

## OUR FAVOURITES SPECIAL

# Fiji IN THE SWIM

*Ocean swimming, open water swimming or wild swimming – call it what you will – enthusiasts travel the globe on swimming holidays, planning their travels around idyllic swimming locations.*

*Fiji is ideal. By Fiona Harper*

Ocean swimming is having a moment. American author and long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad can take some credit for the resurgence in interest. The biopic *Nyad* was released in late 2023 and follows Nyad's near-obsessive compulsion to swim from Cuba to Florida, a distance of 180km, which she finally achieved on her fifth attempt, aged 64 years in 2013.

But ocean swimmers have been quietly slogging across the oceans long before Nyad (played by Annette Bening) and her coach Bonnie Stoll (played by Jodie Foster) splashed across our screens. Ocean swimming, open water swimming or wild swimming – call it what you will – involves swimmers doing their swim thing in lakes, rivers or the ocean. Enthusiasts travel the globe on swimming holidays, planning their travels around idyllic swimming locations. Like Fiji, for example. With more than 300 islands, gin-clear water dotted with colourful coral reefs and a year-round tropical climate, Fiji is the perfect place to unleash your inner ocean swimmer.

Fiji-based cruise company Captain Cook Cruises is meeting this ongoing demand for fitness- and wellness-inspired holidays which shows no signs of exhaustion any time soon. The cruise company recently replaced their flagship Reef Endeavour with 91 metre-long Caledonian Sky, adding an expedition style of cruising not previously seen in Fiji. Caledonian Sky is also a step up in style with two dining areas plus indoor and outdoor spaces, a fleet of zodiacs and expedition crew to enhance the destinations visited. The larger ship means more activity options, with ocean swimming and dedicated wellness voyages with a yoga instructor, added to cruise itineraries.

Which is how I find myself eyeballing a green turtle early one morning. I'd awoken early and watched the sun rise while sipping tea on the balcony of my suite. It's our first morning on a seven-night expedition to Fiji's remote Lau Island Group and

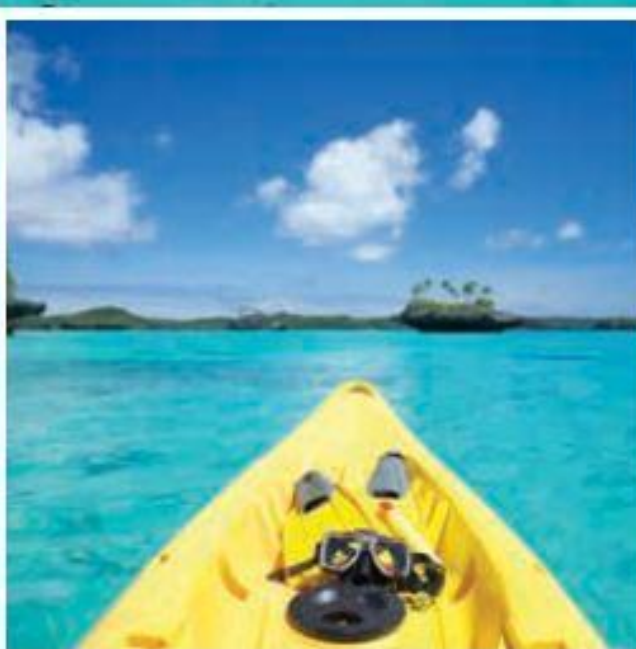
ocean swimming is the first activity of the day. Along with a gaggle of fellow ocean devotees, we don swimsuits and swim goggles and board a zodiac at the rear of the ship. Within moments we're at the swim site, plop into the sea and stroke leisurely towards the shore. There's no structure to our swim – though we could easily do virtual laps – and the novelty of an early morning dip creates a sense of camaraderie. Soon we're dog paddling rather than swimming and chatting away as the activity turns into more of a water-based social soiree than an energetic swim.

Caledonian Sky is anchored in a protected bay in the lee of tropical Makogi Island. Beneath our hull an implausibly cobalt sea contrasts with vine-laden jungle which clads the island's steep-sided flanks. Onshore there's a small community employed by the Ministry of Fisheries to manage programs around giant clam restoration along with turtle conservation. Shards of early morning sunlight pierce the depths beneath me. It's too deep to see the giant clams resting on the seabed but I know the restoration program has been so successful that some clams have grown to more than one metre in girth. It's the turtles though that really capture my attention. We catch a fleeting glimpse of another when its head breaks the surface as we return to the ship where breakfast awaits.

### ZIPPING AROUND IN A ZODIAC

Our next swimming opportunity is at Vanua Balavu, otherwise known as the Bay of Islands, in the northern Lau Group.

The archipelago is protected by fringing reef and consists of multitude limestone islands and weathered islets. Many have been undercut by the sea to create mushroom-like pinnacles which rise from a turquoise sea. It's a surreal seascape of exceptional beauty. Caves have been carved in the eroded limestone while shallow pools and lagoons surrounded by islets are ideal for swimming, but so too for kayaking. As we



Top: Part of the spectacular Lau group. Above: Swimming and kayaking in the aquamarine waters fringed with white sand.

zip around the islands in a zodiac, we launch ourselves into the sea at every opportunity to swim amidst an exquisitely beautiful seascape. The Lau Group is closer to Tonga than it is to mainland Fiji and few foreign visitors come here. Beyond an irregular barge service and a some flights from Suva, the only way to explore the islands is by private yacht or with Captain Cook Cruises.

#### THE PURE PLEASURE OF OCEAN IMMERSION

The following day we visit Fulaga Lagoon in the Southern Lau where a vast lagoon dotted with palm-fringed islands sits within a fringing reef. The channel through the reef is too narrow for Caledonian Sky to enter, so we explore the lagoon by zodiac. Palm-fringed beaches are rimmed by water

of a ridiculous shade of aquamarine, the kind you see in travel brochures and assume the art director has over-saturated the colours. I'd previously spent many months on a yacht in this dreamy archipelago, and it was every bit as beautiful as I remembered. While some of our group scuba dive the outer wall, others snorkel the shallow reef and still others plop themselves under a palm tree and fall asleep with their toes in the tepid sea, I dive into the sea once more. Swimming laps around islets topped with palm trees I feel almost giddy with the pure pleasure of ocean immersion. While I understand Diana Nyad's obsession long distance swimming, the real joy for me is simply to be in the sea.

The writer was a guest of Captain Cook Cruises Fiji. More information [www.captaincookcruisesfiji.com](http://www.captaincookcruisesfiji.com)