

An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The top half of the image is dominated by deep turquoise water. Below it, a shallow lagoon with lighter blue water transitions into a wide, white sandy beach. A few small figures and a boat are visible on the beach. In the bottom left corner, several palm trees are visible against the white sand.

# Living with nature

Visitors to Fiji's traditional communities will not only see the ancient iTaukei philosophy of working with the natural world in action, but can help preserve a way of life in danger of being eroded

Words **Mark Stratton**



**L**ike many tales of the South Pacific, my *talanoa* – or ‘storytelling’ – begins on the water, en route from Vanua Levu to one of the 330-plus islands that sustain the iTaukei, the Traditional Owners of Fiji. Leone Vokai, dreadlocks splayed in the breeze, was piloting our wooden boat to a resort on the tiny island of Nukubati. The staff of its six beachside *bures* (cabins) joined Leone’s wife, Lara Bourke, on the shoreline to sing a melodic welcome. “Bula,” they shouted as one. It is a greeting (meaning hello or good health) that I would hear throughout my time in Fiji.

As I waded ashore, the sand felt soft beneath my feet. In the wooden pavilion, a barbecued *tatavu* feast was laid out before us. We sat on the matted floor and ate taro leaves with roasted yams, as well as fish caught on the line from beyond the lagoon. The lime-leaf tea had even been picked from the garden.

“We harvest 98% of what we eat from our wild gardens,” said Lara, who explained that living with nature has been the essence of Fiji’s iTaukei culture for more than 3,500 years.

I settled into my *bure* surrounded by views of the ocean. Within an hour I was barefoot. Within two hours I’d swum amid bright offshore corals. By late afternoon the sun was finally extinguished across the

Pacific horizon, replaced by the heartbeat of a thousand hidden frogs.

While every exotic preconception I’d had about Fiji’s islands could be found here, I was more excited by the idea that traditional iTaukei life offers visitors a way of seeing these islands more sustainably. Lara had offered one example but I wanted to experience more, so it was among Fiji’s mountain villages, where the old ways thrive in self-sufficient communities, that this story truly begins.

### “Living with nature has been the essence of Fiji’s iTaukei culture for more than 3,500 years”

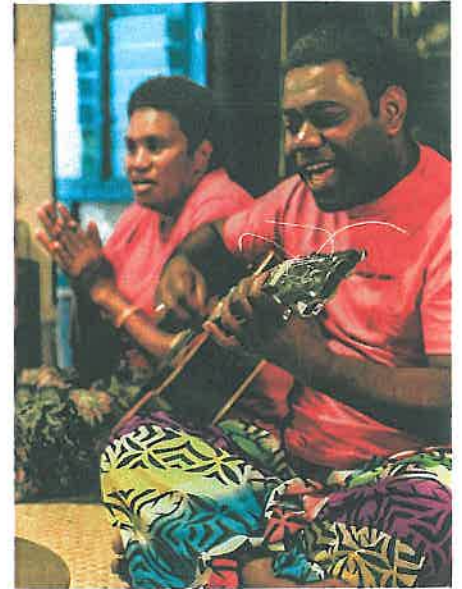
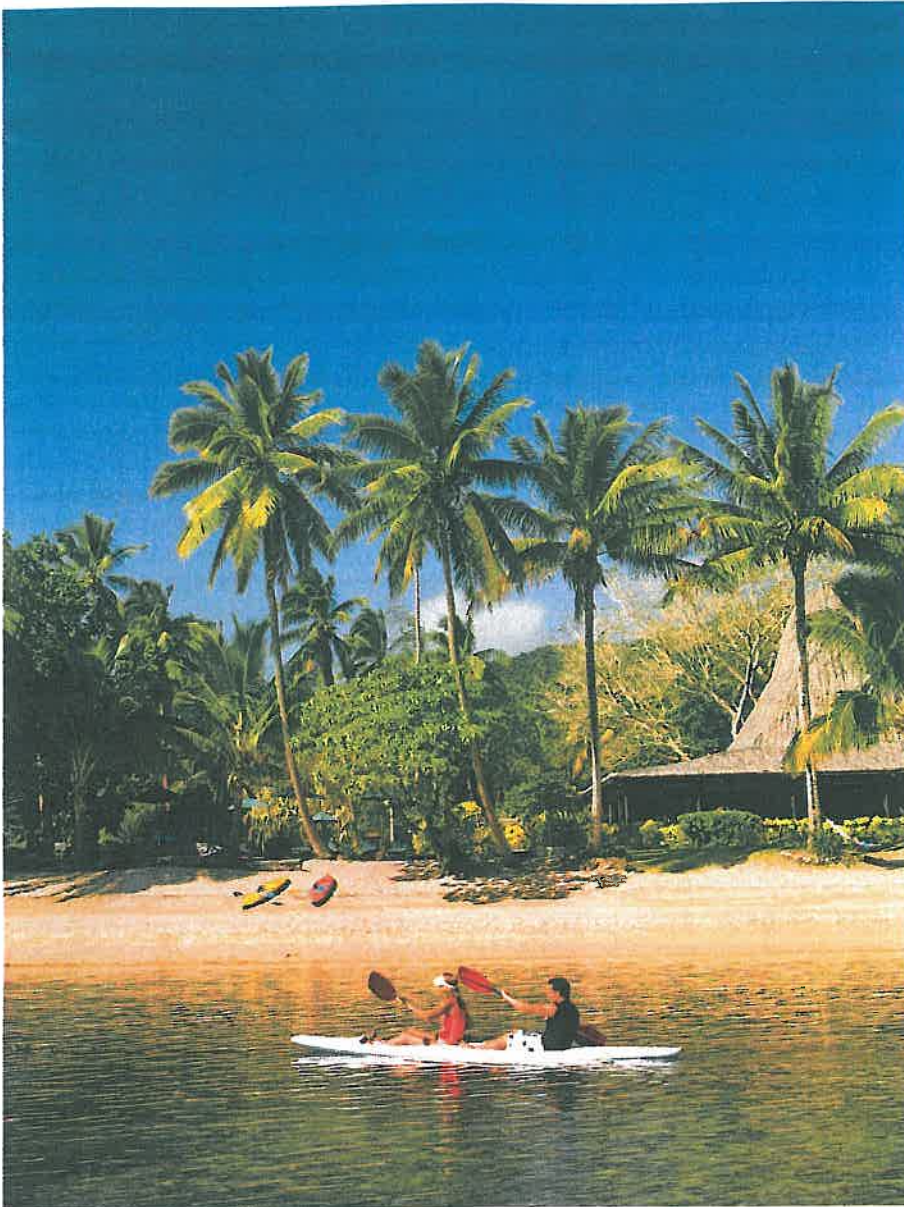
My immersion in iTaukei life began within hours of touching down in Nadi on Fiji’s main island, Viti Levu. My *sahasu* garland, woven with hibiscus bark and placed on me as a greeting, still dangled around my neck as I started learning about two joys of traditional island life: hot-stone cooking (*lovo*) and *kava*, a drink celebrated across the Pacific and ground from the roots of *Piper methysticum*, which translates as ‘intoxicating pepper’.

Sam Soko and his Chinese-Australian partner, Anna Chan, created Vavavi (meaning ‘to bake’) after the pandemic cost Sam his boat-charter business. Their hands-on classes teach how to prepare a *lovo*, and we were soon placing large stones on a wood-fired pit. I was instructed in preparing the food: peeling cassava and halving coconuts with a machete – a useful skill if ever shipwrecked on a desert island. I made *pahusami*, a dish of taro leaves wrapped around vegetables and fish soaked in coconut cream. This was placed inside woven leaves on the hot stones and covered in soil.

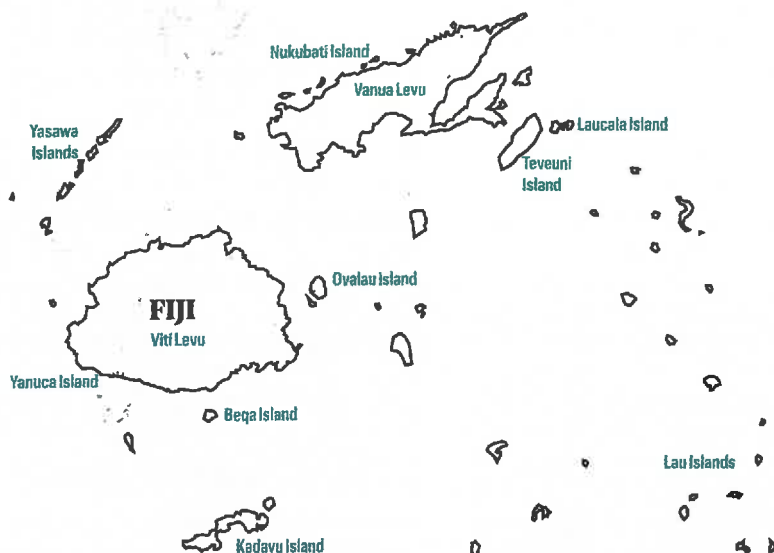
“Lovo are popular at ceremonies like weddings, but if you invite 20 people in Fiji, seventy will turn up, as extended families are huge,” laughed Anna. We unearthed the *lovo* after 90 minutes, barbecued to perfection. The quantity was so abundant that I would’ve welcomed an extended family to help me out.

After dinner, it was *kava* time. In truth, it always is in Fiji. “It’s a formal way to welcome someone,” explained Sam. “It is also an act of respect (*sevusevu*) to present a village’s headman with dried *kava* roots if you are visiting.”

Using a muslin cloth, Sam strained the grated roots that he’d submerged in water, filling a wooden *tanoa* basin with the brown liquid Fijians call ‘grog’. We drank it from coconut shells. Etiquette dictates clapping three times, shouting ‘Bula’ and then downing it in one go. The drink is a mild sedative ▶



**Bulal** (clockwise from far left) Visitors to Nukubati Resort receive a warm beach-side welcome; kayakers splash through Beqa Lagoon, a stretch of water known for its daring shark dives; kava and songs on Nukubati Island; the barbecued fish and locally picked veg served on Nukubati comes fresh from the seas, forests and gardens of the island, making it thoroughly sustainable; the inhabitants of Fiji's Lau Islands are well known for their traditional woodcarvings; coconut milk and flesh is used throughout Fijian cuisine; (previous spread) Fiji is more than just its pristine sands – there is also 3,500 years of iTaukei culture to explore here



## Need to know



### When to go

Fiji's climate is warm throughout the year, with highs of around 30°C. There are two seasons: **May–October:** Sunny, clear skies and peak holiday season. Prices are higher and the beaches busier. The sea has clearer visibility during this period, so it's the best time to dive or snorkel. **November–April:** This is monsoon season, with fewer crowds and lower prices for those who don't mind a few heavy showers. Cyclones are more common in January and February.



### Health & safety

Fiji is a safe country. Cyclones pose the biggest threat, although the country's alert system is effective. There are mosquitoes with dengue fever, but malaria is not reported. As with many sea-based activities, take care with the tides.



### Getting there & around

The author flew with **Cathay Pacific** ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)) via Hong Kong to Nadi, which costs from around £1,601 return and takes about 24 hours. To avoid successive overnight flights, try to break up the journey.

You can fly between islands with Fiji Airway's subsidiary airline **Fiji Link** ([fijiairways.com](http://fijiairways.com)) or take a ferry – although these can be unpredictable at times. Many of the islands' resorts will include a boat transfer as part of your package; if not, **South Sea**

**Cruises** ([southseacruisesfiji.com](http://southseacruisesfiji.com)) does offer reliable connections to the islands. It's around £60 each way between Port Denarau and the Yasawa Islands. An alternative is **Sea Fiji** ([seafiji.net](http://seafiji.net)), which operates small powerboat transfers on demand.

On Viti Levu, the driving time between Nadi and Suva is roughly 3.5 hours. Many bus companies ply this island's roads, and fares between towns are typically inexpensive.



### Carbon offset

A return flight from London to Nadi (Viti Levu), via Hong Kong, produces 1,732kg of carbon per passenger. **Wanderlust** encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit [wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel](http://wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel).



### Visas & currencies

**Visas:** Not currently required by UK nationals.

**Money:** The Fijian dollar (FJD) is currently around FJD2.79 to the UK£.



### Food & drink

You will find international-style cuisine, such as **fish and chips** (especially mahi-mahi), in just about every resort. Yet it's hard to beat the organic traditional food you'll encounter here. Boiled taro (**dalo**) and cassava are staples, **rourou** is a dish of iron-rich taro-leaves, while **kokoda** is the Fijian equivalent of ceviche.

but it is a big part of socialising in Fiji, and learning its etiquette stood me in good stead.

Drinking kava also created a relaxed environment for talanoa (storytelling), and Sam was full of tales. "The lovo was once used by chiefs to cook their enemies and absorb their power," he explained during one of his darker stories. I would soon find out that it was far from taboo to discuss cannibalism here.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The next day, I drove up the west coast towards Volivoli, passing the small trains that ply the narrow-gauge railway to deliver sugarcane to Lautoka port for refinement. Soon the canefields gave way to a coastline of volcanic outliers, and it was here that I passed the grave of Fiji's most prolific cannibal, Udre-Udre, a 19th-century chief who allegedly consumed 872 people. This wasn't even the most notorious example I came across; that honour went to the story of the British missionary Reverend Baker, who in 1867 was said to have broken an iTaukei taboo by touching a local chief's head and then swiftly met his end.

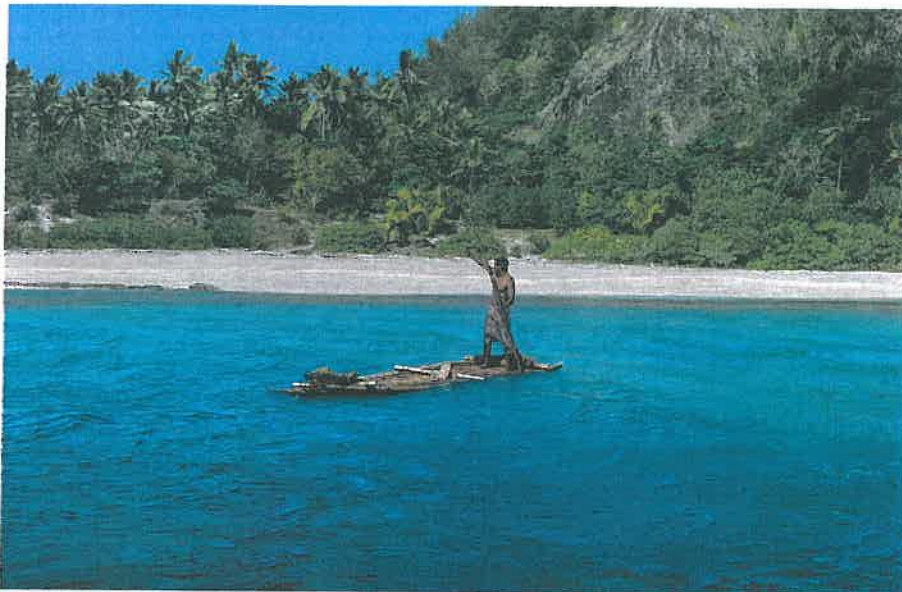
These days breaches of protocol aren't nearly so consequential. Yet cultural traditions remain strong here, and on visiting Nabalasere village in the mountains, I was careful to follow the local custom of not wearing any head covering – that privilege was afforded only to the village chief. I donned a *sulu* (sarong) and, when entering the village, presented my sevusevu of kava roots to the *Turaga-ni-koro* (headman), Aminiasi Levatia.

My observance of etiquette did not, however, stop villagers from pulling my leg.

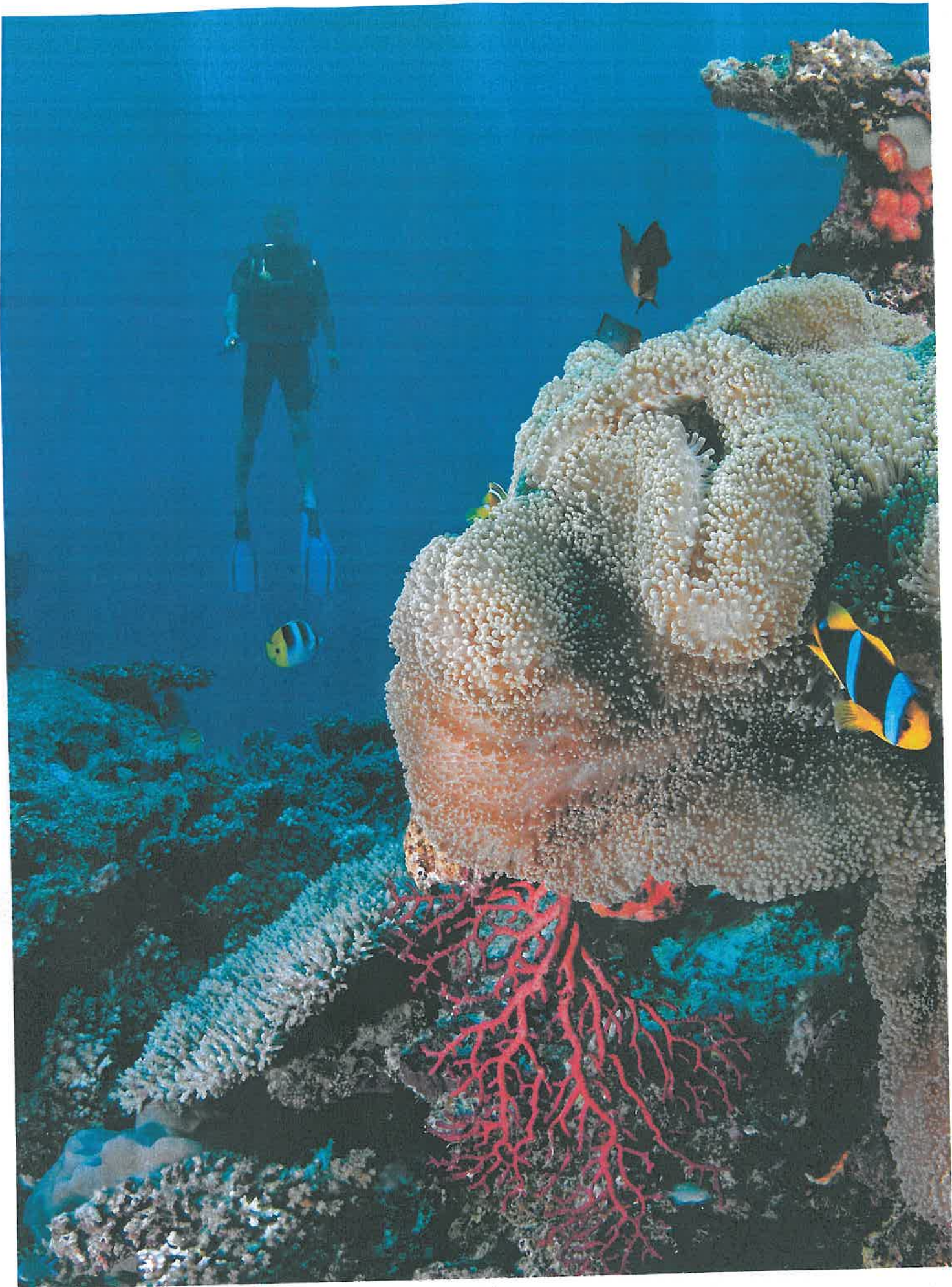
"If you'd come here years ago, we'd be eating you," said Aminiasi, to uproarious laughter during lunch. This was a joyful day of hiking and cultural exchange, all in the company of my guides from Talanoa Treks. The village receives 60 Fijian dollars (£21) per visitor, with the money going towards the community. "Our culture across Fiji is eroding, so bringing visitors helps strengthen it by feeling pride in who we are," said Aminiasi.

The 200-strong settlement was immaculate and fertile. Sky-blue corrugated-iron huts ranged the hillside amid soursop and papaya trees. Pigs and chickens ran amok and gardens of taro, cassava and kava intermingled with rainforest dashed by orange-flowered tulip trees. I swam in a plunge pool beneath a 40m-high waterfall where Aminiasi claimed each rivulet marked the birth of a village boy. After a lunch of home-grown veg, we drank kava and our talanoa was rich.

Women all over Fiji take excess produce from such villages to market, raising a little cash to buy essentials. In capital Suva, I dodged the rain and headed to an undercover market heaped high with organic produce ►



**A quick tippie** (clockwise from top left) Drinking *kava* is typically a social experience in Fiji; Thurston Gardens was built in 1913 on the site of the original village of Suva and was only later renamed after Sir John Bates Thurston, Fiji's fifth Governor; the bridge of land linking Natewa Peninsula to Vanua Levu is so slight that the area developed incredible endemic wildlife – the kind you'd normally find on a lone island; Lara and Leone take visitors out to the world's third-longest barrier reef; Suva's early-20th-century cathedral was built using sandstone blocks imported from Australia; meeting the villagers of Nabaselere; a traditional bilibili raft



**All the colours of the oceans** (clockwise from above) Fiji is home to incredible expanses of coral reefs, with Cakaulevu alone covering some 202,700 sq km; a guide on the Bula Coffee tour demonstrates the time-tested art of drying coffee beans in the sun; the private island Mociu, a protected nature reserve that has been declared off limits to fishermen by the paramount chief of the Mamanucas, makes for a great day trip from Likuliku Lagoon Resort; alconarian coral dominates this reef scene; Beqa's firewalkers display their charred soles to prove this tradition is no sleight of foot; freshly pulled taro roots at a market in Suva



and fronted by flower stalls where ladies sold birds-of-paradise and wild ginger blooms.

"Guests say to me: 'Those poor women sitting there all day.' But trust me, they're having a great time away from their husbands, eating ice creams and chatting," said Peter Sipeli, a poet and gay activist who runs city tours offering an alternative take on Fijian life.

"I want to show Fijian culture is more inclusive, with Indians, Chinese and gay people. We're portrayed overseas as dancing, smiling Pacific islanders, but life is far more complex."

It's a complexity that deepened during British rule (1874–1970), when 60,000 Indian labourers were brought in by *girmit* (agreement) to work the canefields. They were promised good wages but were mostly enslaved. Nowadays, many of the Indo-Fijian community are established traders and farmers, although under iTaukei custom their rights to land ownership are limited.

Another legacy of the British is the city's architecture. Of all Suva's colonial buildings, Thurston Gardens stood out with its elegant clocktower and banyan tree full of hanging fruit bats. Peter also opened my

### **"We're portrayed overseas as dancing, smiling Pacific islanders, but life is far more complex"**

eyes to how much the urban landscape had been repurposed. As we strolled down Cumming Street, the oldest street in Suva, he explained how it had been reclaimed from swampland and become a busy centre.

"It was full of brothels and opium dens in the early 1900s; now it's Gujarati-owned. They came here as traders and look down on other Indians, whose ancestors were indentured labourers," said Peter above the Hindi pop music that blared noisily down the street. "It sells garments that no large Fijian – which is most of us – could fit into," he laughed.

Later we visited the town hall, which was opened in 1905. This handsome, two-storey building has a wraparound balcony and is now home to Ashiyana Indian restaurant.

"I spoke with the owner, who goes by the surname Morris. She told me that the bloody British couldn't pronounce her Indian name, so she anglicised it," explained Peter.

### **THE SAND WARRIORS**

From Suva, it was a short flight north to Vanua Levu, the stepping stone to Nukubati Island. The superstitious local air carrier had no row numbered 13, and I certainly felt lucky to be joining Lara at her small family resort – the most sustainably run accommodation I have ever stayed in. Her father had adapted it to run fully on solar power 30 years ago. All of its waste is treated naturally, produce is home-grown in rainforest gardens and guests drink collected rainwater.

They took me out on a boat to the 260km-long Cakaulevu, the third longest continuous barrier reef system in the world.

"The reef is the identity of all coastal people; we use its tides for transport and marine life for food. Our lives depend on protecting it," Lara explained.

It was a buckarooing 25-minute boat ride across the inky-blue Pacific swell to ►

Cakaulevu. This global biodiversity hotspot is home to 74% of all known coral types and half of Fiji's fish species. In calmer waters, we snorkelled among hard corals shaped like brains, geisha fans and curly kale. Purple and green corals and starbursts of orange anemones surrounded me. Among the myriad sea creatures, I saw octopuses, moray eels, sea cucumbers and giant clams. Later on, spinner dolphins raced our bow.

While heading back to land, we passed the island of the chief whose clan maintain the ancient rights of protection, called *qoliqoli*, over the reef and have the power to declare a taboo on fishing if stocks deplete.

"Nukubati translates as 'sand warriors'," explained Lara. "They were the chief's fishermen and gained a lot of prestige from protecting their fishing grounds. Their canoes were always ready for war."

Cakaulevu felt like something worth fighting for. Reluctantly, I departed Nukubati and headed south, towards Savusavu, the more developed southern coast of Vanua Levu, its beach resorts popular with Americans and Australians. The Hibiscus Highway wended over mountainsides of sandalwood trees and via Vuadomo, where I spied a whitewashed church dedicated to Reverend Timoci, a man said to have had the power to stop cyclones.

We dropped by KokoMana cocoa plantation, a two-hectare plot where agricultural scientist Richard Markham produces bean-to-bar chocolate beneath the rainforest canopy. During a two-hour tour, he explained the science of grafting cocoa varieties and that the plant still grows wild all over Fiji. His mission is to demonstrate how crops, including kava, can thrive under canopy, without the need to clear trees. He encourages local subsistence farmers to get their wild cocoa back in cycle and pays well to take their pods. I savoured the fruits of this labour during a tasting at the tour's end. His chocolate was creamy, with a high cocoa-butter content, and flavoured with sea-salt, chai masala and ginger.

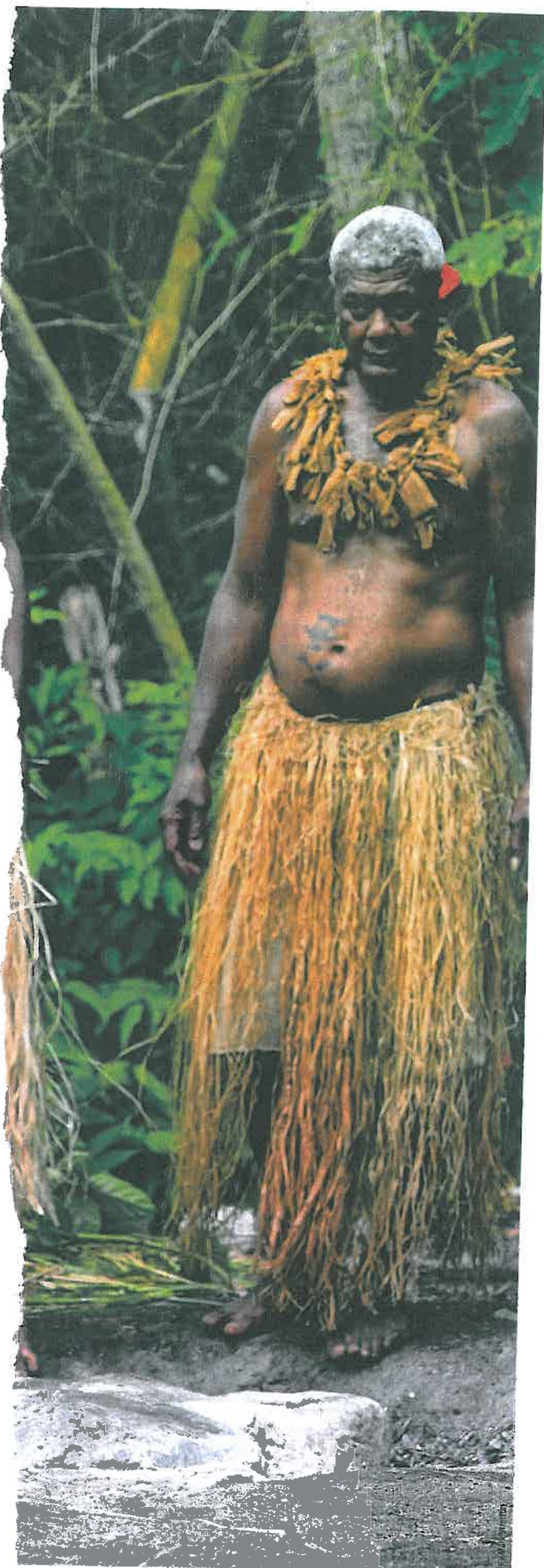
KokoMana's chocolatier is Lina. "She was the accountant," explained Richard, "but when the *Love Island* film crew came here looking for generic footage, they weren't happy with a middle-aged man like me demonstrating tempering chocolate, so Lina stepped in. She turned out to be rather good."

## BRINGING THE FIRE

Leaving the cocoa forests of Vanua Levu behind, I returned to Viti Levu for more island hopping, embarking on the 30-minute sail from Pacific Harbour to Beqa, a small, rugged island to the south. At the resort, I dropped my bags at a bure in a tropical garden, and from the beach I swam out to the reef and snorkelled among the seagrass ▶

**Hotfooting it** (right) Firewalking has been a tradition on Beqa Island for more than 500 years, where it was said to have developed in the highland village of Nakarovu. Participants begin preparing many days before the ceremony and follow strict protocols, even going so far as to abstain from eating coconuts or sex





## Sleeps

**Barefoot Kuata Island** (Yasawa Islands) makes the most of its remote setting. This resort has great snorkelling, beach-facing bures and a laid-back restaurant. Beachfront bures cost £190 per night for two people sharing. [barefootkuatafiji.com](http://barefootkuatafiji.com)

**Beqa Lagoon** (Beqa Island) is a specialist diving resort with both ocean-facing and garden bures. Be sure to stick around for the nightly performances of firewalkers. Two-night full-board packages from £206 per person. [beqalagoonresort.com](http://beqalagoonresort.com)

**COMO Laucaia Island** is an uber-luxurious private-island stay with its own stretches of rainforest and coconut groves. Villas cost from £4,759 per night; three-night minimum. [comohotels.com](http://comohotels.com)

**Grand Pacific Hotel** (Viti Levu) is a stately *grande dame* in Suva, within easy reach of Albert Park and Thurston Gardens. It might be over a century old, but it's been updated to include a modern spa. Doubles from £145 per night. [grandpacifichotel.com.fj](http://grandpacifichotel.com.fj)

**Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort** (Vanua Levu) is an ecologically minded stay in the spirit of its environmentalist namesake (son of Jacques). The dive school, as you'd expect, is well respected. Bures from £930 per night for two sharing. [fijiresort.com](http://fijiresort.com)

**Likuliku Lagoon** (Malolo Island) serves up a wilderness retreat in a remote bay. It has both overwater and beachfront bures, its own restaurant, and runs day trips



to the private nature island of Mociu. Beachfront bures from £1,060 per night for two sharing. [likulikulagoon.com](http://likulikulagoon.com)

**Nanuku Fiji** (Viti Levu) spans 220 hectares of the main island's southern coast. Guests can even help rehabilitate the resort's private reef by assisting in corai and mangrove planting. Suites from £590 per night for two sharing. [nanukuresort.com](http://nanukuresort.com)

**Nukubati** (off Vanua Levu) has six beachfront *bure* cabins. There is organic food, reef diving and a sense that this property is in tune with local customs and traditions. Rooms from £430 per night full-board with activities; three-night minimum. [nukubati.com](http://nukubati.com)

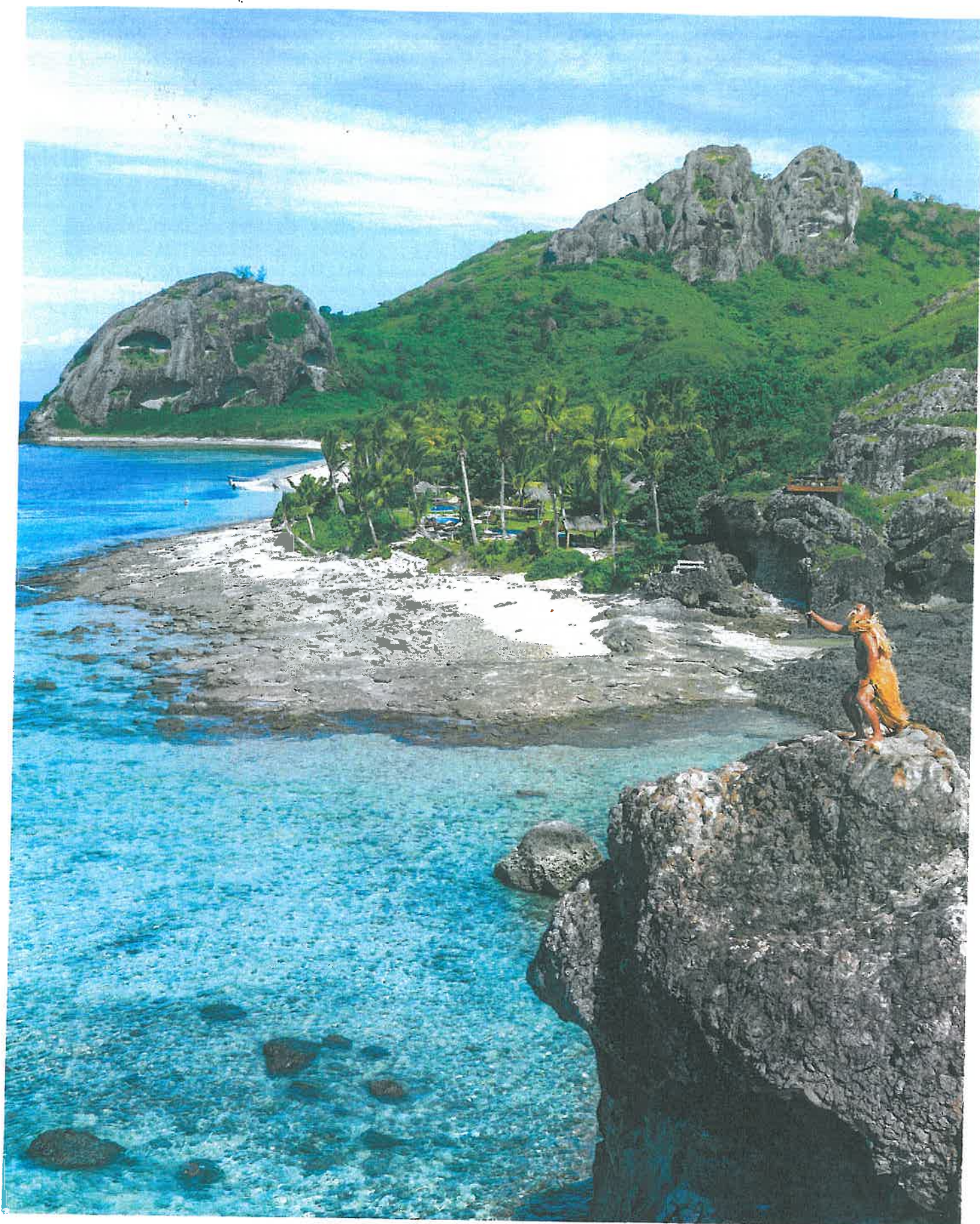
**Shangri-La Yanuca Island** (off Viti Levu) is a high-end stay set by a brilliantly turquoise lagoon. It has a strong sense of sustainability – the author even got to assist in maintaining the reef by building 'fish houses'. Doubles from £236 per night. [shangri-la.com](http://shangri-la.com)

**Volivoli** (Viti Levu) is a well-known dive resort that lies on a cliffside sloping down to the beach. Large rooms with ocean views from £212 per night. [volivoli.com](http://volivoli.com)

## Sustainable Fiji

Travellers who want to make ethical choices will love the offerings of the Duavata Sustainable Tourism Collective ([duavatasustainabletourism.org](http://duavatasustainabletourism.org)). My highlights included:

- **Vavavi** – Learn how to prepare a *lovo* feast. [vavavifiji.com](http://vavavifiji.com)
- **Bula Coffee** – A community-minded coffee company whose tours supplement village incomes and support female empowerment. [bulacoffee.co](http://bulacoffee.co)
- **KokoMana** – Visit the plantation to learn about making chocolate and growing cocoa in the rainforest. [kokomanafiji.com](http://kokomanafiji.com)
- **Talanoa Treks** – Join single- or multi-day treks and book remote village stays. [talanoa-treks-fiji.com](http://talanoa-treks-fiji.com)



**Clear waters ahead!** (clockwise from above) The welcome on Kuata Island is never less than spectacular; the Yasawa Islands span 80km of the Pacific Ocean, off the north-west coast of Viti Levu, and achieved a small amount of fame in the early 1980s as the idyllic setting for the film *The Blue Lagoon* – these days they are better known for their wild peaks, limestone caverns and manta-filled waters, and make for an adventurous escape on multi-day kayaking and sailing trips; Beqa Lagoon is popular for its cageless shark diving, which brings fearless travellers up close to bull, nurse, tiger, blacktip and whitetip reef sharks



## *Fiji's best dives*

### **1 Beqa Island tiger shark dive**

Dive manager Brandon Paige has developed an extraordinary dive where he hand-feeds tiger sharks and bull sharks as divers watch on.

### **2 Great Astrolabe Reef**

A world-class dive among the pristine corals off Kadavu Island. Expect plenty of mantas and sharks.

### **3 Rainbow Reef**

This reef delivers spellbinding corals and tropical fish as you dive Taveuni Island's 'Great White Wall'.

### **4 The Suncoast**

A major site for brightly coloured soft corals that is found off the north-eastern tip of Viti Levu, within reach of Volivoli Resort.

### **5 Drawaqa Island**

A Yasawa dive where manta rays come to cleaning stations off Barefoot Manta Island Resort.



## *The trip*

The author was supported by **Travel Nation** ([travelnation.co.uk](http://travelnation.co.uk); 01273 917479), which offers a 16-night tour of Fiji for £5,695 per person. This includes all the experiences featured in this article, including three nights on Nukubati, a Talanoa Treks hike and stays on Beqa and Kuata islands, as well as international and internal flights and transfers, with B&B accommodation, several full-board days and an overnight in Hong Kong each way. Further support was provided by Tourism Fiji ([fiji.travel](http://fiji.travel)) and Fiji Airways ([fijairways.com](http://fijairways.com)).

and alongside a green turtle. At low tide, women with baskets scoured the rock pools for shellfish, sending mud crabs scurrying inland to the safety of their holes.

The island has a tradition of firewalking. The men of Rukua village built a fire and laid down stones to heat up. It was a bit like a lovo, except they were barbecuing themselves. Dressed in skirts woven from pandanus leaves, they walked across the stones and showed their blackened soles at the end of the display.

"Five hundred years ago, islanders were given a gift that meant they could not be burnt by fire and had the power to heal burns," explained islander Yasiti Ratulevu. "A powerful chief was given the gift by a *veli*, a spirit god, in return for its life being spared. When I was young, I ran into my mother's cooking pot and got third-degree burns. My grandfather, one of the gifted, put his hands on the burns and now I have no scarring."

By catamaran, I sailed westwards to the Yasawas, 20 rainforested islands made up of broken calderas with halos of white sand. I splashed ashore in the warm tide, taking my first steps on Kuata Island, where my steep-roofed bure touched the beach.

There was little time to unpack because a boat was readying to venture out to Moya

Reef for an extraordinary encounter with sharks. With the snorkel guide releasing fish scraps, I was soon swimming among a kaleidoscopic blizzard of brightly coloured fish. It wasn't long before both blacktip and whitetip reef sharks came to investigate. Their heads flicked from side to side, probing for food, sometimes close enough to touch, although I returned to my bure with all my digits intact.

Throughout my island journeys, Fijians explained to me their concerns over the effects of climate change on the sea level and the increase in cyclones. For the conscious traveller, flying halfway around the

world to Fiji to do some good is perhaps counter-intuitive, yet my presence as a visitor here had helped support inspiring pathways for maintaining Fijian customs, which inherently protect these beautiful islands.

A tradition exists whereby departing guests are given a flower to cast into the ocean so that it washes back ashore. It symbolises returning one day, and it stirred in me a sense of unfinished travels. I hadn't yet met the famous woodcarvers of the Lau islands, nor tasted Fiji's best kava on Kadavu, or dived with manta rays, or seen Levuka's ancient villages. I departed feeling my Fijian talanoa had only just begun. ■

**"Five hundred years ago, islanders were given a gift that meant they could not be burnt by fire"**