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Barefoot and bare-chested in Fiji

Fiona Harper



Sailing across Bligh Water it strikes me that those 18th century *Bounty* mutineers might have been on to something. Enticed, no, seduced, by gorgeous bare-breasted Polynesian gals, long dark locks sweeping with buttocks modestly covered with woven palm fronds, the Pacific Islands offered feisty temptations for lonely sailors.

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Cooped up in odorous quarters below decks on a voyage of discovery to who knew where with a shipload of similarly deprived men, it's easy to imagine the allure the islands offered mutinous crew driven by naked lust.

Having been cast adrift with a handful of loyal men and not much else by this lewd mob, Captain William Bligh eventually navigated his teeny dory through the islands we now know as Fiji. With not much else to do as they drifted with the same south easterly trade winds that buffet our ship today, he had plenty of time for elementary chart work.

I'm reminded of his plight as a dozen or so canoes are launched from the beach off **Kioa Island**. Muscular bare-chested men paddle log-carved outriggers around our ship while pretty young things with floral garlands in their hair grace the bow. Drum beat bounces off the mountains while harmonic voices rise above the sea. It's a similar welcome to the one that eventually drove Bligh's men to mutiny, were it not for t-shirts covering the women's breasts.

Maybe it's the heady aroma of frangipani infused in coconut oil that wafts across the breeze. Perhaps it's the sensual warmth of tropical sun on bare skin. Though I suspect the real reason so many are drawn to idyllic islands like this one has more to do with the friendly, laid-back attitude of Fijian people. *Bula!* is the ubiquitous greeting heard everywhere, mostly by adults, though as I wander through the village, if I offer a 'Bula' accompanied by a smile to a child it's instantly returned amidst shy grins and stifled giggles.

Abandoning my shoes and slipping into a sulu (sarong) and bikini within hours of landing at Nadi International Airport, I've shed my winter coat to join **Captain Cook Cruises** exploring Fiji's warm waters. I'm hoping there's no mutinous behaviour onboard the devilishly rough diamond that is the tall ship *Spirit of Pacific*. Sails neatly stowed against yardarms that rake skywards, with decks freshly swabbed by crew kitted out in natty nautical striped shirts, we're off on a sun-drenched **Sailing Safari** through the **Yasawa** chain of islands.

Favoured by the frugal who know a bargain when they spot one, we spend our days sailing around idyllic islands, stopping at a beach here, snorkelling on a reef there, or sailing nowhere in particular just for the hell of it.

At night we bed down ashore in simple beachfront bureas at **Barefoot Lodge** on **Drawaqa** (pronounced Draa-wong-a) Island. Shoes are so yesterday on this pretty island that is just the place to drop in, chill out and rejuvenate one's soul on Fiji time. Drawaqa is blessed with a narrow isthmus of crushed coral sand which forms the hub of island life. From my bure on Sunrise Beach the brisk south easterly trade winds that buffet the coast whip up the sea crashing on the shore a few metres away, ensuring that no-one bar the hedonistic of **honeymooners** linger in bed much beyond dawn.

With no electricity beyond that which the diesel generator pumps out, cold water communal showers keep ablutions to a minimum. Though, with a gin-clear lagoon to swim in at Sunset Beach, we soon discard those pesky showering habits anyway. We also abandon most of our clothes: swimwear and sulus being perfectly acceptable attire at shared tables over breakfast, lunch or dinner.

We dine in the cavernous sand-floor bure midway between Sunset and Sunrise Beaches, the same place where sailing crew 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.

Nearby on Naviti Island, 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 reminds me of Paul Kelly's lyrics — "the colour of the coffee spelt a warning, it was the colour of the river but not nearly as brown."

The kava bowl sits midway between this sombre-faced coterie and my fellow travellers. As honoured visitors, the men in our party sit facing the chief, cross-legged, knees concealed, with ladies sitting respectfully meek behind them. Oddly, men's knees must be covered but their chests may be bare. Go figure!

Meanwhile, ladies of the village, who do not take part in 'men's business,' lay out hand-made handicrafts on colourful sulus nearby. Our groups' 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 bowl.

Shoes discarded, as sweat trickles down my spine pooling in the folds of my sulu, we watch in respectful silence, 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 concealed smirks of mirth amongst

on the way out. As we wander through the village, accompanied by calls of Bula I'm struck by how few Fijians actually wear shoes. I'm also slightly envious of their naked foot freedom, which makes perfect sense in the tropics.

Which is not quite the case a week later when I find myself onboard Captain Cook's 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 on that shoes are mandatory when dining in the Captain Cook Saloon.

Onboard for a seven night Cultural Discovery Cruise into Fiji's little-visited north east, we wade ashore from the ships tender (ahh ... blissfully barefoot again) at far-flung 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. Naturally, laptops, mobile phones and iPods are conspicuous by their absence.

So too, their shoes.

Crossing Bligh Water again on our return to Denarau Marina and civilisation, catching the sun's rays lazing by the pool, I'm rather smitten with simple island life. Sure, those mutineers behaved appallingly towards their captain, lured as they were by the pleasures of the flesh. After another mango daiquiri I'm a little tempted myself to take over the Bridge and reverse our course.

For more information on Captain Cook Cruises visit www.captaincook.com.fj

Have you tried Kava in Fiji? Delicious or disgusting? Enter your comments below.

User comments

Yer Fiji is great if you have millions to spend on a top place to stay , As for the main Island it sucks big time over priced Drinks are way to much 20 dollars for a cocktail . and the food is not much for what you get price wise . Its should be alot cheaper than Australia and its not so dont waste your time . Spend it on the Gold coast and you wont get sick .Food and drinks to much cash for to little . And way to much trash every where and in the water . Fiji pick up your game . Unhappy traveller .

Yes Fiji is dirty, Plastic bags every where .Go diving and all you see is trash and plastic and bottles. The Fijians are underpaid ,And food is the same price as Australia and New Zealand and not to a high standard .Dont eat the curry or you will be on the toilet . Out of all the places to stay I only found one of a good standard . Intercontinental Natadola. As for the rest way to dear for what you get and no beaches . So if you want a good holiday go to Cook Islands . And I said the wages are far below standard for what the Fijian people do . I think they need to start putting money back into the country to pick up the standard of all resorts . And fix the bloody roads

well put it this way it looks like dirty dish water and doesnt taste much better either. lol

It was not as unpleasant as I expected it to be, but certainly not delicious! As they say though, when in Rome, do as the Roman's do, so I had to try it.

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