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# 12

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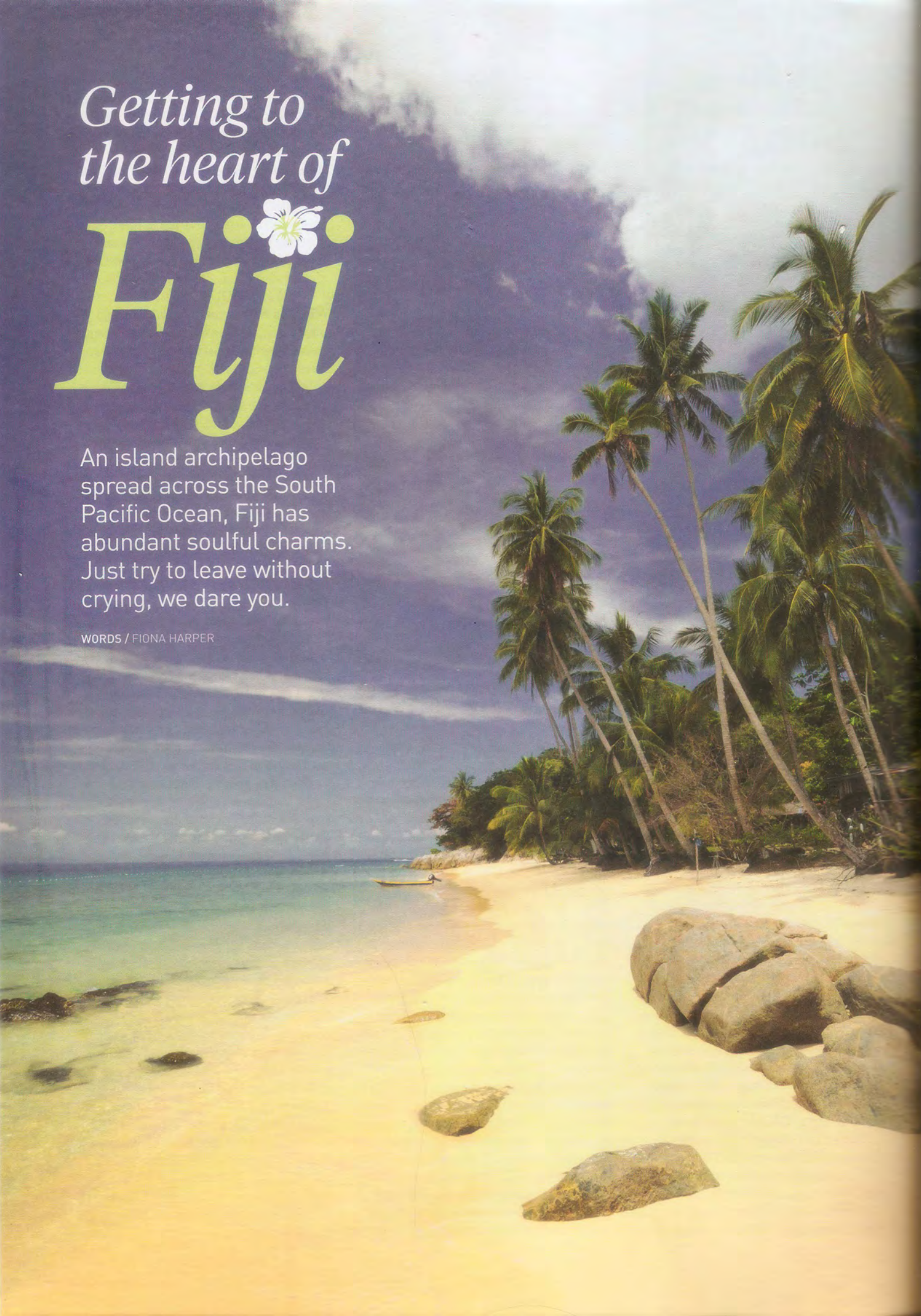
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*Getting to  
the heart of*  
**Fiji**

An island archipelago spread across the South Pacific Ocean, Fiji has abundant soulful charms. Just try to leave without crying, we dare you.

WORDS / FIONA HARPER





No matter how many times I hear the traditional Fijian hymn *Nisa Lei*, tears well in my eyes, inducing an overwhelming melancholy. There's also anguish, too, as it invariably precedes departure from a country dear to my heart. Usually sung unaccompanied in layers of hymn-like stanzas, it's an emotive farewell song laced with melodic harmonies. Music and dance are woven into the fabric of Fijian Polynesian and Melanesian culture and *Nisa Lei* expresses remorse at parting company after sharing good times.

During a recent visit, I heard the mournful melody numerous times. No occasion was more emotional than my early-morning departure from Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort. After completing checkout formalities, the security guard picked up a guitar and started strumming and gently crooning. As my car pulled up, his deep baritone voice rose above the coconut palms, catching on the breeze as he broke into the first lines of *Nisa Lei*. The receptionist joined in, swaying rhythmically.

Mesmerised and emotional, I'm not embarrassed to admit that tears rolled unfettered down my cheeks as we drove away, glorious harmonies ringing in my ears. But I defy anyone to not be moved hearing this song. Or, for that matter, by Fijians in general, who exude a genuine earthy warmth and friendliness.

### VANUA LEVU, LAUCALA & QAMEA

Nowhere is this hospitality more evident than at Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort (JMC). Strongly aligned with best environmental practices both on land and beneath the sea, the resort is a world leader in managing, preserving and protecting the environment. But it's the staff who make the place stand out: they are so unashamedly congenial it feels as though you've lobbied into a party bursting with long-lost friends.

The resort sits on a headland a few kilometres from the town of Savusavu on Fiji's northern island, Vanua Levu. Gardens are irrigated with water recycled from a treatment plant cleverly concealed by colourful lily ponds. The kitchen is supplied with fresh produce year round from extensive fruit and vegetable gardens, along with heavily laden fruit trees planted throughout the grounds. Guests are invited to help themselves, picking their own healthy snacks from whatever is in season. For mango lovers it's an invitation to juicy, sweet paradise. Not that there aren't plenty of decadent options on the menu (caramelised banana pancakes, take a bowl).

Reef fish or farmed prawns are eschewed by resort chefs in favour of local fish caught sustainably. It's no surprise, really, given the resort is surrounded by a marine reserve, thriving under the careful guidance of renowned environmentalist Jean-Michel Cousteau himself. Low-voltage lighting, solar-heated water systems and clever design that negates the need for air-conditioning in *bures* (traditional Fijian huts) constructed from certified forest timber are other ways JMC is making a significant reduction to its carbon footprint.

JMC is also a significant contributor to the local community via its partnership with the Savusavu Community Foundation (SCF). SCF organises free medical clinics, has secured donations in excess of FJ\$20 million in pharmaceuticals, medical supplies and hospital equipment, and organises health-focused community projects. JMC assists by co-ordinating projects, providing support for visiting medical staff as well as raising funds by encouraging guest donations.

Even more isolated from mainland Fiji, Laucala (pronounced Lor-thar-laa) Island is another resort with strong eco credentials. Blessed with the luxury of an entire island at its disposal (and an owner with deep pockets), the



School children prepare for a cultural performance at Drua Drua Island. Below: Dancers entertain Captain Cook Cruise passengers at Kioa Island



resort's 250 acres of farmland are used to sustain island guests and staff. Coffee, vanilla, pepper and sugar crops, along with a coconut plantation, fruit orchards, vegetable gardens and hydroponic horticulture, ensure there is plenty of year-round produce. Cows, pigs, goats and poultry (including egg incubators) provide meat supplies. Local fisherman harvest seafood from surrounding waters and menus change according to the day's catch.

Laucala Spa has its own kitchen that produces beauty products. Decadently aromatic (four signature scents are influenced by citrus, floral, herbs and wood fragrances) and created using natural cold-pressed methods, oils, soaps and shampoos are used in the spa itself as well as in-room amenities in the resort's 25 opulent villas. After sending my smalls off to be laundered one day, they came back wrapped in handmade paper smelling delightfully, as if they had spent the entire day being pampered in the spa. Which is exactly how I managed to while away much of my time when not sailing, playing golf, boating at sunset or relaxing by the private swimming pool. Or eating. Or savouring cocktails created from homegrown organic fruit. Tissues were required on departure (again) as *Nisa Lei* harmonies hovered in the still air above the runway.

Many of Laucala's staff are housed on nearby Qamea (pronounced Ga-mee-ar) Island in a purpose-built village. With only tourism providing much-needed employment, there



are few opportunities in this remote location beyond a handful of tourist businesses.

It's also home to Qamea Resort and Spa, a small resort that has been around for a while. I arrived by a circuitous route that took most of the day and involved a taxi, a minivan and a couple of small boats across open water, and it was a relief to eventually step ashore. Qamea has a reputation as a bespoke luxury resort sited on one of the South Pacific's prettiest beaches. I'd also heard it had a strong environmental focus. Its 17 small bures are clustered among manicured gardens with a backdrop of jagged volcanic mountains clad in lush vegetation.

Visually, it is beautiful. Sun-drenched beaches kissed by a turquoise sea. Kaleidoscopic fish dart through coral gardens. Coconut palms swish in the gentle trade winds, creating a melodic soundtrack to a South Pacific idyll. Only Qamea fell a little short of expectations. I tried so hard to love the resort; as with a long-lost love rekindled, I lobbed onto her shores anticipating an open-armed welcome. Yet to be fair, judging by online guest reviews, others have been besotted with the place. Conspicuously, there was no *Nisa Lei* sung on departure: was that an oversight or final confirmation of staff apathy?

### COMPANIES THAT CONNECT

As I step on board Captain Cook Cruises (CCC) flagship the *MV Reef Endeavour* for a cruise through the southern Yasawa and Mamanuca (pronounced Mam-an-ooth-ar) Islands, guitars strum, ukuleles twang, hands clap and voices ring out from smiling faces. My second time aboard, it feels like a reunion among friends. On a previous voyage, we circumnavigated the main island of Viti Levu on a Cultural Explorer cruise. This time the focus is more islands and beaches, with lots of snorkelling, swimming and diving expeditions interspersed with village visits and cultural performances.

CCC is one of Fiji's most awarded tour operators. With an ethos of providing sustainable tourism that offers guests a true Fijian experience, the company has long-held connections with local communities. The crew, many of whom have family ties to the villages we visit, source local produce such as limes and cassava from the villages as we travel through.

At Tivua Island, CCC's marine biologists are focusing on conserving marine life while raising awareness of reef conservation through educational programs. Guests have participated in coral plantings, where corals are cultivated in order to regenerate healthy reef ecosystems. A giant clam regeneration project is also underway. CCC also visits Makogai Island (during the 11-night Lau Islands cruise), where a giant clam garden project is flourishing. Giant clams the size of washing machines are thriving under the protection of Marine Reserve status. Passengers can snorkel over the gardens or visit the turtle nursery where young turtles are nurtured before being released back into the sea.

CCC also supports the education of young Fijians, contributing both financially and in kind to schools across the country. Many of these schools are in remote villages with little or no electricity, relying on generators or solar systems to power basic needs. Many children have little access to computers that Australians take for granted. Guests are encouraged to donate basic items like exercise books, pencils and reading books, or to leave cash donations in the



From top: Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort specialises in fine Fijian hospitality; guests are free to graze in the kitchen garden



Photography: Frank Harcourt

**Blessed with the luxury of an entire island at its disposal (and an owner with deep pockets), the resort's 250 acres of farmland are used to sustain island guests and staff.**

ubiquitous collection box that appears alongside cultural *mekes* (traditional dance performances). A few dollars go a long way here and most guests consider it a privilege to make a small contribution to the education of Fiji's future leaders.

Another company leading the way in providing a future for Fijians is Pure Fiji. I pop into their headquarters in Suva, ostensibly to pick up some natural therapy products directly from the factory but also to find out more about the company itself. As I'm perusing beautifully packaged lotions and potions in the showroom, I hear the familiar uplifting sounds of Fijian song. It turns out that staff have decided to give an impromptu performance and have briefly downed tools and lined up chorus-style, singing, clapping and dancing. Their joy is infectious and soon I'm laughing and dancing along with them.

The founder of Pure Fiji, Gaetene Austin, tells me she created the company as "a way of investing in Fiji and creating jobs, both for my family and for others". After her husband passed away and she found herself a single mother of seven children, Austin was prompted to find a way to earn a living. Recognising that Pacific Islanders have long used coconut oil as the basis for hair and skin maintenance, she developed soaps and handicrafts using a ready supply of raw product: coconuts.

Pure Fiji is now one of Fiji's most recognised exporters. Seventy-five of the factory's 100 staff are women, who traditionally have few employment opportunities. Additionally, the company creates jobs for about 700 others in rural areas through its handmade paper project. Pure Fiji sources from village communities raw materials such as cold-pressed coconut oil, bark cloth, coconut rope and the delicately woven baskets that products are packaged in.



Austin's daughter Sophia Anania, who manages the marketing side from her Sydney base, enthuses, "We're about people, not just the product. Rather than rely on machines, our people are hands-on." Sharing her mother's passion, she explains, "Where there's a hand, there's a heart and a soul."

Very much a socially responsible family business, the company funds scholarships for village children and makes donations in the form of furniture to schools and libraries. Scholarship graduates have studied at university to become teachers, returning to their villages to educate the next generation. A company with soul, much like Fiji itself, Pure Fiji has deliberately not expanded beyond what is manageable by the family. There have certainly been offers to place their exquisite products into worldwide chain stores, but they have chosen to shy away from such mass distribution. As a result, the brand name has almost become exclusive enough to warrant cult status.

### SOPHISTICATION & RELAXATION

Worldwide hotel chain Sofitel is the antithesis of Pure Fiji, so it's rather ironic that Sofitel Fiji and Sofitel Auckland are the only two hotels globally to stock Pure Fiji products in their guest bathroom amenities kits.

But Sofitel Fiji is not your usual five-star hotel. The French brand has a tradition of greeting guests with the French *bonjour*. In Fiji, tipping its multicultural hat, *bonjour* meets *bula* (the traditional Fijian greeting for hello) in a beguiling melding of French sophistication with relaxed Fijian charm. The hotel works with the Cure Kids Fiji project, raising funds for life-saving equipment for a neo-natal unit, refurbishment of Lautoka Hospital's children's ward and Nadi Hospital's maternity ward. Additionally, funds have helped pay for a program for the early detection and treatment of rheumatic heart disease.

Coffee fiends should pull up a chair on the veranda at La Parisienne for the "best coffee in the country". If you've a hankering for fine dining, V Restaurant is one of the few Fijian restaurants capable of sophisticated French flair thanks to head chef Jean-Marc Ruzzene's leadership. It helps that he has at his disposal a vast market garden

### ESCAPE ROUTES

#### ■ Getting there

Fiji Airways and Virgin Australia fly directly from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to Nadi. Jetstar flies between Sydney and Nadi.

#### ■ Staying there

**Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort** is perfect for family groups or couples; children are allocated their own private nanny, allowing parents free time to relax knowing children are in the best hands. [fjiresort.com](http://fjiresort.com)

Located conveniently close to Nadi Airport on Denarau Island, **Sofitel Fiji Resort and Spa** is a splendid option to start or end your Fijian island explorations. [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com)

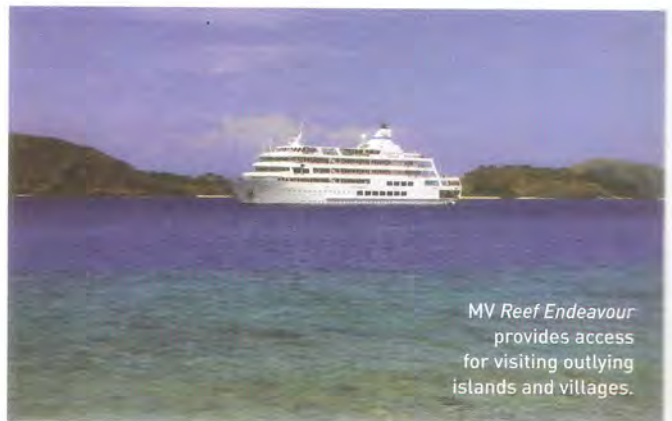
#### ■ What to do

Look for **Pure Fiji Boutique** at Sofitel Denarau or visit the factory in Suva on Saturdays, where Pure Fiji Spa is also located. [purefiji.com](http://purefiji.com)

**Captain Cook Cruises** is one of Fiji's most loved cruise operators. Cruises vary from three-night Yasawa cruises through to 11-night journeys to the far eastern Lau Group islands. [captaincook.com.fj](http://captaincook.com.fj)



Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort is a world-leading eco-resort specialising in fine Fijian hospitality.



MV Reef Endeavour provides access for visiting outlying islands and villages.

Photography: Fiona Harper

within the hotel grounds with an astounding variety of herbs, vegetables and fruit.

Pop into Mandara Spa for a Fijian *bobo* massage using traditional rituals passed through generations designed to balance the mind, body and spirit. With the setting a private enclave shaded by frangipani trees and cooled by gentle breezes, if Fiji hasn't already seduced you, it's likely you'll fall under her gentle charm at the hands of a skilled masseuse. The Sanskrit word *mandara* comes from an ancient legend about the quest to find the secret to eternal youth and beauty.

Fijians seem to exude these qualities in spades. Perhaps it has something to do with maintaining their traditional culture and practices despite an annual influx of tourists. The village chief, who oversees the life of all village residents, is still well respected. Respect is evident, with assets shared and family members embraced no matter how tenuous the blood or family connection. Visitors who respect cultural traditions are welcomed warmly, too. Take the time to engage a Fijian in conversation and you'll likely form the basis of a valued friendship. It's one of the reasons the country continues to lure me to her shores. That and the promise I make each time I hear *Nisa Lei* that I will try not to get teary. 🌿

Fiona Harper is a freelance travel writer based in Cairns, Australia, who focuses on travel and boating lifestyles. Follow her blog at [travelboatinglifestyle.com](http://travelboatinglifestyle.com)