11. Tourism

Colonialism changed Fiji forever. So did the growth of commerce and industry—like sugar. But from the middle of the 20th century, it has been tourism that has changed the face of Fiji.

The main reasons that people come to Fiji are to experience the natural beauty of the islands and the sea, and to be charmed by the Fijian people. Yet in the 19th century, when Europeans first came to its shores, the Fijians were regarded as some of the most brutish and bloodthirsty cannibals on earth.

Many of the islands are exquisitely lovely and the Fijian people have a unique way of making visitors feel welcome. The men are physically attractive with beaming smiles and the women are warm and courteous. These are all essential ingredients for the development of tourism but they were not realised until the middle of the 20th century.

It was then that Hugh Ragg, a scion of an old pioneer family, began building a chain of hotels around Viti Levu. His son David had lived for some years on Taveuni managing a copra plantation near our own. He and my family were close friends and both owned Model-T Fords, which they drove rather wildly on the island’s one-lane gravel roads. On one occasion they crashed into each other on a corner and my sister Jeanine went flying through the front window. They were not going very fast and she wasn’t hurt, but it did cause some family tension.

David joined his father in the hotel enterprise, which they gradually expanded from small country establishments in the main sugar towns to the first real tourist resort at Korolevu Beach. Situated on a beautiful bay on the Viti Levu south coast, it was an instant success. For the first time, Fijian culture was put on display for visitors. They had the opportunity to see the famous Beqa firewalkers and go deep-sea fishing. When Jacque and I were married in 1957 we spent our honeymoon in one of their Fijian bures on the beach and our long and happy marriage has always been linked to Korolevu. Sadly, the enigmatic Apisai Tora, who I have referred to elsewhere, took out his spite on the hotel after a union dispute and burnt many of the bures. It was later rebuilt and continued to prosper until a dispute within the Ragg family led to its closure and sale, and it never re-opened.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the airline Pan American was flying through Fiji to Australia. As there was an overnight stopover at Nadi, some of the airline’s pilots got together and constructed the Mocambo Hotel at the airport. It was such a success that they decided to consolidate their interests in Fiji tourism
by acquiring a lease over lovely Yanuca Island, just off the Sigatoka coast and building The Fijian, which for many years remained the premium resort in Fiji. It provided every facility, from game fishing to golf, bowls and water skiing, and became the model for many others that followed. The architect and project manager was a dour Irishman named Paddy Doyle who stayed on as the manager of the resort for most of his life. His personality was synonymous with the place and it was never the same after he left to set up his own small resort. Perhaps the happiest day of Paddy’s life was when he went to Buckingham Palace in full morning dress to receive an honour from the Queen for his contribution to Fiji tourism. The resort was later bought by the giant Malaysian hotel chain Shangri La.

Another of the great characters of Fiji tourism was Dick Smith (not to be confused with the Australian electrician).

Dick’s family had a prosperous business in Sydney but he had decided to forsake the city for the islands. He acquired a Second World War Fairmile and sailed to Fiji. The Fairmile was a narrow gutted, speedy, torpedo boat that rolled dreadfully in heavy seas, but it was an exciting addition to the Fiji marine scene. Dick wanted to start an island resort and someone advised him to have a look at Taveuni. We were living on the island at the time and gave him a lot of slanted advice, hoping he would start something in our area. But it didn’t suit his dream, which he eventually found in the Mamanuca Group off Nadi. At first there was Castaway Island, and later Dick’s Place, which became Muscat Cove on Malolo Lailai.

This was freehold land which he shared with another developer who established Plantation Island at the other end. Dick started with a few bures, then some multi-roomed villas. Its lovely sheltered bay became a haven for overseas yachts so he put in a yacht marina. Then came time-shares and a subdivision of part of the island for the homeowners. Dick created something special on Malolo Lailai and we went there often to enjoy his hospitality and to walk on the idyllic beaches surrounding the island. It was from a hill on the island that my family and I watched the dawn of the new millennium.

Another Dick who played a significant part in developing tourism was Dick Warner. Dick was a New Zealander who came to Fiji as a school teacher before joining up with Harvey and Iris Hunt in forming the first travel agency, Hunts Travel Service. Dick was a small man with tremendous energy and an astute feel for tourism. He knew that tourists wanted to stay on a small island so he developed Treasure Island off Nadi with Dan Costello. This was a little island surrounded by sand and sea. Just beside Treasure Island, Dan started up what became the most popular budget resort for young people, Beachcomber. Dan became the face of Fiji tourism. A larger than life effervescent man who wore a heavy beard and carried far too much weight, he was always laughing, joking
and enjoying life to the fullest. Dan came from an old pioneer family. His uncle discovered the Emperor Gold Mine, which has always been the richest in Fiji. Another uncle was Mine Host at one of Suva’s best known hotels, The Garrick. Before going into tourism, Dan ran a successful butchery, and while I was living on Taveuni running pigs and cattle, he would often charter a small ship and come up to Taveuni to buy a shipload of livestock.

Tourism has made a huge difference, not just to the Fiji economy, but to the way of life of its people. The islands and people of Fiji are a natural fit for tourism, and when tourism blossomed throughout the world in the second half of the 20th century, Fiji was ready. Overseas investment poured in. All kinds of supporting industries were started and, above all, jobs were created for the ever increasing population.

One of the people who played a big part in putting Fiji tourism on the map was Mahendra Patel, known as Mac.

Mac’s family owned a small store in the backwater town of Ba. Like so many Indian families, they understood the need for a good education and sent Mac to one of the best schools in Melbourne. He returned with a keen commercial flair and saw the opportunities in tourism and, in particular, duty free trading. His duty free shop at Nadi airport was not only a huge success but won many international awards for its quality. Mac acquired agencies for many of the world’s most prestigious products and opened shops not only in Suva but in the best tourist resorts. He helped to shape the growth of the industry by influencing government leaders and became a close confidant of Prime Minister Mara. Mac was a cheerful extrovert who exuded charm, confidence and style in keeping with the luxury products that he sold. He was also hyperactive and writing a profile on him for a magazine was a strange experience. I had arranged to interview him in his office but as I sat before him, he responded to my questions at the same time as he issued a continuous stream of instructions to his staff. He never lost track of our conversation.

One of the ironic twists of fate was that this highly successful, respected and influential entrepreneur who was appointed by the government to chair one of its organisations was charged with corruption, convicted and sent to prison. When he was released he left Fiji, never to return.

Two other Gujarati families also saw opportunities in tourism: Tappoos and the business known as Jack’s. They established outlets in the main centres and resorts. Along with Motibhai’s, they became the commercial face of tourism in Fiji and were extremely successful.

While working for Dad on Taveuni in the 1950s, he sent me to investigate a possible uranium deposit on Waya Island in the Yasawas. He charted a boat
belonging to Trevor Withers who had just set up a tourist operation called Blue Lagoon Cruises. Little did I know that it would grow into the most popular cruise operation in the South Pacific with six ships carrying people on three to eight day cruises. The man who really made it possible was not Trevor Withers but David Wilson, who came to Fiji as manager of a travel agency. Through very astute dealings he acquired ownership, bought new ships, set a standard, identified stops in the beautiful Yasawa islands, established a good relationship with the Fijian people in the islands who provided the local colour, and marketed his product with great skill. David made his fortune and eventually sold cruise operation to a Fijian company.

Many of us who called Fiji home didn’t really like going to the big resorts for holidays, as we felt like tourists ourselves. We preferred to go to small island operations where we were known to be locals. Jacque and I and our family favoured Nananu-i-ra, a small island off the Rakiraki coast. Nananu means ‘dream’ in Fijian. The island is freehold and was owned by a number of families. Two of them, the McDonalds and the Bethams, who were related, had cottage operations on a beautiful beach. You had to take all your own food and beverages and do your own cooking, but it was a haven of peace and loveliness, and it only cost a moderate price. We alternated between staying with each family so as to not cause offence, as they were touchy and rather jealous of each other. Oscar Betham had once managed the Club Hotel in Suva and I was drinking with him the night before my son Richard was born. I bet him a case of whiskey that the child would be a boy, which it was, and to my disgust he never paid his debt despite my frequent reminders over many years.

The cottages were right on the beach so most of our time was spent wallowing in the tepid sea or snorkeling around the reef, which was teeming with an amazing variety of fish. Small boats were available to go ocean fishing or picnicking on beaches on the far side of the island. There were never more than a dozen or so people holidaying there, so it was very close to paradise. Later, part of the island was subdivided and sold to overseas buyers, and by the turn of the century there were about 20 luxury homes on one point of the island. On the highest part, a 40-room hotel was constructed. Isolation had become suburbia. Our refuge from tourists was gone.

But that was the way ahead. Tourism was Fiji’s best hope and many backpacker operations sprung up on isolated locations in the Yasawas, Kadavu, Taveuni, Ovalau and Lau. Some locals frowned on the backpackers, believing they came to Fiji and enjoyed our natural beauty but paid nothing for it. While this may have been the case with some who went into Fijian villages and tried to live very cheap, many were simply astute travelers. They scorned the expensive resorts,
spent as little as possible on rooms and food, but outlaid huge sums on scuba diving or game fishing. More of these tourists’ dollars stayed in Fiji compared to the dollars that were spent in the luxury resorts.

Yet that was where the big money was to be made. I had a taste of this when I was invited to be a director of a company that bought into the huge Denarau development out of Nadi. It was one of the most stimulating periods of my life, as I became part of a team of investment bankers, developers, planners, architects and financiers as they put together plans for villas, hotel, marinas and golf courses. It was fascinating to observe the rivalry between the various interest groups and the intensity with which they applied themselves to the tasks. Lengthy meetings were held in Fiji, Auckland and Wellington. Consultants came and made presentations. Data was analysed and decisions involving many millions of dollars were made. Chairmanship of the group alternated between Brierleys, the New Zealand investment bankers who owned Air New Zealand, and Fay Ridgerite, the international firm of merchant bankers. At one point, the Chairman was the man who built Sky Tower in central Auckland, and who incidentally also built a beautiful home on Nananu-i-ra. Another chairman was a Fiji Indian who had migrated to New Zealand and made his way up the ladder at Brierleys to become one of their top men.

Denarau became the cornerstone of Fiji tourism mainly because of a smart strategy that the developers put in place. The natural state of the area was a number of small islands surrounded by mangrove swamps and fringed by white sandy beaches. These were a mixture of freehold, state owned and native land. The developers reclaimed the mangrove swamps and embarked on a land swap whereby the freehold land was put together in one place and sold as residential blocks to New Zealanders, Australians and locals. The state land was accumulated in the centre for the golf course and other infrastructure, while the land around the coast was made into native land and leased out to hotel developers. The freehold land was quickly sold off and by the latest count there were seven international hotels on this land. The native land owners benefitted tremendously from this arrangement as they collected regular rent payments.

The other part of the development plan involved the creation of Port Denarau, which became the launch pad for cruise operators taking tourists to island resorts in the Malolo, Mamanuca and Yasawa Islands. Many of these were backpacker operations and one cruise ship group operated like a bus, stopping at each place with arriving or departing guests.

Many quality shops and restaurants were also set up at Port Denarau and these not only attracted guests from the various hotels but the huge cruise liners from overseas that visited Suva and Lautoka and began calling into Denarau.
Denarau consolidated Nadi as the centre of tourism in Fiji and all kinds of activities blossomed in the area.

The main beneficiaries of this growth were not only the native land owners who received rent but the thousands of men and women who found jobs and set up little businesses. They were a natural fit for tourism activities. For many, this brought about a dramatic change in lifestyle. At last there was opportunity and hope for them and their children.

Many more cruise liners came to not only Suva, Denarau and Lautoka, but called at more remote areas like Kadavu and Savusavu. Resorts sprung up at Savusavu, on Taveuni and in parts of Lau. The tourist dollar began to spread to rural areas.

Fiji also became an attractive place to hold international conferences. There were comfortable venues, hospitable people and efficient technology.

It’s debatable as to how much of the tourist dollar stays in Fiji. Certainly the government collects a whole range of taxes and the local airline, Fiji Airways, benefits from bringing people to our shores. Local shopkeepers get their share. Employees get a fair chunk. But the big spend is on accommodation, food and beverages. This all goes to the big hotels that are owned by overseas groups and it is a deep dark secret as to how much of that dollar stays in the country.

By the beginning of the 21st century, tourism was the number one foreign exchange earner for Fiji. It had surpassed sugar, garments, gold and all other industries. It was also the largest employer of labour. Capital was pouring in to finance huge tourism projects at Momi on the Coral Coast and at the beautiful Natadola Bay. The Pacific appeared to be a region of peace and tranquility in an otherwise troubled world. The future for tourism was as bright as the tropical sun.

Yet it was well understood that tourism is a fickle industry and the flow of tourists could quickly dry up if they felt threatened by civil unrest, unpleasant weather, poor service, or high costs. Tourists do not want to see guns in the streets or hear about human rights abuses. Often it is foreign governments that advise their people not to go to places that pose any kind of danger.

So it came as no great surprise that the industry came to a shuddering halt in 2000 when George Speight and his thugs invaded the streets of Suva and in 2006 when Commodore Bainimarama removed the democratically elected Prime Minister Qarase from power. Overseas governments told their nationals not to visit Fiji. Hotels were empty. Staff were laid off. Investment dried up. Projects ground to a halt. The Fiji economy went into free fall.

But optimism remained. Fiji was just too good a visitor destination. Those in the industry waited out the threat and put recovery plans in place. When
things did return to normal and foreign governments removed adverse advisory notices, the tourists came back, albeit on very attractive packages. The industry continued to grow and provided jobs and much needed foreign exchange.