

MYSTIC LAU

Day 2 Lavena, Taveuni

Eleven slices of paradise in 11 days, Captain Cook Cruises offers an amazing peep into the mystic Lau group of islands on Fiji's eastern sea borders.

IT DID NOT DAWN ON ME until the Reef Endeavour eased effortlessly into Port Denarau to keep my cabin door open. Unlike my next-door neighbour, Andrea. Although not recommended by the captain, Andrea got away with it because she had her mother Margaret with her. At 90, Margaret prefers the sea breeze to the cool air of the air condition in their cabin. But that open door I reckon was a great way to welcome paradise each day of the cruise.

Margaret, Andrea and I were all part of Reef Endeavour's inaugural Discovery of Lau Cruise in October. All together, 126 guests went on the cruise complimented by the 56 ever cheerful and helpful ship crew.

In 11 days, the ship visited some parts of Fiji that had never been visited by tourists. Some of these islands are much closer to Tonga than to the Fijian capital, Suva.

Lauans have interacted and traded with the Tongans long before the arrival of Europeans into this part of the Pacific Ocean and their strong influence could still be seen by visitors to Lau to this day in their skin complexion, language, architecture of their houses (their being no corners but rounded ends), their polotu (church service), even the sports they play. More often than not, a village green in Lau will not be complete without a concrete cricket pitch!

I kept a journal during the 11-day cruise of Lau.

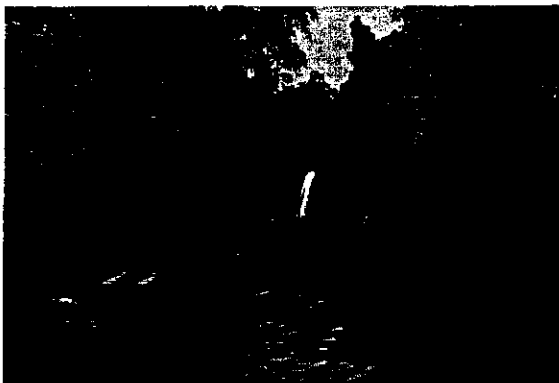


Day 1 Departs Port Denarau

A ticker tape musical send off by the ever-popular Fiji Police brass band threatens to blast off the rain clouds that hover off Port Denarau. 126 passengers from Australia mainly with some sprinkles of New Zealanders and Europeans including two "brave" children and two teenagers are on board. Evening was spent with pre-dinner cocktails before a la-cart dinner was served at the Reef Endeavour's Captain Cook Lounge.

be accessed on the Lavena nature walk. BBQ lunch was served on the beach and I bought myself a fresh bu (green coconut), took a photo then tweet it, much to the envy of many of my friends.

Richard's adventure took the cake today though. He took a walk with his wife to Lavena village after the waterfall hike and he met his cousin from Sydney at the Lavena Lodge! Both men knew they would be holidaying in Fiji. But all his cousin knew was that Richard was cruising with Heather in a remote part of the country. Richard and Heather arrived on Lavena by Reef Endeavour that morning just as his cousin and wife were arriving at Taveuni on a small plane from Nadi International. Small world!



Day 3 Welagilala, Lau

A postcard of island paradise is Welagilala; little patch of green circled by wide, white fine sandy beach amidst a sea of inviting aquamarine waters. Its attraction is its remoteness. It used to be a lighthouse outpost but in this age of GPS navigation, the lighthouse is now an empty tower of rusting metal. Sea bird colonies make Welagilala their home now, and the two caretakers on the island say turtles nest there as well. Passengers spent the day swimming, snorkelling or diving with Dan and James, the Viti dive master and instructor on board Reef Endeavour. Welagilala is now under lease to an Australian millionaire who wants to turn it into his family's private holiday getaway. Did check with Richard and he said the millionaire was not another long lost cousin!

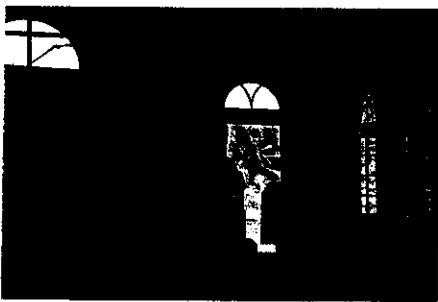
Day 4 Bay of Islands, Vanuabalavu

This natural wonder comprises three limestone caves located on a bay of aquamarine waters that is littered with scores of little outcrop of islands. Passengers spent the morning swimming in the Qara ni Vola Yaca (name writing cave) and Qara ni Bose (meeting cave). The latter is where the custodians of the Bay of Islands believe was the war room of their ancestors. Swim through a small opening, you will enter into a cathedral-like interior. All around the high ceiling can be seen what looked like seats and this is where the vu (ancestral gods) of Daliconi sit to map out their war strategies.



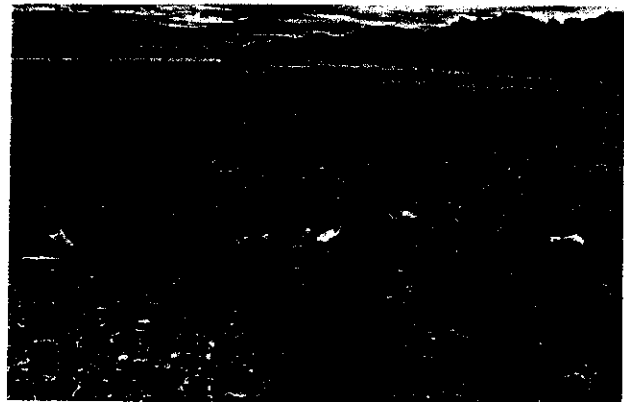
Day 5 Sawana, Vanuabalavu

Polynesian hospitality was the order of today as the people of Sawana rolled out their world-renowned Tongan friendliness to welcome passengers and crew of the Reef Endeavour. Little boys performing warrior spear dances and little girls doing solo maiden dance of Tau'olunga were a hit. Molly who was part of the cruise with husband Mike, owner of Viti Dive, was fascinated with the unique masi (tapa) design two girls were wearing on the day. Instead of the traditional brown and smoky white dye, their masi were brown and black! The girls' mother, wife of the village pastor (who is posted to Sawana from Tonga), says she used young mangrove shoots to make the black dye.



Day 6 Waiqori, Oneata

Deep into Lau territory and the strong Tongan influence continued with a refreshing polotu in picturesque Waiqori Village. It is Sunday and everybody on the island turns up in their Sunday best to attend polotu on their beautiful concrete church up on a knoll. Chief of Oneata and his people dressed the Fiji Director of Captain Cook Cruises, Commander Semi Korollavesau, in masi to show their appreciation for the visit. The singing in church was inspiring; instead of the electrical music beat, the choir leader uses a metal dong. Delicious Fijian dessert of vakalolo (mashed ripe banana and cassava served with caramel sauce) and fresh bu awaited us after the polotu. Afternoon was spent on a secluded beach away from Waiqori. I joined two of the five Petersen sisters in finding a track from the beach to Oneata District School to deliver donations of stationery.



Day 7 Fulaga

Fulaga is easily the most spectacular island of Lau. With a passage too narrow for ships like the Reef Endeavour to navigate, tender boats were lowered in the open sea for snorkelling, coral viewing and sight-seeing in the beautiful Fulaga Lagoon. Little mushroom islands dot the lagoon as well as spectacular sand banks. Folklore speaks of a giant cockerel that rested on a rocky outcrop many moons ago and feeling hungry, started scavenging for food as cockerels do using their powerful legs. Those legs stirred up the dirt; rocks started to crumble and went flying down the lagoon. Scattered rocks are now little islands and the people of Fulaga are known as the people of Vanua Seu, the foraging islands. Fulaga is one of the last remaining islands in the group that still uses outrigger canoes. They build their own from vesi trees that grow on the island and canoe sails were weaved from pandanus.



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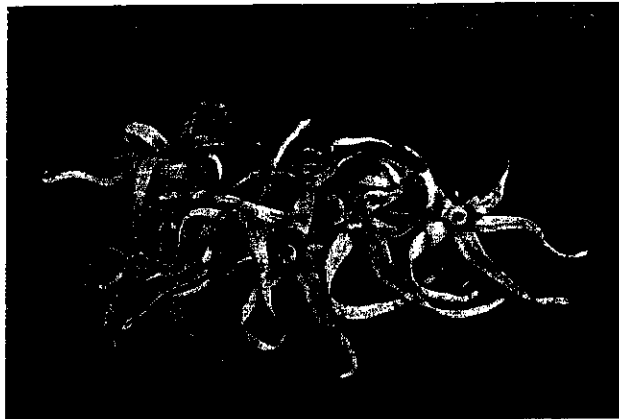
Day 8 Vuaqava

Until the arrival of the Reef Endeavour today, Vuaqava was off limits to outsiders. Its main attraction is the large seawater lake at the centre of the island. It's a 2.5km hike from the beach to the lake, along the way, hikers get to enjoy natural forests littered with hardwood species like vesi. Remains of old forts, settlements and burial caves can be seen along the trail. Habited until the early 1900s, Vuaqava was abandoned and considered tabu except for two of its inhabitants who were struck by a mysterious illness. Descendants of the two survivors now live on nearby Kabara Island.



Day 9 Naikeleyaga, Kabara

Kabara people are natural wood turners. In fact, they are the traditional builders and carvers of Lau's high chief. Vesi grows in abundance on their island as well as neighbouring Vuaqava. Kabara Islanders not only are skillful with their carving tools but their women and men are exceptional dancers too. Their performers will stand out in any event through the head decorations their women dancers wear. This is the island where young girls still wear their hair locks proudly, a peculiar Lauan custom that celebrates the maiden's virgin purity. Naikeleyaga hosted passengers to an island feast on their village rara (green), not far from the concrete cricket pitch.



Day 10 Udu, Totoya

Udu Village offered a school stop for guests of Captain Cook Cruises. Sixteen children and their three teachers make up Udu Village School, a village with 15 homes. Many guests came along with stationery, stuffed dolls and clothes and the children reciprocated by performing several dances. The boys danced about elves that have horns on their heads, long white beard and skinny legs, while the girls performed the Mokosoi dance, a popular yellow fragrant flower. Totoya is the home of a famous string band in Fiji. The Voqa ni Ua kei Daveta Tabu is named after a sea passage on the island where the island's ancestral god resides.

Day 11 Namuana, Kadavu

This was the climax of ancient Fiji experience when guests witnessed the ritual of turtle calling on Namuana Point on Kadavu Island. The Reef Endeavour had steamed westward after Totoya and as the sun rises behind the ship and pods of dolphins play on starboard, Namuana Point comes into view. The ritual started with the priest stating the three golden rules: no camera, no pointing at the turtles and no loud talking. The women seated on the ground away from the priest - who is perched on a huge boulder that leans on to the water some 40 metres below - then started their chants: "Ni nanumi ira nomuni tamata, moni vude sara mada -

Consider your people please and do surface we beg of you," the women sang. In some of the stanzas of the chants, a lali (wooden gong) and guitar are used.

I would have missed it if it wasn't for the priest's son. He actually pointed to the blue waters below and all I could see was this huge patch of brown near the water's surface. It stayed afloat for a few seconds before it dived into the deep again. The women continued with their chant, this time with a lot more vigour and excitement. They are happy no doubt that one of the turtles has heard their plea. About three minutes later, the priest's son again pointed down to the water. This time it was a smaller turtle, may be 10 to 15 years of age, probably a green turtle, swam on the surface of the water from the left of the point to the centre for about two to three minutes before it too made its dive into the deep. It was magical!

WORDS: SAMISONI PARETT*

PHOTOS: JONATHAN DASS

* Pareti was a guest of Captain Cook Cruises in their maiden Discovery Cruise of Lau in October 2013.

