

Welcome to Fiji

"The beach perfectly matched my vision of paradise: fine sand and vivid blue sea set against a lush palm forest. I never want to leave this magical place!"

The Fiji archipelago lies in the South Pacific, hundreds of volcanic islands scattered over 1.3 million km² of the Pacific ocean; remnants of a sunken continent. Adrift in isolation for millennia, Fiji remains unspoiled, beautiful and tranquil, with one thousand miles of palm-fringed, sand beaches, stunning coral gardens, and azure lagoons. In days of old it was known as the Cannibal Isles, feared by mariners because of fierce warrior peoples and treacherous waters. In some places life has changed little over the centuries and the exotic customs and traditions of the many peoples that have settled in Fiji have been preserved. The modern islanders are vibrant, outgoing, and friendly.

Know your History

Fiji's fascinating history is generally thought to begin with the arrival of Polynesian peoples who came to the Pacific from South East Asia via Indonesia in about 3500 B.C. Modern Fijians, however, date their country's birth with the arrival of the great Polynesian chief Lutunasobasoba in about 1500 B.C. Once settled in the South Pacific, two distinct peoples emerged – the Melanesians and the Polynesians – but as seafarers intermarried throughout the region that is now modern Fiji, the modern Fijian people emerged (about 500 B.C.). At the time, however, these people were known as "Lapita people", named after a distinctive type of fine pottery that they produced, remnants of which have been found in practically all islands of the Pacific east of New Guinea. It is interesting to note that a massive volcanic eruption in the 12th Century in southern Vanuatu coincides with the disappearance of the Lapita pottery style there and its sudden emergence in Fiji.

Abel Tasman & Captain James Cook

European discoveries of Fiji were accidental. The Dutch explorer Abel Tasman came across them as he was seeking routes across the South Pacific, but he did not settle there. Later, Captain James Cook visited the region in 1774 and made further discoveries, but it was only the shipwrecked sailors and runaway convicts from the Australian penal settlements who settled there. By the 19th Century, sandalwood traders and missionaries arrived; the latter contributing to the decline of cannibalism in the country as they gained influence. In 1874 Fijian Chief Ratu Seru Cakobau, self-styled "King of Fiji", together with other senior chiefs, ceded Fiji voluntarily to Queen Victoria, and Fiji became a British colony. It is interesting to note that when Seru Cakobau accepted Christianity in 1854 the rest of the country followed suit, bringing about a rapid decline in tribal warfare.

British rule

From 1879 to 1916, Fiji's Indian population grew as colonial authorities brought Indians to the colony to work as indentured labourers on sugar plantations. This marked the start of an era of important economic and social change in Fiji. After the indenture system was abolished in 1920, many Indians stayed on as independent farmers and businessmen.

The end of World War Two saw Fiji taking its first steps towards internal self-government. In 1953 the legislative council expanded to 32 members, 15 of them elected and divided equally among the three major ethnic constituencies (indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians, and Europeans). Although the legislative council still had few of the powers of the modern Parliament, it brought native Fijians and Indo-Fijians into the official political structure for the first time, and fostered the beginning of a

modern political culture in Fiji.

However, it was not until April 1970, when Fiji's Legislative Council agreed on a compromise electoral formula and a timetable for independence as a fully sovereign and independent nation with the Commonwealth, that the nation finally became independent.

Independence

Since independence, Fiji has developed a major sugar industry and established productive milling, tourism, and service industries. The country has diversified of late into small-scale industries and this has contributed to the creation of a strong, stable economy, with greater revenue for public works, medical services, and education. The country's central position in the region has been strengthened by recent developments in sea and air communication and Fiji plays a major role in regional affairs. Fiji enjoys one of the lowest crime rates in the world.

1987

However, independence has not come easily. In 1987, perceived as a government dominated by the Indo-Fijian community, the democratic rule was interrupted by two military coups. The second of these two coups replaced with British monarchy and Governor General with a non-executive president and changed the country's name from the Dominion of Fiji to the Republic of Fiji (in 1997, this was further changed to Republic of the Fiji Islands). The civil unrest from the coups meant that there was a heavy Indian emigration, leaving the Melanesians in the majority, but resulting in economic difficulties.

1990s

In 1990, the ethnic Fijian domination of the political system was institutionalised by a new constitution; the Group Against Racial Discrimination (GARD) was formed to oppose the new constitution and restore the 1970 constitution. In 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, who carried out the 1987 coup, was elected prime minister under the new constitution. Three years later, he formed the Constitutional Review Commission.

A new constitution was approved in 1997, supported by most leaders of the indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities, and Fiji was re-admitted to the Commonwealth of Nations. Following the 1997 constitution, Mahendra Chaudry was elected prime minister, but this was short-lived when George Speight instigated another coup in 2000, and toppled the government.

Qarase

Later the same year, rebel soldiers went on the rampage after two mutinies at Suva's Queen Elizabeth Barracks. The High Court demanded the reinstatement of the constitution, and in September 2001, interim prime minister Laisenia Qarase's party, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua, won the election.

In 2005, the Qarase government proposed a Reconciliation and Unity Commission. The commission would have the power to recommend compensation for the victims of the 2000 coup, and grant amnesty to the coup's perpetrators. Frank Bainimarama, the army's commander, particularly opposed the proposition. He said it was a sham to grant amnesty to those who played roles in the coup and currently support the present government. His already tense relationship with the government was put under further strain as he continued his objections throughout May, June and

July.

2006 coup d'état

Bainimarama was instrumental in the 2006 coup d'état in late November and early December. Qarase was handed a list of demands after a bill was put forward to parliament – part of which offered pardons to the participants of the 2000 coup attempt – and was told to accept by 4th December or resign. Qarase refused to do either, and President Ratu Josefa Iloilo is said to have signed a legal order dissolving parliament on the 5th December. Bainimarama took over the powers of the presidency and named Jona Senilagakali as caretaker prime minister. By 4th January 2007, he had restored executive powers to Iloilo, but this was not the end. Iloilo endorsed the military's actions, and named Bainimarama interim prime minister.

2009 constitutional crisis

After the Fiji Court of Appeal ruled the 2006 coup illegal in 2009, Fiji was thrown into a constitutional crisis. Bainimarama agreed to step down as interim PM, along with his government, and Iloilo would appoint someone else. However, on 10th April 2009, Iloilo suspended the constitution, dismissed the court of appeal and appointed himself "Head of the State of Fiji under a new legal order". He then reinstated Bainimarama as interim prime minister, along with the previous cabinet.

Fiji became the first nation to ever be expelled from the Pacific Islands Forum, after failing to hold democratic elections by 13th July 2009, and the second country to be suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations on 1st September, after refusing to hold elections by 2010 – claiming to need more time to end a voting system that Bainimarama said favours ethnic Fijians.

Money Talks

With the exception of tourism and inward remittances from Fijians resident overseas, most other sectors are performing weakly. Sugar output continues to decline and the garment industry has been decimated by globalisation. Gold production is down, although agriculture and timber sectors are showing signs of limited growth.

Tourism, and other activities linked to it, including construction and retail consumption, has been the principal driving force of the economy in recent years. Tourism arrivals have been increasing steadily, in part at least a consequence of the downturn in South East Asia following terrorism incidents there. Several major new tourism projects are underway, with others at an advanced planning stage.

The garment industry, half the size it was before the 2000 coup, has been further downsized following expiry of special access arrangements with the US. The sugar industry is facing serious problems, both external and internal.

Exports

Fiji's major exports are textiles and sugar, though both of these have failed to make an impact in the global market. Fiji also exports fish and mineral water but the coup and poor agriculture has meant that the country is still classed as developing.

Money

The currency is the Fijian Dollar, and most tourist hotels and many restaurants accept credit cards. But not all ATMs accept the full range of credit cards issued overseas. The Australian and New Zealand Bank (ANZ) ATMs accept UK Visa and MasterCard and the Westpac ATMs accept Maestro. Not all places will change money, so it's best to change it in Suva.

Airport Departure Tax is 75 Fijian Dollars, which includes Noise Tax and Airport Departure Tax. Increasingly, this is included in the ticket price, but you may wish to check that this is so. Do not bring Scottish, Irish or older English notes. You will not be able to get them changed as the banks here are very fussy.

Get Culture Savvy

Religion

A multi-racial, multi-cultural nation, the population of Fiji is made up of significant numbers of followers of all major religions. Ethnic Fijians, Indians, Europeans, other Pacific islanders and Chinese can be found in Fiji. Most people living in Fiji have some English language skills, which makes integrating into the local community much easier. These groups practice a variety of religions, but Christianity, Hinduism and Islam are the predominant forms. Visitors are welcome to join locals for worship in the Christian churches, mosques, and Sikh and Hindu temples that adorn the land.

In particular, a Methodist service will give you a good insight into how the Fijian village culture is structured and why the people are so friendly and family-focused. You may not understand many of the words, but the singing and ceremony will stay in your memory. Gau is a predominantly Methodist island.

Fijians are easy-going, but there are a number of important cultural considerations to bear in mind when interacting with locals.

Wear modest clothing: Always carry a Sulu (a type of sarong) to cover bathing togs or shorts and halter tops. All of our volunteers are required to wear sulus at all times when in public. Topless bathing is forbidden.

Remove your hat: Remove your hat when you are in village. Wearing one's hat is an insult to the chief.

Remove your shoes: When you enter someone's home, take your shoes off and leave them at the door as a mark of respect.

Do not touch children's heads: It is insulting to touch someone's head in Fiji. Though it may be tempting to touch the heads of wide-eyed, giggling children, refrain!

Gifts: When visiting a village it is customary to present a gift of vagona, which is also known as kava. A half-kilo (appropriate amount) costs approximately F\$10. This present is given to the Turaga ni Koro, or executive head of the village. The presentation is usually in his house and will be attended by some of the older men who happen into the vicinity at the time. Be prepared to shake hands and answer many personal questions. It's a great idea to bring photos. If you stay in a village overnight, leave your host a gift.

Arts & Crafts

Fiji's arts and crafts are heavily influenced by Polynesian and Malaysian cultures. Many of these crafts are strictly associated with one gender – the men are involved in carving and canoe building, whilst the women dominate pottery, mat weaving and the making of tapa. Tapa, or masi, is often exchanged as gifts, and is made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree and decorated with charcoal in symbolic patterns.

Food

In pre-colonial times, Fijian cuisine consisted of mostly root crops, vegetables, and fruits, and various land animals such as wild pig. Along the coast a large amount of local seafood was also eaten. Meals would have been prepared with herbs and spices on wood fire rock ovens. Traditionally, cooking areas were located in the centre of the house – so the smoke could repel insects and strengthen the roof.

Another traditional method of cooking is the lovo. Closely related to the hangi in New Zealand Mori culture, a lovo is an earth oven – the fire is made in a pit in the ground lined with heat resistant stones. When the stones are hot, the food is wrapped in banana leaves, placed in the pit and covered with earth to cook, often for a few hours. Palusami, parcels of taro leaves soaked in coconut milk, is often cooked this way, as are onions and often tinned meat.

Ceremonial cannibalism was also performed, but is now thankfully extinct. The process of consuming your enemy was a form of humiliation for them, as opposed to sustenance.

More modern Fijian food is greatly influenced by Indian cuisine and spices. You can find a mix of European, Indian and Chinese dishes in most Fijian households.

Holidays

Dates and days vary year to year

New Year's Day

Birth of the Prophet Muhammad

Good Friday

Easter Saturday

Easter Monday

National Youth Day

Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day

Queen's Birthday

Fiji Day

Diwali

Christmas

Boxing Day

Learn the Lingo

Most people speak English as well as Fijian and Hindi, but you'll find that you learn a great deal about your local hosts if you learn a bit of Fijian. Any word with a "d" has an unwritten "n" in front of it - Nadi is pronounced "Nandi" and the delightful cold, marinated seafood dish kokoda, is "kokonda". You put an "m" before the "b" in words like Toberua (Tomberua). Sigatoka is "Singatoka", Naigani is "Ninegani". And a "c" is pronounced "th", as in the Mamanuca Islands. Some handy words and phrases are:

| ENGLISH | FIJIAN | PRONUNCIATION |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Hello/hi | Ni sa bula | Nee sar bula |
| Good morning | Ni sa yadra | Nee sar yarndra |
| Goodbye | Sa moce | Sa more there |
| Please | Yalo vinaka | Yarlo veenarka |
| Excuse me | Me tulou | Tulou too low |
| Yes | Lo | Ee or |
| Thank you/good | Vinaka | Veenarka |
| Thank you very much | Vinaka vaka levu | Veenarka varka levoo |
| Much/big | Levu | Levu levoo |
| No | Sega | Senga |
| Eat | Kana | Karna |
| Village | Koro | Ko ro |
| A little/small | Vaka lailai | Va ka lie lie |
| Great/a lot | Vaka levu | Va ka levoo |
| Fast | Vaka totolo | Va ka tortorlo |
| Slowly | Vaka malua | Va ka mar lua |
| House | Vale | Va le |
| Toilet | Vale lailai lai | Va le lie lie |
| Come | Lako mai | La ko my |
| Go | Lako tani | La ko tan i |
| One | Dua | Du a |
| Two | Rua | Ru a |
| One more | Dua tale | Du a ta le |

Lay of the Land

Fiji rests in the heart of the Pacific Ocean midway between the Equator and New Zealand. The country comprises approximately 330 islands, of which about one-third are inhabited. The country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers about 1.3 million km² of the South Pacific Ocean.

The two main islands, which account for 87% of the total landmass, are Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Other sizeable islands are Taveuni, Kadavu, Ovalau, Gau (where Frontier is currently working) and Koro. 83% of the land is owned by indigenous Fijians. Only 16% of the landmass is suitable for agriculture. This is found mainly along the coastal plains, river deltas, and valleys. Apart from the capital Suva, Lautoka is the only other major city and both are located on the island of Viti Levu.

What's the Weather like?

Fiji enjoys a tropical South Sea maritime climate without great extremes of heat or cold. The islands lie in an area that is occasionally traversed by tropical cyclones, which occur between the months of November to April. The temperature averages 22°C for the cooler months (May to October) while

from November to April temperatures are higher with heavy downpours. Fiji's flora and fauna are relatively few in number but are of exceptional scientific interest because of the higher proportion of endemic forms.

Biodiversity

Much of the Fiji's tropical forests have been cleared by loggers and converted to plantations and its coral reefs are increasingly threatened by bleaching and unsustainable harvesting. Because of Fiji's isolation, many species on the island have not evolved much beyond their ancestors, and afford scientists a unique opportunity to examine the species' histories. There are 5 main Fijian native species that are not only endemic, but are creating a strong interest because of their evolutionary progress. The Fijian Monkey-faced Flying Fox , which is one of the most primitive species of fruit bats and the only mammal endemic to Fiji, the Fiji Banded Iguana and Fiji Crested Iguana who are endemic to the Fiji-Tonga area and are recognisably related to their cousins in the Americas, the Fiji Tree Frog and finally the Fiji Ground Frog.

Fiji's biodiversity is best shown underwater. 80% of Fiji's population lives within 5 km of the coast, and the reefs are their main source of protein. The marine ecosystems are vital sources of food, income, employment, foreign exchange, and cultures. The marine eco-region around Fiji is considered the crossroads of the Pacific, thanks to its perfect geographical location; it is a unique system that connects expanses of coastal wetlands and mangroves, seagrass and algae beds, mudflats, lagoons, and a diverse range of coral reefs. Within this framework are over 390 different species of coral, which are home to around 1,200 varieties of fish and countless invertebrates. The mangroves and seagrass habitats of the Fijian region are ideal breeding and feeding grounds for the fish, invertebrates, reptiles and seabirds that call this region home.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Lonely Planet Guides to Fiji. Dean Starnes & Nana Luckham. Lonely Planet Publications. ISBN 9781741047936 (2009)

Wildlife

- Collins pocket guide to the coral reef fishes of the Indo-Pacific and Caribbean. E Lieske & R Myers. Collins, 1996. ISBN 9780007111114
- Indo-Pacific Coral Reef Field Guide. G.R. Allen & R. Steene. Tropical Reef Research, Singapore, 1994. ISBN 9789810056872
- The ecology of fishes on coral reefs. P. Sale. 2002. ISBN 9780126151817
- Coral Animals of the Indo-Pacific. T.M. Gosliner, D.W. Behrens & G.C. Williams. Sea Challengers, CA, 1996. ISBN 9780930118211
- World Atlas of Coral Reefs. Mark D Spalding, Corinna Ravilious and Edmund P Green. ISBN 9780520232556

Teaching Guides

- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Elementary Students of English 2nd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 9780521529327
- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Intermediate Students of English 3rd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 9780521532891
- Lessons from Nothing: Activities for Language Teaching with Limited Time and Resources (Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers). Bruce Marsland. Cambridge University Press, 1998. ISBN 9780521627658
- Games for Children (Resource Books for Teachers). Gordon Lewis & Gunther Benson. Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 9780194372244
- Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching 2nd Edition. Diane Larsen-Freeman. Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 9780194355742

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INTO THE WILD
THE GAP YEAR BLOG FROM
FRONTIER

