

History

VITIAN HISTORY

Shaped over 35 centuries, Fiji's precolonial history is a complex blend of influences by Polynesian, Melanesian and, to a lesser extent, Micronesian peoples who came and either left or stayed.

The original inhabitants of Fiji called their home Viti. These were Lapita people, probably from Vanuatu, who arrived about 1220 BC and stayed for only a short while before disappearing from the archaeological record. Their descendants, who became assimilated with people who arrived from Melanesia, were coastal dwellers, who initially relied on fishing and seem to have lived in relative peace. Around 500 BC a shift towards agriculture occurred along with an expansion of population – probably due to further incursions from other parts of Melanesia – that led to an increase in intertribal feuding. Cannibalism became common and in times of war, villages moved to ring-ditched fortified sites. By around AD 1000 Tongan invasions had started and continued sporadically until the arrival of Europeans.

Eventually the islands became known to Europeans as Fiji. The story goes that Captain Cook asked the Tongans what the name of the islands to their west was. He heard 'Feegee', the Tongan pronunciation of Viti: so 'Fiji' came from an Englishman's mishearing of a Tongan's mispronunciation!

While there were extended periods of peace, Fiji was undergoing intense social upheaval at the time of the first European settlement in the early 19th century, and these regular tribal skirmishes lead Europeans to believe that it was in a constant state of war.

EUROPEAN EXPLORERS & TRADERS

The goal of Europeans who sailed the Pacific during the 17th and 18th centuries was to find *terra australis incognita*, the great 'unknown southern land' later called Australia. Some of them bumped into Fiji on the way.

Abel Tasman became the first European to sail past the Fiji islands in 1643, and his descriptions of treacherous reef systems kept mariners away for the next 130 years. The English navigator James Cook visited uneventfully, stopping on Vatoa in the southern Lau Group in 1774. After the famous mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789, Captain Bligh and his castaway companions passed between Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, through a channel now known as Bligh Water.

Tongans had long traded colourful *kula* feathers, *masi* (printed bark cloth) and weapons with the eastern Fiji islands. From the early 19th century, European whalers, and traders of sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber), tackled their fears of reefs and cannibals and also began to visit.

Fragrant sandalwood was highly valued in Europe and Southeast Asia. Tongans initially controlled the trade, obtaining sandalwood from the chiefs of Bau Bay on Vanua Levu, and then selling it to the Europeans. However, when Oliver Slater – a survivor of the shipwrecked *Argo* – discovered the

There's a widespread legend that the first Fijians arrived from Tanganyika, East Africa in the ancestral canoe *Kaunitoni*.

Lapita pottery found at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes – now open to visitors – suggest this was one of the earliest settlements in Viti.

Crimson ceremonial *kula* feathers come from the common collared lory, a chunky, multicoloured, acrobatic parrot that hangs out in small flocks.

TIMELINE 1220 BC

Lapita people arrive, probably from Vanuatu, and settle on the coasts

500 BC

Melanesians from elsewhere in the Pacific arrive and begin permanent settlement

Life in Feejee: Five Years Among the Cannibals by a Lady (whaler's wife Lady Mary Wallis) provides an alarmingly frank and often funny read. Look for David Routledge's edition of her 1840s journals.

location of the supply, he spread the news of its whereabouts and in 1805 Europeans began to trade directly with Fijians, bartering metal tools, tobacco, cloth, muskets and gunpowder. By 1813 the accessible supply of sandalwood was exhausted, but the introduction of firearms and the resulting increase in violent tribal warfare were lasting consequences of the trade.

Considered a tasty delicacy in Asian markets, *bêche-de-mer* was another lucrative commodity. The intensive harvesting and drying process required hundreds of workers for a single *bêche-de-mer* station. Chiefs who sent their villagers to work boosted their own wealth and power, and it's estimated that 5000 muskets were traded during this period. It, too, was a short-lived trade, lasting from 1830 to 1850.

Expanding Chiefdoms & Tongan Influence

By 1829 the chiefdom of Bau, in eastern Viti Levu where trade with Europeans had been most intense, had accumulated great power. Bauan chief Cakobau, known to foreigners as Tui Viti (King of Fiji), was at the height of his influence by 1850 despite having no real claim over most of Fiji. But in 1848, Tongan noble Enele Ma'afu had led an armada of war canoes to capture Vanua Balavu in northern Lau. He became governor of all Tongans in Lau and by 1854 he was a serious threat to Cakobau's power. By the late 1850s, the Tongans were the controlling force in eastern Fiji.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Missionaries

In the 1830s London Missionary Society pastors and Wesleyan Methodist missionaries arrived in Southern Lau to find converts and to preach against cannibalism.

Progress was slow until the chiefs started to convert. Powerful Cakobau somewhat reluctantly adopted Christianity in 1854. This was a triumph for the Methodist Church, who later sent Reverend Baker out to spread the gospel in the western highlands of Viti Levu. In 1867, unfortunately

Contact with the firearms – and diseases – of Europeans had a marked impact on Fiji's ethnic population, which only recently regained its 18th-century level.

GOING NATIVE

Trade was often helped along by beachcombers. Generally regarded as 'white savages', these were mainly deserting or shipwrecked sailors, or escaped convicts from the recently established penal colony of Australia. Sensible beachcombers increased their chances of survival by making themselves useful to chiefs, serving as interpreters and go-betweens with the Europeans, and as carpenters and marksmen.

Charles Savage was especially influential. After being shipwrecked on the *Eliza* in 1808, the Swede retrieved muskets and ammunition from the wreck and helped Bau to become one of the most powerful chiefdoms in Fiji. In return for war service he received a privileged position and many wives, and survived for about five years before being killed in battle. His skull was preserved as a *kava* bowl.

First marooned in Tonga, Harry Danford made his way to Fiji's Namosi Highlands in 1846. He repaired muskets, acted as a doctor, and advised Chief Kuruduadua in his dealings with European settlers. Harry guided several expeditions into the interior of Viti Levu: his knowledge of the language and culture – not to mention his survival for a decade in previously 'unknown' territory – made him a legendary figure.

for him, he was killed and eaten by locals who resented his manner and the imposition of ideas associated with Bau (see p120).

Christianity became accepted for its similarity to the existing beliefs of *tabu* (sacred prohibitions) and *mana* (spiritual power), and most Fijians adopted it alongside their traditional spirituality. Many villagers continue to worship their ancestral gods through such practices as *kava* ceremony, *tabu* areas and codes of conduct, and the symbolic *tabua* (whales' teeth; see below).

Commercial Settlers

By the 1830s a small whaling settlement had been established at Levuka, on Ovalau, which became one of the main ports of call in the South Pacific for traders and warships. In 1840 Commandant Charles Wilkes led a US expedition to Fiji that produced the first reasonably complete chart of the Fijian islands. He also negotiated a port-regulation treaty whereby the chiefdom of Bau was paid for the protection of foreign ships and the supply of provisions.

This mutually beneficial relationship was fraught with tension. Relations began to deteriorate in 1841 when Levuka was razed by fires, which the settlers suspected Cakobau of instigating. Later, during the 1849 US Independence Day celebrations, the Nukulau island home of US consul John Brown Williams was destroyed by fire and locals helped themselves to his possessions. Williams held Cakobau (as nominal King of Fiji) responsible for the actions of his people and sent him a substantial damages bill.

Cakobau came under increasing pressure and in 1862, still claiming to have power over all Fiji, he proposed to Britain's consul that he would cede the islands to Queen Victoria in return for the payment of his debts. The consul declined, but the rumours caused a large influx of settlers to Levuka who bickered among themselves, and disputes erupted with Fijians over land ownership. The town became a lawless and greedy outpost, on the verge of anarchy and racial war. Cakobau's huge debt was not cleared until 1868 when the Australian Polynesia Company agreed to pay it in exchange for land (see p118).

Blackbirding

The worldwide cotton shortage prompted by the American Civil War resulted in a cotton boom in Fiji that indirectly stimulated blackbirding – the

The Nabutautau villagers, whose ancestors ate Reverend Baker in 1867, apologised to his descendants in a public ceremony in the village in 2003.

Missionaries developed written Fijian language – called Bauan – from the dialect spoken in the powerful chiefdom of Bau during the 1830s.

TABUA

Tabua, carefully polished and shaped whales' teeth, were believed to be shrines for the ancestor spirits. They were, and still are, highly valued items and essential to diplomacy. Used as a powerful *sevusevu* – a gift presented as a token of esteem or atonement – the acceptance of *tabua* binds a chief to the gift-giver. Traditionally, a chief's body was accompanied to the grave by a *tabua*.

Originally *tabua* were rare, obtained only from washed-up sperm whales or through trade with Tonga. However, European traders introduced thousands of whale teeth and replicas made of whalebone, elephant tusk and walrus tusk. These negotiation tools became concentrated in the hands of a few dominant chiefdoms, increasing their power.

AD 1000

Tongan and Samoan warriors begin a series of incursions into Vitian territory

1774

Captain Cook hears 'Viti' pronounced as 'Fiji', and thus names the country

1789

Captain William Bligh makes rough navigation charts while drifting between the Vitian islands after the *Bounty* mutiny

1830

The first London Missionary Society pastors arrive and begin to devise a written language

trade in labourers. Europeans brought other Pacific Islanders to labour on the Fijian cotton (and copra and sugar) plantations.

Most were islanders from the southwest Pacific Islands, especially the Solomon islands and New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). Initially, people were coaxed into agreeing to work for three years in return for minimal wages, food, clothing and return passage. Later, chiefs were bribed and men and women were traded for ammunition. By the 1860s and 1870s the practice had developed into an organised system of kidnapping, and stories of atrocities and abuses by recruiters resulted in pressure on Britain to stop the trade. In 1872 the Imperial Kidnapping Act was passed, but it was little more than a gesture as Britain had no power to enforce it.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

With the end of the American Civil War in 1865 came a slump in the world cotton market. In the following years, epidemics swept the country: an outbreak of measles wiped out about one-third of the indigenous Fijian population. Social unrest was on the rise.

Nevertheless, by 1873 Britain was interested in annexing Fiji, citing the need to abolish blackbirding as justification. On the grounds of Cakobau's earlier offer, Fiji was pronounced a British crown colony on 10 October 1874 at Levuka.

If the chiefs could be persuaded to collaborate with the colonisers, then Fiji would likely be more easily, cheaply and peacefully governed, so the colonial government protected Fijian land rights by forbidding sales to foreigners. This successfully retained land rights for the indigenous owners, and 83% of the land is still owned by indigenous Fijian communities. Give or take a dissenting chief or two, it also helped to maintain peace.

Levuka's geography hindered expansion, so the administrative capital was officially moved to Suva in 1882.

Indentured Labour

In a further attempt to maintain good relations with its subjects, the colonial government prohibited the employment of indigenous Fijians as plantation labourers. Fijians were increasingly reluctant to take full-time work for wages, preferring traditional subsistence work that satisfied their village obligations and was less regimented.

Plantation crops such as cotton, copra and sugar cane had the potential to make the Fiji economy self-sufficient, but demanded large pools of cheap labour. Indentured labour seemed the perfect solution. In 1878 negotiations were made with the Indian colonial government for labourers to come to Fiji on five-year contracts, after which time the labourers, or *girmitiyas*, were free to return to India, though free passage for the return trip was only available under certain conditions. They began arriving in Fiji at a rate of about 2000 per year.

About 80% of the labourers were Hindu, 14% Muslim, and the remainder mostly Sikhs and Christians. Overcrowded accommodation gave little privacy, people of different caste and religion were forced to mix, and social and religious structures crumbled. Despite the hardship, the vast majority of *girmitiyas* decided to stay in Fiji once they had served their

contract and many brought their families across from India to join them. For more information on Indo-Fijian history and culture, see p44.

By the early 1900s India's colonial government was being pressured by antislavery groups in Britain to abolish the indenture system. In 1916 recruitment stopped and indenture ended officially in January 1919. By this time, 60,537 indentured labourers were in Fiji.

Power Plays & the World Wars

Fiji's colonial government discouraged interaction between Indians and Fijians. Indians, restricted from buying Fijian land, moved instead into small business, or took out long-term leases as independent farmers.

The 1920s saw the first major struggle for better conditions for Indians and increasing labour unrest. By siding with the Fijians, Europeans diverted attention from their own monopoly on freehold land and their power and influence in the civil service. It was convenient to blame all problems on the Indian community and to exacerbate fears that the size of the Indian population would surpass that of indigenous Fijians.

Fiji had only a minor involvement in WWI: about 700 of Fiji's European residents and about 100 Fijians were sent to serve in Europe. The conflict in the Pacific during WWII was much closer to home. Around 8000 Fijians were recruited into the Fiji Military Force (FMF) and from 1942 to 1943 fought against the Japanese in the Solomon Islands.

INDEPENDENCE & INCREASING ETHNIC TENSION

The 1960s saw a movement towards Fijian self-government and, after 96 years of colonial administration, Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970. In the rush towards independence, important problems such as land ownership and leases, and how to protect the interests of a racially divided country, were not resolved. Fiji's first postindependence election was won by the indigenous Fijian Alliance Party (FAP). But despite an economic boom in the immediate postindependence years, by the early 1980s there was a decline in the price of sugar and the reality of the country's accumulating foreign debt began to hit home.

Ethnic tensions became apparent as the economy worsened. In Fiji most shops and transport services were (and still are) run by Indo-Fijian families. A racial stereotype developed portraying Indo-Fijians as obsessed with making money despite the fact that, like indigenous Fijians, the vast majority belonged to poorer working classes and – unlike indigenous Fijians – would never secure land tenure on their farming leases.

The FAP was perceived to be failing indigenous Fijians in their hopes for economic advancement. Greater unity among workers led to the formation of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and in April 1987 an FLP government was elected in coalition with the National Federation Party (NEP). Despite having an indigenous Fijian prime minister, Timoci Bavadra, and a cabinet comprising an indigenous Fijian majority, the new government was labelled 'Indian dominated' as the majority of its MPs were Indo-Fijian.

Military Coups of the 1980s

The victory of the coalition immediately raised racial tensions in the country. The extremist Taukei movement played on Fijian fears of losing their

For a clear, concise and readable overview of Fijian and regional history, dip into *Worlds Apart: A History of the Pacific Islands* by IC Campbell.

For daily news, views and sports information check out the *Fiji Times*, established in 1869 and currently owned by the Murdoch media empire, at www.fijitimes.com.

1867

Methodist minister Reverend William Baker is eaten by villagers in the Western Highlands

1874

Fiji cedes to Britain on 10 October in a ceremony at Levuka

1879

The first group of Indian indentured labourers, *girmitiyas*, arrives to work in the sugarcane fields

1951

Fiji Airways, now Air Pacific, is founded

GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS

The basic unit of Fijian administration is the *koro* (village) headed by the *turaga-ni-koro* (a hereditary chief), who is appointed by the village elders. Several *koro* are linked as a *tikina*, and several *tikina* form a *yasana* or province. Fiji is divided into 14 *yasana*, and each has a high chief.

The Great Council of Chiefs was created by British colonisers to strengthen the position of the cooperating, ruling Fijian elite, and it gained great power after the military coups of the 1980s and the introduction of the 1990 constitution. The council appoints the president, who in turn is responsible for appointing judges, in consultation with the Judicial & Legal Services Commission. It also has authority over any legislation related to land ownership and common rights. The council supported the 2000 coup, as well as the controversial 2005 Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, which seeks to offer amnesty to the perpetrators of the coup.

land rights and of Indo-Fijian political and economic domination. On 14 May 1987, only a month after the elections, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka took over from the elected government in a bloodless coup and formed a civil interim government supported by the Great Council of Chiefs.

In September 1987, Rabuka again intervened with military force. The 1970 constitution was invalidated, Fiji was declared a republic and Rabuka proclaimed himself head of state. The following month, Fiji was dismissed from the Commonwealth of Nations.

The coups, which were supposed to benefit all indigenous Fijians, in fact caused immense hardship and benefited only an elite minority. When the Indo-Fijians were effectively removed from the political process, tensions within the indigenous Fijian community were exposed. These included conflicts between chiefs from eastern and western Fiji; between high chiefs and village chiefs; between urban and rural dwellers; and within the church and trade-union movement.

The economic consequences of the coups were drastic. The economy's two main sources of income, tourism and sugar, were severely affected. Development aid was suspended and from 1987 to 1992 about 50,000 people – mostly Indo-Fijian skilled tradespeople and professionals – emigrated.

Tipping the Scales

On 25 July 1990 a new constitution was proclaimed. It greatly increased the political power of the Great Council of Chiefs and of the military while diminishing the position of Indo-Fijians in government. Indo-Fijian political leaders immediately opposed the constitution, claiming it was racist and undemocratic. As the 1992 elections approached, the Great Council of Chiefs disbanded the multicultural FAP and in its place formed the Soqosoqo-ni-Vakavulewa-ni Taukei (SVT; Party of Policy Makers for Indigenous Fijians). Rabuka returned to the scene as interim prime minister and party leader of the SVT. Changing his hardline approach, he was twice elected, in 1992 and 1994.

The 1997 Constitution

In 1995, a Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) presented its findings. It called for a return to a multiethnic democracy and, while accepting

that the position of president be reserved for an indigenous Fijian, proposed no provision of ethnicity for the prime minister. The government acted on most of the CRC's recommendations and a new constitution was declared in 1997.

In the same year, Rabuka apologised to Queen Elizabeth for the 1987 military coups, presented her with a whale's tooth *tabua* as a gesture of atonement and the following month Fiji was readmitted to the Commonwealth.

The May 2000 Coup

In the May 1999 elections, voters rejected Rabuka's SVT and its coalition partners. The FLP won the majority of seats and its leader Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister.

Many indigenous Fijians were far from pleased. Convinced that their traditional land rights were at stake, protests increased and many refused to renew expiring 99-year land leases to Indo-Fijian farmers. On 19 May 2000, armed men entered the parliamentary compound in Suva and took 30 hostages, including Prime Minister Chaudhry. Failed businessman George Speight quickly became the face of the coup, claiming to represent indigenous Fijians. He demanded the resignation of both Chaudhry and President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and that the 1997 multiethnic constitution be abandoned.

Support for Speight's group was widespread and Indo-Fijians suffered such harassment that many fled the country. Chaudhry, despite having suffered broken ribs during a beating by his captors, refused to resign. Finally, in an attempt to bring the situation to an end, President Ratu Mara unwillingly announced that he was removing Chaudhry from power. Speight's group demanded Mara's resignation as well and, with lawlessness increasing and the country divided over his role, Ratu Mara relinquished power. The head of Fiji's military, Commander Frank Bainimarama, announced martial law. After long negotiations between Speight's rebels and Bainimarama's military, and after eight weeks in captivity, the hostages were released and the 1997 constitution was revoked.

International disapproval for the coup was meted out as trade sanctions and sporting boycotts. Travellers were given warnings to steer clear of Fiji. The economy, particularly the tourism sector, was hit hard and many businesses folded.

In March 2001, the appeal court decided to uphold the 1997 constitution and ruled that Fiji be taken to the polls in order to restore democracy. Lasenia Qarase, heading the Fijian People's Party (SLD), won 32 of the 71 parliamentary seats in the August 2001 elections. Claiming that a multiparty cabinet in the current circumstances would be unworkable, Qarase proceeded to defy the spirit of the constitution by including no FLP members in his 18-strong cabinet.

In the meantime, Speight pleaded guilty to treason. He was given a death sentence that was quickly commuted to life imprisonment, likely out of fear of further protests and rioting. Ironically, Speight is serving out this sentence on the small island of Nukulau off Suva. This is the island where, in 1849, the looting of the US consul's house acted

Fiji's first coup took place 108 years to the day after the arrival of the *Leonidas* carrying the first group of Indian indentured labourers.

The 2000 coup is described from the inside by one of the hostages, and from the outside by one of the journalists on the scene, in *Speight of Violence*, by Michael Field, Tupeni Baba & Unaisi Nabobo-Baba.

1970

Fiji becomes independent on 10 October after 96 years of colonial rule

1979

A remake of *The Blue Lagoon* in the Yasawas catapults Brooke Shields to teenage stardom

1987

Two military coups take place under the leadership of Lt Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka; Fiji is expelled from the Commonwealth

1997

A new constitution calls for return to multiethnic democracy; two years later Indo-Fijian Mahendra Chaudhry becomes prime minister

Borrowing a line from Quentin Tarantino, opponents of the 2005 Promotion of Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill sported 'Kill Bill' stickers.

as an impetus for cession of Fiji to Britain; one of the major products of cession was the coming of the first indentured labourers, the presence of whose descendants sufficiently enraged Speight to instigate the 2000 coup.

TO BE CONTINUED...

With a general election due in 2006, it will be interesting to see what the future holds. While the economy slowly struggles to its feet after 2000, and tourists return to Fiji, in many places racial issues continue to simmer. There are notable exceptions: in the west of Viti Levu, for example, Indians and Fijians have lived amicably for decades under leadership that has encouraged racial tolerance and collaborative development.

The Qarase government's draft Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (PRTU) Bill divided the country during 2004 and 2005. Supporters say it will start to heal the wounds left by the last coup; opponents say that its amnesty provisions will allow those involved in the coup to disown responsibility for their actions. In early 2006 tension between the military (who are opposed to the bill) and the government rose again and rumours of an impending coup hit the airwaves. As this book goes to press, though, negotiation rather than confrontation seems to be the method of resolution.

2000

Businessman George Speight heads the May 19 coup; 30 hostages are held in parliament for eight weeks; Speight is jailed

2005

The draft Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill offers possible amnesty to the 2000 coup perpetrators

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

In Fiji, a smile goes a long way. Fijians welcome *kaivalagi* – foreigners, literally ‘people from far away’ – by going out of their way to assist visitors, or to chat in shops and cafés, and this makes for comfortable travelling. Not wishing to disappoint, a Fijian ‘yes’ might mean ‘maybe’ or ‘no’; this can be disconcerting for visitors.

Despite its recent history of internal conflict, face-to-face confrontation is rare in Fiji and is discouraged. Impersonal forms of dissent and argument are common, though, as a look at the letters page of any Fijian newspaper will show. The presence of Indo-Fijians (descendants of indentured workers) remains both one of the great strengths of, and challenges to, a sense of national identity in the country; see p47.

LIFESTYLE

Food is relatively plentiful and easy to grow in Fiji’s tropical climate, and many people live well and live long; the average life expectancy is 69 years. Unemployment is around 8%, with almost half of all households living below the poverty line. The negative effects of these are mitigated by extended family networks, whose village members often support the town-dwellers with food; the town-dwellers in turn support villagers who come to town for schooling, medical treatment or work.

In rural areas, many aspects of an interdependent way of life remain strong. Indigenous Fijian villagers live in land-owning *mataqali* (extended family groups) under a hereditary chief who allocates land to each family for farming. Clans gather for births, deaths, marriages, *meke* (traditional dances) and *lovo* (feasts). *Yaqona*, or *kava*, drinking is still an important social ceremony; see the boxed text p67. Communal obligations have to be met, including farming for the chief, preparing for special ceremonies and feasts, and village maintenance.

Village life is also conservative: independent thinking is not encouraged and being too different or too ambitious is seen as a threat. Concepts such as *kerekere* and *sevusevu* are still strong, especially in remote areas. *Kerekere* is unconditional giving based on the concept that time and property is communal; this can prove difficult, for example, for anyone attempting to start up a village shop. *Sevusevu* is the presentation of a gift such as *kava* for, say, permission to visit a village or, more powerfully, a *tabua* (whale’s tooth) as a token of reconciliation or as a wedding gift.

Fiji is becoming increasingly urbanised, and traditional values and the wisdom of elders are often less respected in towns and cities. Many young people travel to the cities for education, employment or to escape the restrictions of village life, but the increased freedom comes with competition for jobs and a less supportive social structure. Television’s mostly imported programmes present different values and contradictory messages to the ones associated with village life.

The population drift to urban centres is becoming a challenge for Fiji, with squatter-settlements on the edges of many towns; see p128 for more details. As everywhere, high levels of deprivation have led to an obvious presence of beggars and street kids, and to the increased use of alcohol and drugs, and accompanying crime.

For those in work, disposable income is almost nonexistent. With wages for government workers around \$150 a week – and just \$50 for

The UN’s Human Development Report provides detailed information annually about Fiji’s position in the world development rankings. Link to Fiji on their website <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics>.

Fijians are usually happy to have their photo taken (or are too polite to say no) but always ask first. Consider sending photos as a thank-you present.

HOME & HOSTED: VILLAGE ETIQUETTE

If you visit a village uninvited, ask to see the headman at once; it's not proper just to turn up and look around. Never wander around unaccompanied: beaches, reefs and gardens are all someone's private realm. Complex codes of behaviour are in operation; do as you're asked, and discreetly find out why later.

- Dress modestly; sleeves and *sulu* or sarongs are fine for both men and women. You will rarely see adult Fijians swimming and when they do they cover up with a T-shirt and *sulu*. Wear slip-on shoes: they're easier to take off when entering houses or temples.
- Take off your hat and sunglasses, and carry bags in your hands, not over your shoulder; it's considered rude to do otherwise.
- It is rare to see public displays of affection between men and women so curtail your passions in public to avoid embarrassing or offending locals.
- Bring *yaqona* (*kava*) with you. This is for your *sevusevu*, requesting permission to visit the village from the *turaga-ni-koro* (hereditary chief) and, in effect, the ancestral gods. He will welcome you in a small ceremony likely to develop into a *talanoa* (gossip session) around the *tanoa* (*yaqona* bowl) so be prepared to recount your life story. The custom throughout Fiji is to finish drinking *yaqona* before dining. Be warned – this can result in some very late meals!
- Check with your host if you can take photos and wait until after the *sevusevu* to start snapping.
- Stoop when entering a *bure* (thatched dwelling) and quietly sit cross-legged on the pandanus mat. It is polite to keep your head at a lower level than your host's. Fijians regard the head as sacred – never ever touch a person's head.
- If you're staying overnight, and had planned to camp but are offered a bed, accept it; it may embarrass your hosts if they think their *bure* is not good enough. If you'll be bathing in the river or at a shared tap, wear a *sulu* while you wash.
- The custom of *kerekere* means that people may ask you for things. If you don't want to give an item away, just say that you can't do without it; but be sensitive to people's lack of material goods, and take minimum gear on village visits.
- Travel with thank-you gifts of tea, tinned meat, or sugar, or contribute some cash to cover costs.
- Sunday is for church and family so avoid visiting then.

unskilled workers – paying the rent is often hard enough. There are exceptions of course, and the salaries of some executives are on a par with the Western world. Spacious houses with big gardens reflect this affluence, but most homes are modest and often crowded.

About 25% of the population is of school-age. Education is heavily subsidised by the government; almost all children attend primary school, and most complete lower secondary education. While not officially segregated, many schools are run by the major religions; Indo-Fijian children tend to go to Hindu or Muslim schools and indigenous Fijians tend to go to Christian schools. There's also a Chinese-Fijian school in Suva.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) was established in 1968 as a Pacific regional university, with its main campus in Suva. The Fiji School of Medicine (FSM) and the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) are also in Suva.

POPULATION

Fiji's population is guesstimated to be around 836,000. Population growth has almost halved in the last 30 years or so, with Fijians opting to have smaller families, and about 30% of Fijians are aged under 15. About 60% of Fijians are urban dwellers, which is high given that urban centres are few.

English is the official language of Fiji, literacy stands at 97%, and Fiji is regarded as the educational centre of the Pacific.

The government categorises people by their racial origins, as you'll notice on the immigration arrival card. 'Fijian' means indigenous Fijian, and while many Indo-Fijians have lived in Fiji for several generations, they are referred to as 'Indian', just as Chinese-Fijians are 'Chinese'. Fijians of other Pacific Island descent are referred to by the nationality of their ancestors. Australians, Americans, New Zealanders – and Europeans – are 'Europeans'. Mixed Western and Fijian heritage makes a person officially 'part-European'. There is relatively little intermarriage.

Several thousand people from the island of Rotuma have moved to 'mainland' Fiji to pursue a level of education and work that their remote northern island can't offer. I-Kiribati from Banaba island and Tuvaluans from Vaitupu island have resettled on Rabi and Kaio islands off Vanua Levu.

MULTICULTURALISM

One of Fiji's hot topics, the almost equal number of Fijians and Indo-Fijians has shaped the country's culture for both the better and the worse. From colonial days the notion of racial integration and sense of one national identity has been discouraged, and the legacy has been maintained by successive Fiji administrations. There is ongoing tension between land-owning ethnic Fijians, and entrepreneurial Indo-Fijians – in simplified terms, this is tension between those who have power but little capital, and those with capital but little power. Visitors, though, will rarely sense this tension, and the upside of Fiji's cultural heritage is a heady mix of laid-back Melanesian lifestyle and Indian commercial street scenes. See p44 for more information on Indo-Fijian culture.

MEDIA

Newspapers are printed in English, Fijian, Hindi and Chinese and are lively forums for the controversial issues – such as race – that people rarely discuss face-to-face. A weekly newspaper, *Kaila*, is aimed at teenagers. Great attention is paid to local and human interest stories, and political journalism treads warily around government sensibilities – in 2004 a New Zealand journalist was blacklisted for his unfavourable reportage in 2000.

There are several Fiji radio stations, mostly of the music, chat and sports variety, and BBC World Service and Radio Australia can be heard on local FM stations. femTALK's 'radio-in-a-suitcase' broadcasts community radio geared towards women's issues.

Television arrived in Fiji in 1991 when Television New Zealand relayed World Cup rugby matches. The one government-run local free-to-air station – called, sensibly, Fiji One – has been criticised for the lack of local content except for news, sport and game-shows: it broadcasts mostly foreign sitcoms and series in English. An exception is *The Pacific Way*, a monthly programme about development issues in the region, made by the media unit of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and usually shown around the third Sunday of the month. At about 10pm Fiji One switches over to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Asia-Pacific TV station for overnight viewing of ancient serials and documentaries. Fee-for-service satellite channels are available in most hotels and bars.

RELIGION

Traditional Fijian religion was based on ancestor worship whereby, for example, a good warrior became a war god after death, or an outstanding farmer became a god of plenty. Belief in an afterlife was strong, with priests mediating between people and the gods who required appeasement by initiation ceremonies, mutilation rituals and mourning sacrifices.

Islanders from Banaba (Ocean Island), Kiribati, were resettled on Rabi, Vanua Levu after their homeland had been stripped bare by phosphate mining.

The International Press Institute's annual World Press Freedom Review is both broadly encouraging and constructively critical about Fiji's media at www.freemedia.at.

GROWING PAINS

In traditional Vitian society, growing up may well have been dreaded by young girls. Until the 20th century, a girl's initiation into adulthood was marked by the *veiqia* rite, the elaborate tattooing of the pubic area. Each village had a female *duabati* (hereditary tattoo specialist) who used a spiked pick, light mallet, bamboo slivers, sharp shells and soot to create the blue-black designs. Often a few girls were tattooed at once, taking turns to hold each other down. The ritual would stretch out over weeks or months and was carried out during the day when men were out, to conceal the screaming.

It was believed that untattooed women would be persecuted by the ancestor spirits in the afterlife – slashed about the pubic region or pounded to a pulp and fed to the gods – so girls were loath to defy the custom. Even after missionaries had suppressed what they saw as a pagan ritual, fake tattoos were sometimes painted on dead girls in an attempt to bluff the gods.

These practices appalled the first missionaries and from the 1830s onwards the old religion was gradually supplanted by Christianity, now enthusiastically practiced by most Fijians. About 52% of Fijians are Christians, the majority of whom (about 37% of the population) are Methodists, and the church is a powerful force in internal affairs. There's a Catholic minority of around 9%, and evangelical Christian churches are increasingly popular.

The arrival of Indian indentured labour brought other religions to Fiji. Hinduism is practised by 38% of the population, and Islam by about 8%. About 2% of the population follow other religions or none.

WOMEN IN FIJI

On paper, Fiji's working women are doing relatively well. Women received the right to vote and to stand for parliament in 1963, yet still hold only 6% of seats in parliament. While 51% of senior officials and managers are women, they earn only 36% of their male counterpart's salary.

There's an active Fiji Women's Rights Movement, which helped push the Family Law Bill through parliament in 2004; women now have the right to pursue issues around child custody, access and maintenance. Paid maternity leave, while rarely matching a full-time wage, makes it easier for working women to spend more time with their babies.

In much of Fiji, violence disguised as a cultural norm prevails. According to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, two-thirds of men in Fiji consider it acceptable to hit the women in their family, and incidents of random violence against women are common.

SPORT

Rugby, especially popular with indigenous Fijians, is the one sport that has continually put Fiji on the world sporting scene since the first match between Fijian and British soldiers was held in 1884. Under coach and captain Waisale Serevi, the national team took the Rugby World Cup Sevens title for the second time in 2005. The rugby season is from April to September and every village in Viti Levu seems to have its own rugby pitch.

Women's rugby, initially a source of some controversy in conservative villages, is gaining acceptance but has nowhere near the resources of the men's game – an invitation for the Fiji women's rugby union to tour South Africa in 2004 had to be declined because of lack of funds.

Soccer is popular with Indo-Fijians. Even if you're not a footy fan, it's worth going to a rugby or soccer match just to watch the crowd!

The British also brought the golfing habit to Fiji; one of the world's current top golfers, Vijay Singh, is Indo-Fijian (see p48 for more on Vijay). There are golf courses on Denarau island, at hotels along Viti Levu's Coral Coast and Suva. Basketball and netball are played widely, and there's a small local surfing circuit.

When the Pacific Games were held in Suva in 2003, new sporting facilities were built and existing ones upgraded. Many regional sporting events are now held in the capital. Check out the sports pages of the *Fiji Times* for venues and events.

ARTS

Traditional arts and crafts such as wood carving and weaving, along with dancing and music, remain an integral part of life in many villages. These traditions have inspired much of the small but thriving Fijian contemporary arts scene, and Suva is the place to seek it out.

The Oceania Centre for Arts & Culture (p124), in the grounds of the USP, provides working space for artists, musicians and dancers. The Fiji Arts Club has an annual exhibition, usually in August or September, in Suva. Suva is also the hub for things literary in Fiji, including occasional readings by members of the Pacific Writing Forum, and performances of work by Fijian playwrights.

Literature

There's still a strong oral storytelling tradition in Fiji, especially in rural areas where nights are long and electricity is limited or nonexistent. When stories are transcribed it's usually into English, and *Myths and Legends of Fiji & Rotuma*, by AW Reed and Inez Hames, gives a good selection.

Fiji has a small but strong community of poets and writers, whose work is often gritty and realist. Joseph C Veramu's 1996 novel *Moving Through*

A HAIRY SITUATION

For indigenous Fijians, the head is *tabu* (sacred) and, in reverence to its sanctity, precolonial Vitians spent entire days with the hairdresser.

Until initiation, boys were kept bald except for one or two upstanding tufts. A man's hair, on the other hand, was a symbol of his masculinity and social standing. Men sported flamboyant, extravagant and often massive hair-dos, ranging from the relatively conventional giant puffball to more original shaggy or geometric shapes. Styles were stiffened into place with burnt lime juice. Hair was dyed grey, sky blue, rust, orange, yellow and white, often striped or multicoloured.

Before initiation, girls wore a lavish cascade of bleached or reddened corkscrew ringlets which hung down to their hips. These ringlets, known as *tobe*, represented the prawns they were destined to fish in later life. Women, on the other hand, wore more conservative hair-dos – close-cropped with random tufts dyed rusty brown or yellow. A wife's hair could never outdo her husband's and a husband's could not outdo the chief's.

People slept on raised wooden pillows to keep their coiffure from being spoilt. The head was especially dressed for festive occasions with scalp scratchers (practical for lice), ornamental combs, scarlet feathers, wreaths of flowers, and perfumed with grated sandalwood.

Shaving one's head was a profound sacrifice for a man and was often done as a symbol of mourning or to appease a wrathful ancestral spirit. Women's *tobe* were popular war trophies.

Early Europeans were astonished by the variety of elaborate hair styles. Not long after a missionary measured one indigenous hair-do at 5m in circumference, the custom was deliberately suppressed as a 'flagrant symbol of paganism', not suitable for the 'neat and industrious Christian convert'.

News of the current Fiji arts and entertainment scene can be found at www.kulchavulcha.com or in the fortnightly *Kulcha Vulcha* newsletter available at Suva's coffee shops and elsewhere.

Writers from Fiji and the nearby region are well-represented in poetry and prose in two anthologies, *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English since 1980* and *Niu Waves: Contemporary Writing from Oceania*.

Everything you ever wanted to know about Fiji rugby union – including how the national women's team is doing – can be found at www.teivovo.com.

A BRUSH WITH CULTURE

If you entered an indigenous Fijian village in the mid-19th century, there was enough make-up flying around to make you think you'd landed backstage of a Broadway show. Before the practice was stamped out by the missionaries, Fijians decked themselves out in face and body paint on a daily basis. They worked from a palette of yellow from ginger root or turmeric; black from burnt candlenut, charcoal or fungus spores; and blue and vermilion introduced by the traders. Vermilion became worth its weight in gold and was traded with the Europeans for baskets of *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber).

A typical day saw Fijians made-up in stripes, zigzags and spots. Ceremonies and war called for more specialised designs, often used to carry specific meanings.

Men mostly used red and black, associated with war and death, on their faces and sometimes chests. Young men were covered in turmeric for *buli yaca* (puberty) ceremonies, or renaming ceremonies to celebrate their first enemy kill.

Women favoured yellow, saffron, pink and red body paint, with fine black circles drawn around their eyes for beauty. In the first three months of pregnancy, women were painted with turmeric as, during pregnancy, a woman was under sexual *tabu*. (Males found smudged with turmeric paint were ridiculed.) After the birth, both mother and baby would be made-up again until the baby was weaned. The bodies of dead or dying women were adorned with turmeric or vermilion paint.

These days, there's not a stripe or a zigzag to be found among indigenous Fijians; however, in the Indo-Fijian society, body painting still remains an important and commonly practiced art. In a tradition brought from India, intricate henna (or *mehndi*) designs are most commonly painted on women's hands and feet for marriage ceremonies. Painting the bride is a ceremony in itself, seen as both therapeutic and spiritual, and most designs are linked to religious beliefs and practices. Hidden in the design will often be the initials of the husband. If the husband can find them, he will be the dominant partner; if he fails, his wife will rule the roost. The henna lasts anywhere from a few days to three weeks; as long as it does, the new bride is exempt from all housework.

As in the rest of the world, henna 'tattoos' are becoming trendy and you may spot young Indo-Fijian women painting them onto customers in the markets.

the Streets is an eye-opener about disaffected youth in Suva. Daryl Tarte's sweeping historical saga *Fiji*, and more recent novel *Stalker on the Beach*, both look at the influence of outsiders on the country.

Beyond Ceremony: An Anthology of Fiji Drama showcases Fiji's playwrights including Vilsoni Hereniko, Sudesh Mishra, Jo Nacola, Raymond Pillai and Larry Thomas; look out for occasional performances of their work in Suva.

Since the 1970s Indo-Fijian writers have increasingly worked in English. Writers of note include Subramani, Satendra Nandan, and poet Mohit Prasad who wrote *Eating Mangoes* (2001). The theme of the injustice of indenture – and, latterly, the experience of the coups – rates highly in Indo-Fijian literature.

Collections of women writers' poetry include *Of Schizophrenic Voices* by Frances Koya and *Nei Nim Manoa* by Teresia Teaiwa.

Cinema

Fiji's gorgeous scenery has attracted filmmakers since the original *Blue Lagoon* was filmed in the Yasawas in 1948. It was remade there in 1979 starring Brooke Shields, and *Return to the Blue Lagoon* with Milla Jovovich was shot on Taveuni in 1991. In 2001 Tom Hanks filmed *Castaway* on Monuriki in the Mamanuca islands, where Jodie Foster's 'heaven' sequence in the sci-fi movie *Contact* was also filmed. The fantastically

awful *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*, released in 2004, was filmed in the waterways and hills around Pacific Harbour.

The Fiji Audio Visual Commission, formed in 2002, hopes to attract more filmmakers to the country by offering significant tax incentives. Yaqara Studio City, a huge and high-tech audiovisual complex, is in development in western Viti Levu.

Fiji's first home-grown feature film, *The Land Has Eyes*, is set during the last gasp of colonialism in 1960s Rotuma. Made in Rotuman language with English subtitles, and a mostly local (and nonprofessional) cast, it paints a wonderfully low-key picture of a community on the cusp of change.

Music

For a taste of contemporary pop and rock music, check out popular local musicians Seru Serevi and Danny Costello, and bands including Delai Sea and Voqa ni Delai Dokidoki. The band Black Rose has become Fiji's most successful music export. Reggae has been influential and is very popular, and there are a couple of jazz bands in Suva. Sunday church services usually feature fantastic choir singing. The Oceania Centre produces CDs of Pacific music with a contemporary twist; listen to, for example, Sailasa Torā's album *Wasawasa*.

Indo-Fijian singer Aiysha is a big hit in India, and local Indo-Fijian band The Bad Boys play at venues around Fiji. Music from Bollywood films, and Indian dance and pop music is popular, as is classical *qawali*. Vocal, tabla (percussion) and sitar lessons are given at Indian cultural centres.

Dance

Visitors are often welcomed at resorts and hotels with *meke*, a dance performance that enacts local stories and legends. In the past, *meke* were accompanied by a chanting chorus or by 'spiritually possessed seers', as well as by rhythmic clapping, the thumping and stamping of bamboo clacking sticks and the beating of slit drums. The whole community participated in *meke*. In times of war, men performed the *cibi*, or death dance, and women the *dele* or *wate*, a dance in which they sexually humiliated enemy corpses and captives. Dancing often took place by moonlight or torchlight, with the performers in costume, and with bodies oiled, faces painted and combs and flowers decorating their hair.

Traditional Chinese dancing is also still practised in Fiji, and Indian classical dance, including Bharat Natyam and *kathak*, is taught at Indian cultural centres.

MELODIOUS MEASURES

Replaced with guitars and keyboards, traditional indigenous instruments are a rare find in Fiji these days. Yet once upon a time, nose flutes were all the rage. Made from a single piece of bamboo, some 70cm long, the flute would be intricately carved and played by your typical laid-back Fijian, reclined on a pandanus mat and resting his or her head on a bamboo pillow. Whether it was the music or the pose, flutes were believed to have the power to attract the opposite sex and were a favourite for serenading.

Other instruments had more practical purposes, such as shell trumpets and whistles which were used for communication. Portable war drums were used as warnings and for communicating tactics on the battlefield. One instrument you are still likely to see (and hear) is the *lali*, a large slit drum made of resonant timbers. Audible over large distances, its deep call continues to beckon people to the chief's *bure* or to church.

Fiji's first indigenous film, *The Land Has Eyes*, filmed in Rotuma by Rotuman-born writer and filmmaker Vilsoni Hereniko, premiered to rave reviews in 2004 and was submitted for nomination in the 2005 Academy Awards

Check out the latest literary offerings from and about Fiji and the Pacific online at the University of the South Pacific's bookshop www.uspbookcentre.com.

For a more contemporary dance experience, look out for performances by the Oceania Dance Theatre (p124) in Suva.

Architecture

TRADITIONAL

The most beautiful example of a traditional Fijian village is Navala (p144), nestled in the Viti Levu highlands. It is the only village remaining where every home is a *bure*. *Bure*-building is a skilled trade passed from father to son, although the whole community helps during construction and people know how to maintain its woven walls and thatched roof. Today, however, most villagers live in simple rectangular, pitched-roof houses made from industrialised materials requiring less maintenance. For more information on *bure*, see p81.

COLONIAL

The historic town of Levuka (p174), the former capital of Fiji, has been nominated for World Heritage Listing. A number of buildings here date from its boom period of the late 19th century, and the main streetscape is surprisingly intact, giving the impression that the town has been suspended in time.

The British influence on Suva is reflected in its many colonial buildings, including Government House, Suva City Library, and the elegantly decaying Grand Pacific Hotel, due for renovation in 2006.

MODERN

Some of the country's modern architecture combines modern technology with traditional Fijian aesthetics, knowledge and materials. Notable buildings include the parliament complex, the USP campus in Suva, the *bure Bose* (meeting house) at Somosomo on Taveuni and, begun in 2005, the Great Council of Chiefs complex in Suva.

Resorts with distinctive architecture include the upmarket Vatulele Island Resort, Koro Sun Resort near Savusavu and Raintree Lodge outside Suva.

Pottery

Pottery, first brought to Fiji by the Lapita people, has a 3000-year history in the islands, and some modern potters still use traditional techniques. Wooden paddles of various shapes and sizes beat the pots into shape, while the form is held from within using a pebble anvil. Coil and slab-building techniques are also used. Once dried, pots are fired outdoors in an open blaze on coconut husks, and often sealed with resin varnish taken from the *dakua* tree.

Two of Fiji's best-known pottery villages – Nakabuta, in the lower Sigatoka Valley, and Nasilai, on the Rewa River near Nausori – receive visitors. Pottery demonstrations take place every Tuesday and Thursday on the veranda of the Fiji Museum in Suva.

Wood Carving

Traditional woodcarving skills are largely kept alive by the tourist trade, providing a ready market for war clubs, spears and cannibal forks. *Tanoa* (drinking bowls) and *bilo* – *kava* cups of coconut shell – remain part of everyday life. *Tanoa* shaped like turtles are thought to have derived from turtle-shaped *ibuburau*, vessels used in indigenous Vitian *yaqona* rites.

The Fiji Museum is the best place to see authentic traditional woodcarvings, and there are usually carvings in progress at USP's Oceania

Centre in Suva. Be aware that many 'handmade' artefacts for sale at handicraft centres may have been mass-produced by a machine.

Bark Cloth

Masi, also known as *malo* or *tapa*, is bark cloth with black and rust-coloured printed designs. In Vitian culture, *masi* was invested with status and associated with celebrations and rituals. It was worn as a loincloth by men during initiation rituals, renaming ceremonies and as an adornment in dance, festivity and war. *Masi* was also an important exchange item, used in bonding ceremonies between related tribes. Chiefs were swathed in a huge puffball of *masi*, later given to members of the other tribe.

While men wore the *masi*, production has traditionally been a woman's role. Made from the inner white bark of the paper mulberry bush, which has been soaked in water and scraped clean, it's then beaten and felted for hours into sheets of a fine, even texture. Intricate designs are done by hand or stencil and often carry symbolic meaning. Rust-coloured paints are traditionally made from an infusion of candlenut and mangrove bark; pinker browns are made from red clays; and black from the soot of burnt *dakua* resin and charred candlenuts.

It is difficult to see *masi* being made, though you'll see the end product used for postcards, wall hangings and other decorative items. Textile designers have also begun incorporating traditional *masi* motifs in their fabrics.

Mat & Basket Weaving

Most indigenous Fijian homes use woven *voivoi* or pandanus-leaf to make baskets, floor coverings and fine sleeping mats. Traditionally, most girls living in villages learned to weave, and many still do. Pandanus leaves are cut and laid outdoors to cure, stripped of the spiny edges, and boiled and dried. The traditional method of blackening leaves for contrasting patterns is to bury them in mud for days and then boil them again. The dried leaves, made flexible by scraping with shells, are then split into strips of about 1cm to 2cm and woven. Mat borders are now often decorated in brightly coloured wools instead of parrot feathers.

"What's something creative to do while relaxing under a coconut palm?" you ask. For a user-friendly picture-by-picture guide to basket weaving and other crafts look for a copy of Mereisi Tabualeva's *Traditional Handicrafts of Fiji*.

Fiji's Treasured Culture (www.museum.vic.gov.au/fiji) is an online exhibition of fabulous artefacts held in Museum Victoria (in Melbourne) and Suva's Fiji Museum.

Indo-Fijian History & Culture

Clement Paligaru

It would be hard to imagine Fiji without Indo-Fijians. With enterprise and resilience, they have forged a presence that permeates throughout the country. Despite mostly being the descendants of indentured labourers who arrived in the country up to 130 years ago, Indo-Fijians are still considered *vulagi* (visitors) by many indigenous Fijians. But this has never stopped them making the most of life on the islands, adding their own touch to the rich mosaic of Fiji's cultural traditions.

For a visitor, this Indo-Fijian presence is difficult to ignore. Fiji may well be best known for indigenous ceremonies, *lovo* (earth ovens), leis and crafts; however, Indo-Fijian culture provides another dimension – food, shopping, temples and festivals, as colourful as you would find in Rajasthan but with an undeniably Fijian character.

After decades of living the island life, Indo-Fijians have dispensed with many formalities they carried from India. Instead, a laid-back culture has evolved, forever changed by circumstance and liberal doses of the infectious Pacific way. It's one Indian lifestyle you're unlikely to encounter or enjoy anywhere else in the world.

COMINGS & GOINGS: A HISTORY

The earliest Indian arrivals in Fiji were indentured labourers brought by the British to work in the sugar industry in the 1870s. As the pioneers adapted to life as labourers, they also forged the foundations of a unique Indo-Fijian cultural identity, later bequeathed to generations that followed.

Very early on, it had dawned on most workers that the confines of plantation life were simply too tough and restrictive to accommodate the strict social and religious codes of India. Labourers began socialising, eating and marrying across caste and religious lines. That's not to say religious and cultural practices were abandoned. The new Indo-Fijians simply got rid of the social hang-ups. The 'subversive' practice of selecting only the Indian customs that suited life on the islands had begun.

When the time came to return home after their labour contracts had expired, many Indians decided to remain in Fiji. For many this decision was made because they were not eligible for, or couldn't afford, the costly passage to India. Another reason was the possibility of being kicked out of their communities back home for breaking Indian mores. In any case, the idea of starting anew in Fiji was much more attractive for many Indian labourers. Little did they realize that the bountiful future would also be a fraught one.

By the time indentured labour was abolished in 1919, independent sugar-cane, cotton, tobacco and rice farms had been set up by Indo-Fijians on land mostly leased from indigenous Fijians. Other migrants ran small stores or became public servants and maids. The big move into commerce began in the 1930s, following the arrival of a second wave of business migrants from India. There was no doubt Indo-Fijians were hard working and becoming prosperous. Some indigenous Fijians found they didn't make bad friends either. But their success did not go down well with everyone.

As the new migrants set about laying the foundations for their future, many indigenous Fijians began to feel increasingly uneasy. The customs and ambitions of Indo-Fijians were deemed offensive. And some Fijians regarded the migrants as usurpers of their land. This was despite laws introduced in the late 1800s forbidding the sale of native land, and forever guaranteeing indigenous Fijians over 80% of land ownership. This, however, did not stop the Indo-Fijians from demanding rich arable land for lease. As the Indo-Fijian farmers and businesspeople became prosperous, many indigenous groups became wary of being eclipsed economically. The seeds were sown for decades of dispute, primarily over land leases, between the two ethnic groups.

By the mid-1900s the Indo-Fijians had become indispensable to the economy, dominating agriculture, business and the public service. They also outnumbered indigenous Fijians. But the lack of political power and land-ownership rights remained a source of insecurity for the Indo-Fijians. A previously fledgling campaign for political equality began gaining momentum despite facing stiff resistance from Europeans and Fijians.

When independence from Britain occurred in 1970 the campaign for equality had laid the foundations for race-based politics in the country. After much debate, the new constitution set out an electoral system arranged along racial lines. Indo-Fijians, like other races, would be allocated a set number of seats in parliament. The politics of ethnicity was now institutionalised. To win easy votes, political parties could play the race card.

After independence, Indo-Fijians felt fairly secure under the rule of Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, whose Alliance Party promoted multiracialism. During this period, national celebrations showcasing Indo-Fijian culture alongside the indigenous became the norm. But some Fijians were troubled by this increased acceptance of Indo-Fijian culture. In the mid-1970s the Alliance Party's concessions to Indo-Fijians on issues such as land leases, combined with the lack of prosperity among indigenous Fijians, led to a backlash by nationalists. Warning of an Indo-Fijian takeover, they demanded that 'visitors' leave.

As the Alliance Party scrambled to introduce pro-indigenous policies in the mid-1980s, Indo-Fijian voters turned to the new Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and its platform of social reform. Labour, in coalition with an Indo-Fijian-dominated party won the elections in 1987. But, soon afterwards, it was overthrown in a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. The reason? Although the government was led by an indigenous Fijian, Dr Timoci Bavadra, the idea of an Indo-Fijian-dominated coalition was too much for the nationalists. To ensure the pendulum didn't ever swing back to favour Indo-Fijians, Rabuka introduced a racially biased constitution in 1990. Thousands of skilled and professional Indo-Fijians fled the country.

By the mid-1990s Rabuka, now prime minister, came under pressure internally and internationally to review the 1990 constitution. It was during this review that Fiji came closest to ending its long history of the politics of race. Calls were made to minimise the number of race-based parliamentary seats. A complex system of governance was recommended, which would force parties to cooperate across ethnic lines and 'share power'. The new constitution, declared in 1997, adopted some of these ideas. It was fairer to the Indo-Fijians, but it was not as progressive as some had hoped, and seats were still race based. Nevertheless, constitutional experts lauded the idea of political power sharing in government, which aimed to promote interethnic cooperation.

An Indo-Fijian, Clement Paligaru came to Australia in 1984. He has reported extensively on the Pacific region for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Today's Indo-Fijians are among some 10 million descendants of indentured Indian labourers who live outside India.

The word *gimit* is used to describe the indenture system. It entered the Indo-Fijian lexicon when the *gimitiyas* (early labourers) mispronounced the word agreement.

At least 15 Indo-Fijian religious and cultural associations exist around the country, through which communities maintain cultural and religious affiliations with India. One organisation established the new University of Fiji near Lautoka in 2005.

THE BOLLYWOOD BEAUTY

This 2005 book, by Shalini Akhil, tells the story of Kesh and her cousin, Rupa. Kesh is a feminist, loves pubs, swears a lot and was born and raised in Australia. Her Indo-Fijian cousin Rupa is the exact opposite. She diligently cooks curries, wears saris and is heading for an arranged marriage. When Rupa comes to live with Kesh in Melbourne, their worlds collide. Wicked humour and disarming honesty spice up this tale of culture clash, identity struggle and the Indo-Fijian way. For more information on the book, see www.kai-india.com.

In the 1999 elections, Rabuka was rejected and Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister, FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry, came to office. But within a year, Chaudhry's confrontational style and social-reform agenda proved unpalatable for the nationalists. In 2000 the Chaudhry government was overthrown, following a coup led by nationalists. Chief among Chaudhry's sins was his insistence on a fair outcome for thousands of Indo-Fijian farmers whose long-term land leases were expiring.

After a lengthy series of court battles regarding the coup, Fiji returned to the polls in 2001. The country elected Lasenia Qarase, a declared champion of the indigenous cause, as its leader.

Since Qarase's election, Indo-Fijians have again been leaving the country in droves. But many more have chosen to remain in Fiji, the country they call home, including those Indo-Fijians in the business community who hold Qarase in high regard. Despite acceptance from some Indo-Fijians, many are concerned about Qarase's pro-indigenous policies and his controversial campaign to pardon the jailed perpetrators of the 2000 coup.

THE FIJIAN IN INDO-FIJIAN

One of the most common observations made when Indo-Fijians are compared with Indians on the subcontinent is that they are very relaxed and friendly. There's no doubt that more than a century of living in the islands with laid-back indigenous Fijians who greet others warmly has had an effect. The distance from India and its strict mores has had a profound influence and Indo-Fijians have largely discarded the rigidities of India's caste and social structure. In Fiji, schools, higher-education institutions, the workplace and places of worship do not discriminate according to caste or class differences. As a result, the relative ease

with which Indo-Fijians socialise and engage is arguably one of the characteristics that sets them apart from Indians – especially the middle classes in India. For example, in Fiji wedding invitations from economically disadvantaged or village-based relatives are seized upon by their well-to-do relatives as an opportunity to catch-up with family and indulge in feasting and celebration. Such disregard for social codes would be frowned upon in India. Although some traditions such as arranged marriages are still the norm, Hindu wedding practices have generally changed in Fiji. While still distinctly Indian,



Indo-Fijian muslims, Labasa, Vanua Levu
PHOTO BY TOM COCKREM

weddings in Fiji have largely been standardised and are an amalgam of various traditions. The nuptials are attended by family and friends, and last at least an hour. In some states in India, rituals last just a few minutes, and in other states, they are sometimes witnessed only by a handful of family members.

One of the more significant cultural departures from India has been the emergence of a unique Hindi dialect. Known as 'Fiji-Hindi', it is an amalgam of regional dialects spoken by the indentured labourers from India. Today it is used in all informal family and social settings. In India, it would be regarded as *toota-phoota*, or broken Hindi. But universal use among Indo-Fijians has contributed to its increasing acceptance as a legitimate dialect. For some useful words and phrases in Fiji-Hindi, see p275.

THE INDIAN IN INDO-FIJIAN

With some five generations of history in Fiji, the Indo-Fijian community has forged a strong identity in its adopted homeland. This identity is an unique blend of Fijian and Indian cultures. For an Indo-Fijian, being ethnic Indian as opposed to being indigenous Fijian is about a certain type of upbringing and way of life. The outlook and aspirations of Indo-Fijians emphasise the importance of education and hard work to ensure a secure future. Add thriftiness for good measure and you have the core of the Indo-Fijian package.

India remains an important cultural beacon for Indo-Fijians, influencing rituals, culinary traditions, dress and entertainment. Today these influences provide some of the more obvious signs of cultural distinction between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians.

Most Indo-Fijians love homemade rotis (traditional breads) straight from the kitchen. Steaming curries are served with roti and rice, with condiments completing the meal. Many Indo-Fijians have a weakness for *mithai* (traditional sweets). Out of the home, the curry combo also finds its way to schools, the workplace and the outdoors.

Tradition, pride and identity have also ensured that saris, the colourful Indian dress worn by women, remain popular in Fiji. The Muslim- and Punjabi-influenced *salwaar-kameez* (flowing pant, top and scarf outfit) is also standard. Most Indo-Fijians are practising Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, and across the country, temples and mosques lend a particularly Indian feel to the landscape. The domes, minarets and red flags atop bamboo poles in backyards also serve as a reminder of the strength of Indo-Fijian adherence to the faiths of India. Hindus make up about 38% of Fiji's population and Muslims 8%.

Entertainment and recreation continue to have a decidedly subcontinental flavour for many Indo-Fijians, with the local cinemas providing a regular dose of Hindi-language Bollywood film and music. Indo-Fijian home-entertainment systems are often tuned to provide Bollywood on tap, as well as an endless supply of Hindi-pop music videos. Apart from the pure escapism value, Bollywood films also provide many with the only connection they have with India and subcontinental Hindi.

MILAAP – DISCOVER YOUR ROOTS

A small but growing number of Indo-Fijians are now retracing their ancestral roots in India. Sydney-based documentary maker Satish Rai has been making documentaries about his and others' experiences. Documentaries include *Milaap: Discover Your Indian Roots* (2001) and *Milaap: A Royal Discovery* (2003). Another film is in the pipeline.

On special occasions, such as weddings and festivals, younger family members learn to make *mithai* (traditional sweets).

Fiji remains a popular stopover for Bollywood stars and musicians on overseas tours. Check papers for events if you want a slice of Bollywood action.

Most Indo-Fijians will never visit India. Few now dream of going there. Those who do visit are motivated by a desire to explore their cultural heritage and ancestry, while others simply visit out of curiosity; however, few are compelled to take the journey as an affirmation of their identity; it is Fiji they turn to for that.

ETHNIC TENSIONS

Most aspects of Indo-Fijian lifestyle and culture have comfortably coexisted with the indigenous Fijian way of life for more than a century. A quick look around reveals that large numbers of Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians live side by side, work together and go to the same schools. But apart from attending some sports, entertainment and special occasions together, the two groups still tend not to engage socially. Their economic, educational, cultural and social priorities, including *tabu* (that which is forbidden or sacred), differ. These differences have proven rich fodder for political agitators seeking to exploit the insecurities of indigenous Fijians.

For example, the domination of a few Indo-Fijians in the economic sphere, as well as their high visibility in white-collar occupations, has often been used by nationalists to fan the coals of resentment. In reality, many Indo-Fijians remain economically disadvantaged. Yet the threat of 'eventual Indian domination' has been a recurring theme in Fiji politics.

Quite often, Indo-Fijian success, flamboyance (new cars, big houses and gold jewellery) and materialism have served as convenient reminders of what makes Indo-Fijians different as well as threatening. The perceived lack of Indo-Fijian respect for Fijian customs also serves to annoy many indigenous Fijians. For example, when people are sitting down at a meeting on the ground or floor, Fijian custom requires that you pass them in a crouching motion. The tendency for Indians to walk upright in such situations is seen as arrogant and disrespectful. One coup leader even referred to the way Indians 'look different and smell different' when justifying his actions to the international media.

The Indo-Fijian 'threat' has in fact often served as a perfect smoke-screen for other agendas. Since the 2000 coup, the media has been a forum for speculation about whether the coup was in the economic or political interests of the disenfranchised or whether it only benefited an elite group of indigenous and nonindigenous opportunists. Whether these allegations will reverse entrenched perceptions about Indo-Fijians is yet to be seen. Widespread opposition to Prime Minister Qarase's move to permit the release of jailed 2000 coup leaders indicates that many indigenous Fijians will not blindly follow their nationalist government. Even though the bill is said to be inspired by indigenous concepts of forgiveness, there is recognition that such appeals to indigenous loyalty will serve only to ridicule the law, placate nationalists and divide the races.

VIJAY SINGH

Indo-Fijian Vijay Singh is one of the world's most successful golfers and has won many of the world's prestigious events. When he was young, he used to climb over a fence and dart across the Nadi airport runway to practise on the only course in Fiji. After he left the country in search of his dream, he never thought he would return again. His relationship with Fiji remained on ice for decades but thawed in 2005 when he returned to oversee the planning of a new golf course.

In the mid-1970s Indo-Fijians made up 49% of the country's population. It is estimated by some that, by 2022, Indo-Fijians may comprise just 20% of the population.

There are hundreds of small Hindu clubs called 'mandalis' around the country. Once a week they recite the Indian epic of Ramayana and sing hymns as part of devotional rituals.

COMING TOGETHER

Despite the differences between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians, the way the two groups coexist and influence each other is testament to shared experiences for over a century. In many ways Fiji is already witnessing the synergy that has resulted from cooperation between these two communities. Many Indo-Fijians may be leaving the country in search of economic and political stability, yet this has not stalled the momentum of a mutual cultural exploration by Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians.

Increasing numbers from both communities speak each other's language. In Fiji's cane belts on the western side of Viti Levu and around Labasa on Vanua Levu, many indigenous cane farmers who work alongside Indo-Fijians speak Fiji-Hindi fluently, while their families immerse themselves in Bollywood films. Indo-Fijian music and songs have even been recorded and released commercially by indigenous Fijian artists. Elsewhere, Indo-Fijians in rural communities, including former Christian mission settlements, also speak Fijian.

In larger urban centres, fashion and popular culture are also breaking down barriers. Visit Fiji during the Hindu Diwali festival (held in October or November) and you will see many indigenous Fijian women wearing Indian fashion. More generally, indigenous women are now wearing Indian jewellery and using sari cloth for traditional outfits. Night-clubs are playing Bollywood DJ mixes and bars are serving bowls of curry with drinks the way Indo-Fijians do in their homes. Across the country, sport, in particular soccer, plays a role. Team members hold regular curry, beer and *kava* (a narcotic drink) nights and banter in Hindi or Fijian. Indo-Fijians are now even playing the indigenous Fijian-dominated rugby. When victorious national rugby sides return from overseas, Indian dancers greet them alongside the thousands of Fijian spectators.

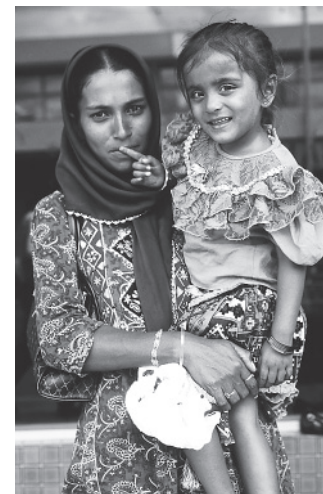
Perhaps the most amazing transformation that has taken place is the elevation of Indian food in indigenous Fijian life. In many homes, almost every second meal is a curry. So be prepared: if you accept an invitation to an indigenous Fijian home, you may not be served Islander food.

Intermarriage, however, remains one area few are willing to explore. For many the cultural, religious and social differences remain insurmountable. Among Indo-Fijians, notions of cultural differences and religious purity have placed intermarriage firmly in the too-hard basket. Early colonial policy prohibiting racial intermingling has also been blamed for limiting interaction and understanding between the communities. There is a minuscule, but growing, number of intermarriages taking place; this is testament to the resolve of the few who are risking ostracism and breaking *tabu*.

Elsewhere, filmmakers, nongovernmental organisations and artists often push the boundaries of cross-cultural experimentation to promote national unity and understanding. Cultural groups such as the Shobna

A growing number of Fijian performers are fusing Indian and indigenous Fijian traditions in their music and choreography. They include popular band Black Rose, musician Karuna Gopalan and choreographer Shobna Chanel.

Indo-Fijian mother and child, Labasa, Vanua Levu
PHOTO BY TOM COCKREM



Chanel Dance Group fuse rhythms and traditions of Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian cultures at national and international events. Femlink-pacific, a community-based organisation produces radio programmes and video documentaries that reflect universal themes in Indian festivals. Indo-Fijian filmmaker James Bhagwan has even scored international prizes for his documentaries promoting freedom and tolerance using cross-cultural themes.

CULTURAL IMMERSION

The best way to experience Indo-Fijian culture is to share a meal at the home of an Indo-Fijian. To increase the chances of being invited, you can always meet sociable Indo-Fijians at some of their favourite celebrations, haunts, shops and cultural venues around urban centres. If you are lucky enough, you may meet someone who could take you to an Indo-Fijian settlement to witness rural life and be treated to real down-to-earth hospitality. That could mean anything from a glass of fresh country-style lemon juice to a village-style curry feast, complete with home-grown vegetables. Just remember to take some sweets with you as a gift for your hosts.

There are many fantastic eateries in cities and towns serving home-style meals. But try to also explore some of the places in smaller towns that cater for Indo-Fijians. They often serve seasonal vegetables such as *duruka* (Fijian asparagus), *katahar* (jackfruit) and *kerela* (bitter melon). Do not forget to ask for pickles and chutneys made from local fruits such as mangoes, *kumrakh* (star-apple) and tamarind. Remember even some of the locals do not know these places exist. So put some effort into asking around and you're likely to experience a culinary adventure you will never forget.

Annual festivals and events also offer the visitor a chance to experience Indo-Fijian culture. Diwali (Festival of Lights) takes place across the nation in October or November. You can join in the fun by wearing some traditional gear (or a *bindi* on the forehead) and sharing *mithai* and candles. Events include temple fairs where thousands of Indo-Fijians gather to watch rituals and enjoy folksy meals. In Suva, the South Indian fire-walking festival, held during July or August, takes place at the **Mariamman Temple** (Map p119; Howell Rd, Samabula). In Vanua Levu, the Ram Leela festival is held at the Mariamman Temple in Vunivau (east of Labasa) around October. If you want to explore Hindu mysticism, try the Naag Mandir (Pathaar) temple north of Labasa, where a shrine is built around a large rock that devotees believe is growing in the shape of a cobra (p207). Other interesting events include the annual South Indian Sangam convention (www.sangamvillage.com), which takes place around Easter. During the rest of the year, visitors are welcome at Hindu and Sikh temples.

Fairground activities accompany Fiji's soccer season, which runs from February to October. Club soccer matches are played on weekends and culminate in the interdistrict tournament, held in a different location each year (www.fijifootball.com). On the sidelines there is fierce culinary competition under tin sheds, where *pulau* (aromatic fried rice), curry and roti are sold. Be prepared to eat with your fingers and put up with the distorted Bollywood and folk music blaring around you.

If you want to hear and watch authentic Bollywood, there are cinemas in all major towns and cities with regular sessions of Hindi films (without subtitles); newspapers carry screening details. Bollywood music tapes and CDs are usually available in duty-free shops, as well as at music stores such as **Procera Music Stores** (Map p122; ☎ 330 3365) in Suva. In major Indo-Fijian shopping areas, such as Toorak and Cumming Sts in Suva, there is a wide variety of stores selling Indian spices, saris and knick-knacks.

Temple etiquette must be followed. Wear modest clothes, remove footwear and abstain from non-vegetarian meals and alcohol on the day of your visit.

Environment

THE LAND

Fiji is south of the equator and north of the tropic of Capricorn. The country's territorial limits cover an enormous 1.3 million sq km, but only about 18,300 sq km of this – less than 1.5% – is dry land. The 180-degree meridian cuts across the group at Taveuni island, but the International Date Line has been doglegged eastward so all islands fall within the same time zone – 12 hours ahead of GMT.

The more than 300 islands vary from tiny patches of land a few metres in diameter, to the main island, Viti Levu, which is 10,390 sq km. Tomanivi (also called Mt Victoria), Fiji's highest at 1323m, is near the northern end of a range that separates eastern and western Viti Levu. The mountain range also acts as a weather barrier, with Suva, the country's capital, on the island's wetter side. Both Nadi, home to the country's main international airport, and Lautoka, the second most important port after Suva, are on the drier western side of the island.

Vanua Levu, the second-largest island 60km northeast of Viti Levu, is also mountainous, with many bays of various shapes and sizes. Taveuni, the third-largest, is rugged and, with rich volcanic soil, is known as the 'Garden Island'. Kadavu, south of Viti Levu, is formed by three irregularly shaped land masses linked by isthmuses, with beautiful reef lagoons, mountains, waterfalls and dense vegetation.

The remainder of Fiji's islands are relatively small.

WILDLIFE

Like many isolated oceanic islands, Fiji's native wildlife includes a few gems but is otherwise relatively sparse. Many plants and animals are related to those of Indonesia and Malaysia, and probably drifted in on the winds and tides.

Animals

Fiji's main wildlife attraction is its birdlife, but bird-watching in the wet season (roughly November to April) is hard work.

More than 3500 years ago, the first settlers introduced poultry, Polynesian rats, dogs and pigs to Fiji. This was good for the people but not so good for native animals; two big-footed mound-building birds and a giant flightless pigeon immediately became extinct.

NATIVE MAMMALS

Six species of bat are the only native terrestrial mammals; you'll almost certainly see large fruit bats – *beka* or flying foxes – flying out to feed around sunset or roosting during the day in colonies in tall trees. Two species of insectivorous bats are cave dwellers and seldom seen.

Dolphins and whales are found in Fijian waters, with several other species passing by on their annual migration. *Tabua*, the teeth of sperm whales, have special ceremonial value for indigenous Fijians (see p29).

INTRODUCED MAMMALS

All other land-dwelling mammals have been introduced. The common Indian mongoose was introduced in 1883 to control rats in the sugarcane plantations. Unfortunately, the rats are still there as the mongoose mostly chose to eat Fiji's native snakes, frogs, birds and birds' eggs instead.

Writer Umberto Eco is captivated by the time-shifting possibilities of the 180-degree meridian that bisects Taveuni island, and by its fabulous orange dove, in his wonderfully strange novel *The Island of the Day Before*.

FIJI'S ISLANDS & REEFS

Wondering what lies beneath? The majority of Fijian islands are volcanic in origin, but you'll also encounter coral and limestone islands. Fiji's reefs take three different forms: fringing, barrier and atoll.

Volcanic Islands

Volcanic islands generally have a series of conical hills rising to a central summit. Pinnacles indicate the sites of old volcanoes, with crystallised lava flows reaching the coast as ridges, forming cliffs or bluffs. Between these ridges are green valleys, with the only flat land to be found along the river basins of larger islands. The coasts are lined with beaches and mangroves, and the wetter sides of the islands – facing the prevailing winds – support thriving forests. The leeward hills are home to grasslands with only a sparse covering of trees.

There are no active volcanoes in Fiji but there is plenty of geothermal activity on Vanua Levu; in Savusavu some locals use the hot springs to do their cooking! Viti Levu and Kadavu are also volcanic islands.

Limestone Islands

These are characteristically rocky land masses that have risen from the sea, with cliffs undercut by the sea, and topped by shrubs and trees. Generally, a central depression forms a basin, with fertile undulating hills, and volcanic materials thrust up through the limestone. Vanua Balavu in the Lau Group is a limestone island.

Coral Islands

If you're looking for somewhere to swim or snorkel, head to one of Fiji's coral islands. Small and low, they are generally found in areas protected by barrier reefs, with surface levels at the height at which waves and winds can deposit sand and coral fragments. Their coasts have bright, white-sand beaches, and mangroves are found in the lagoon shallows. Examples of coral islands are Beachcomber and Treasure Islands in the Mamanucas, and Leleuvia and Caqalai in the Lomaivitis.

Fringing Reefs

Narrow fringing reefs link to the shore of an island and stretch seaward; during low tide the reefs are exposed. Often the bigger fringing reefs have higher sections at the open-sea edge and drainage channels on the inside, which remain water-filled and navigable by small boats. Where rivers and streams break the reefs, fresh water prevents coral growth. The Coral Coast on southern Viti Levu is an extensive fringing reef.

Barrier Reefs

Large strips of continuous reef, barrier reefs are broken only by occasional channels some distance from the coastline. Fiji's Great Sea Reef extends about 500km from the coast of south-western Viti Levu to the northernmost point of Vanua Levu. A section of this is unbroken for more than 150km, lying between 15km and 30km off the coast of Vanua Levu. Smaller barrier reefs encircle Beqa, and the Astrolabe Reef circles Kadavu.

Atolls

Atolls are small rings of coral reef with land and vegetation on top, just above sea level and enclosing a lagoon. Despite their idyllic representation in tales of the South Pacific, most have inhospitable environments. The porous soil derived from dead coral, sand and driftwood retains little water, and is often subject to droughts. The vegetation is hardy pandanus, coconut palms, shrubs and coarse grasses. Of Fiji's few atolls the best-known is Wailagi Lala, in the Lau Group.

Domestic animals turned feral include pigs, introduced by the Polynesian settlers, and goats, brought by missionaries.

In the 19th century, Europeans inadvertently but inevitably brought with them the brown-and-black rat and the house mouse.

BIRDS

Of the 57 birds that breed in Fiji, 26 are endemic. Despite the fairly short distances between islands, some birds, such as the orange dove of Taveuni and the cardinal honeyeater of Rotuma are found on one or two islands only.

In urban areas you're likely to see the chunky collared lory – a common parrot – and the brilliant emerald red-headed parrotfinch. Aggressive introduced species, such as Indian mynahs, have forced many native birds into the forest, where you'll hear barking pigeons and giant honeyeaters. Some 23 tropical sea birds are also seen in Fiji. Fiji's rarest bird, the Fiji petrel or *kacau* (seen on the back of the \$50 note), is only known on Gau in the Lomaiviti Group.

Taveuni and Kadavu islands, and Colo-i-Suva Forest Park outside Suva, are good bird-watching spots.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Fiji's 27 species of reptiles are mostly lizards. The endemic crested iguana, only identified in 1979, is found on the Yasawas and, mostly, on Yadua Tabu, off the west coast of Vanua Levu; its ancestors are thought to have floated to Fiji on vegetation from, unusually, South America. The banded iguana is also found in Fiji.

Two native terrestrial snakes are found in Fiji. There's a small (and nonpoisonous) Pacific boa, and the Fiji burrowing snake. Both are rarely seen. Of the four sea snakes in Fiji you may see the *dadakulaci*, or banded sea krait; occasionally they also enter freshwater inlets to mate and lay eggs on land. They are placid, but while they can't open their jaws wide enough to bite humans, don't risk it: the venom is highly poisonous.

Five turtle species are found in Fijian waters: the hawksbill, loggerhead, green (named after the colour of its fat), Pacific Ridley, and leatherback. As in many other parts of the world, turtle meat and eggs are considered a delicacy in Fiji, although the taking of eggs and the capture of adults with shells under 46cm, is banned. As most turtles only reach breeding age at a size much larger than this, the ban isn't really effective.

The cane toad was introduced from Hawaii in 1936 to control insects in the cane plantations. It's now become a pest itself, competing with the native ground frog in coastal and lowland regions. The native tree frog and ground frog have retreated deep into the forests and are rarely seen.

MARINE LIFE

Fiji's richest animal life is underwater. There are hundreds of species of hard and soft coral, sea fans and sponges, often intensely colourful and fantastically shaped.

As coral needs sunlight and oxygen to survive, it's restricted to depths of less than 50m. Wave-breaks on shallow reefs are a major source of oxygen and corals on a reef-break are generally densely packed and able to resist the force of the surf. Fragile corals such as staghorn grow in lagoons, where the water is quieter.

Fiji's tropical fish are exquisite. Among many you're likely to see are yellow-and-black butterflyfish, coral-chomping blue-green parrotfish, wraithlike needlefish, and tiny territorial black-and-white clownfish guarding their anemone home. Fat-fingered blue starfish and delicate

Birders will want copies of two essential illustrated pocket guides, *Birds of the Fiji Bush*, by Fergus Clunie, and *Dick Watling's Birds of Fiji – Sea & Shore Birds*.

Check out the (mostly) encouraging results of Birdlife International's 'Important Bird Areas in Fiji' project online at www.birdlife.org and link to Fiji.

feathered starfish are common. Some marine creatures, such as fire corals, scorpionfish and lionfish, are highly venomous; in doubt, don't touch! And watch where you put your bare feet.

Small black- and white-tipped reef sharks cruise along channels and the edges of reefs. The open sea and deeper waters are the haunt of larger fish, including tuna, swordfish, and rays.

Plants

Most of Fiji is lush with fragrant flowers and giant, leafy plants and trees. There are 1596 identified plant species here, and about 60% of these are endemic. Many are used for food, medicine, implements and building materials.

RAINFOREST PLANTS

Forest giants include valuable timbers such as *dakua* (Fijian kauri). It's a hard, durable timber with a beautiful grain, used for furniture making. Of many different fern species in Fiji, a number are edible and known as *ota*. *Balabala* (tree ferns) are similar to those in Australia and New Zealand; once used on the gable ends of *bure* (traditional thatched dwellings), they are now commonly seen as carved garden warriors – the counterpart to the Western gnome. The Pacific Islands are famous for their palm trees and Fiji has 31 species that reside in the rainforest and on the coasts.

You'll see *noni* products – cordials and soaps – for sale. *Noni* is an evergreen that produces a warty, foul-smelling, bitter-tasting fruit. Despite this, it's gaining credibility worldwide for its ability to help relieve complaints including arthritis, chronic fatigue, high blood pressure, rheumatism, and digestive disorders.

Fiji's national flower is the *tagimaucia*, with white petals and bright red branches (see the boxed text, p215). It only grows at high altitudes on the island of Taveuni and on one mountain of Vanua Levu.

Orchids are abundant. Vanilla is a common orchid and there's a renewed commercial interest in its cultivation for use as a natural food flavouring.

COASTAL & RIVER PLANTS

Mangroves are the most distinctive plant communities along the coast. They provide important protection for seashores against erosion, and are

CORAL WARNING: GLOBAL WARMING

One of the most obvious effects of global warming is the melting of polar icecaps and consequential rise in sea level – estimated at 0.5m to 1m in the next 100 years. Rising sea levels will eventually cause devastating flooding and coastal erosion in many low-lying Pacific countries; the island of Gau, in Fiji's Lomaiviti group, has already lost 200m of coast. As well as the loss of land, the rising seawater table will poison crops and reduce the available fresh groundwater.

To date, Fiji's greatest warning of global warming has been coral bleaching. When physiologically stressed by raised water temperatures, coral loses the symbiotic algae that provide its colour and nutrition. If water temperatures return to normal, coral can recover; however, with repetitive bleaching entire reefs can be degraded and die. In 2001 and 2002, Fiji's reefs experienced huge amounts of bleaching, affecting 65% of reefs and killing 15%. As one of the most productive ecosystems on earth, reefs provide habitat and food for 25% of marine species; they also protect Fiji's smaller islands, provide food for local people and are a major source of income through tourism. As the bleaching occurs in shallow waters it has so far had no effect on Fiji's dive-tourism industry, but continued degradation could quickly spell disaster. In recognition of this, Fiji signed the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change in 1998.

Can't tell a batfish from a butterflyfish? *Tropical Reef Life – a Getting to Know You & Identification Guide*, by Michael Aw, gives an informally detailed overview of underwater life, plus photographic tips.

breeding grounds for prawns and crabs. Mangrove hardwood is used for firewood and for building houses, which has led to the destruction of many mangrove areas.

Casuarina, also known as ironwood or *nokonoko*, grows on sandy beaches and atolls. As its name suggests, the timber is heavy and strong and was used to make war clubs and parts of canoes.

An icon of the tropics, the coconut palm continues to support human settlement. Coconuts provide food and drink, shells are used for making cups and charcoal, leaves are used for baskets and mats, and oil is used for cooking, lighting and as body and hair lotion.

Several species of pandanus are cultivated around villages; the leaves provide raw material for roof thatching and weaving baskets and mats.

Other common coastal plants include the beach morning glory, with its dawn-blooming purple flowers, and beach hibiscus with its large yellow flowers and light wood once used for canoe building. The *vutu* tree flowers only at night; its highly scented blooms are white and pink with a distinctive fringe, and were traditionally used as fish-poison.

GARDEN PLANTS

Botanist John Bates Thurston brought many plants to Fiji in the 19th century. Introduced African hibiscus is Fiji's most common garden plant, and is used for decoration, food and dye, and a medicine for treating stomach pains can be distilled from the leaves and fruit. Bougainvillea and yellow allemanda are also common, both introduced from Brazil. *Bua*, or frangipani, with its strongly scented flowers, is often used in soaps and perfumes, or tucked into people's hair.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Fiji has several protected conservation areas, though lack of resources means that conservation is hard to ensure. Bouma National Heritage Park and Ravilevu Nature Reserve now protects over 40% of Taveuni's land area and contains several well-maintained walking tracks. Koroyanitu National Heritage Park, near Lautoka in the highlands of Viti Levu, is also well established.

Other significant sites include the Sigatoka Sand Dunes on Viti Levu's Coral Coast, Colo-i-Suva Park and Garrick Reserve near Suva, and Tunuloa Silktail Reserve near Navua on Vanua Levu; the respective chapters have more information. For permits to go the Yadua Taba (home to the crested iguana), Garrick Reserve, and several other sites of ecological and historical importance you will need to contact the **National Trust for Fiji** (Map p122; ☎ 330 1807; nationaltrust@is.com.fj; 3 Maafu St) in Suva.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Ecotourism is a buzzword in Fiji, as elsewhere. In areas of intense tourism, it has become trendy for resorts and tours to tack an 'eco' onto their name; some are more environmentally aware than others. However, while remote villages can benefit from the income brought by low-impact tourism, it also brings additional pollution and rapid cultural change.

Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund have offices in Suva, and campaign regionally on issues including ocean fisheries and climate change.

Air Pollution

Out of town, air quality is generally good, though there's often a smoke haze from burning domestic rubbish. In towns, lack of maintenance means

Suva's beautiful (but under-resourced) public gardens opened in 1913, named after botanist JB Thurston, who introduced many ornamental plants to Fiji.

Fiji's first piece of national environmental protection legislation, the Environment Management Act, came into force in 2005.

Find out what climate change means for the Pacific at the World Wildlife Fund's website at www.wwfpacific.org.fj or see how Greenpeace's Pacific fisheries campaign is going at www.greenpeace.org.au/oceans.

RESPECT & PROTECT

Many of Fiji's endangered animals and plants are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites). Others are protected by national legislation. If you buy a souvenir made from protected or endangered species, and don't get a permit, you're breaking the law and chances are that customs will confiscate it at your overseas destination. In particular, remember:

- *Tabua* are *tabu* (sacred) – whale's teeth are protected.
- Turtle shell looks best on live turtles.
- Leave seashells on the seashore; protected species include giant clams and helmet shells, trochus, and tritons.
- Tread lightly. Stepping on live coral is like stepping on a live budgie; you'll kill it.
- Many plants including most orchids are protected.

Trash & Carry

Your litter will become someone else's problem, especially on small islands; where possible, recycle or remove your own.

Don't Rush to Flush

Fresh water is precious everywhere, especially on small islands; take short showers, and drink boiled or rain water, rather than buy another plastic bottle.

that many vehicles emit thick exhaust; local authority spot-checks and fines are an attempt to address this. In 2005 a deep toxic fire burned for days in the Suva municipal rubbish tip, provoking debate on the problem of solid waste management for island states.

Erosion & Deforestation

Burning of forests and land-clearing for agriculture has resulted in the erosion of fertile topsoil. Sugar-cane and other steep-slope farming have increased erosion even further. Pine plantations (though they have drawbacks in other ways) and the reintroduction of sustainable agricultural practices are ongoing attempts to restore soil quality, quantity and jobs.

Water Pollution

About 59% of the population has access to a sustainable water source. In urban centres water quality is generally good but not everywhere; Lautoka residents, for example, boil their water before drinking.

The sea around the busy ports of Suva and Lautoka is polluted with sewage seepage, oil spills and litter dumping. Destructive fishing techniques, such as the use of explosives, are still used without much control, and coral harvesting for the aquarium industry can be a problem. The use of drift nets for fishing is illegal. These and other issues are being addressed by local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), which work with local people on community-based coastal management, aiming both to improve community livelihoods and protect biodiversity.

For encouraging and creative examples of how communities can manage their own resources, check out the Communities and Coasts web page of www.fspi.org.fj.

Diving

Jean-Bernard Carillet

Diving in Fiji is truly amazing, offering innumerable underwater glimpses that will make even the most world-weary diver dewy-eyed. The water is warm, clear, and teeming with life. You'll see a myriad of multihued fish, canyonlike terrain and vertigo-inducing walls festooned with exquisite soft and hard corals resembling a lush flower garden in full bloom. You can also have heart-pounding experiences such as drifting with the current in Somosomo Strait or going nose-to-nose with massive bull sharks in Beqa Lagoon. Whatever your level of expertise and your inclinations, you'll find your slice of underwater heaven.

Diving conditions

Although Fiji is diveable year-round, the best season is from April to October. November to March tends to see the most rainfall, which can obscure visibility off the main islands with river runoff.

Keep in mind that many dives are subject to currents, which vary from barely perceptible to powerful. Visibility varies a lot, from a low of 10m at certain sites up to 40m at others.

Water temperatures range from 23°C in August to 29°C in January. You won't need anything more than a thin neoprene or a 3mm wetsuit.

DIVE SITES

For well-informed divers, Fiji equals soft corals, and justifiably so. Dive Somosomo Strait off Taveuni and you'll know what we mean. But soft corals and drift dives are not the only *raison d'être* of the diving in Fiji. You'll also find majestic reefs ablaze with technicoloured critters and a spectacular underwater topography. The only weak point is the dearth of impressive wrecks. But the dive repertoire is endless, with diving on offer on all islands. In fact, it's hard for divers to decide where to go: there are so many fabulous dive sites. Just as the individual islands have their distinct flavours, so too do the dive sites have their own hallmark. Just take your pick!

A dive instructor and incorrigible traveller, Jean-Bernard Carillet has written widely for various French publications and has also coordinated and co-authored Lonely Planet diving guides.

Fiji is dubbed 'the soft coral capital of the world', and rightly so.

FIJI'S TOP DIVE SITES

For Beginners

Shark Reef (Beqa Lagoon, Viti Levu) Bull sharks galore – a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Gotham City (Mamanuca Group) Reef species aplenty and excellent coral.

Dreadlocks (Vanua Levu) An aquariumlike setting, with a host of kaleidoscopic tropicals.

Yellow Wall (Kadavu) An atmospheric site resembling a fairytale castle.

Lekima's Ledge (Yasawa Group) An underwater cliff and a feast for the eyes.

For Experienced Divers

Great White Wall (Taveuni) Possibly the best soft-coral dive in Fiji.

Nigali Passage (Shark Alley, Lomaiviti Group) An exhilarating drift dive spiced up with regular sightings of grey sharks.

Nasonisoni Passage (Vanua Levu) Another rip-roaring drift dive in a narrow passage.

Split Rock (Kadavu) A maze of faults, canyons and tunnels.

E6 (Bligh Water, Lomaiviti Group) A phenomenal seamount that brushes the surface; a magnet for pelagics.

Viti Levu

Viti Levu is normally the visiting diver's first glimpse of Fiji. Although less charismatic than Taveuni or Kadavu, it boasts a fair share of underwater wonders and deserves attention for its variety of sites. The best diving is found off Nananu-i-Ra island to the north and in Beqa Lagoon to the south, but there are also some interesting options off Toberua island to the east and in Navula Passage to the west. Most dive sites are suitable for all skill levels.

But what sets it apart is the diving at Shark Reef in Beqa Lagoon, where you can witness a phenomenal shark-feeding session (see the boxed text, below). Here you're almost certain to go nose-to-nose with massive predators.

Of course there are much less intimidating sites around Viti Levu. In Beqa Lagoon, the quality of the corals is not the strong point but you'll

The site rundown in this chapter is by no means exhaustive. For more information see Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Fiji*. It details 74 dive sites, with full-colour photos throughout.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL WITH THE OCEAN'S MOST FEARED CREATURES

We've done it, and we won't forget it. Believe us: you'll experience the adrenaline thrill of a lifetime. A few kilometres off the Viti Levu coast near Pacific Harbour lies Shark Reef. For once, you won't come here to marvel at soft or hard corals. Instead, this spot is home to a phenomenal shark-feeding session three times a week – an exclusivity of **Beqa Adventure Divers** (☎ 345 0911; www.fiji-sharks.com).

In other parts of the world, shark feeding usually involves grey reef sharks and, if you're lucky, lemon sharks and nurse sharks. Here, up to eight different types of sharks turn up: tawny nurse sharks, white-tip, black-tip and grey reef sharks, sicklefin lemon sharks, silvertips and the star performers, massive bull sharks (up to 25 individuals at a time) and even the heavyweight of them all – tiger sharks! Handfeeding these monsters would seem suicidal. However, the two feeders from Beqa island have become experts in 'taming' the predators. They claim they are protected by traditional magic. Apparently, this protection is effective as no incident has ever been recorded in their more than six years of diving.

There are two distinct dives. The first one is at 30m. On a coral rubble patch, the divers form a line, behind a purpose-built small coral wall, a few metres away from the feeders. The feeder dips into a huge bin and pulls out hunks of dead fish. He is soon in the middle of a maelstrom. For several minutes at a time it may be hard to work out what is happening in the swirl of tails and fins as one shark after another materialises, ripping and tearing at the bait. It's definitely (in)tense, but there's no frenzy to speak of. The sharks approach in surprisingly orderly fashion, even the more ponderous-looking bull sharks. Being within touching distance of these predators is absolutely awesome, but you'll also be enthralled by the other fish species that are invited to this free meal, including schools of giant trevally, snapper, grouper and surgeonfish.

The second dive takes you down to 17m. Again, you sit on a clear arena behind a small wall. Now, the hefty bull sharks and the lemon sharks are more inquisitive and come even closer to the feeder. But wait! The adrenaline level has not reached its maximum. If the arena suddenly clears, then you know that a four-metre tiger shark is going to make its appearance. When it takes the bait from the feeder, you can see its cavernous maw...

Let's put it frankly. This is more a show than a dive. Fish feeding is a controversial subject among diving operators all over the world. On the one hand, these artificial encounters undeniably disrupt natural behaviour patterns. Sharks that grow dependent on 'free lunches' may unlearn vital survival skills. Some have developed dangerous Pavlovian responses to the sound of revving boat motors. On the other hand, some experts think that these shows have educational virtue and raise awareness among divers; a diver who has viewed these often misunderstood creatures up close becomes an instant shark-lover with a positive image of these feared denizens of the deep.

Whatever your stance on the issue, these dives are conducted in a very professional way. There's a comprehensive briefing prior to the dive and divers are watched over by divemasters with large poles. At no time do you feel a sense of threat.

Take note that bull sharks leave the spot from October to January to mate.

like the underwater scenery at Caesar's Rock, which has a multitude of pinnacles riddled with tunnels and caves. A long-standing favourite, Side Streets features a collection of small coral pillars scattered in a reef passage. ET features a vast tunnel more than 30m long and 5m in diameter. The sides of the tunnel are densely blanketed with sea fans and soft corals. Carpet Cove (also known as Seven Sisters) is a good spot, with the wreck of a Japanese trawler that was scuttled in 1994, at about 25m.

Diving along the northern shore of Viti Levu is focused on the offshore islands and reefs near Rakiraki, including Nananu-i-Ra. This area is a diver's treat, with a good balance of scenic seascapes, elaborate reef structures and dense marine life. Dream Maker ranks among the best sites in the area. You'll enjoy weaving your way among large coral heads lavishly blanketed in a bright mosaic of sea fans and gorgonians – a typical Fiji dive. Breath Taker is famous for its dense concentration of colourful tropics and the quality of the corals. To the northwest, off Charybdis Reef, Spud Dome Spud Dome is renowned for its dramatic scenery while Heartbreak Ridge offers a chance at spotting pelagics.

Mamanuca Group

Due to their proximity to Nadi and Lautoka on Viti Levu, the Mamanuca islands are very popular among divers and can easily be reached from these two towns by boat. You can also base yourself on Malolo island. Most dive sites are scattered along the Malolo barrier reef or off the nearby islets. Diving is probably less spectacular than in other areas of Fiji but it's still rewarding, with diverse marine life, good visibility and a varied topography, as well as a glut of easy sites that will appeal to novice divers.

A well-regarded site, The Supermarket is famed for shark encounters but we found the site pretty barren the day we were there. Divemasters occasionally feed the predators at this site. Inside the barrier reef lagoon, Gotham City comprises several coral heads surrounded by a smorgasbord of reef fish in less than 20m. Other sites to look for include Namotu Reef, The Big Ws (where you'll see some big fish) and Bird Rock. Wreck buffs will explore the *Salamanda*, a 36m vessel that was sunk as an artificial reef. She rests upright on a rubble seafloor in the 20m range and is partly encrusted with a variety of glowing soft corals and anemones. There's usually abundant fish life hanging around.



Diving lesson,
Mana island
PHOTO BY PHIL WEYMOUTH

Yasawa Group

No crowds and very few dive boats: this is diving in the Yasawas. This chain of ancient volcanic islands offers excellent corals, pristine reefs and good visibility – not to mention superb topside backdrops. Check out Lekima's Ledge, a stunning underwater cliff off Vawa island, suitable for novice divers, and Paradise Wall, another recommended wall dive off the western side of Yasawa island. There are also interesting caves to explore off Sawa-i-Lau island, including Blue Lagoon Caves.

Lomaiviti Group & Bligh Water

Central Fiji roughly covers the area between the country's two main landmasses – it extends from Bligh Water in the east to Namena and the Lomaiviti Group in the west. Most sites in this 'golden triangle' can only be accessed by live-aboards (see p65) and remain largely untouched. One of the most spectacular dive regions in Fiji, it boasts a unique configuration, which consists of an intricate maze of vast barrier reefs surrounding large lagoons and islands, all exposed to both nutrient-rich runoff and clean ocean water. This constant interplay of ecosystems ensures prolific marine life and reefs bloom with corals.

E6 is consistently rated as one of the best sites in Fiji. This seamount in Vatu-i-Ra Channel rises from 1000m to the surface and acts as a magnet for pelagics in search of easy pickings. You might come across schooling barracuda, hammerheads and eagle rays. On the leeward side you'll marvel at soft corals and fans in full blossom. A huge swim-through in the seamount, called the Cathedral, creates a magical atmosphere, especially when beams of sunlight filter through the cracks in the ceiling.

Another spectacular seamount reaching from 1000m to just below the surface, Mount Mutiny is sheer delight, with a colourful collection of throbbing coral communities adorning the wall. Keep an eye out for cruising pelagics.

In the mood for an adrenaline rush? Off Gau island, Nigali Passage (also known as Shark Alley) is the right place. A drift dive by essence, this narrow channel is one of the most active in this region. The site's biggest claim to fame is the almost ever-present squadron of grey sharks (up to 20 individuals) that haunt the passage, as well as schooling trevally, barracuda, snapper and the occasional rays. A less challenging site on the northwest side of Gau's barrier reef, Jim's Alley features a collection of coral boulders that bottom out at 24m.

TAKE THE PLUNGE!

You've always fancied venturing underwater on a scuba dive? Now's your chance. Fiji is a perfect starting point for new divers, as the warm water in the shallow lagoons is a forgiving training environment. Most resorts offer courses for beginners and employ experienced instructors, most of them competent in English.

Just about anyone in reasonably good health can sign up for an introductory dive, including children aged eight years and over. There are various programmes on offer, including Discover Scuba, which takes place in a pool, and Discover Scuba Diving, which is a guided dive in open water.

If you choose to enrol in an Open Water Course while in Fiji, count on it taking about three days, including classroom lectures and training. Another option is to complete the classroom and pool sessions in your home country and perform the required open water dives in a PADI- or SSI-affiliated dive centre in Fiji. Once you're certified, your C-card is valid permanently and recognised all over the world.

For some top dives for beginners, see the boxed text on p57.

Off the southeastern coast of Vanua Levu, Namena island is another hotspot, with several breathtaking sites, including Chimneys, in less than 25m. As the name suggests, you'll see several towering coral pillars, all coated with soft corals, sea fans and crinoids. Numerous reef species hide in the undercuts. Finish your dive in the shallows atop the pinnacles, where constellations of basslets and blennies flit about the coral structures. Some instructors also swear by North-Save-a-Tack, located in a current-swept passage renowned for its copious fish life and healthy corals.

Off Wakaya island, make a beeline for Blue Ridge. This site derives its name from the abundance of bright-blue ribbon eels. Although they lead the show, many other species will vie for your attention, including dartfish, gobies and leaf fish and, if you're lucky, hammerheads and manta rays.

Vanua Levu

Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu is a true gem with numerous untouched sites for those willing to venture away from the tourist areas. Most dive sites are in or around Savusavu Bay. The underwater scenery is striking, the walls are precipitous and the fish population (which includes pelagics) is diverse.

Experienced divers won't miss Nasonisoni Passage, a rip-roaring drift dive in a narrow, current-swept channel. During tidal exchange, divers are sucked into the passage and propelled through the funnel by the forceful current.

Do you like tiny critters? Dreadlocks, right in the middle of Savusavu Bay, is an enchanting site that will appeal to all levels. A jumble of coral pinnacles in less than 20m harbours numerous kaleidoscopic tropicals, including harlequin filefish, lionfish, butterflyfish, gobies, nudibranchs, sweetlips...

As the name suggests, Barracuda Point is famed for schooling barracuda that can be spotted at about 25m. Batfish are also regularly seen here. Healthy staghorn corals and gorgonians complete the picture.

Dreamhouse refers to a small seamount that seems to attract a wealth of pelagics, including grey reef sharks, jacks and tuna. If the current is not running, all you do is spiral up around the coral mound and marvel at the luxuriant setting.

Taveuni

Blessed with lush rainforests, cascading waterfalls and a profusion of tropical plants and flowers, Taveuni is called 'The Garden Island'. It's more or less the same story below the waterline. The Somosomo Strait, a narrow stretch of ocean that is funnelled between Taveuni and Vanua Levu, has achieved Shangri-la status in the diving community, and for good reason. Strong tidal currents push the deep water back and forth through the passage, providing nutrients for the soft corals and sea fans that form a vivid and sensual tapestry on the reefs. This area is often described as Rainbow Reef. As if it wasn't enough, vertical walls add a touch of drama.

Start with the aptly named Purple Wall. And what a wall: it is suffused with a dense layer of purple soft-coral trees, whip corals and sea fans wafting in the current. Numerous overhangs and arches harbour soldierfish and squirrelfish. At the entrance of Somosomo Strait, Great White Wall is one of Fiji's signature dives. It's an awesome wall and drift dive, with a phenomenal concentration of white soft coral (it's actually pale lavender), resembling a snow-covered ski slope. When the current is running, soft-coral trees unfurl from the wall to feed and feature an almost heavenly glow – a truly ethereal sight. In the same area, don't miss

The only downside in Somosomo Strait is the average visibility. It does not exceed 15m to 20m when the currents flow.

FREE THRILLING RIDES

Drift diving is an integral part of Fiji diving. As the tide rises and falls, enormous volumes of water flow in and out of the channels, across the reefs and along the walls, forming bottle-necks and creating strong currents. The current becomes a great buddy, helping propel you through the water with amazing ease. All you do is immerse yourself in the ocean and let yourself be sucked through the channel, until the effects of the current weaken. Because the distance covered during the drift dive is huge, a boat follows divers' progression by tracking their bubbles. At the end of the dive, the instructor inflates a brightly coloured marker buoy to signal the exact position of the group, and the boats picks up the divers.

Drift diving is very exciting because you feel as though you're flying or gliding through the channels. But it's an advanced activity that requires specific skills, including a perfect control of buoyancy. Such dives are more suitable for intermediate or advanced divers. Local dive centres usually check divers out before taking them to these sites.

Rainbow Passage. Once again a photogenic spot, it features a large, submerged reef offering a wealth of marine life and spectacular bouquets of soft corals. A number of pinnacles protruding from the reef are wreathed with luxuriant soft-coral trees in every colour of the rainbow. Look closely for the rich resident fish and invertebrate population, including nudibranchs, Christmas tree worms, crinoids and clown fish.

In the middle of Somosomo Strait, Annie's Bommies is an explosion of colour, with several big boulders liberally draped with soft corals and surrounded by swirling basslets. Unlike other sites, it's not a wall dive, so you can leisurely weave your way among the boulders and stare at coral exuberance. Other sites include Cabbage Patch, Blue Ribbon Eel Reef, the Ledge, the Pinnacle, Yellow Grotto and the Zoo.

But there's more to Somosomo Strait than coral splendour and vertigo-inducing walls. The nutrient-rich water also produces pelagic sightings. It's not uncommon to encounter manta rays, white-tip reef sharks, kingfish, barracuda and, with a bit of luck, even leopard sharks.

There are also superb dive sites around neighbouring Matagi, Qamea and Laucala islands and at Motualevu Atoll, some 30km east of Taveuni. Check the Edge, off Motualevu Atoll. This breathtaking drop-off is adorned with a wide variety of soft and hard corals and carved by numerous overhangs and windows at various depths. Another renowned site, Noel's Wall, is a feast for the eyes. The wall is showered in soft-coral bushes covering the whole colour spectrum. Due to the isolation of the site, you've got a reasonable chance to spot bronze whalers, tuna, barracuda, jacks and manta rays.

Kadavu

Kadavu's main claim to fame is the Great Astrolabe Reef, a barrier reef that hugs the south and east coasts of the island for about 100km. For divers, this is a gem of a reef, with a vibrant assemblage of exquisite hard and soft-coral formations and breathtaking walls beginning as shallow as 10m. The dramatic seascape is another highlight, with a network of passages, swim-throughs and crevices sheltering a stunning variety of reef species. You can't get bored here. Unlike Taveuni, currents are probably easier to handle in this area, but be prepared for rough seas and reduced visibility when it's raining or when the winds blow, especially from November to April.

On the western side of the Great Astrolabe, recommended dive sites include Broken Stone, Split Rock and Vouwa. They more or less share the same characteristics, with a mind-boggling combination of twisting

canyons, tunnels, caverns and arches. If you like scenic underwater seascapes, you'll be in seventh heaven here.

In the mood for an adrenaline-pumping ride? Try Naiqoro Passage, just off the east coast of Kadavu. This narrow channel is frequently swept by strong tidal currents and offers rewarding drift dives along steep walls.

The northwestern side of Kadavu is a bit overshadowed by the Great Astrolabe but it also features superb dives in their own right. Novice divers in particular will feel comfortable here – the dive conditions are less challenging than anywhere else in Kadavu but still offer excellent fish action. If you want a relaxed dive, Mellow Reef does the trick. It consists of several boulders, in less than 20m. It's an ideal site to refresh your skills before taking on deeper dives. Another easy dive, Yellow Wall is a very atmospheric site in the 20m range, featuring several pinnacles graced with yellow soft corals. Wend your way around these rocks and marvel at the colourful fauna fluttering about. Once you've had your fill of soft corals and drift dives, you might want to explore the *Pacific Voyager*, a 63m-long tanker that was intentionally sunk in 1994 as an artificial reef in 30m of water. It's nothing spectacular but it makes for a welcome change.

DIVE CENTRES

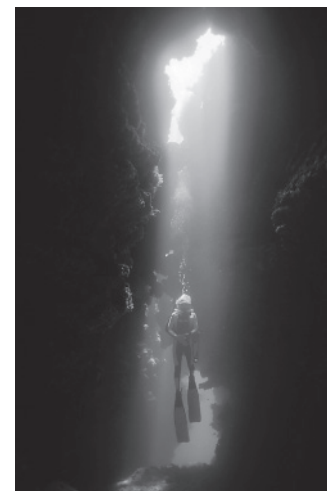
Dive centres are open year-round, most of them every day. Many are attached to a hotel and typically offer two-tank dive trips. Try to book at least a day in advance. Operators offer a whole range of services, such as introductory dives (for children aged eight years and over, and adults), night dives, exploratory dives, and certification programs. Most dive centres are PADI- or SSI-affiliated, two agencies that are recognised internationally.

Diving in Fiji is rather good value, especially if you compare it to other South Pacific destinations. If you plan to do many dives on one island, consider buying a multiday package, which comes out much cheaper. Generally, prices don't include equipment rental, so it's not a bad idea to bring all your gear. Most dive shops offer free pick-ups from your accommodation and accept credit cards.

There's one recompression chamber in Suva (p120).

DIVING & FLYING

Most divers get to Fiji by plane. While it's fine to dive soon *after* flying, it's important to remember that your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts advise 24 hours) *before* your flight, to minimise the risk of residual nitrogen in the blood that can cause decompression. Careful attention to flight times is necessary in Fiji because so much of the interisland transportation is by air.



Mystical cavern at Broken Stone, Kadavu Group
PHOTO BY CASEY & ASTRID WITTE
MAHANEY

Currents bring life to the reef. They constantly channel nutrients in and out with the tides, attracting all forms of sealife along the food chain. When the current flows, the corals bloom into flowerlike beauty. When it's absent, the corals withdraw into their spicules.

Go to www.divefiji.com and the diving page at www.bulafiji.com for more information on diving in Fiji.

**Hard-coral garden,
Lau Group**PHOTO BY CASEY & ASTRID WITTE
MAHANEY**Documents**

If you're a certified diver, bring your C-card; it's a good idea to have your dive logbook with you as well. Centres welcome certification from any training agency (CMAS, PADI, NAUI etc), but may ask you to do a dive to assess your skills.

HOW MUCH?

Introductory dive: about \$150

Two-tank dive: about \$190, including equipment rental

Open Water certification course: about \$820

Choosing a Dive Centre

There are at least 30 professional dive centres in Fiji. All of them are affiliated with one or more internationally recognised certifying agencies, usually PADI or NAUI. In general, you can expect well-maintained equipment, good facilities and knowledgeable staff, but standards may vary from one centre to another. On islands with several operators, do your research and opt for the one that best suits your expectations. The list that follows is by no means exhaustive. More dive centres are detailed in the destination chapters. For information on diving in the Lau Group, see p232.

Viti Levu

AquaBlue (☎ 672 6111; www.aquabluefiji.com) At Wailoaloa Beach, near Nadi; see p78 for more details.

Aqua-Trek Beqa (☎ 325 0324; www.aquatrek.com) At Pacific Harbour; p113.

Beqa Adventure Divers (☎ 345 0911; www.fiji-sharks.com) At Pacific Harbour; p58.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

The Fiji islands are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves, as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any other litter you may find.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust.

LIVE-ABOARDS

A couple of live-aboards ply the Fiji waters, with usually week-long itineraries. A live-aboard dive trip is recommended for those looking to experience unchartered and uncrowded dive sites beyond the reach of land-based dive operations, especially the sites in Bligh Water and off the Lomaiviti Group.

Fiji Aggressor (www.fijiaggressor.com)

Nai'a (☎ 345 0382; www.naia.com.fj)

Sere-ni-Wai (☎ 336 1171; www.sere.com.fj)

Beqa Divers Fiji (☎ 336 1088; www.bequadivers.com) At Pacific Harbour and Suva; p126.

Crystal Divers (☎ 669 4747; www.crystaldivers.com) At Rakiraki and Nananu-i-Ra.

Dive Tropex (☎ 675 0944; www.divetropex.com) At Sheraton Fiji Resort, Sheraton Royal Denarau; p78.

Ra Divers (☎ 669 4511; www.radivers.com) At Rakiraki and Nananu-i-Ra; p141.

Scuba Bula (☎ 651 0116; www.scubabula.com) At Seashell Surf & Dive Resort, Momi Bay; p102.

Toberua Island Resort (☎ 347 2777; www.toberua.com) On Toberua island; p137.

Vatulele Island Resort (☎ 672 0300; www.vatulele.com) On Vatulele island; p118.

Mamanuca Group

Castaway Dive Centre (☎ 666 1233; www.castawayfiji.com) At Castaway Island Resort; p154.

Dive Tropex (☎ 675 0944; www.divetropex.com) At Tokoriki Island Resort; p78.

Subsurface (☎ 666 6738; www.fijidive.com) At Beachcomber Island Resort, Musket Cove Resort, Malolo Island Resort, Treasure Island Resort, Navini Island Resort, Tavarua Island Resort and Wadigi Island Resort; p149.

Yasawa Group

Dive Trek Wayasewa (☎ 666 9715; www.bbr.ca/wayalailai) At Wayalailai Eco Haven Resort on Wayasewa island; p163.

Yasawa Island Resort (☎ 672 2266; www.diveyasawa.com) On Yasawa island; p169.

Lomaiviti Group

Moody's Namena (☎ 881 3764; www.moodyshamenafiji.com) On Namenalala island, just south of Vanua Levu; p190.

Vanua Levu

Dive Namale (☎ 885 0435; www.namalefiji.com) At Namale Resort; p199.

L'Aventure Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji (☎ 885 0188; www.fijiresort.com) See p199.

Taveuni

Aqua-Trek Taveuni (☎ 888 0286; www.aquatrek.com) See p212.

Dive Taveuni/Vunibokoi (☎ 888 0060; http://divingwithtyrone.tripod.com) At Tovu Tovu Resort, led by experienced Tyrone Valentine; p212.

Pro-dive (☎ 888 0125; www.prodiver.com) See p212.

Swiss Fiji Divers (☎ 888 0586; www.swissfijidivers.com) See p212.

Taveuni Estates Dives (☎ 888 0063; www.taveunidive.com) See p212.

Kadavu Group

Dive Kadavu (☎ 333 7780; www.divekadavu.com) See p225.

Matava Resort (☎ 333 6098, 330 5222; www.matava.com) See p226.

Waisalima Beach Resort Dive Centre (☎ 333 7281; www.waisalimafiji.com) See p227.

Bring a light to appreciate the wealth of colours below the surface.

Food & Drink

Fiji's food reflects the country's location as the multicultural hub of the Pacific, with its blend of indigenous Fijian, Polynesian, Indian, Chinese and Western tastes. Starchy carbohydrates play a big part in Pacific diets, but a spending spree at a fabulous local fruit and veggie market will increase your intake of the other food groups.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Traditional Fijian foods include *tavioka* (cassava) and *dalo* (taro) roots, boiled or baked fish, and seafood in *lolo* (coconut cream). Meat is fried and accompanied with *dalo* and *rourou* (boiled *dalo* leaves in *lolo*), though you'll often find the colossally popular corned beef substituting for the real thing. *Kokoda* is a popular dish made of raw fish marinated in *lolo* and lime juice, with a spicy kick. See also p68 for details on popular local snacks.

Indo-Fijian dishes are usually spicy, and a typical meal is meat (but never beef or pork), fish or veggie curry with rice, *dahl* (lentil soup) and roti (a type of Indian flat bread). Chinese food is generally a Western-style takeaway affair with stir-fries, fried rice, chop suey, chow mein and noodle soups.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Ask locally if the tap water's OK to drink – in some places it is, in others it's not and will need to be boiled – but local and imported mineral water and soft drinks are available. Most milk is long-life or powdered. Fresh local fruit juices and smoothies are great, but 'juice' on a menu often means sickly sweet cordial. The chilled water from green coconuts is refreshing.

Alcoholic Drinks

A variety of local and imported spirits and beer is available in bottle shops, most restaurants, and some supermarkets. Fiji Bitter and Fiji Gold are locally brewed beers, and the Malt House Brewery in Suva brews its own. Most wine is from Australia or New Zealand, and decent enough bottles start around \$15. You can expect to pay about \$4 for a beer in a bar, more at upmarket resorts. A 750mL bottle of Fiji Rum is about \$30.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

A wander through a busy Saturday market is a must – you'll have some fun encounters asking stallholders what they're selling, and how to cook it.

Follow your nose to the seafood. That bright-green mini bubble-wrap is actually *nama*, a seaweed that becomes a cold salad to accompany fish; the yellow bird-nesty mass is *lumi*, another seaweed that gets cooked into a sort of jelly. Plates of scary-looking raw peeled shellfish are sold with a squeeze of lime and fresh chilli, and the less said about the rubbery *bêche-de-mer* the better. Don't know if you'll recognise *bêches-de-mer*? They're also known as sea cucumber, and that's just what they look like.

If you prefer something sweet, look for stalls with piles of things wrapped in banana-leaf. Try teeth-jarringly sweet *vakalolo*, made of cassava. It may look as though it's been passed through the digestive system of a large animal, but it's actually delicious.

The ubiquitous corned beef became easier to preserve (and serve) after the 1875 invention, in Chicago, of the tapered corned beef can.

Legend has it that the plant that *kava* is made from sprung from the grave of a Tongan princess who died of a broken heart.

KAVA

Kava, also called *yaqona* or *grog*, is as much a part of Fiji as beaches and *bure* (traditional thatched dwellings). It is mildly narcotic, looks like muddy water and makes your tongue go furry. You won't escape trying it!

Yaqona is an infusion prepared from *Piper methysticum*, a type of pepper plant. It holds a place of prominence in Fijian culture – in the time of the 'old religion' it was used ceremonially by chiefs and priests only, but today *kava* is a part of daily life, across the country and across the races. 'Having a grog' is used for welcoming and bonding with visitors, for storytelling sessions or merely for passing time. When visiting a village you will usually be welcomed with a short *sevusevu* ceremony (whereupon you'll present a gift to a village chief), where you will be initiated into *kava*-culture (see p36).

There are certain protocols to be followed at a *kava* ceremony. Sit cross-legged, facing the chief and the *tanoa*, or large wooden bowl. Women usually sit behind the men. Never walk across the circle of participants, turn your back to or point your feet at the *tanoa*, or step over the cord – if there is one – that leads from the *tanoa* to a white cowrie shell (it represents a link with the spirits).

The dried and powdered root, wrapped in a piece of cloth, is mixed with water in the *tanoa* and squeezed out; you will be offered a drink of the resulting concoction from a *bilo* (half a coconut shell). Clap once, accept the *bilo*, say '*bula*' (meaning 'cheers' or, literally, 'life'), and drink it down in one go. Clap three times in gratification. The drink will be shared until the *tanoa* is empty. You are not obliged to drink every *bilo* offered to you, but it is polite to drink at least the first. Despite rumours, it doesn't taste that awful (kind of like a murky medicine) and the most you're likely to feel from one *bilo* is a furry tongue. After a few drinks you may feel a slight numbness of the lips. Long sessions with stronger mixes can make you very drowsy, and some heavy drinkers develop *kanikani*, or scaly skin.

Kava is a mild narcotic and has been used as a diuretic and stress reliever for pharmaceutical purposes. It has properties that combat depression, reduce anxiety, and lower blood pressure – news that spread like wildfire through health-obsessed Western countries in the 1990s. When trade in *kava* peaked in 1998, Fiji and neighbouring Vanuatu were exporting US\$25 million worth of *kava* each year. But the good times didn't last. A German study done in 2001 indicated that *kava* potentially caused liver damage, and in late 2002 most of Europe as well as Canada and the USA had either banned or put warnings and restrictions on *kava*.

After further research and lobbying, in 2005 the World Health Organization gave its support for reviving *kava* sales, and the Fiji Kava Council is hopeful that the ban will be lifted.

CELEBRATIONS

Fijians love food. The communal selection, preparation, cooking, and eating of enormous multiple servings all play a central role in ceremonies and celebrations.

Lovo are traditional indigenous Fijian banquets in which food is prepared in an underground oven. A hole is dug in the ground and stones are put inside and heated by an open fire. The food – whole chickens, legs of pork, fragrant stuffed *palusami* (meat or corned beef, onions and *lolo*) or *dalo* – is wrapped in banana leaves and slowly half-baked and half-steamed on top of the hot stones. Delicious! Traditionally, *lovo* is served for family get-togethers and for more formal occasions such as church festivals and funerals.

If you're fortunate enough to be around Indo-Fijian Hindus during Diwali (Festival of Lights; p248), you'll be served fabulous vegetarian food during the three-day celebratory period, plus an astonishing array

You'll find some neat Fiji food and folklore stories by following the 'restaurant' link at www.fijilive.com/fijimagic.

of sweets such as *gulab jamun* (deep-fried dough served in a sugar syrup) and *barfi* (Indian confectionery made from milk and sugar) on the day itself.

Lunar New Year is celebrated by Fiji's Chinese community with multi-course banquets accompanied by lion dancers and drummers.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Nadi and Suva have a good variety of eateries ranging from cheap cafés in town to fine dining on the waterfront. Most places serve a combination of adapted Chinese, Fijian, Indian and Western dishes, and Japanese and Korean speciality restaurants are increasingly popular. Cheap restaurants and food halls charge between \$4 and \$8 for main meals; in decent city restaurants and resorts expect to pay upwards of \$20 for a dish. Locals don't often linger over the dinner table and restaurants close early; you won't find many places open after 9pm.

Quick Eats

Fijians, like many peoples of the world, are forgoing traditional foods for readily available fast foods, but interesting (and often nutritionally better) local snack foods can be found at street stalls and in the markets.

You haven't truly eaten locally until you've had a roti parcel. Easy food for travelling and breakfast, it's Indian flat bread wrapped around a serve of some sort of curried meat or spicy vegetable; most food stalls sell it.

In the markets you'll see all manner of anonymous cooked foods wrapped in banana-leaf packages. These will almost certainly be something starchy, probably *tavioka*, which has been grated and mixed with coconut, slightly sweetened, then baked or steamed. They're filling, with the ultimate biodegradable packing.

Around town you'll see Indian *mithai la gaadi* – sweet stalls that also sell cheap snacks such as roasted salted peas or cassava chips. They're often stationed around school entrances.

Be sensible about what you try. It's not a good idea to scoff down cooked meat that's been sitting around for a while, but if it comes from an icebox and is cooked in front of you – like the street barbecues that spring up at night – it's probably fine.

Self-Catering

Every large town in Fiji has a fresh fruit-and-vegetable market and at least one supermarket where you can buy basic groceries. Most villages have a small shop but, as villagers grow their own fresh produce, stock is often limited to tinned fish, corned beef, and packets of instant noodles.

FIJI'S TOP FIVE

- Raffles Floating Restaurant (Tradewinds; p131), a floating restaurant at the Raffles Tradewinds in Lami – just outside Suva – has a lunchtime view to die for and great fish burgers.
- Capital Palace (p132), a Chinese restaurant in Suva, has chaotically loud, busy and fun yum cha sessions on weekend mornings; the food's good, too.
- Daikoku in Nadi (p85) and Suva (p132) sizzles up superlative teppanyaki and serves some of the finest sushi and sashimi in the Pacific.
- Gopal's (p206) in Labasa serves scrumptious, filling and dirt-cheap Hare Krishna food and thalis.
- Bula Re Café (p200) puts an inventive slant on traditional Fijian fare with alfresco dining.

One of Fiji's efforts to combat obesity was an import ban in 2000 of high-fat 'lamb flaps' (don't ask) from New Zealand.

Test your culinary skills and enjoy fabulous food photos from a Fijian kitchen at www.fijibure.com/namatakula/food.htm.

DOS & DON'TS

- Don't start serving yourself or eating until asked to do so by your host – there may be prayers said beforehand.
- Do have a snack before joining a *kava* session; you won't eat until it's finished – and this may take some time.
- Tipping is not expected but is, of course, welcome; 10% of the bill is sufficient if you feel so inclined.

If your accommodation has cooking facilities, it will generally sell (very) basic supplies; but you'll be better off to stock up in town.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Being vegetarian in Fiji is pretty easy, especially if you're partial to Indian food. Many Indo-Fijians are strict vegetarians, so most Indo-Fijian restaurants have lots of veggie options and there are Govinda's or Hare Krishna vegetarian restaurants in most sizeable towns. Most resorts and tourist restaurants have at least one token veggie meal on the menu.

The only time a person's vegetarian-ness can prove tricky is on visits to indigenous Fijian villages. If you are planning to go on a tour, be sure to tell the tour operator of your eating preferences when you book as your hosts may find it strange – and perhaps offensive – that you'd refuse meat that they may not easily be able to afford. Communicating that your religious beliefs or your health won't allow you to eat meat are probably the most acceptable explanations.

EATING WITH KIDS

You'll have no problem feeding children in resorts, where kids' menus are on offer. Food halls in Suva are good value with a variety of food styles, and most will hold back on the chilli or cook up a special request out the back.

For fussy eaters, there's always the standby of a bunch of fresh bananas and fresh bread from Fiji's many hot bakeries. There's Western-style fast food in Suva and Nadi. Baby food is available in supermarkets, and it's probably wise to use boiled or bottled water for infants. See also p245.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

People rise at first light in Fiji, so breakfast – of fresh bread, or roti – is taken early. Fijians snack regularly in the gaps between eating a big lunch and a big, early dinner. Many people prefer to eat with their hands, and most restaurants have hand-washing basins available. In villages or in homes people often eat seated on a mat on the floor; men generally eat first, along with any visitors. As a guest, you'll be served the best food available; if it's not to your taste, accept and eat it graciously.

The fasting month of Ramadan is observed by Muslim Fijians, who don't eat during daylight hours. It doesn't make much difference to eating options for visitors, but your taxi driver or tour guide might be less energetic than normal during this period.

Public eating places are often theoretically nonsmoking, though this is rarely enforced. In the larger towns, bars and nightclubs are open until the early hours of the morning, and the party animals only get going after 10pm.

Can't tell a mango from a mangosteen? You will once you've savoured *A Taste of the Pacific*, a regional food guide and recipe book by Susan Parkinson, Peggy Stacy & Adrian Mattinson.

Fiji's flag illustrates three of the country's main food crops – sugar, bananas and coconuts.

EAT YOUR WORDS

If you thought *kokoda* was a WWII walking trail in Papua New Guinea, think again. For a better taste of the language, see the pronunciation guidelines, p272.

Useful Phrases

breakfast – *katalau*

lunch – *vakasigalevu*

dinner – *vakayakavi*

Food Glossary

achar – Indian pickles

baigan – eggplant

barfi – Indian confectionery made from milk and sugar

bêche-de-mer – sea cucumber

bele – green leafy vegetable, served boiled

bhaji – spinach, or any leafy green vegetable

bhindi – okra

bu – green coconut

bulumakau – beef

čā – tea (Fiji-Hindi)

dalo – taro, a starchy root served boiled or baked

dhaniya – coriander

gulab jamun – deep-fried dough served in a sugar syrup; an Indian dessert

ika – fish

jalebi – Indian sweet

jira – cumin

kava/yaqona – narcotic drink prepared from the roots of a *Piper methysticum* shrub

kokoda – raw fish marinated in lime juice and *lolo*, served with chilli and onion...yum

lolo – coconut cream

lovo – food cooked on hot stones in an underground oven

lumi – a seaweed that is commonly cooked into a jelly

masala – curry powder

mithai – Indian sweets

nama – a seaweed commonly served as an accompaniment to fish...not so yum

palusami – corned beef (or meat), onions and *lolo* wrapped in *dalo* leaves and baked in *lolo*

puri – deep-fried, flat Indian bread

roti – Indian flat bread

rourou – boiled *dalo* leaves in *lolo*

seo – Indian savoury snack

tavioka – cassava

thali – Indian dish with several vegetarian dishes

toa – chicken

ura – freshwater prawns

uto – breadfruit, usually boiled or baked in a *lovo*

vakalolo – a sweet made from cassava