



A FROLIC IN Fiji

In need of a getaway, Sarah Friggieri heads to the culturally rich South Pacific island



The moment I step off the plane at Fiji's Nadi International Airport, I feel a sudden rush of relaxation come over me.

A band is playing an island tune and I'm warmly greeted with a friendly 'bula' from the locals. (Bula is said to mean anything from hello, goodbye, welcome, love and life.) It's something you hear regularly. I quickly settle into 'Fiji time',

which – being a busy Sydneysider – is something I haven't been able to do since I was two!

Many who plan a trip to Fiji think Suva, its capital, is the only place to visit, but a beautiful lush area called the Coral Coast sits just 15km south of the airport, and I quickly discover why it's known as Fiji's adventure capital.

I take a river safari tour to local village Natawa Tawa Di, where I'm welcomed into the tribe with a kava

ceremony, which involves sharing a traditional drink made from the root of yaqona, an indigenous plant. After being treated to a lunch prepared by the local women and indulging in a dance (or four!), it's back to the return river safari, which includes seven 360-degree spins. I look like a drowned rat by the end of it, but being on captain Mike's raft is fun, entertaining and eye-opening!

See, it's thanks to Mike that I'm still alive... Well, kinda. He tells me that I shouldn't pat adults on the head, which sounds pretty obvious, but legend has it that in the mid-1800s, missionary Reverend Thomas Baker did just that to a village chief and, well, he was thrown into the pot and served for dinner that night! Captain Mike assures me that cannibalism hasn't been practised here for more than 100 years.

After an adventure-filled day, I am greeted with champagne and canapes in my room at the Outrigger on the Lagoon Fiji. I discover this is part of the resort's signature five-star 'talei' butler service for deluxe ocean-view rooms and bures, which also includes a nightcap of port and a sweet treat later in the evening.

The next morning, I sit down

for breakfast at the resort's Sundowner Bar, before spending a few hours relaxing by the new child-free pool, Vahavu. I then decide to trek to the top of Fort Hill. OK, 'trek' is a bit of a stretch – getting to the top is pretty easy, but once there I take in the magnificent view of the 'salad bowl', the name given to the plantation where Fiji's fresh food is grown.

During my time in Fiji I meet Kini Sarai, a retired international rugby player who is enthusiastic about the history of Fort Hill and Fiji. He tells me about the locals' ancestors who used to live high up on the mountains, fearing capture by the enemies and being eaten. Unfortunately, because they needed to come down for food, the long trek was usually the death of them. He also tells me former Wallabies captain John Eales visited a local bone

doctor to fix his broken rib while he was recuperating in Fiji – and it worked! He then went straight back to Australia to play a match. The secret to the Fijian rugby team's success, Kini says, is that they train on the same sand dune I had climbed for fun. 'The dunes work the core muscles – very important in rugby, as they make you run faster, throw further, last longer,' explains Kini, just before the trek that made me realise I'm stronger than I thought.

Luckily, I had the foresight that I would be exhausted by the end of the day and had booked a treatment at Bebe Spa, after which I headed up to Kalokalo Bar for the best view of a Fijian sunset.

Exploring the Outrigger resort, I'm struck by how much of the Fijian culture is instilled inside the 40-plus acres of land. Women from local villages set up jewellery stalls, you can buy – or make your own – artwork using local materials at The Art Cart, and don't even get me started on Polynesian night (three words: Hot. Fire. Dancers).

It's also great to see such a variety of people at the resort – families, couples, girlie groups on a weekend away, wedding parties (the resort celebrated 249 weddings last year!) and singles who, like me, are taking advantage of the new adults-only pool as they enjoy a much-needed few days away from the hectic city life. Bula! **N**



Fiji's locals bid you a 'bula' wherever you go, while at the Outrigger resort you can create your own artwork (left).

Go for a trek at Fort Hill (left), or enjoy the luxurious surrounds of the resort (above, right).



TO GO

- Fiji Airways flies twice daily to Nadi from Sydney (from \$308), once daily from Brisbane (from \$460) and once daily from Melbourne (from \$382). Visit www.fijiairways.com.
- Stay at Outrigger on the Lagoon Fiji from \$235. Visit www.outriggerfiji.com.
- Dive into adventure with the Sigatoka River Safari (from \$65 for children and from \$130 for adults, www.sigatokariver.com) and on the Sigatoka Sand Dunes (\$6 per person, www.nationaltrust.org.fj/sigatoka_sanddunes) before indulging in a gorgeous spa treatment at Bebe Spa Sanctuary (www.bebespa.com).
- To find out more about Fiji's gorgeous Coral Coast, visit www.coralcoastfiji.org.

Top 3 customs to know

- If you're taken, wear a frangipani on the right side of your head. Single? Rock it on your left. And if you're single and ready to mingle, legend has it that you should put it on top of your head!
- If visiting a village, take unwanted clothes, books, paper, pencils, etc. The local kids will love it!
- When heading outside the resort, it's respectful for women to wear a sarong – especially in villages.

