



A jet boat down the longest river in Fiji - Sigatoka



Traditional lunch at Jubairata village prepared by local women



The Kava ceremony is an important part of Fiji's culture

# BEYOND THE BEACHES: A DEEPER DIVE INTO FIJI'S CULTURAL HEART

Go beyond Fiji's picture postcard image to explore vibrant villages steeped in timeless traditions, the historic vibe of the capital, Suva, and the ocean's wonders. **Words by Pallavi Pasricha**

Images by: Fiji Tourism, Elliot Grafton & Pallavi Pasricha

“Bula! Fiji is much more than swaying palm trees, white sandy beaches, and the resorts. Fiji is the people,” a local tells me a couple of days into my trip along with the traditional greeting. I am not quite ready to believe it because I have arrived with exactly those visions—basking on endless stretches of sand and treading turquoise water.

But the dark clouds and rainfall that welcome me on my arrival signal that this emerald archipelago has something else in store for me—a deeper, richer experience of this South Pacific country of 300 small islands lying close to New Zealand.

### The Sigatoka Valley

On its main island, Viti Levu, I swap the ocean for the river as I whiz past sheer cliffs, verdant hills, and lush landscape in a jet boat down its longest river, Sigatoka, before arriving at a village, where I plug into the heart of Fiji's culture.

Called the ‘Salad Bowl of Fiji,’ the fertile Sigatoka Valley is dotted with riverside villages where time moves slowly, and traditions hold strong.

As I get off at Jubairata village, the guide hands out sarongs to wear because women cannot be dressed in shorts or skirts. An effusive welcome by the locals makes me immediately feel a part of their home. Friendly, enthusiastic sounds of “bula,” which means “hello,” drift constantly as we tour the grassy fields dotted with thatched homes.

Then it is time for the kava ceremony, which lies at the heart of their culture. Considered auspicious, the country's ceremonial drink is prepared by crushing the dried roots of the pepper plant into a fine powder and served in a coconut shell cup called ‘bilo’. I gamely accept a bowl of kava, then, following the local etiquette, say “Bula,” down it in one shot, and clap three times, saying “Vinaka,” which means thank you. The communal feeling it induces gives me a high even as my lips tingle with the potent drink.





Snorkeling is a must in Fiji



The Grand Pacific hotel is over a century old



The jet boat for Moon Reef leaves from Natalei Eco Lodge

Sitting on the floor, I feast on sweet fried bread, chicken, greens, cassava, and more prepared by the local women wearing bright patterned dresses. Much laughter and dancing follows, and I leave the village just the way they want us to—happy.

More than half of Fiji’s 900,000 people are iTaukei, its indigenous inhabitants, while the others are of Indian origin, descended from indentured laborers brought during the colonial era.

**Ocean Encounters**

While the rain may have played spoilsport with beach hopping, the sea still calls. A jet boat from Natalei Eco Lodge in Dawasamu Tailevu takes me to Moon Reef, where the wondrous sight of scores of dolphins leaping and spinning awaits me. It almost seems that they dance in tandem with the songs we play, darting higher when the music is upbeat. An hour of snorkeling for a sneak peek under the reef’s clear waters is the perfect encore for my brief tryst with the ocean.

**Fiji’s capital city—Suva**

Not many stop at the capital, Suva, during their Fiji sojourn, but it is the perfect place to plug into its urban vibe and history. I get my dose of the country’s past at the over a century-old iconic hotel, The Grand Pacific, the home of royal guests during the British colonial era, whose photos are proudly displayed on a lobby wall.

The harbor-facing lodging even has a suite dedicated to its most prominent patron, Queen Elizabeth II, who visited several times. I wander onto its massive balcony, then spend the evening by the swimming pool listening to tales of the country’s colonial past as I nurse the hotel’s signature GPH G and Tea that’s inspired by its longstanding tradition of high teas on the balcony.

It is made with Earl Grey tea, dried Fijian Batiri orange, and Fiji’s local Blue Turtle Gin. I watch the sun paint Suva’s harbor red as I get this history lesson.

**Fiji by road**

With Fiji accepting the Indian driving license, driving around the small nation that has two main highways—the King’s Highway (north) and the Queen’s Highway (south)—is a great way to wrap up the trip. The dark clouds have gone. Setting out from Suva in my car, I meander along verdant terrain, tranquil and the palm-fringed ocean under a brilliant blue sky. I let my thoughts drift and realize what a different trip this has turned out to be, connecting me with Fiji’s past, its people, and a landscape that offers much more than lazy days lounging on beaches. ■

