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by Fiona Harper

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Not far from celebrating their ships 21st birthday, Captain Cook Cruises have been cruising Fiji so long they're almost a national treasure. Travel writer Fiona Harper gives you the lowdown and her verdict.

The Summary

Reef Endeavour doesn't pretend to be a luxurious ship providing impeccable service and fine dining. It does however sit very comfortably in the small ship cruise market with a charming Fijian flavor. Friendly crew, personal service, convivial surroundings, lashings of food, entertainment and interesting shore excursions satisfy most passengers looking for a good value Fiji experience. Stepping onboard you'll need to be a little bit flexible though, as Fijians in general are pretty relaxed and things don't always go according to plan. Discard your watch along with your big city stress levels and slip into Fiji Time.

The Ship

MV Reef Endeavour was built in Suva and launched in 1996. With a relatively shallow draft she is able to negotiate narrow waterways, quiet rivers and shallow bays, enabling passengers to get up close and personal with the Fijian islands. Because of her intimate size MV Reef Endeavour is the first (and only) cruise ship to visit the remote the Lau Islands, one of Fiji's hidden treasures.

Befitting her 18 years of service, MV Reef Endeavour was recently spruced up and modernised – a sort of coming of age party if you like. Swanky new rattan tables chairs and comfy sofas were installed throughout, the dining room and cabins were refreshed and crew kitted out in new uniforms. With capacity limited to 130 passengers, it's pretty easy to find your own private spot over five decks. There are plenty of spaces for reading, socialising or soaking up the tropical ambience.

Up on the sun deck, hammocks were strung up, upholstered lounges were added for sun-worshippers or shade-loving book readers near the Jacuzzi tub. It's a popular hangout for exercise junkies too with a small gym, steam room and enough room for stretching your sea legs. Most nights the bar opens for sundowners beneath twinkling fairy lights.

Senakai Spa is located one deck below with massage tables setup either indoors (air-conditioned) or alfresco behind a screen. Sun lounges and plump sofas overlook the pool below. Up forward on this deck is the library which has books and movies, tea and coffee plus there's a small outdoor deck overlooking the bow. It's a good spot to watch the crew during anchoring operations if you're so inclined.

Voyaging in the tropics, the pool deck is the ships hub. Adjoining the freshwater pool is the Yasawa Saloon: if there's anything going on you're likely to hear about it on this deck. It's also where you'll find the Pursers Office and gift shop, live TV screens showing the ships route, games, tea & coffee (and cookies!), free wifi and the bar. Late at night it's also where the crew congregate around the kava bowl, often accompanied with guitars and always with laughter. Guests are welcome to shed their shoes and share a bowl of kava or kick up their heels on the dance floor. Happy Hour is undoubtedly the most social occasion each day when guests congregate in the Yasawa Saloon for pre-dinner drinks and canapés. With daily cocktail specials it's a splendid time to mingle and make new friends before adjourning to Captain Cook Saloon for dinner.

Smokers, you'll need to find a pew at the very aft section of this deck – it's the only smoking section onboard.



The Cabins

During the last refit eight Staterooms were converted into four double sized suites to make one bedroom Tabua Suites. Each suite is equipped with refrigerator, minibar, tea & coffee making facilities, TV & DVD player. Bedrooms can be closed off from the living area with each room serviced by its own bathroom. Interconnecting family rooms were also created by linking Staterooms internally making these a fabulous option for family groups.

All air-conditioned cabins have private bathrooms and are serviced daily. Each evening while you're at dinner the crew deliver the next day's program along with bedtime chocolate treats. Upper deck cabins have large windows and doors opening onto walk around decks so natural light and fresh air are abundant. Lower cabins have non-opening portholes.

The Crew

Captain Cook Cruises have the most friendly crew you're likely to find anywhere in the South Pacific. It's a big call I know, but entirely apt. With around 50 crew they're almost entirely Fijian apart from a couple of Australian Officers. Don't be surprised to see burly deck crew hoiking frail passengers gently onto their shoulders in order to get them ashore from ships tenders. It doesn't happen often as most passengers simply step off the tender into the shallows and onto the beach. But I've seen them give fellow passengers piggy back rides if they've worn the wrong shoes and the coral is too sharp for delicate city feet. They'll likely be the same crew giggling like teenagers later that night, performing traditional dances in warrior costumes.

Without a doubt MV Reef Endeavour's best asset are the crew. Friendly, fun and fabulous, they'll likely leave a lasting impression long after you've disembarked.

The Voyages

All cruises depart from Denarau Marina, about 20 minutes' drive from Nadi International Airport. The Yasawa Islands are a chain of coral cay and continental islands that run north-south, and are well known for white sandy beaches, postcard-pretty islands as well as thriving coral and marine life on fringing reefs.

Departing weekly on either 3 or 4 nights duration to the southern Yasawas. Island, excursions to villages include school and church visits, traditional meke (dance performance), lovo feasts (food cooked in underground ovens) and cultural ceremonies involving kava. For more in-depth immersion into Fijian culture take one of the seven night cruises themed on Colonial Fiji or Four Cultures.

After three years of negotiating with villagers, elders and Govt bureaucrats, 11 night cruises to the remote Lau Island Group began late in 2013. Next year there will be three voyages to these remote eastern islands where you'll likely find the 'real Fiji'. Indeed, with few airstrips, and a monthly barge service from Suva, the only other visitors to the area are cruising yachties. Visiting the Lau Group is a rare opportunity to meet and mingle with locals who have little exposure to western travellers.

The Verdict

Captain Cook Cruises are one of Fiji's most respected cruise companies. They have a strong ethos of giving back to the communities they visit, contributing in cash and kind to schools, employing locals (many of whose villages are on the itinerary) and keeping cultural traditions alive. Additionally they encourage passengers to donate funds or basic equipment like exercise books, pencils and reading material in schools that lack basic infrastructure like 24 hour electricity. And they do it all in a fun, entertaining manner that few have trouble finding fault with. Highly recommended.

More information www.captaincook.com.fj

Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventure. Follow her at www.travelboatinglifestyle.com

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