

# Welcome to their world

It's the friendliness of the people and their cultural richness that make a Fiji cruise so memorable, writes **Sarah Mennie**

AN OLD man rests in a sagging hammock, a blow dart in his hand. In front of a nearby thatched hut, a young woman sorts coconuts to be sold at market.

Their village on Kulu Island, home to 15 people and a collection of pig and chickens, is metres from a postcard-perfect beach. The smiles from the villagers are a reminder why Fijians are considered among the friendliest people in the world.

This is Fiji at its best, and on its new route, Captain Cook Cruises will take you there.

The seven-night Discovery Cultural Cruise visits remote villages as it takes in three distinct cultures of the islands – Matanivanua, Polynesian and Melanesian.

There is also the glorious scenery, snorkelling on the world's third-longest reef and – if you are game – on-board dive instructors can take you through a full PADI scuba course or give you a taste for breathing underwater with an introductory dive.

There were many unforgettable moments on this trip aboard the 73m, 65-cabin Reef Endeavour, but one on-land experience will always stand out.

Meandering through the mangroves of the Dreketi River by tender boat, we saw a couple of villagers waving from a nearby bank. Our captain pulled up and we were

invited ashore.

Given that this village visit wasn't on our itinerary, the scene that greeted us stunned even the cruise director, who has been taking tourists around Fiji for five years.

The villagers heard a rumour we might be coming, so they spent days preparing a welcome party for us. When we arrived, dozens of children were sitting patiently under a tree, where they had been waiting for three hours.

A group of mothers sat nursing their infants, surrounded by baskets full of homemade snacks.

We took our places on woven mats and sat silently as village chiefs performed a traditional seveseva welcome ceremony.

And then the festivities really began. The children grabbed at our hands, desperate to get us cups of tea and something to eat.

They wanted to know our names and to tell us theirs. Their favourite thing was photos – photographing one child at a time was almost impossible, with every other kid diving in as soon as a camera was whipped out.

There was so much love in this little village. Eventually we motored back up the Dreketi River in the moonlight.

One morning, we dropped anchor just off Kiva Island, settled by

people from Tavala, a group of locals guided in their outrigger canoes to greet us. They circled Reef Endeavour, their rich singing floating up to us.

On their island, which is home to about 200 people, they greeted us with head-to-head floral wreaths for our hair. Inside their town hall, they put on a spectacular singing and dancing performance. The senior dances were amazing, but it was the five-year-olds who stole the show, with their teacher reminding them of the steps.

The planning for the cruise itinerary paid off. With so many village visits, it could have felt like Groundhog Day, but it worked beautifully.

The trip also included Labasa, a bustling town with a strong Indian influence, and Kiva, another island.

This cruise is not just about village visits. There are so many chances to snorkel you'll feel completely at home in your face mask and fins. If you don't fancy coming face-to-face with a reef shark (which several people did), the glass-bottom boat is a safer option. The ship has a swimming pool, spa, two bars, two lounges, loads of food, ample sun deck and viewing areas, comfy cabins and a friendly crew.

**The writer was a guest of Tourism Fiji, Captain Cook Cruises, Air Pacific, Novotel Nadi and Rosie Holidays.**



Sarah Mennie in the pool on the Reef Endeavour is giving a diver a pig on Kiva Island (above right) and the sun deck (opposite). *Dance picture: Sarah Mennie*



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## Getting there

Go2 Pacific Flyer daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Nadi and Suva (twice a week). From Melbourne, 01 1800 230 100 or see [www.go2pacific.com](http://www.go2pacific.com)

## Doing there

Captain Cook Cruises' seven-night Discovery Cultural Cruise has two itineraries to choose from, including stops in the heart of the Pacific Islands. For more prices, call 1800 230 100 or [www.go2pacific.com](http://www.go2pacific.com). 01 1800 230 100 or [www.go2pacific.com](http://www.go2pacific.com)

## Staying there

At Kiva, the Novotel Nadi is a 4-star resort, styled to blend with local Fijian culture. For more prices, call 01 1800 230 100 or [www.go2pacific.com](http://www.go2pacific.com)

