

Barefoot in Fiji

Fiona Harper



WHEN WAS
THE LAST TIME
YOU STOPPED?

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Hens scratch in the dirt, their cackle the background soundtrack to serious ceremonial business going on beneath the palm-thatched shelter. Respected male elders sit cross-legged behind bare-chested Chief Ratu Viliame Ratudradra and his bodyguard. A massive hardwood kava bowl, filled with liquid the colour of creamed muddy water, is placed between this sombre-faced coterie and my fellow travellers. As honoured visitors, the men in our party sit cross-legged, knees covered, facing the Chief, with ladies sitting respectfully meek behind them. Meanwhile, ladies of the village, who do not take part in this ceremony, lay out handmade handicrafts on colourful sulus (sarongs) on the grass beyond. Our group's representative hands over a customary yaqona root (otherwise known as kava), wrapped in newsprint, to the village spokesman as a precursor to sharing the peppery liquid brewing in the kava bowl.

Shoes long since discarded, as sweat trickles down my spine pooling in the folds of my sulu, we watch mesmerised, lethargically stupefied beneath a steamy cloak of humidity. The grave mood is broken by a random breakaway chicken scurrying across the mat, brushing past the kava bowl. Its flight causes stifled smirks of mirth amongst our group while the Fijians mostly ignore it.

We've stepped ashore at Soso Village to pay our respects to Chief 'Ratu' as we leisurely cruise the waters that lap Naviti Island's shores on a four day Sailing Safari. It's customary to request formal permission to sail these waters, though with tourism a drawcard for villagers, it's more likely an occasion for visitors to briefly experience village life and pick up a couple of authentic souvenirs on the way out. As we wander through the village, accompanied by calls of Bula (Fijian for hello, welcome) I'm struck by how few Fijians actually wear shoes. I'm also slightly envious of their naked feet, which seems to make sense in the tropics. White sails billow above the deck of the tall ship *Spirit of Pacific*, competing with cotton wool clouds against a cobalt blue sky, as we drop anchor in the turquoise water to bed down on Drawaqa (pronounced Dra-wonga) Island's Barefoot Lodge.

With no electricity bar what is produced from a diesel generator, cold water communal showers and unobtrusive thatched-roof bures dotted beneath coconut palms keep things pleasantly simple. The island is blessed with an isthmus of white sand, with bures overlooking either Sunrise or Sunset Beach. With brisk south-easterly trade winds during my visit, from my bed in a Sunrise Bure, the sound of the ocean crashing on the beach a few metres away ensures that no one sleeps much past dawn.

Barefoot Lodge is aptly named. Shoes are so yesterday on this pretty little island that is just the place to drop in, chill out and rejuvenate one's soul on Fiji Time. Guests share tables over breakfast and dinner in the large sand-floor bure, the same place where sailing crews gather cross-legged on the raffia mat each evening to sing, play guitar and drink kava. We're welcome to join in, though mostly we retire early, exhausted by days in the sun spent snorkelling, kayaking, sailing and swimming. It's relaxed and informal, with bathers, a sulu if you must, de rigueur dress code for meals.

Which is not quite the case a week later when I find myself onboard the boutique cruise ship *MV Reef Endeavour* circumnavigating Fiji's second largest island Vanua Levu. Though hardly formal by most cruise standards, cruise director Mark does make it clear early in our seven night voyage that shoes are mandatory when dining in the Captain Cook Saloon. Onboard for a Cultural Discovery Cruise, we wade ashore (aaah... blissfully barefoot again) at little-visited remote islands. Places without postcards, if you like. Visiting Drua Drua Primary School, not only do they not have postcards, they also don't have power. Shrouded in darkness after sunset, it's a world far removed from the gadgets and electronic wizardry which most of us take for granted. Advised to dress respectfully prior to going ashore as villagers live a traditional Christian way of life, our offensive shoulders and knees are covered. Naturally, shoes are optional.

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