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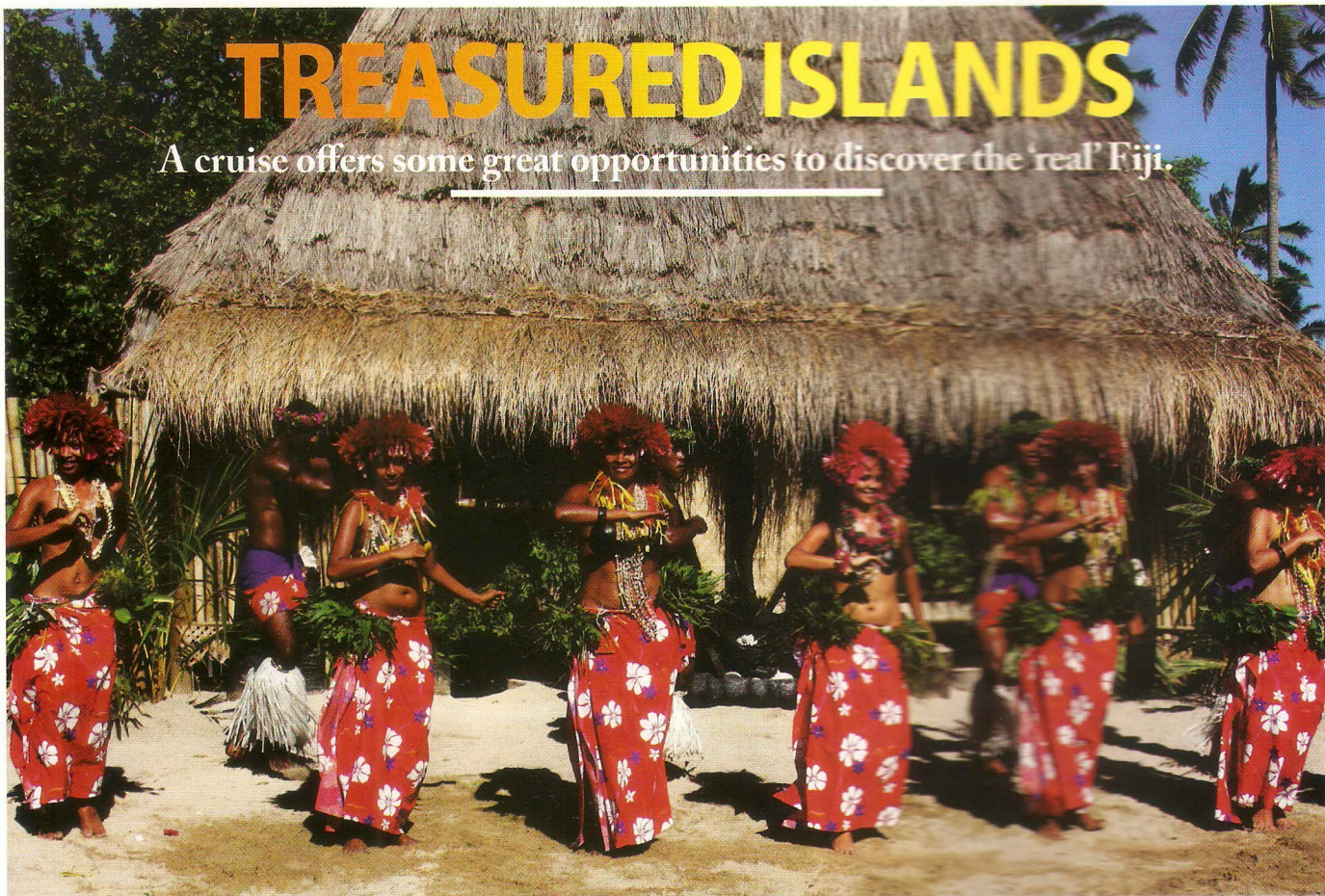


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BABY ON BOARD + WIN A FIJI CRUISE + ALASKA FOR BEGINNERS

# TREASURED ISLANDS

A cruise offers some great opportunities to discover the 'real' Fiji.



Words Fiona Harper

Infused with the balmy scent of frangipani and coconut oil, Fiji has a distinct aroma that has sunshine-drenched holiday written all over it. A Fijian cruise also comes with its own special tropical soundtrack that sways to Fiji time: swishing palm fronds on shore excursions to pristine beaches, gentle waves washing over fragmented tinkling coral, the whoosh of a bow wave slipping past the ship's hull, tinny ukuleles strung with fishing line accompanying melodious voices. And, everywhere, the ubiquitous "Bula" greeting (meaning hello) accompanied by wide smiles from young children through to village elders.

Fijians' friendliness is just one of the reasons Australians keep returning. But venture beyond sparkling white sand beaches (which admittedly are very tempting) and you'll find a plethora of other reasons to cruise Fiji's turquoise waters.

Village tours are a major highlight of any cruise, with Fijians opening up their homes, schools and churches to welcome visitors. Even for the non-religious, attending a Sunday church service is highly recommended. Ladies tuck frangipanis behind their ears and frock up in colourful dresses. Men don floral Bula shirts while

children sit, looking respectful, in their Sunday best. Harmonic voices ring out above the palm trees as hymns are sung and sermons delivered. Visitors are always welcome but make sure you dress appropriately by covering shoulders and knees, remove hats and sunglasses and carry small change for the donation box.

A visit to a village also offers the opportunity to buy handicrafts directly from craftsmen and women. Buying arts, crafts and shells in villages rather than at souvenir shops in Nadi is one way to repay villagers' generous hospitality. Look out for tapa cloth that's made from the bark of mulberry trees and beaten and folded into shape before being decorated with charcoal motifs and symbols. Intricate patterns make these highly sought after – traditional wedding garments (for both men and women) are made from tapa. Mats and baskets woven from dried pandanus leaves are also popular artefacts to take home, as are kava bowls and symbolic weaponry carved from indigenous hardwood.

Lovo feasts are a splendid way to experience local food as well as an opportunity to sit down with villagers, share a meal and a laugh or two.

Most cruises incorporate a lovo, where an oven is prepared from a pit dug in the soil, lined with stones and heated by fire. Food is usually a mix of pork, chicken or fish along with root vegetables like cassava, taro, yam and sweet potato. The entire feast is wrapped in banana leaves or woven palm

frond baskets topped with damp hessian sacks to contain the heat. Often a *meke* will be performed, intertwining stories told through song and dance by elaborately costumed dancers, before the feast is served.

Keep an eye out for the gathering of cross-legged men and you'll likely find a kava bowl at the centre. Wait to be invited before settling down on the mat, slurping a bowl of muddy-looking water before a slightly intoxicating effect washes over you and you'll be well on your way to understanding Fiji Time.

## MY PICK

**BEST EXPERIENCE:** Traditional Fiji massage at Mandara Spa Sofitel (a few minutes from Denarau Harbour) pre or post cruise.

**BEST CRUISE:** Lau Islands Cruise with Captain Cook Cruises (three departures in 2015) – pristine islands in far-eastern Fiji where very few venture.

**BEST SOUVENIR:** Woven pandanus mat decorated with dyed fronds.

For more information see [fiji.travel](http://fiji.travel).