22. Islands

While my fascination with my homeland has always been about its great diversity of people and the pragmatic manner in which they have adapted to the changes that have enveloped the nation over the past 80 years or so, one can’t ignore the charm and allure of the many islands where history has been indelibly written.

Not the least of these is the island of Bau. While only 20 acres in extent, it has maintained a central place in Fijian influence and culture since the days of Ratu Seru Cakobau in the 19th century. At that time, four thousand people lived on the island and there were more than 20 high temples. A flotilla of 20 or so huge war-going canoes, 100 feet in length, could be seen around the island. From this tiny speck of land Ratu Seru Cakobau ruled Fiji and with other chiefs he ceded Fiji to Queen Victoria. It is an island situated at the mouth of a river where there is nothing but mangroves. There is little of beauty about it. Yet the Bauan people are immensely proud of their heritage and influence over the affairs of Fiji. I have written elsewhere about one of their greatest sons, Ratu Sir George Cakobau. Many other sons and daughters of the island have risen to prominence in Fiji but, regrettably, since the death of Ratu Sir George, bickering within the family circles have prevented the people of Bau from appointing a successor Vunivalu, that is, paramount Chief of Fiji. Possibly because it is so steeped in history, I have always experienced a powerful feeling of mystique whenever I have been at Bau. I felt uneasy about walking on its sacred soil. There is a dignity and charm about the way people from Bau behave, yet I can’t ignore the barbaric rites that were conducted there a mere 150 years ago. In many ways, Bau and its people symbolise the way that the world and Fiji has changed and how difficult it to adjust.

Another tiny, round island, even smaller than Bau, is Nukulau. Located in Laucala Bay, just a few miles off Suva, it was bought by an American in 1846 for 36 pounds. John Brown Williams built a two storey house on the island and became the American Consul. While celebrating American Independence Day on the 4th July in 1849, the house was burnt to the ground when an American fired off a cannon. Its sparks set the house alight. According to Williams, Fijians then looted the house, and his claim for compensation from the Cakobau Government overshadowed the affairs of the nation for the next 20 years. Williams claimed $5,001.38 and a visiting American Naval Commander carried out an investigation and ordered the ‘natives’ to pay the amount in pigs, guns and fish, and to build him a new house. Commander Boutwill assessed other losses of Americans in Fiji at $43,531. It was Cakobau’s inability to pay this sum that eventually led him to invite the British Government to assume dominion
over Fiji. It took many more years to reach agreement but finally the islands were ceded to Queen Victoria. The people of Fiji have often speculated on what the islands would be like today if the Americans had gained control.

Nukulau was to be thrust into the limelight again in 1884 after the Indian immigrant ship Syria was wrecked off Naselai Reef. The survivors were transported by the CSR sugar boat, Ratu Epeli, to Nukulau, and this was the Indians’ first real contact with Fiji. From there, they and many who followed, for Nukulau became a quarantine depot, dispersed to many parts of the group and helped to build their fortunes and fortunes for Fiji.

Both Fiji and Nukulau gained unwanted international notoriety in 2000 after George Speight mounted his parliamentary coup. When Speight was arrested, the authorities sought a safe place to incarcerate him. It was felt that the jail facilities around Suva were unsuitable as his supporters could easily break in and free him if they so desired. They sought somewhere more isolated and Nukulau, which could be patrolled by the navy and was accessible enough to be serviced, was considered the right place for him and his followers. So George Speight and some of his followers had the beautiful island of Nukulau all to themselves, though I have no doubt that the glamour of imprisonment on an island paradise soon wore off. Perhaps he also meditated on the irony of his fate. His coup was aimed at reinstating the absolute Paramountcy of the Fijians. Yet, there he was, a prisoner on the island where Indians first landed.

Another island steeped in history is Ovalau, with its town of Levuka. This was Fiji’s first capital, though it was hardly a capital to be proud of. In its early years, the town was populated by many dregs of humanity and was a den of iniquity. Yet is was where commerce, industry, government, justice, politics, education and law and order began. Its main attraction then was the deep, sheltered harbor, and for those with an eye for natural beauty, the jagged mountain peaks that stood like sentinels directly above the town. Commerce and government was conducted on the tiny coastal strip while colonial-style houses were built on the hillsides. Many of these houses and stores remain today to remind us of the way that people lived and Levuka has now been listed as a World Heritage Site. Levuka will always be an integral part of Fiji’s heritage as it was there that the Deed of Cession was signed. A deed that stated, inter alia, ‘That possession of and full sovereignty and dominion over the whole group of islands … known as Fiji … and over the inhabitants thereof … are hereby ceded to … Her said Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and herheirs and successors.’ Seldom in history has there been such an act of faith and trust by one people in a foreign monarch.
Levuka today is a kind of quaint backwater curiosity where there is clearly a great deal of poverty. It is kept alive by a tuna canning plant and by backpacker tourists who find its laid-back style appealing. But it remains the emotional soul of Fiji.

The Island of Rabi was sold in the early part of the 20th century to Unilever, which is today one of the giant multinational companies. Unilever developed coconuts and copra, as they were one of the world’s largest buyers of coconut oil. The island off the northern tip of Vanua Levu is rugged and the hills are covered in verdant forests, as it is the wet zone of Fiji. The coastal strips are rich and fertile.

After the Second World War, the British Government sought a place to relocate the Banaban people of Ocean Island. The British Phosphate Company had been mining phosphate on the island for many years and had laid waste most of the arable land. The Japanese had also occupied it during the war and had all but wiped out the Banabans. They were a dejected and demoralised people and had been persuaded to try living on Rabi. But it was a difficult adjustment for them. They had been used to a dry warm climate on Banaba while Rabi had over 100 inches of rain a year and was comparatively cold in winter. While there was sufficient land to cultivate and the sea around Rabi had abundant fish, it was not their homeland, where their ancestors had lived and died for centuries. The older generation fretted and longed to return and some did go back each year for short spells to re-establish their ownership. However, Banaba could not sustain them and gradually the younger people adjusted to life on their new island and the people became an integral part of Fiji. Yet they retained their culture and their identity and Rabi is always regarded as different to the rest of Fiji.

Only a few miles away from Rabi is the lovely island of Kioa with its idyllic white beaches. This island was sold to the people from Tuvalu, which was part of the former Gilbert and Ellice Group. Like the Banabans, they were moved because their small atoll could not sustain them. They too retained their culture and identity. I recall visiting the island when we were out on a fishing trip. It was soon after the people had settled there in 1950 and little was known about their customs. It was a Saturday and we had planned to anchor off the island for the night. The people received us warmly and invited us to join in a feast and celebration. Exotically prepared food from the sea and root crops were spread out in vast quantities on coconut leaves on the floor. When everyone had eaten, the music and dancing began. Music was made by singing and beating the floor vigorously with hands. The building we were in was an old wooden structure and it shook to its foundations as 100 men and women beat the floor and began leaping around in dance. It was the first time I had witnessed the exuberance of the Tuvalu dance and 50 years later I can still hear the full-throated singing and thumping of feet and hands on that old floor and picture the joy and happiness
of the people that evening. Like the Banabans, many of the Tuvalu people have now integrated with their Fijian hosts, but when it comes to election time they were bracketed with Europeans, Chinese and others.

Another island that became off limits for the people of Fiji was Makogai. When Europeans sailed into the Pacific they brought with them many diseases, and isolated communities had little resistance to them. Measles killed off more than a third of the Fijian population in the 19th century. Another common disease was leprosy. It was then thought that the only way to deal with leprosy was complete isolation from the rest of the community. Accordingly, the colonial government set up a leper station on Makogai, an island not far off the old capital of Levuka. Anyone found to have the disease was transported to the island and remained there for life or until they were considered cured. The patients were cared for by Roman Catholic sisters. One of many who gained enormous respect was Sister Mary Agnes. She came to Fiji from France and took charge at Makogai in 1916. She was feared, loved and respected, and ruled the island with a rod of iron. Yet, despite her tough exterior, the patients said she was a devoted ‘mother’ to every person on the island. She lived there till she died at 85 and was awarded France’s highest decoration, the Legion of Honour.

While no unauthorised person was allowed to land on Makogai, I travelled on an inter-island ship that called there many times. My family, with their large herds of cattle, were contracted to supply beef to the community. The inter-island ship that commuted between Taveuni and Suva during the 1940s and 1950s would load our cattle at Taveuni and offload them at the island two days later. While this process was taking place, with the ship lying half a mile off the coast, we would stand on deck and watch the lepers go about their business, fearful that somehow the wind might blow germs out to us. Leprosy then had a horrible image and we dreaded the thought of catching it. My Mother and Father had the very unpleasant experience of discovering that one of our ‘house boys’ had the disease and he was hastily shipped off to Makogai.

Eventually, new ways were discovered for treating leprosy and the facility was closed. The island was unused for many years until the Agricultural Department took it over and began breeding and raising sheep, which were then not found in Fiji. A distinct breed was developed that was suited to Fiji’s climate and conditions. The Department also began cultivating sea clams in the shallow waters around the island and these were distributed to other island communities where clams had been denuded.

My cousins Adrian and Spencer and I were avid fisherman and travelled to many remote islands of Fiji seeking the ‘big one’ and simply basking in the untouched beauty of tiny atolls and marine life.
East of Taveuni are three little islands aptly called Nukutolu, meaning three sands. We had spent the 22nd November 1963 fishing around the reef and had a good haul of trevally and Spanish mackerel. That evening, we anchored the boat in the lagoon and made camp on the sandy beach. The island was crawling with coconut crabs, those unusual creatures with a single huge claw that is capable of shredding the husk from a coconut and breaking it open so as to eat the flesh. We caught a couple and cooked the big claws, which were full of meat and delicately flavoured with coconut. We sat on the beach with a bottle of whiskey and watched the sun burst into scarlet hues as it descended over the distant hills of Taveuni. It was a glorious evening and we sat on the sand, gently fanned by a cool evening breeze, talking about our day on the sea and how fortunate we were to be living in this corner of paradise. We had a short wave radio which was hung on the branches of a nearby, scrubby tree, and at six pm, we listened to the news. We didn't expect anything startling, as the world seemed to be at relative peace, and we certainly did not expect the announcer to say that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas. Like thousands of other people around the world, the moment of receiving that news has lived with me forever. For us, sitting on a small, deserted tropical island in the mid-Pacific, the thought of such an act of violence was hard to imagine. It was too remote to believe, and the three of us drank a great deal of whisky that night as we discussed and analysed the ramifications of this dastardly deed.

Another island that I went to only once is the most northern of the Fiji group and is located at the very bottom of a huge oblong lagoon. The only entrance to that lagoon is 20 miles to the west. As you sail through the narrow passage there is no land mass in sight at any point of the compass. You must simply trust the chart that somewhere to the east, between the two great arms of reef, there is a small island where people live. Paradoxically, that island is called Naqelelevu, meaning big soil. It is a very rocky island with hardly enough good soil to sustain a village community. Yet it is home to a few hundred people, many of whom would never leave it, or see a big city, car, supermarket or movie theatre. Theirs is a life that revolved around the pulses of nature and was largely sustained by the resources of the vast, abundant reef. One link to the outside world is the lighthouse on the island, which is the first indication to mariners travelling to Fiji from the north that they had entered Fiji waters.

On the occasion that we visited the island, the people had just had a foreign link of a different kind. The fishing ships of Japan and Korea had just discovered the vast fish resources of the southern Pacific and were making incursions into Fiji and other island groups. Perhaps their charts were outdated or their skippers were simply not up to the task, but from 1960 onwards many fishing ships hit the reefs of Fiji. We found one on the reef not far from the village. Getting to it was rather hazardous. We had to wade across the reef from the lagoon side
and counter the seas that were crashing in from the east. The boat itself had been abandoned by its crew, so we had the run of it after we had clambered up its slippery side. It was our first experience of what life would be like on a Japanese fishing vessel, and we were not impressed. The crew’s quarters were in the focasle. They were no more than dog boxes with straw to sleep on. There was one pot belly stove at the stern for cooking and absolutely no place to relax. It must have been a case of fish and sleep. The holds were half full of rotten fish and many of the lines and glass balls for keeping the lines on the surfaces were still there. The villagers had done a pretty good job of looting the ship. And why not? If they hadn’t taken the stuff the ocean would have claimed it in the course of time.

The closest I have come to a treasure island is Vatu Vara, which lies some 60 miles off the eastern side of Taveuni. We could see its misty 1,000-foot peak from the hills at the back of our plantation. According to legend, an American ship loaded with gold hit the reef around the island en route to Australia in the 19th century, but before it sank into the depths some of the crew managed to remove the gold and hide it on the island. Unfortunately, all but one of the crew died before another ship called, and he never revealed the hiding place. Over the years, a number of Europeans bought the island, obviously to search for the treasure. Strangely, many went mad, perhaps out of frustration, or perhaps they found the loot and didn’t know what to do with it. In any event, the island developed a kind of mysterious aura and some said that it was haunted.

My cousins and I called there many times, as it is one of the most beautiful islands one could ever experience. The huge lagoon on the northern and western sides had a rare beauty. Most lagoons, protected by a perimeter of reef, have huge castles of coral growing within them, while at Vatu Vara, the bottom is a carpet of pristine white sand. All that mars its perfection are the hundreds of giant clams that grow peacefully in its bosom. The way into the lagoon is a shallow passage that small boats can enter only at high tide. Facing the lagoon is a tongue of fertile land. The island then rises precipitously to its peak of 1,000 feet. This falls away on the eastern and southern side to deep water. The mountain itself is made of what Fijians call culai rock. Translated into English, this means needle rock. It’s as though the island was once below the ocean surface and the peak we now see is a dead wall of coral. Climbing that mountain is extremely treacherous, as one has to crawl over the tangled roots of trees that have miraculously established themselves on that inhospitable face. There is also an abundance of bird life there, the most prolific species being the wood pigeon. Wherever we went to Vatu Vara, we took our .22 rifles and had a feast of this delicacy.

On one trip to the island we took with us the Taveuni doctor, an Englishman who we had befriended. It was on this trip that we came to suspect that maybe the
island was haunted. We were anchored in the lagoon after entering at midday. After lunch the four of us went off at different directions to shoot pigeons and a couple of hours later we returned to the boat; everyone but the doctor. We waited till about five pm, and when there was still no sign of him we decided to go and search. We found him at the bottom of the cliff looking as though he had been through a mincing machine. He explained that he had been walking along a plateau about 50 feet above when he had inexplicably lost his footing and tumbled down the cliff. His whole body had been lacerated by the razor sharp rock. His most serious injury was to his left leg where the calf muscle was cut through to the bone. We carried him back to the boat and patched him up as best we could with our medical kit. It was imperative that we get back to his hospital on Taveuni and there was only just enough water in the passage to allow us through. Even so, we hit the reef many times. Throughout the journey home, he tried to fathom what had made him fall but he really had no logical explanation. It became another episode in the mystery of the haunted island.

In 1860, William Hennings, a German from Bremen, arrived in Fiji. He married a niece of King Cakobau and introduced cotton growing to many parts of Lau. He befriended both Cakobau and the High Chief of Lau, Ma’afu, a Tongan who was the main threat to Cakobau’s absolute control of Fiji. Hennings more than any other person was responsible for establishing peaceful relations between the two high chiefs and the third most powerful leader, the Tui Cakau. His son, Gustav, was to become one of the leading merchants, establishing branches in many of the islands and cornering the copra, bêche-de-mer, pearl shell and tortoiseshell markets. In the course of their lives, the Hennings acquired a number of islands in Lau, including Naitauba. Many years later it was sold to the Hollywood movie star Raymond Burr, who subsequently sold it to an American religious group.

While it was still owned by the daughter of Gus Hennings, we visited it a number of times, as it was only about a four-hour run from Taveuni and was in the centre of some great fishing grounds. Just south of it is the perfectly round atoll of Mailima, whose outside walls drop sheer into the clearest blue sea it is possible to imagine. It was an absolute joy to dive around that reef and gaze upon the wondrous growths of coral and other marine life. Unfortunately, it was also a haven for sharks. I have never seen so many in one place. They cruised around in packs and we dared not spear fish for we quickly found out that to do so was to send them in a frenzy and invite them to shred the fish from our spears.

The spacious old colonial home on Naitauba was unique for one particular reason. It seemed to me that it had been built around the toilet, which was located in a large room in the centre of the building. To sit on the seat, which itself was in the centre of the room, was like being on a throne. The justification
for the toilet’s position was that it was sited right over a subterranean stream, albeit a stream that was some 30 feet below. The reader can, I am sure, imagine the curiosity of the person emptying his or her bowels, as they waited to hear how long it took for excrement to hit the water far below.

Koro Island was described thus in the rather quaint prose of the early-20th century:

Nature has been lavish of her charms here. The domain recalls the primitive ages of the world when the earth was fresh from the creator’s hands, and its face unchanged by the utilitarian devices of man. The beach is skirted by a gorgeous fringe of trees, through the centre of which the natives have made a shady walk, extending several miles. The avenue is arched by overhanging boughs, which sometimes leave a narrow strip of blue sky in view, while on one side the dense foliage allows occasional glimpses of the sea rising on the reefs or sparkling in the sunlight, falling in spray upon the broken shore. Ascending a thickly grassed eminence, we gained a prospect of woods, water and mountains which would have moved the most callous to admiration.

On arriving at the island one evening in January 1945, my mother, sister and I were not in the least interested in nature’s hand. We were returning to school in Suva after the Christmas holidays and had just completed a very rough passage across the capricious Koro Sea from Taveuni on the small cutter, Tui Valavala. She was one of the many 100-foot inter-island trading ships that carried copra and, if necessary, passengers, from the outer islands to Suva. At the stern was a box-like cabin that served as the bridge and accommodation for the captain and passengers like us. The hold, where the copra was stored, was in the centre, and the ten crew were housed on the focasle. She was powered by a stinking, poorly maintained engine that often broke down, leaving progress to the more reliable, yet faded and patched sails on the single mast. The smell of copra and sweaty bodies was all pervading and to escape it we would climb on top of the cabin where we lashed ourselves safely with ropes. On a fine day it was quite pleasant on the cabin top, but when the seas were breaking over the beam and bows it was miserable, though still better than the smells and cockroaches and other insects below.

One this particular day it had been far too rough for safety on the cabin top so we had spent the time rolling around on the poor excuse for bunks and trying to ignore the odours and insects. No doubt it was just as unpleasant for the crew, or perhaps something else had happened during the voyage, for shortly after we entered the sanctuary of the reef a vicious fight broke out. We had just moved out onto the cabin roof.
At first the fight was confined to the hatch area, but when someone produced a cane knife and started swinging, it spread to the cabin and then the cabin top, where the three of us were huddled together in terror. A body crashed against us and we screamed. I really thought that we were about to be carved up. But the captain emerged from the cabin with a long heavy club. He was a rather timid, middle-aged man who had shown great courtesy to us, but he was suddenly transformed into a raging bull. Swinging his club and yelling at the men he rather surprisingly subdued them. He apologised profusely to my mother as we chugged our way just off a village and suggested that we go ashore and have a bath. If we could have found some other way to get to Suva from Koro island we would not have gone back on board the Tui Vala Vala. But we did so, and the rest of the trip was uneventful, through the crew remained sullen.

Due north of Taveuni, encircled by a protective reef, there is a cluster of five islands known as the Ringolds. They are dominated by the islet of Thombia. This is a perfect cone rising out of the sea, except for the fact that its tip and central core have been blown away by an ancient volcano. Inside, there are precipitous jungle-covered walls that descend into a bottomless pit. It is a truly beautiful place that evokes strong images of its explosive birth. On another of the islets is the concrete grave of Apolosi Nawai, a self-styled Fijian prophet who, in the early part of the 20th century, opposed the Europeans control and promised to return all lands to the Fijians and founded the Viti Kabani, an all-Fijian cooperative. He went from village to village collecting subscriptions, winning a huge following and gaining control of the lucrative banana export industry. The colonial government saw Nawai as a serious threat and tried to counter his influence by arresting him for what they claimed was embezzlement. He was jailed for 18 months, but when he got out of jail, the government found that their strategy had backfired. He was treated like a king by the people of central Viti Levu and with this support he proclaimed that he would mint his own money, run the towns and schools, manage ships, industry and wharves, have his own police, magistrates and tax system, and his own flag—a sun, moon and star. It was too much for the government and he was arrested again in 1917 and exiled for seven years to the distant island of Rotuma. By the time he returned, Viti Kabani had collapsed, so he projected himself as the leader of a new church: the Church of the Era. He professed to perform miracles and claimed to hold a document, signed by Queen Victoria, giving him supreme powers over Fiji. The government sent him back to Rotuma for another ten years. By the time he was freed, the Second World War had started and the Japanese were threatening Fiji. It was rumored that he was in contact with the Japanese, so he was shipped off to New Zealand for the duration of the war. After he returned, he was again exiled, this time to the tiny islet in the Ringolds, where he died.
Was he a fraud, or a genuine nationalist who wanted to re-establish Fijian pride and dominance in a place that had been taken over by foreigners? Strangely enough, he once blessed the earth at Nadi and prophesied that people from the far corners of the world would one day come there. This spot is now Nadi International Airport.

I shall never forget my first visit to the island of Wakaya over 50 years ago. The voyage, in an old cutter, had begun in Suva, thence to the old capital of Levuka. When we left Levuka at daylight to make the 15-mile crossing to Wakaya, a howling south easterly was blasting through the narrow channel and an early morning drizzle of rain obscured our destination. But slowly, ever so slowly, the full profile of the island emerged from the mist, rising out of the sea at one end to sheer 200-foot black rocky cliffs at the other. It resembled a giant whale butting its way into the seas. This profile and the misty haze gave it a somewhat sinister appearance.

Suddenly, the rain clouds passed and brilliant sunlight blazed down. The lush greenery of the jungle, the starkness of the cliffs, and the sparkling gold of the beaches came to life. The island’s character seemed to change to one of beauty and fascinating allure. I had the eeriest feeling that here was an island with a soul. Indeed, as I came better acquainted with Wakaya, I came to believe that it did have a unique character and a certain mystique.

Perhaps this is because Wakaya has not been allowed to lie sublimely in its lonely Pacific haven. Its peace has been shattered by disputed ownership and violent cannibal battles. It gained international fame when an elusive German raider, Count von Luckner, was captured off its shores during the First World War. For many years it operated as a copra plantation. It has now become a private haven for Hollywood and international celebrities like Tom Cruise and Bill Gates. An American doctor’s wife who had searched the world for the right place to build a holiday home told me, ‘We have found the most beautiful place on Earth.’

It has rich archaeological remains of Pacific Island cultures dating back to 700 B.C. and many stone fortifications. There is some evidence that it may have been settled by people from Samoa. Many bloody cannibal battles took place on Wakaya, the last recorded one being in 1838 when the Tui Levuka crossed the island with 800 men in 40 war canoes. The Wakaya people had constructed strong fortifications, so a lengthy siege took place. They were eventually forced back towards the high cliffs and, rather than surrender and be clubbed to death and eaten, the men leaped to their deaths onto the black rocks far below. Not far from these cliffs is now a colony of flying foxes. Old Fijians say that the screeching of the creatures are the echoes of the warriors cries as they plunged to their deaths.
The first European sighting of Wakaya was by William Bligh as he passed through Fiji in his open boat during the epic voyage after the mutiny. It was reputed to be one of the first tracts of land sold to a foreigner when it was purchased in 1849 by a sea captain. One of the early owners was the American David Whippy who grew cane and made the first crystallised sugar in Fiji. It is the only island in Fiji where deer roam freely.

When I recently returned to the island I was captivated by the uniquely beautiful homes that were built on many exquisite sites. Yet, as I walked through the silent bush hearing only the call of wood pigeons, the bleat of goats and the scampering retreat of wild deer, I got the impression that nothing had changed. Clambering over the ruins of ancient Fijian villages and forts, picking up pieces of old pottery and stone tools, I felt the ghosts of the ancients still inhabited the gnarled twisted banyan trees that are as old as the ruins.

Someone once described the Pacific Islands thus: ‘Pacific Islands are like their women. They are beautiful, warm, alluring. But one can never be sure what is hidden in their bosom.’

I have made no mention of the two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, for they are somewhat different. They are more like land masses with their towns and cities and industry and urban problems. Viti Levu has the highest mountain in Fiji, Mount Victoria. I have climbed it twice with my family simply because it is there. The view from the top is unspectacular and disappointing, but there is something satisfying about standing on a nation’s highest peak, holding your arms above your head and shouting, ‘I made it.’ There are other more interesting mountains. One is a plug of rock just outside of Suva known as Joske’s Thumb, so named because it looks like a thumb. Long before he conquered Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary tried and failed to reach the summit. But he did come back many years later and scaled its rocky face. Looking down on the Nadi plains is a range known as the Mountains of the Sleeping Giant. Need I say that the range resembles the body of a great giant. In the shadows of the range are some of Fiji’s most spectacular gardens. Started by the Hollywood star, Raymond Burr, there is an enchanting collection of orchids and other tropical plants.

Fiji’s second highest mountain, Mount Uluiqalau, is on the island of Taveuni. From its lofty peak, on a fine day when it’s not shrouded in cloud, there is an uninterrupted view across to the rugged hills of Vanua Levu to the west, north to the beautiful Ringolds, east to the remote islands of Lau, and south to Koro Island and beyond. Looking down on the coconut plantations on the fertile flats and the surrounding lush jungle covered hills, it is easy to understand why Taveuni has always been known as the Garden Island of Fiji.