

Under a Fijian sun – first impressions

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Fiji can offer a diverse range of first impressions for the first time visitor, depending on how you arrive and where you go.

I first set foot on Viti Levu in 2010, alighting mid trip on a 21 day South Pacific cruise to taste-test the cultures and sights the island nations are known for. Come with me as I reminisce.

As we sailed through azure waters, our first Fijian port of call was to Denarau Island. Once a swampy area it has been transformed by man into a tourist drawcard with fairly expensive price tags. The island is adorned with top end hotels, a water park, apartments, villas and expensive private homes with spacious modern interiors and private jetties.

Port Denarau is the jumping off point for both the Yasawa and the Mamanuca groups of islands off shore. Most of the inter-island ferries are based here and departure times find the terminals a multi-cultural hotpot of tourists, ranging from backpackers to the five star travellers. This is a collection point for Fijian tourism dollars.

The ship anchored outside of Denarau Island and my little family with fellow passengers were ferried to the wharf at Port Denarau in tenders.

Port Denarau complex put on a show for the 2000 plus passengers who alighted there that Sunday. The coffee coloured men in grass skirts were shimmering with sweat and a liberal coating of coconut oil, in the hot May sun. The heat reflected up from the concrete surrounds in the heart of the complex where the performances were held. Men beat the lali (drums) while others did the meke (a dance) and others still offered a bilo (cup) of kava for the tourists willing to challenge their tastebuds.

Port Denarau is a fort of shopfronts selling bulk manufactured souvenirs or American branded cafés and restaurants. We had the option to escape and take a tour on the open-sided Bula bus for a quick whip around the island.

Looking back that first glimpse of Fiji, for me, did not do it justice. There is so much more to Fiji and thankfully our cruise itinerary included two more ports to broaden that view.

Overnight we cruised around to the capital city of Fiji, Suva situated on the south eastern end of Viti Levu.

Suva city crawls up the hills that surround the central business area. Here the experience was very different. Anchored at Queens Wharf we could browse the local range of products at the small market set up specifically for our arrival inside the wharf area. Bright bula fabric in sulus, shirts and bags beckoned. Coconut shell crafted earrings and necklaces, were interspersed with imported plastic or enamel alternatives.

Once we left the safety of the wharf area we were swallowed in the crowds at the bustling marketplace. The Suva City Markets are found in a two level building, open six days a week. Rows and rows of tables offer up fresh, mostly organic, produce.

In season, the pineapples, pawpaws, watermelon and mangoes are a big drawcard. With a mix of indigenous Fijian, Indo-Fijian and Chinese traders you will find shallots, eggplant, tomatoes, ginger, lettuce, coriander and so much more. Leafy greens such as fern fronds and water spinach and hardy root crops of dalo and cassava can be found also.

Most produce is sold in heaps or bundles. A heap of tomatoes may include five or six. A heap of pineapples can consist of three or five, depending on size.

Upstairs we find selections of Indian spices to buy by the scoop. The aroma tickles the senses enticingly. This is where the kava and yaqona sellers also sell their wares. Kava, in Fiji, is known as the pounded form of yaqona sold by the size of the brown paper bags it comes in. Yaqona is the roots of the pepper plant, *piper methysticum*, which is sold as bundles if you want to pound your own.

When we arrived in 2010 the touts were waiting for us. They only appeared when a ship arrived. Their tactic was to approach you as you crossed the bridge near the seawall. They would engage you in initial conversation, ask your name and quickly scuttle off to produce an on-the-spot hand carved item with your name embellished on it with the expectation that you would buy it.

Thankfully we had been pre-warned of this practice and declined to offer up our names, no matter how friendly the conversation. The tout force grew in numbers as more cruise ships arrived, so occasionally things would get ugly. Tourists weren't prepared for this opportunistic affront which was backed up by expectations that they weren't aware of.

City authorities and tourist police clamped down on touts since then making the tourism experience far more pleasant. While I can appreciate that any way to make a dollar is a driving factor in developing countries, the approach was quite intimidating and unsettling, especially for a sole female parent.

Venturing away from the markets we found handicraft markets near the seawall. Here we bargained. This was my 14 year old son's first introduction to bartering. He relished it, as it fed the budding entrepreneurial investment banker lurking within him.

Tiny stalls all offering similar products, some of which we witnessed being carved or woven as we wandered.

Suva offered up streets of shops that ranged from bright cotton bula fabric to intricate 22 carat gold jewellery to burnt DVDs of yet-to-be-released movies. The burnt DVD industry has also been curbed.

Combing through the grocery shops to discover new products is always a favourite first time experience for me in a new country. Sometimes I walk away being none the wiser to what the product is used for, sometimes my curiosity is piqued enough to buy and try. Aromas from food courts wafted from blends of Asian chop suey, Indian curries and Fijian vakalolo dishes. Gloria Jeans or McDonalds was the standby option for sceptical children.

Sukuna Park, near the water, at the edge of the main shopping area was an obvious meeting place for locals, some sharing sandwiches; others in groups singing and entertaining themselves; some snoozing under the shade of the sprawling trees in the afternoon sun. Hints of old colonial facades can still be seen under the street signage of Victoria Parade as a street parade marched past.

So by now we had two very different tastes of Fiji. One was a very upmarket touristy browse-as-you-will, buy-as-you-like experience and the other an everyday city bustling with shop assistants, who like to be in your personal space as they shadow you, and a need to have street smarts and be wary.

Back onboard, the view over the marketplace, showed the mayhem of the bus stand. Buses were coming and going, hundreds of people moving around alighting and boarding at the end of the work day. I marvelled at how disorganised it all looked. Even at a height it seemed challenging to watch the herd of people walking in every direction, taxis tooting, and the barrage of open sided buses coughing out their diesel fumes as they took people to their destinations.

Bula was the word everyone used in passing, always with a smile.

Little did I know at the time of departure that, in the future, Suva would become my home and I would use the word bula every day, many times a day.

Our third and final Fijian port of call was an island in the Kadavu group to the south of Viti Levu, a small island with no roads and no transport, other than feet. The island had one village of roughly 100 people and a marine research field station for the University of the South Pacific. The island is perched near the Astrolobe reef, a must-do experience for divers.

There was lovo on offer for lunch, and kava, of course. The villagers sold some of their wares, bright sulus waved in the breeze and they performed the meke for the tourists but that was the sum total of man-made entertainment.

Mother nature provided different entertainment. We walked to the other side of the island. A steep hill on the way gave us a brilliant view back to the cruise ship before our return. All the while we were followed by a dog we called Spot, for no particular reason.

Finding a quiet tourist free patch of finely ground coral and sand, away from the village festivities, we spent the rest of our day lazing on the beach, snorkelling and swimming. We broke open an aged coconut and ate the flesh; we rounded up hermit crabs and raced them in a rounded divot in the sand. We collected shells and made patterns in the sand. We built miniature rafts, and fossicked through the flotsam for building materials.

The beach was of shell grit, littered with driftwood and shaded by coconut palms. This is the essence of island life.

Our three day introduction to Fiji presented three different experiences and three vastly different environments with the most memorable day being the one we spent baking and relaxing under the Fijian sun.