

WET 'N WILD IN Fiji

Raft river rapids, drink kava with village chiefs, dive with sharks, and explore a cannibal cave fortress. Fiji has activities galore to satisfy your quest for adventure.

BY JANICE MUCALOV



Guitar-playing musicians serenade with traditional folk songs — a blend of Polynesian and Melanesian styles. INSET: Fijian village women lay out their handcrafted souvenirs to sell to tourists. FACING PAGE: A guest drinks her bilo of grog at a local kava ceremony.



The water explodes in a kaleidoscope of colours as I peer through my snorkel mask. Bright golden butterfly fish dart about fingers of white coral. Lime- and turquoise-hued parrotfish peck at clumps of grey, mushroom-shaped corals. There are red sea fans and sprightly schools of blue-splashed surgeonfish, and a tipsy black-banded Picasso triggerfish checks me out with its bulging eyes.

This is the Fiji I came to experience. But surely there were activities and interesting places here for soft adventure enthusiasts to explore beyond the coral reefs, powdery white beaches, and bathtub-warm waters? This South Pacific nation, comprising some 330 islands, also boasts cascading waterfalls, highlands with traditional villages, historic landmarks, and remote rivers. And I was determined to check out this other side of Fiji as well.

Nadi and Denarau Island

On the main island of Viti Levu, Nadi is home to Fiji's principal international airport. Most of its attractions are found in the surrounding grassy foothills and forested mountains. To explore the area, hire a car, or take one of the many tours offered.

The Garden of the Sleeping Giant, about a 30-minute drive north of Nadi, is worth a visit — even if you do not have a green thumb. Established by the late Raymond Burr, the Canadian actor from the *Perry Mason* courtroom drama series, the beautifully landscaped gardens encompass one of the world's largest orchid collections. A canopy-covered boardwalk trail snakes past lily ponds and bamboo groves, and you can step inside Burr's holiday shack containing old photographs and even his walking cane.

Inland, an all-day, four-wheel-drive safari along bumpy dirt roads

is the way to discover the pine-covered Nausori Highlands and Fiji's most authentic and picturesque village. Set on a volcanic slope on the Ba River, far away from electricity, Navala is made up of some 200 traditional *bures* — pole-supported bungalows with thatched roofs and bamboo-woven walls.

A visit to Navala typically includes the welcoming Yaqona ceremony — a highlight of any village visit. As you sit cross-legged in a circle, ceremony leaders in grass skirts pound kava, the root of a pepper shrub. They grind the root down to a fine powder and then mix it with water to make the famous non-alcoholic drink that acts as a soporific (sleep inducer). After the chief has drunk from the *bilo* or coconut shell, it is passed around for others to try. Custom dictates that you clap once to receive the *bilo* and three times when you hand it back.

We attended a Yaqona ceremony at a different village, and I confess I never took a sip (it is OK to politely decline), but my more daring husband reported that kava tastes slightly muddy and numbs the mouth.

Thankfully, he did not fall asleep. (I suspect nervous visitors get a watered-down version.)

Back near Nadi, you can enjoy more civilised pursuits on the vacation hub of Denarau Island, only a 10-minute-drive away, across a small bridge. Be sure to take the blue "Bula Bus" to the marina, which features a sprawling new complex bustling with cafes, boutiques, restaurants, and adventure-booking offices. Sailboats for day cruises to the neighbouring Mamanuca Islands and catamaran ferries take off from the nearby jetties. It is the perfect place to wander with an ice cream or to relax while enjoying a cappuccino.

One of the harbourfront plaza's seven restaurants is also one of Fiji's best eateries. Offering a fusion of Indian and Southeast Asian cuisine, the stylish Indigo gets rave reviews. For a nice dining experience, sit at a table right by the water and feast on delicately spiced butter chicken or Thai-style crab. Another favourite is Cardo's Steakhouse, which includes char-grilled steak and fish among its tasty offerings.

In addition to great restaurants, Denarau Island boasts a championship par-72 golf course. I am not much of a golfer, but the Denarau Golf & Racquet Club course, designed around tidal waterways, looks superb. Landscaped with giant coconut palms, it is a course that begs concentration, with water hazards on 15 of the 18 holes, and bunkers shaped like sea creatures.

The Coral Coast

Southwest of Nadi is the picturesque Coral Coast. A paved highway curves around the emerald coastline, offering wonderful views of waves breaking on the reef beyond. Day tours from Nadi offer various combinations of the most popular attractions





Traditional Fijian *bures* (huts or houses) in the rural village of Navala on Viti Levu are constructed of hand-woven thatch made from natural materials such as bamboo, coconut fibers, reeds, and sugar cane leaves.

and activities on the islands.

About 20 kilometres south of Nadi, Momi Battery Historic Park is situated amidst sugar cane fields high on a hilltop overlooking Momi Bay. During World War II, the New Zealand army set up bunkers and two 6-inch guns, recycled from the Boer War, to protect Nadi from a possible Japanese attack. One concrete bunker is now a small museum with photographs depicting the site's history.

Farther south are the Sigatoka Sand Dunes. Protected by the National Trust of Fiji, huge, rolling dunes stretch for more than 6 kilometres along a surf-swept beach. Well-maintained tracks lead through the forest to the dunes, where stone tools, pottery shards, and human skeletal remains are continually unearthed — evidence of the Lapita people who lived here some 2,500 years ago.

Fiji's inhabitants are so warm and friendly that it is hard to imagine they practised cannibalism in earlier times. But enemies did end up in the cooking pot. Climb a steep trail up to the remains of the ancient Taveuni Hill Fort, and you can see a grisly stone on which victims were killed.

More relics of Fiji's cannibal history are found inside the Naihehe Caves. The last cannibal tribes lived within this cave fortress, ruled by a pagan priest. Sloshing ankle-deep in water on a guided tour of the lantern-lit Cathedral Chamber, you can see the priest chamber, ritual platform, and even a cannibal oven. The cave is dripping with stalactites and stalagmites, but it is the history of the Tongan warriors that makes this visit

special. This, and also the fact that on the return, you raft downstream on the Sigatoka River on a traditional bamboo *bilibili* steered by a guide standing on the back with a pole.

Adventure Capital

A two-hour drive from Nadi brings you to Pacific Harbour, which is often called the adventure capital of Fiji. This is the base for some of Fiji's greatest thrills — scuba diving, surfing, white-water rafting, and jet-skiing — all easily arranged as day tours from Nadi and Denarau Island.

For a real rush, raft the Class II to III rapids of the Upper Navua River. This is a must-do excursion. It is not just the torrents that take your breath away; the scenery is stunning, too. The river slices through a deep, narrow gorge, fringed with moss and lush rainforest, and fed by countless silvery waterfalls. Of course, you also get the chance to cool off by jumping in the water and floating down the river with your raft. Anyone who is reasonably fit can do the trip.

The Mamanuca Islands

No visit to Fiji is complete without spending some time on the Mamanuca Islands, offshore from Nadi. These 20 or so small islands are the quintessential South Seas paradise — white-sand beaches, swaying palm trees, and sparkling turquoise lagoons. Underwater, the Mamanucas are known for their spectacular coral reefs and clouds of candy-coloured fish.

There is a host of scuba operators to take divers out to sites that are easily reached from Denarau Island. Keen to

see some sharks? Various nutrient-rich currents converge on the spot known as the Supermarket, which is world-famous for attracting grey, white-tipped, and black-tipped species. To ramp up the excitement, dive masters often hand-feed these forbidding fish, some of which are longer than two metres (but generally considered harmless).

The most developed of the Mamanucas is Malolo Lailai Island. From here you can take a boat to visit one of two Fijian villages, Yaro and Solevu, on neighbouring Malolo Island. After the traditional kava ceremony, you are invited to purchase souvenirs such as shell necklaces, wooden bowls, and masks. Feel free to take lots of photos. The Fijian children especially love posing for the camera, and their happy faces are bound to make you smile. ■

Award-winning travel writer Janice Mucalov has visited all seven continents, writing about her adventures along the way. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 464 and 467

CLIMATE: Fiji enjoys a hot tropical climate year-round, with temperatures averaging between 26°C and 31°C. The summer rainy season is from November to April; expect heavy but brief showers. Winter is slightly cooler and less humid.

DON'T MISS: A day sailing cruise to the Mamanuca Islands for snorkelling, dolphin watching, and a visit to a local Fijian village.

TIPPING: Tips are not expected or encouraged. But feel free to donate if you see a "staff Christmas fund" box.

CAR HIRE: Recommended on Viti Levu if you want to explore on your own.

VISITOR INFORMATION:

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