



ALL ABOARD

Cruising Fiji
Beyond
Postcard-Perfect

With over 300 islands to explore, hopping aboard a small ship is the perfect way to see the best of Fiji. Fiona Harper has cruised with Captain Cook Cruises countless times and shares her tips for finding the real Fiji.



A village visit aboard the MV Endeavour is a must if you want to experience the real Fiji.

Infused with the balmy scent of frangipani and coconut oil, Fiji has a distinct aroma that has sunshine-drenched holiday written all over it. A Fijian cruise also comes with its own distinct tropical soundtrack that sways unmistakably to Fiji Time. Swishing palm fronds on shore excursions to pristine beaches. Gentle waves washing over fragmented tinkling coral. The whoosh of a bow wave slipping past the ship's hull. Tinny ukuleles strung with fishing line accompanying melodious voices. And everywhere, the ubiquitous Bula greeting (meaning hello) delivered with wide-mouth smiles from young children through to village elders. Fijians' friendliness is just one of the reasons that travellers keep returning. Venture beyond sparkling white sand beaches (which admittedly are very tempting) and you'll find a plethora of other reasons to cruise Fiji's turquoise waters.

Village visits are a major highlight of any cruise as

Fijians open up their homes, schools and churches to welcome visitors to village shores. Even for the non-religious, attending a Sunday church service is highly recommended. Ladies tuck a frangipani behind their ear and frock up in colourful dresses. Men don floral Bula Shirts while children sit respectfully in their Sunday best. Harmonic voices ring out above the palm trees as hymns are sung and sermons delivered. Visitors are always welcome but make sure you dress appropriately by covering shoulders and knees, remove hats and sunglasses and carry small change for the donation box.

Village visits also offer the opportunity to purchase handicrafts directly from craftsmen and women. Purchasing arts, crafts and shells during village visits rather than at souvenir shops in Nadi is one way to repay villagers' generous hospitality. Tapa cloth is made from the bark of mulberry trees, beaten and folded into



Cruising on-board MV Reef Endeavour Captain Cook Cruises' Lau and Kadavu Islands Cruise offers a rare opportunity visit islands and

shape before being decorated with with charcoal motifs and symbols. Intricate patterns make these highly sought after – traditional wedding garments for both men and women are made of tapa. Mats and baskets woven from dried pandanus leaves are also popular artefacts to take home, so too kava bowls and symbolic weaponry carved from indigenous hardwood.

Lovo feasts are a splendid way to experience local food as well as an opportunity to sit down with villagers, share a meal, and likely a laugh or two. Most cruises incorporate a lovo where an oven is prepared from a pit dug in the soil, lined with stones and heated by fire. Food is usually a mix of pig, chicken or fish along with root vegetables like cassava, taro, yam and sweet potato. The entire feast is wrapped in banana leaves or woven palm frond baskets topped with damp hessian sacks to contain the heat. Often a meke will be performed, intertwining stories told through song and dance by elaborately costumed dancers before the feast is served. Look for the gathering of cross-legged men and you'll likely find a kava bowl at the centre. Wait to be invited before settling down on the mat, slurping a bowl of muddy-looking water

before a slightly intoxicating effect washes over you and you'll be well on your way to understanding Fiji Time.

My choice of the best Fiji cruise

Captain Cook Cruises' Lau and Kadavu Islands Cruise offers a rare opportunity visit islands and villages where few visitors venture. Cruising on-board MV Reef Endeavour with no more than 130 like-minded passengers, this far-flung adventure highlights the very best of Fiji. Think remote island archipelagos in eastern Fiji like the Bay of Islands where mushroom-like limestone islets rise from an aquamarine sea. Snorkel on coral reefs bursting with colourful tropical fish darting among soft corals in every hue of the rainbow swaying gently in the current. Purchase exquisite carved timber and woven pandanus artworks crafted by artisans. Visit schools and enjoy dance performances. Experience the emotion of a church services where a harmonic choir rings out through the palm trees and parishioners' Sunday dresses come in tropical colours and scented flowers are tucked behind ears. www.captaincookcruisesfiji.com/small-ship-cruises/11-night-lau-kadavu-cruise



villages where few visitors venture. Top right: 19th Century wedding tapa, from the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

