

# INTO THE Blue

*With its surf, sun and smiles, Fiji has long been the picture-perfect getaway. We venture beyond the spas and poolside loungers to get a taste of vaka i taukei (the Fijian way of life).*

WORDS CARLA GROSSETTI



The picturesque Beqa Lagoon.

(opposite) A fruit and vegetable stall at Suva's Municipal Market.



A few hours after touching down on the heat-hazy tarmac of Fiji's business hub, Nadi, our shuttle bus — laden with six surfboards and four backpacks — grinds to a rather juddering halt on a hairpin bend.

Just a few minutes later, the air is thick with dust as three cars slow, then swerve to the side of the road, directing shards of low-beam light toward us. About eight young men promptly pour out of their cars and push our broken-down bus to safety.

"Vinaka vaka levu (thank you very much)," we stutter as the men smile, give us a wave and disappear into the inky black night. It's almost midnight when the replacement vehicle sent to rescue us

finally bounces us down the dirt track toward Waidroka Bay Resort (Queens Rd, Pacific Harbour; www.waidroka.com), where we happily fall into our beds.

Pulling the curtains aside the next day is akin to the big reveal. The sky chucked down a drenching torrent of rain all night and the earth is waterlogged and rinsed green. There are birds circling overhead and, all around us, *Jurassic Park*-esque jungle tumbles right down to the sea, which is as smooth as silk.

Yes, we have come to Fiji for rest and rejuvenation. But we've also come here to learn what we can — in a limited amount of time — about this South Pacific nation, its people and what it has to offer visitors

beyond the bubble of a hermetically sealed resort. In 2010, the government passed the Regulation of Surfing Areas Decree, which opened up Fijian waters to all visitors — not just those who were lucky enough to be staying in certain resorts.

The modest hotel only accommodates a small number of guests. As a result of the decree, most of the visitors are surfers, stand-up paddle boarders, snorkellers, divers and kayakers, or anyone who enjoys venturing beyond their poolside lounge.

### INTO THE BIG BLUE

Waidroka Bay Resort's resident Australian surf guide Joel Dawson says the Fijian government's decree to grant all surfers access to world-class reef breaks really put Fiji back on the map as a premier surf destination. Dawson says that although it has been documented that surfing was practised in Fiji as far back as the late 1800s, the sport has only recently seen a real resurgence in popularity with locals. This comes thanks to the new law, coupled with a push by the Fiji Surfing Association to make surfing a national sport.

"When you get waves in Fiji, you get great waves. The relaxation of the laws means surfers are now less restricted as to where they are able to surf, and they can choose a break according to the wind or the swell direction," he says.

"Compared to Australia, the reef breaks here create something unique. Not only are you not going to get waves like this back home, but you are surfing over this ridiculously colourful world of iridescent fish and really bright corals. The water is incredible — it's postcard blue, warm and always so clear. It makes a day out surfing something to remember," says Dawson, who hails from Newcastle in NSW.

For surfers, there are eight breaks near Waidroka Bay, both lefts and rights, that are suitable for everyone from beginners to pro surfers. Divers and snorkellers can descend to many spectacular sites in and around Beqa Lagoon, where coral-reef cities and a medley of marine life abound: everything from white-tip reef sharks, turtles and moray eels, right to leopard sharks, sea snakes, sweetlip and shrimp.

Boat trips are also offered from resorts in the vicinity of famed breaks such as Restaurants and Cloudbreak, off the coast of Tavarua. These come with a celebrity endorsement, too: Kelly Slater has named them some of the best in the world. ▶



(clockwise from above left) A surfer takes on a huge wave; Kelly Slater has named Fijian breaks some of the best in the world; Waidroka Bay Resort; scuba divers in the coral reefs of Beqa Lagoon.



(from this image)  
A scenic waterfall near the Waidroka Bay Resort; a local chops kava roots; a church in Korovisilou.



Down at the pontoon, we meet a local staff member named Pate Tuvata, who flashes a mega-watt grin as he introduces himself. “*Bula, bula,*” he says. Soon after, Pate invites us to visit his village, Korovisilou, to meet his uncle, chief Ponipate Tuvata.

Waidroka Bay is located on the main island of Viti Levu. It’s right between Nadi and Suva in a lush region known as the Coral Coast. Less than five kilometres away is the neighbouring village of Korovisilou, where most of the local resort staff reside.

After a few days of falling into the vortex known as ‘Fiji time’, we take a taxi ride that has us skirting the southern coast of Fiji eastwards, where thatched cabins morph into squat brick houses that multiply into suburbs, until we arrive in the sultry city of Suva and its busy, buzzing Municipal Market (Usher St and Rodwell Rd).

As we are swept through a huge current of people, we stop to admire some pretty goldfish, flitting around in their tank. “Do you eat them?” I ask the stallholder. He whoops ecstatically and Pate erupts into loud peals of laughter. “No, these fish are for aquariums,” he says.

We follow his advice and buy half a kilogram of the local drink, kava, which costs us about FJ\$25 (\$14). We will present it to his uncle, chief Ponipate, as a *sevusevu* (offering) so that we can gain acceptance

into the Korovisilou village. “You should never offer a chief pre-made kava powder — you must always buy the *waka* (made of the lateral roots of the kava plant). The powder is like giving your host a bad bottle of wine,” says Pate.

### A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

It’s Sunday and Sainimere ‘Si’ Vivuga, who has worked at Waidroka Bay Resort since it opened, meets us on the steps of her church in Korovisilou.

After the priest has made his way to the altar, a slow-moving village elder stands up and addresses the *kai vilagi* (white people) in the congregation. Si, who is cradling her sleeping son Moses in her arms, discreetly whispers a translation. “He is welcoming you all to the village and to the church, and says he hopes that you enjoy your stay,” she tells us. When the choir starts to sing, it’s as if their voices have poured from the skies.

Although we don’t need the chief’s permission to attend a church service, we do need his consent to tour the village. We are presented to chief Ponipate, who

*Offering the chief pre-made kava powder is like giving your host a bad bottle of wine.*

invites us into his home to sit cross-legged on a woven mat on the floor. Having been offered his *sevusevu*, the chief cups his hands, chants in a dry, rasping voice and claps loudly three times.

“*Bula,*” he roars, which we’ve learnt can either mean welcome, hello or cheers, and with that, we are granted the freedom to explore the village, accompanied by Si and a rustling crowd of children.

In Korovisilou, there are no fences. Instead, there are chickens scratching in the dirt, women cooking taro root over fires, men drinking kava and children running from one home to the next.

“We live communally. When the women go to work, we care for each other’s children. If someone has no food, we feed them,” says Si, who shares her home with her extended family. “For Fijians, our *mataqali* (clan) is everything to us.”

**GETTING THERE** To book your Virgin Australia flight to Fiji, visit [www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com) or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).