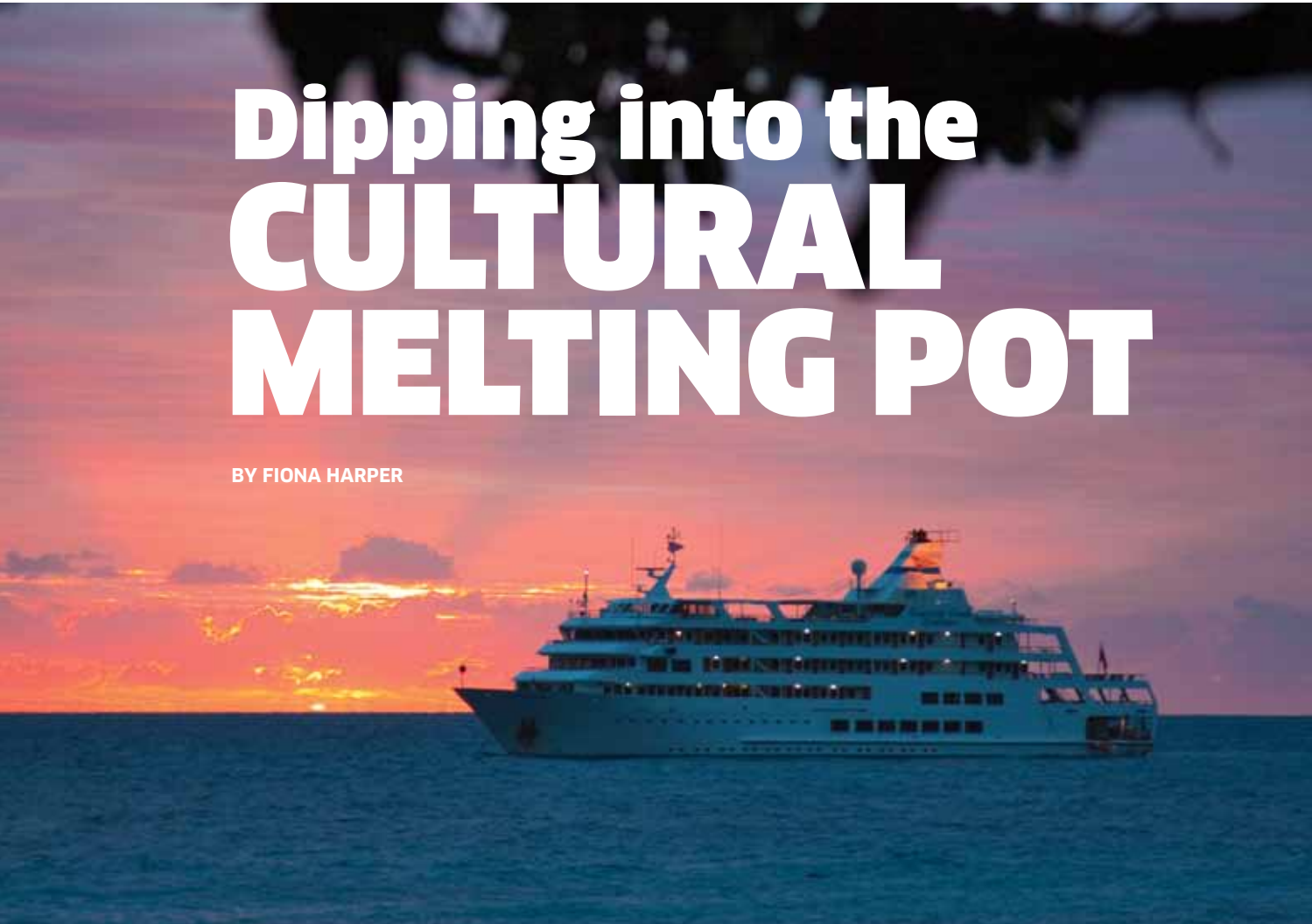


Dipping into the CULTURAL MELTING POT

BY FIONA HARPER



“OUR PEOPLE CAME TO THIS ISLAND to start a new life in Fiji in 1946 after our island, Vaitupu, became overcrowded. Volunteers came first, then the rest of the population followed. Today, we are Fiji citizens but our heart is Tuvaluan,” the village spokesperson says, placing his hand over his heart.

His symbolic gesture is the cue for the few hundred villagers gathered to break into song once again, singing stories of their Polynesian homeland.

The beachfront community hall is charged with emotion as men of all ages seated around a communal drum beat it loudly, enthusiastically.

Sitting cross-legged on all sides, villagers clap their hands and sing while beautiful ladies and handsome young men line the walls, their hips swaying in unison.

Adorned with traditional costumes made from raffia and woven palm fronds, with heads festooned with colourful floral garlands, their faces break into wide-mouth smiles as harmonic voices seem to raise the roof from the rafters.

Their passion for song and dance is palpable and infectious. Looking around at my fellow passengers, delight is written all over their faces as they watch, mesmerised.

I’ve come ashore at Kioia Island in north eastern Fiji as part of Captain Cook Cruises’ new offering - Discovery Cultural Cruise - circumnavigating Fiji’s second largest island, Vanua Levu.

Promising to visit ‘places without postcards’, many of the villages we call into are little visited by travellers. Island hopping, we dip our toes into the melting pot of Indo-Fijian, Polynesian, Micronesian, as well as Melanesian-Fijian cultures. Just the second time that the ship MV Reef Endeavour has visited these parts, the seven-night cruise offers a fascinating insight into the many facets that comprise multicultural, multiracial Fiji.

The Somo Somo Strait is well known amongst divers for fertile currents that feed the extensive soft coral gardens. This same current takes our ship northwards from Kioia Island to Rabi (pronounced Rambli) Island, another mountainous island with an immigrant population.

Displaced by British phosphate miners entering their tiny homeland in the pursuit of guano (used in the fertiliser industry), Banaba Islanders were relocated to Rabi Island around the same time the Tuvalans were on the move. They must be a stoic lot, Banaba Islanders.

Prior to this relocation, survivors of the World War II Japanese invasion were sent to the Caroline Islands to serve as labourers prior to moving onwards to Rabi.

Today, from their new home, their song and dance reflects the lost connection with the island and ancestors they left behind.

A group of these gentle-natured people come onboard MV Reef Endeavour one afternoon as we are anchored nearby. Coffee-coloured skin glistening, young dancers in grass skirts, shell bracelets and anklets, the women in raffia bras, dance to the Micronesian rhythm of acoustic guitar, clapping and harmonic voices.

Long dark hair brushing their backs as they sway, a middle-aged lady in the group is thrilled to be temporarily reunited with her nephew who works onboard our ship. Yanaka, whose twin

sons are in the dance troupe, tells me she recently visited the Australian Gold Coast on a business conference.

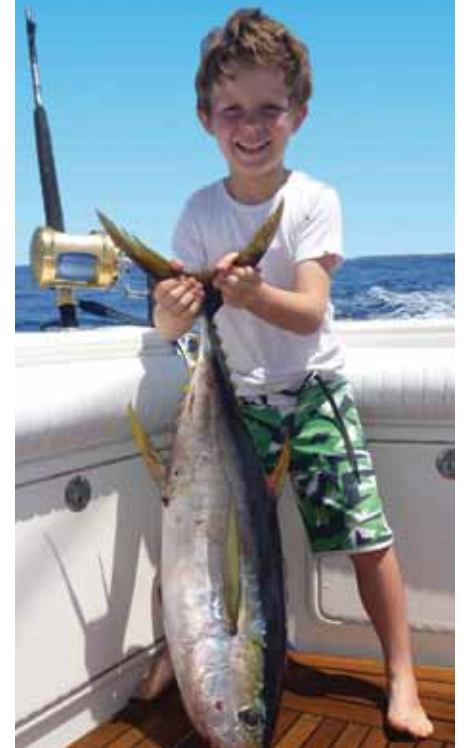
“Our Banaba virgin oil is sold in Australian beauty salons as massage oil,” she says, holding out her arm for me to sniff. The sweet aroma of floral infused coconut oil fills my nostrils, her skin almost baby-like in its softness from a lifetime usage of coconut oil.

Continuing our cultural journey into traditional Fijian life, another shore excursion finds us visiting Drua Drua Island, where villagers and school children eagerly anticipate our visit. Many passengers have brought books, pencils and other gifts specifically to assist children who suffer the consequences of their remote location.

Where most of us exist in a technology-driven world, these kids close their books before the sun sets as there is no electricity for reading after dark.



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The good humour is infectious as giggling locals take our hands, inviting us to join in impromptu dancing as we await the rest of our group.

Naturally, mobile phones and computers are non-existent in the absence of power to charge the gadgets that most of us take for granted.

School Principal Semi Goletoka gives us a guided tour of the classrooms and dormitories where 65 students board on-island to attend classes during the school week.

"I was posted here two years ago," he says proudly. "We care for these children 24 hours each day so that they may have an education.

"We face many challenges, but the most important goal is to get electricity into the school," Goletoka says from the steps leading to his classroom.

Parents rotate on a roster system to cook and care for the youngsters, some of whom are as young as five. Family life at home is sacrificed in order to receive an all important education, but come Friday afternoon the youngsters return by boat to their outlying island homes.

As we are entertained with song and dance by school children, the obligatory collection box sits nearby. As honoured guests and visitors, it's a consistent theme as we continue our journey through the islands that seem peacefully idyllic at first glance.

The reality, however, is that many remote villagers struggle to sustain themselves beyond subsistence living. And, certainly in Drua Drua Island's case, with their humble goal to buy a generator so that students may



learn about computers and be connected via the world wide web, many of my fellow passengers are happy to contribute a donation. It's a small price to pay for the warm hospitality we receive throughout our journey.

Welcomed on the beach as we disembark our tenders, invariably there is singing, rhythmic clapping, guitars and joyful song. The good humour is infectious as giggling locals take our hands, inviting us to join in impromptu dancing as we await the rest of our group. It's hard not to join in, causing hysterical giggling amongst onlookers.

As Principal Goletoka says, "we educate our children not only in arithmetic and English, but also with morals and values so that they grow up to be good people."

In many countries, you wouldn't think about wandering through an unfamiliar village. In Fiji, such random meanderings are not only safe, they are enthusiastically encouraged by villagers in these outlying islands.

With songs ringing in my ears as I switch on my computer and download a swag of unwanted emails, I'm also just a little envious of a lifestyle bereft of pesky technology that demands my instant attention. ■

FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY

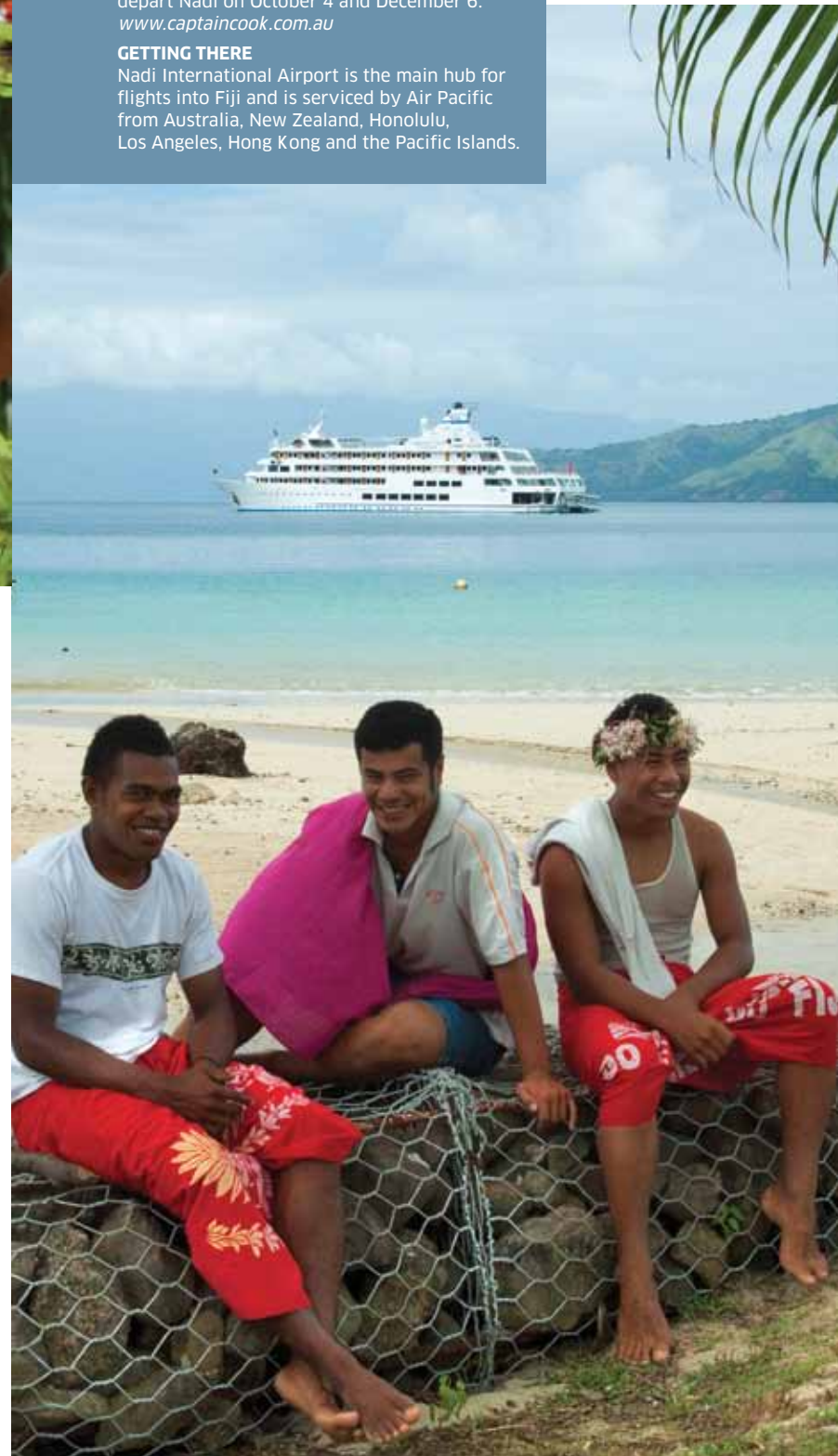
Sonaisali Island Resort - just 20 minutes drive south of Nadi International Airport, connected to mainland Viti Levu via a three-minute boat ride which operates 24 hours.

CRUISE INFORMATION

2011 seven-night Discovery Cultural Cruises depart Nadi on October 4 and December 6. www.captaincook.com.au

GETTING THERE

Nadi International Airport is the main hub for flights into Fiji and is serviced by Air Pacific from Australia, New Zealand, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and the Pacific Islands.



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