

The Adventures of Marilyn and Paul

By Marilyn Peterson

November 1-14, 2009 visit to:
The Republic of Fiji Islands

Fiji is an archipelago of more than 332 islands, of which 110 are permanently inhabited. The first people to settle there were the Polynesian explorers who found the islands while paddling their way across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. They were eventually followed by European settlers and in the 19th century, large numbers of immigrants from India settled in Fiji, becoming prominent in commerce and trade.



Our November trip to scuba dive in Fiji was so much more.

NISA BULA! (Hello/Hi)



We were on a live-aboard dive boat named the Tui Tai that over the next six days would sail north from the island of Taveuni to a group of even smaller and more remote islands.



- Our first day of exploration found us on mountain bikes, exploring the island of Taveuni. We rode down a dirt road, meeting and greeting the locals who were out shopping at a nearby store. What immediately struck us was how friendly everyone was. Adults or small children, it did not matter. All greeted us with a genuine smile and a shout of “Bula.” I noticed that many of the people we met appeared to be of Indian descent. Indian names adorned the names of some of the stores and their voices had that distinct accent.

The first store in the world to open each day.



International Dateline

Taveuni is one of two places in the world where the International Dateline crosses over land (Antarctica being the other).



We found the small cement monument that marked the spot and we had to sit on top of it with our feet in two different days. I sat there contemplating the passage of time while locals walked by, looking amused and laughing at us tourists. It made me realize how much we are all alike....I had done the same thing when watching tourists pose in front of famous landmarks back home in Las Vegas.



The Tui Tai pulled out of Taveuni and headed north, reaching the sparsely populated island of Rabi the next day. We hopped on mountain bikes and pedaled down their only road, past numerous small houses. As on Taveuni, the local people we met were warm and friendly. Their exclamations of “bula” were undoubtedly genuine. I noticed that these people appeared to be of Pacific Asian Island descent rather than the Indians we had seen on Taveuni.



- That evening after dinner, we took a short boat to shore and walked up from the beach to a long building that was obviously used as a community hall. Entering, we were warmly greeted by the village elders and after giving each of us flowers for our hair, they motioned for us to sit on woven mats. Men, women and children were seated across the hall, directly in front of us. They were holding what I could only describe as clubs and they had small drums on the floor directly in front of them. They started to beat on the drums and sing. The beat was captivating and the singing was beautiful. A group of young men and women entered from the opposite end of the hall and began to dance. At the conclusion of the dance, we had a chance to mingle with our hosts. They were genuinely happy to see us and asked us many questions about where we were from and what we did. They offered beautiful craft and art items for sale.

Some of the artwork was made of Tapa cloth, a popular fiber made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree.



The people in this particular village were well known for making basketry and mats from the leaves of the Pandanus Tree. The mats were especially distinguished by highly decorative borders. (Note mats on church floor.)



On several islands, we were entertained by groups of school children. We were awe struck by how well these children sang and danced. Their costumes were lovely and reminded me of Polynesian designs I had seen elsewhere.







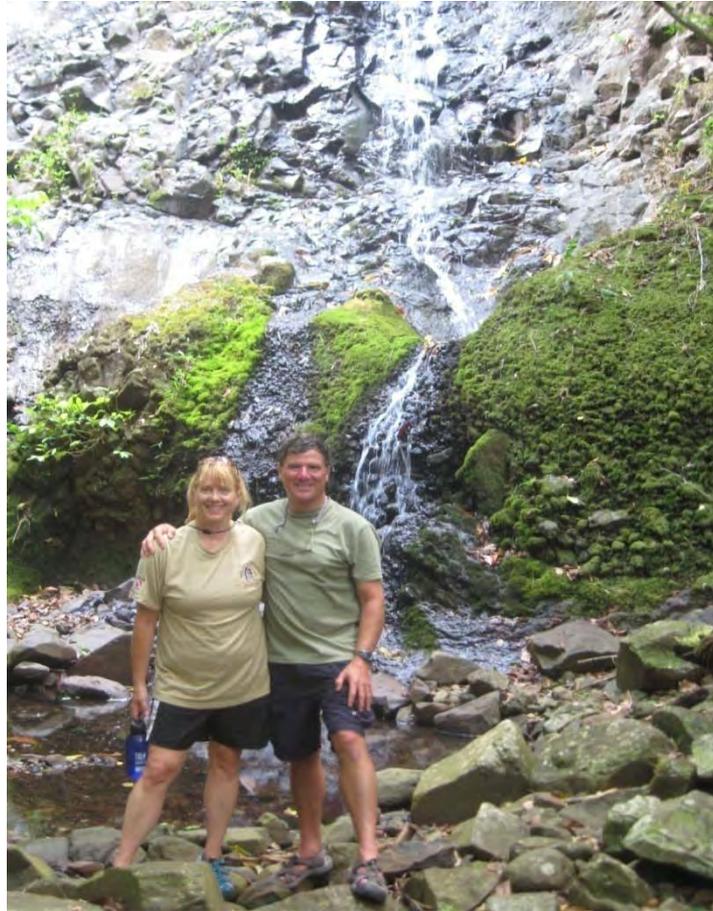
Our visits to the more remote Islands of Fiji introduced us to indigenous people many of whom were of Melanesian decent. We also met many people whom were of Micronesian and Polynesian descent.



After the week on the Tui Tai, we spent a week at Beqa (pronounced Benga) Island Resort, located on Beqa Island, a roadless island with two villages near our dive resort. Most of the villagers work at the resort, commuting by foot each day. They welcomed us to their island with lei's and a lovely welcoming song.



We were given a tour of the island and hiked to a beautiful waterfall about a mile above the resort. Our guide was a young lad named Teymo. He told us that someday, he was going to be the chief of his village. Although he is the son of the current chief, we learned that lineage alone does not guarantee his succession as he has to be approved by his people. We have no doubt he will make a great chief.



As he led our hike, he pointed out, with great pride, that his people grow or harvest on their island everything they need to survive.



We later toured the two nearby villages and were entertained by the school children. We brought donations of pencils, pens, and paper to the school, as there is a shortage of these supplies.



One of the local ladies that we spoke with said that when their children were ill they used home remedies to “cure” them. It was obvious that there is a need for better dental care.



None the less, the children, dressed in their school uniforms were charming and much better behaved than the youngsters I've seen back home in Las Vegas. While closely watching these people, it slowly dawned on me that while they may be poor by western standards, they are very happy with their lives on their beautiful island. They have all they need to eat, drink and thrive. No stress from the morning drive to work, or worrying about their investment portfolios. It made me ponder what was really important in life.



Later that afternoon, Tyemo demonstrated many different uses for the coconut tree. He was able to take the fronds from the tree and in just a few minutes of work, turn it in to a basket.



Each night we were entertained by local musicians or dancers. One night Tyemo showed another of his many talents and joined the musicians.



- Tyemo also led the kava ceremony. “Kava (*Piper methysticum*) is an age-old herbal drink that was the beverage of choice for the royal families of the South Pacific. Believed to originate from Melanesia, kava grows abundantly in the sun-drenched islands of Polynesia. Although drunk for centuries by the islanders, it was only during Captain Cook’s voyage to the Pacific in 1768-1771 when white man first encountered the plant and its consumption in sacred ceremonies. According to Cook’s account, natives chewed or pounded the root and mixed it with water to produce a brownish, often bitter brew which they then consumed for its psychoactive properties. A soothing drink with proven medicinal effects, kava is now available to anyone seeking to calm nerves or ease stress as well as anxiety while combating fatigue the natural way.” (Kava information from Wikipedia on-line) In this case it was placed in a sock and delicately pounded in water until ready to drink.

Kava Ceremony



Kava Ceremony



Tyemo will be chief someday!



On our last night on the island, the staff and families from Beqa entertained us with **firewalkers**,



dance ceremonies by a group of women from the village,



and a **war dance** by the men and boys who had donned the clothes their warrior ancestors had worn in to battle.



They ended their show by singing the traditional **good-bye song**.



The next day we bid a fond farewell to
Fiji

