



## Trek through a Fiji few tourists see

**T**HE highland villages of one of Fiji's two main islands, Viti Levu, are still relatively unknown to seasoned travellers, yet it is now easy to take guided treks to these areas, far from the beaten tracks of Suva and Nadi.

Ilai, the guide, a wiry old character, met us at Nadi airport. We would be visiting his relatives in all the villages on our itinerary.

Our trip was divided into two sections, trekking in the highlands of the interior and a visit to a coastal island. Each day we would walk about six to 10 miles, on a well-defined track, linking the villages. The walking was easy on gentle slopes with some shallow river crossings. Ponies carried our gear.

At night we stayed in *bures*, local village houses, sleeping on soft, grass-stuffed matting and eating with families, taro root and leaf, freshly caught fish, cassava and yams, *bele* (a green vegetable), sweet fruit and puddings.

Sometimes the whole village would turn out to meet us, the children slithering up palm trunks to collect coconuts, the village welcoming committees turning on a *yagona* (kava) ceremony.

To reach the starting point of our trek, we travelled in brightly painted, open-sided buses through highland towns where beautiful Indian women seemed to glide, rather than walk in their rippling saris.

The marketplaces teemed with smells, colours and activity. Traders, perched on their mats beside pyramids of succulent produce, sang out their wares, imploring us with dramatic eyerolls and gestures to sample a slice of pineapple or try on a sunhat.

It was more like wandering through a shopping carnival with its riotous arrangements, chillis neatly piled beside religious objects, freshwater oysters positioned beside bright little limes, plastic combs and mirrors alongside live poultry.

On the first day we stopped at a riverside to enjoy a picnic lunch and swim in the Wainibuka River before arriving at our first village, Navavai, in the early afternoon.

That night we were treated to the first of many Fijian feasts and treats, fresh green coconut milk sipped through a straw made from a stalk. We were shown how to scoop out the soft, jelly-like flesh of the young coconut with a wedge spoon made from coconut shell.

Fijians have few needs which can't be met by making use of what grows naturally. If a wall in a *bure* needs thatching it's simply a matter of

### TRAVEL

By BERWYN LEWIS

stripping palm fronds and plaiting them.

Night falls quickly in Fiji because it is situated between 15 degrees and 20 degrees south of the equator. Suddenly the sky turns orange, then pink, the bushland falls silent briefly, then everything is transformed into deep starlit purple. The night sounds of crickets and birds begin, a constant and thrilling whir which fuses with the sound of the river.

In Navavai, a village of about 30 families, all the food is grown in adjoining jungle gardens and clearings. Village lifestyles are co-operative: women cook, wash, fish, weave and garden, men build *bures*, clear forests and fish off the reefs. Childcare is shared by everyone, particularly the very young and old.

Early mornings were far too good to miss. At first rooster crow, sometimes before dawn, the fields were still cloaked in mist, the grass wet with heavy dew, the river a glassy mirror. At sunrise a soft breeze ruffled the bougainvillea blossoms and huge hibiscus, stirring the scents of ginger flowers and honeysuckle.

Sometimes we were invited to go fishing. The young men donned their one concession to western technology, ancient pairs of goggles, and, brandishing homemade spears, they set out with the women. By driving the fish towards the nets and "herding" them with "beaters" (made from plaited palm fronds) a fine catch of Malay fish was soon threaded up by the gills and landed, when the headman divided it up according to village protocol and need.

The fish were barbecued over hot coals and served with breadfruit, a starchy accompaniment to most meals which can also be prepared as a sweet dish by cooking in coconut and caramelised sugar.

Another sweet dish, *vakalavalava*, is made from coconut, cassava root and sugar. The mixture is rolled into banana leaves (the tin foil of Fijian kitchens), tied up with a flat leaf (*voivoi*) and baked to a chunky, cake-like consistency.

The highlight of the trip was a visit to a waterfall near Nasukamai, a village of 850 hectares, owned by Ilai. Hidden from sight we could hear the waterfall and see its clouds of spray before we arrived at the edge of its foaming and bubbly pools.

It dropped over a 60m cliff into a bottomless underwater cave. Between diving into its freezing depths, we explored the mossy rocks, breathing soft raspberry, mint and orange scents, picking wild grapefruit and swinging from vines.

Nasukamai turned on a village dance for us, complete with guitar and exquisite harmonised singing, a legacy of the missionaries.

We discovered rock'n'roll Fijian style, a sober four steps forward and four back, arms chastely folded against the square of a partner's back. All very demure to us, but a quick glance through the unsealed windows revealed the youngsters of the village observing us with wide grins and cheeky asides, like any crowd on a starlit night hanging around the dance halls of the world.

The older boys and girls flirted with an exuberance and sense of humour which made our way seem dull and desperate. The dance halls constantly exploded with waves of laughter. These villagers operated on a strong collective energy: one laughs and everyone does, as though connected to a group psyche, perhaps the effect of close village living.

On arrival at the island of Moturiki, Part Two of our trip, we were greeted by the headman of Daku. He treated us to a feast of

clams, abalone, reef fish, prawns and a seaweed called *nama*, served in a marinated state with a taste like fresh garden peas.

When in doubt old Fijians consult omens. These include owl behaviour and communicating with the spirit of *yagona*, the object of worship in pre-missionary days. Whalebones are still exchanged at village weddings and local witchdoctors, who preside at all official village functions, sometimes work in city hospitals advising on the use of traditional jungle medicines.

If this sounds a long way from five-star living, don't be deterred. There were bush showers and we came across one shop which sold spark plugs, toothbrushes, candy bars, soap and pictures of Princess Di and Charles.

Life in the Fijian highlands and islands is charmed and part of the reason is the disregard for the future. Yet how many more generations of Fijian children will continue to understand food as something which grows outside, down the path, past the bamboo and coconut groves?

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