the coup has had.



Taveuni

Querying the effects of the coup with our local agents prior to our journey, we were advised that the local police had just put on hold some of the new regime's requests so that a local game of rugby was completed without interruption. To us this was a clear indication that the majority of Fijian daily life remains virtually unaffected despite the new regime, and so we set off to discover the islands for ourselves.

The majority of visitors on a short trip focus their time on the main island of Viti Levu, or the nearby Mamanuca and Yasawa archipelagos, all beautiful spots in their own right. What we were seeking though was the 'real' Fiji, the untouched northern islands, the kind of places which appeal to the more adventurous traveller, and these are just a short flight away from the main gateway of Nadi on Viti Levu.

Vanua Levu and Taveuni lie to the north east of Viti Levu, and are in stark contrast to the small, pristine, sandy Mamanuca islands which lie to the west of Viti Levu. Here the rainforest grows thick, the beaches are of volcanic black sand, and the small isolated villages hold fast to their culture whilst still welcoming visitors to their shores. Taveuni itself is often referred to as the 'garden island', perfect for walking and nature spotting. A trip into the Bouma National Heritage Park takes you deep into the Vidawa Rainforest and to the sparkling Tavoro Falls, and from high vantage points there are spectacular views across the islands of Qamea, Matangi and the Lau group.

Dipping down into valleys and past rivers, you encounter ancient villages where, with a guide to assist, you can experience a true Fijian welcome. Many of the local resorts work alongside the villages to provide traditional feasts with food cooked



Secluded cove



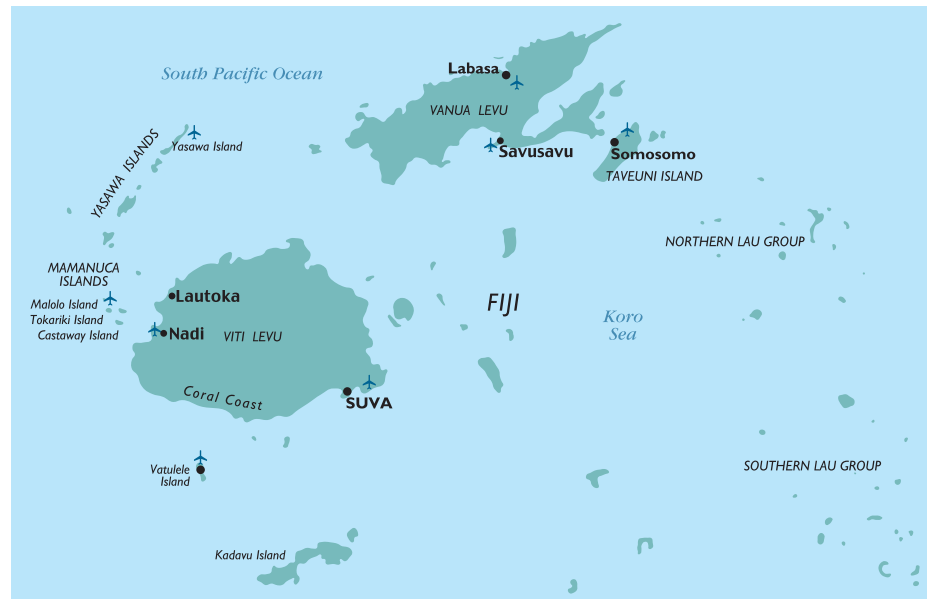
Local villagers



Luxury oceanfront bure, Taveuni Island Resort



Kava ceremony



in huge underground ovens (lovo) for many hours. The Fijians love to entertain, and often such feasts are accompanied by animated singing and energetic dance displays (meke).

For those who really want to immerse themselves in the local culture, the islands offer a wealth of experiences such as cookery lessons, village tours, language courses, church visits and lessons in the traditional uses of forest plants in Fijian medicine. Walking the Lavena coastal track in eastern Taveuni leads you into the heart of the Fijian north, as well as offering some of the most beautiful and wild coastline in the region.

Despite being further away from the more popular visitor haunts, these islands do not require a compromise when it comes to accommodation. With a selection of excellent small resorts and locally run properties, you can explore from a very comfortable base, and return from a day in the rainforest to fine dining

and spa treatments should you wish. The diving in northern Fiji is excellent, with many resorts offering superb facilities and instruction for those who need it.

Wherever you travel in Fiji, the most common theme is the wonderful, open good-heartedness of the people. You will be greeted with a cheerful “bula” (hello) at every opportunity. Having conversed with people from various walks of life, it became clear to us that the non-violent coup had not dampened the spirits of the local people, and that little or no effect was felt outside the capital of Suva – located in the east on the island of Viti Levu. Today, business continues as normal, albeit a little quieter, making this the perfect time to take advantage of fewer crowds, and not to say some tempting offers from many of the resorts.

We knew it would be hard to leave. The traditional farewell song Isa Lei encourages you to remember your

time in Fiji fondly and to return soon, and as these sentiments echoed across the sands we too hoped that it would not be long before we could return for another stay in these magical islands.

Sian Thomas & Lucy Harrison
Fiji Specialists

FACT FILE

A 14 night trip to Fiji, including some time in the northern islands and return flights, costs from £2,400 per person. Please call Sian, Lucy or Cass on 01993 838 825 for details.

