



## **FIJI**

Flying into Fiji at daytime is beautiful, as all the little scattered islands look pretty in the turquoise of the Pacific Ocean. I landed in Nadi on the island Viti Levu at night, seeing countless lights in the dark below me, wondering how strange it was to arrive somewhere without having an idea what the place actually looked like.



### *Nadi*

I had chosen a hostel near the beach but unfortunately it was fully booked. The lady at the reception desk offered me to sleep in her office on the floor and I agreed with that, just happy to find a place to rest. But I had to wait until she finished her job around midnight and decided to enjoy the warm night on the terrace.

A group of local musicians were sitting on the floor, singing and playing local instruments I had never seen before, obviously entertaining a few tourists who were listening to them. When I

entered the circle, the locals ended their song, turned towards me and asked me to introduce myself. Then they told me I'd have to drink a cup of "kava" as a rite of initiation and pointed to a beautiful big bowl filled with a brownish liquid. When I asked what exactly I was about to drink everybody laughed. I agreed to try and was told to clap my hands and say "Bula!" which among other things means "hello". Then I received the half coconut shell in which the drink was offered and swept it down, feeling the rather bitter and spicy taste make my taste buds go a little numb. Everybody applauded and I was admitted. One of the musicians showed me a cotton bag filled with a powder, explaining that it was made of the ground roots of a Polynesian pepper plant. He placed the bag in the bowl, added water and then washed and squeezed the bag. Slowly water and powder mixed and ready was another kava drink.



He assured me that kava didn't have any alcohol but was some kind of narcotic drug. As a new member I had to drink some more of the brine and with every sip my mouth went numb. Still, at a certain point I couldn't drink any more and spent the rest of the night watching sceptically how the musicians went on drinking, stopping any other action, being totally indifferent and lost in a kind of apathy.

Eventually I went to bed, my head feeling dizzy, my ears still sounding from a song I had just learned, a real catchy tune "Welcome to the Fiji islands, where the girls are pretty...".

The next day I had to rise quite early as I couldn't occupy the reception desk all morning. My head and stomach felt a little strange and I blamed it on the kava. One of the musicians, a guy called Jim had invited me to have lunch with his family and I was curious to see how they lived. Until then, Fiji for me was just a collection of beautiful islands with hotel resorts for the rich and famous - and I was none of these.

It took me a while to find the address in a rather poor area where the houses looked simple and small. Finally I knocked at Jim's door and his wife, who introduced herself as Liti let me in. Inside there was just a rather murky, small living room with practically no furniture except for some chairs and a kitchen. Four young girls and a little boy were sitting in the dark, looking at me without saying anything. I took the last available chair and was served some plates with delicious food that I placed on my lap as there was no table. Jim was nowhere to be seen. Liti and I started a conversation which none of the children joined in. Although English is the second official language they didn't seem to understand us. Liti was a very friendly and interesting woman and I liked her immediately.

But the expression in her face was quite bitter and when I mentioned Jim she started to curse him. She told me about kava being a big social problem in Fiji with many men like Jim showing a typical addictive behaviour, spending all their money on the powder, drinking themselves literally away, losing any interest in families, friends or jobs, feeling misunderstood, hanging out with other kava addicts who share the one interest. As kava is the national legal drink, its consumption socially accepted and seen upon as "male", it's hardly avoidable and no one admits the dangers it really causes.

Like so many others Jim had lost his job and was trying to make some money as a musician. But usually Liti never saw any of that money, so she was the one who raised the five children, doing whatever job was available, trying to make ends meet. I felt quite depressed about her story and followed into the kitchen to lend her a hand doing the dishes. And there was Jim sitting on the floor with a friend, sharing a bowl of kava, both looking horribly pale and sick, not paying any attention to me or anyone else. I felt that I needed some sunshine again and left.

As Nadi was the touristiest area I decided to leave and maybe explore one of the small islands. I knew that Fiji was a quite expensive destination and was interested if I'd find a place where I'd be able to live my cheap and easy life as a rucksack-tourist. Reading about luxurious hotel resorts charging 1000 Euros per night made my jaws drop. Knowing a little bit more about the poor economic situation of the locals this seemed to be a ridiculous contradiction that upset me.

Viti Levu's south coast has also the promising name "coral coast" and I decided to go there. I took a minibus which reminded me of buses in Indonesia – only that the ones in Fiji were air conditioned and equipped with DVD players.



I got off at a village called Korolevu and found a campsite near the beach. Unfortunately rain set in and I went to a sheltered terrace to have a look at the other guests. I found the typical international scene of young backpackers whose main idea of travelling seemed to be having "fun" no matter what it takes. I didn't feel like joining in any drinking games especially as they had to do with kava.

The next day I was offered to join a tour to a traditional village in the neighbourhood. Usually when I travel I try to avoid tours as they normally don't have anything to do with the real life of a people but as I still didn't have any positive insight into Fijian culture I decided to participate.

In the village a kind of chief expected us and we were served kava again which I had to accept politely. We had a look around and I wasn't sure in which respect this village should be more traditional than others. But I could at least witness one very traditional Fijian thing and that was "lovo". Lovo is a way of preparing food in an earth oven. First some villagers dug a hole in the ground. Then they filled it with hot coals and food, fruits, vegetables, coconut milk, seafood, meat and fish. In the end the hole was covered with huge banana leaves.



While the earth oven did the cooking I had the chance to visit the local school. The place was quite spacious and beautifully surrounded by a palm tree forest. Lunch break was just finishing, some students were still eating, others were playing soccer and some young ones were brushing their teeth. I really liked this scene, because I had the impression that

the students were enjoying themselves and a certain freedom in what they were doing.



Back in the village the lovo was ready and the food was dug out again, smelling incredibly tasty. In the official house of the community we were invited to sit down on the floor. Then we had to repeat the inevitable kava ceremony before the delicious food was served on mats made of banana leaves. This whole combination together with traditional music was great and left an unforgettable impression.

Nevertheless I wanted to leave Viti Levu and decided to go to the third largest island, a very remote place called "Taveuni".

I only knew that from time to time there was a ferry that left from Suva, so I continued travelling along the South coast until I got there.

### *Suva*

Suva is the capital of Fiji and is a rather busy city. I went to the harbour to ask for the next ferry and was lucky because it was more or less about to leave.

It didn't surprise me that hardly anyone went to Taveuni because the trip via ferry took 24 hours. Looking for a packed lunch I checked out a market close to the harbour. There were many different sorts of fruits to choose from and the Fijians had interesting names for everything.

Entering the ferry I found out that I was the only tourist. The ferry seemed to be okay but turned out to be quite uncomfortable if not unsafe. There was a kind of living room with some rows of seats and I tried to use some seats as a bed. In the front there was a TV showing Asian fight movies non-stop. Finally I managed to fall asleep but was suddenly awakened by a loud noise: a huge piece of the ceiling had fallen down. Luckily no one had been sitting there and everyone was watching the scene with stoical tranquillity.



### *TAVEUNI*

Reaching the shore of Taveuni I felt like Noah must have when he left the Arch. There was no real harbour but a small jetty surrounded by coconut palms. To me, Taveuni seemed a very interesting place. I followed the road until I arrived at the nearest village. In the first garden I saw a hut with a sign that said "Sunset accommodation" and decided to stay there. The owners, an elderly, very friendly Indian couple proudly showed me around. Of course, the hut was basic but friendly and sufficient and I wasn't going to spend much time indoors anyway! Also, I really liked the garden where pineapple and pawpaw plants were growing. The lovely lady brought freshly sliced pineapple – which I spat out again as soon as she left the room: it was spiced with cumin and salt and honestly, I hadn't quite expected that taste! The couple had knowledge of every plant and animal on the island and within the next few days I tried out a lot of new things. I was allowed to

pick whatever fruits I fancied and was shown how to make coconut milk and produce coconut oil. Also they told me that there was an Indian minority in Fiji, descendants of labourers who had been brought from India when Fiji was a colony.

I took a trip around the island, or not quite around it as the only road along the sea stopped at some place. The hilly centre of the island wasn't inhabited at all; there was the densest jungle I'd ever seen in my life!

Exploring a few villages I found out that a lot of former plantations were reused as tourist accommodations. But as I mentioned before, there were hardly any tourists who knew about Taveuni and so I had the paradise for myself. I experienced hospitality wherever I went and was invited to camp on the plantation for little money. Getting up in the mornings I started the days strolling through the gardens, picking whatever fruits I liked, breakfasting on fresh vitamins. Taveuni was also a great place to go hiking; I was stunned by the beauty of the "Bouma National Heritage Park" where I climbed a small mountain, enjoying tropical forests with cascades and plants, beaming sunshine and a gorgeous view on the sea. Sometimes I met local children who accompanied me and showed me around, obviously enjoying their tropical playground. But most of all I was happy that I finally had found *the* paradise Fiji is said to be!



### **Questions on the text**

- *Where are the Fiji islands situated?*
- *What do the inhabitants of Fiji mean with "lovo"?*
- *What's the name of the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Fijian island?*
- *How long does it take to get from Suva, the capital of Fiji, to Taveuni by ferry?*
- *How did the Indians come to the Fiji islands?*

### **Discussion Topic**

*When you hear the name of Fiji you probably think of wonderful sandy beaches, the turquoise sea, coconuts and things like that. As you just have learned there are not only luxurious resort hotels on the islands but also shabby slum like areas where the poor live. Are you of the opinion that it's okay that tourist's pay thousands of dollars for their stay – sums with that many locals could feed their families for months? How could the situation be changed?*

### **Internet Activity**

Go to [www.bulafiji.com](http://www.bulafiji.com) and find out how many islands belong to Fiji.

### **Essay writing**

*"Kava" is a typical Fijian drink and has a narcotizing effect on the nervous system. It helps to forget problems. Kava has become a social problem in Fiji yet but hardly anybody is aware of this. In Austria we do not have such a national drink but the consumption of beer is considered as absolutely okay and not at all dangerous.*

*What do you think about drinking alcohol in general? What dangers are there when people play down the consumption of alcoholic drinks and what comes to your mind when you think about alcohol as a socially accepted drug?*