

Cousteau resort in colorful Fiji a respite from civilization

By Julie Ann Shapiro

Listening to the rustling fronds of the coconut palms on Fiji, you get a sense of the people and culture. They are not rushed by civilization or worries; they are the island lullaby, fitting sounds for a lounging in a hammock or strolling down the beach. They are just one of many welcoming and enduring sounds of a vacation in paradise.

Landing in Fiji in the city of Nadi, my family and I stepped off the airplane to a slightly darkened sky and were greeted by three men strumming guitars and singing "My Fiji." As we picked up our luggage, the locals waved, saying, *bula*. The word is synonymous with *hello*, and one that embodies the Fijian mind-set, "No worries, be happy."

Standing outside, waiting to board the Sun Air interisland plane, I heard the morning birds, their deep, haunting voices sounding like a CD of the rain forest.

We left for the island of Vanua Levu, heading toward a peach-colored sunrise and away from civilization and commercialism. At the airport, the plane was greeted by three cows, apparently unaware of the soothing island of immense peace and beauty around them.

The van that took us to our destination drove down a dirt road past lush green plants, the ever-present swaying coconuts, papaya and guava trees, past chickens strolling in front of houses painted in bright turquoise, yellow, and pink



Ah, Fiji. The name, let alone pictures of the place, conjures thoughts of the romantic South Seas. The island is proud of its efforts to preserve and protect all that beauty, too. *Julie Ann Shapiro photos*

The Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort, a five-star retreat and sister to the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur and the Hotel Hana in Maui, is 17 acres of coconut plantation overlooking Savusavu Bay. Each *bure* (hut) is built Polynesian-style and decorated in understated elegance. The *bures* have a king-size bed, armoire, couch, desk, large bathroom, mini bar and an inviting patio with a hammock and lounge chairs. It's the perfect setting to watch the sunset, sip a tropical drink, and just get away from it all.

The resort offers eco-friendly activities and cultural events as well as top-notch water sports in sea and pool. There are even special activities for children.



Fijians are justifiably proud of their traditional ways, and welcome visitors into community gatherings.

My family loved the colorful fish we saw while snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking or walking along, peering into tide pools.

Our myriad memories are made of more than the sea, though. We saw a man scale a coconut tree effortlessly and bring down a green coconut. He taught us how to get to the meat, and we tasted the freshest grated coconut possible. And when we made a basket from coconut palms, the local

culture became a part of our lives, if only briefly.

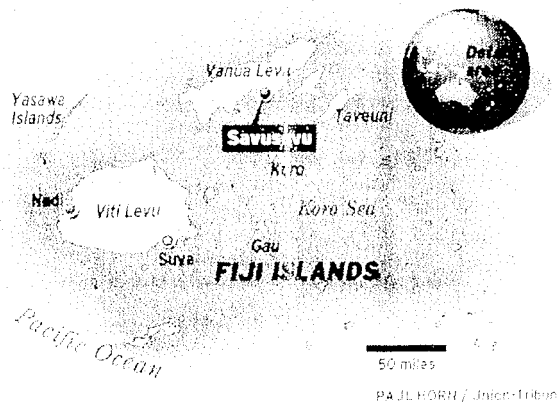
Everywhere you look in Fiji, there's color. At the open-air market in Savusavu, the farmers sold fruit and vegetables in vibrant oranges, reds, purples, greens, and yellows — the same vivid colors as the *sulus* (skirts) they wore.

Long roots of kava, the color of dirt, sat in the grass wrapped in bundles or packaged as powder in small bags. Either is used for making the traditional Fijian drink: Kava is used for greeting and receiving, for celebrations and everyday life.

A bowl of warmth

In the evening at the resort, the Bula Boys sang Fijian songs around a traditional kava bowl. Sipping from the kava bowl, I felt welcomed by the inherent warmth of the Fijians, my new friends, who invited me to walk with a medicine man, attend a traditional Fijian wedding, take a hike in a rain forest and visit with a chief in a local village.

As the medicine man, Numaiya, led us through the grounds of the resort, up a mountain where cows roamed and along a rocky stretch of the beach, he identified each plant and its medicinal use. Numaiya said the Fijian people rarely seek medical care and that everything they need is in the plants, whether they have a cold, a stomachache, diabetes, heart trouble, or an insect bite. He said if someone breaks a bone, it's treated the traditional way in four days by using touch therapy.



When you see a wedding in a park in California, you might admire it, but you'd likely feel you're intruding. The opposite happened in Fiji. The resort staff told us to be sure to attend an upcoming traditional wedding. A few days later, the bride

and groom, both guests of the resort, also invited us.

Four warriors carried the bride on a raft to meet the groom. One person blew a conch shell, and two drummers beat a wooden drum, alerting the villagers a celebration was coming.

Before the ceremony, a choir sang hymns in Fijian, and the resort community sang, hummed and shared in the couple's joy. Under a flowery canopy, the bride and groom exchanged their vows.

As we drove to Waisali Rain Forest Preserve, an occasional rooster, pig, cow, horse, or family appeared, tending the land. Slowly, the houses gave way to lush tropical vegetation, then a grove of pine trees emerged, throwing the senses off, a reminder of logging activity. The rain forest itself provided a blanket of soft rain, a rigorous hike, walls of green plants, and an inviting waterfall.

The resort adheres to the preservation principles of Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Fu-

tures Society, and in addition to offering a vacation experience, tries to enlighten visitors. The resort's video presentation about coral-reef awareness brings sea life up close and shows the truth of the phrase, "protect the ocean and you protect yourself."

As the video explained, the wonder and beauty of the sea is a treasure to protect. The message came home in images showing dynamite tossed into the ocean for fishing and destruction of the rain forest.

But thanks to the efforts of environmentalists, such practices are being curtailed. Local fishermen used to put a poisonous plant in the water to make harvesting easier. It hurt the sensitive coral-reef environment and is no longer practiced.

Duane Silverstein, a guest at the resort and executive director of Seacology, a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving the environment and cultures of the islands, said that in the village of Nadogo, the group provided funding for basic access road improvements in exchange for a protective covenant preserving a 2,000-acre rain forest. In Nasigasiga, Seacology built a kindergarten and medical dispensary, and in turn villagers created a 400-acre rain-forest reserve.

Making friends

On one excursion, we went into a nearby village, and out of respect, my family wore *sulus* but no sunglasses, hats, or sleeveless tops. Carrying kava root, flour and rice, I wondered if these gifts would be well received and if there would be awkward moments when two

cultures came together.

Meeting the locals felt like visiting a friend of a friend, with the extended warmth that only a friend can bring to a new social gathering. We presented the kava to the chief; he thanked us and welcomed us into the village. Women placed leis made of leaves and flowers over our necks. A couple of men played guitars while the women sang and taught us a dance; three steps together and three steps back.

Moving to the beat of the strumming guitar and the whistling coconut palms, I danced to Fiji.

Julie Ann Shapiro is a San Diego writer.

Information

• **Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort:** (800) 246-3454; www.fijiresort.com



• **Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society:** (805) 899-8899; www.oceanfutures.org

• **Seacology:** (510) 559-3505; www.seacology.org

• **Fiji tourism:** (800) 932-3454; www.bulafiji.com