

Fiji

With alabaster beaches, cloudless skies and kaleidoscopic reefs, Fiji is the embodiment of the South Pacific dream. Most who head here want little more than to fall into a sun-induced coma under a shady palm, and with over 300 islands to choose from, the decision on where to unfurl your beach towel isn't easy. While some may find that anything more than two snorkelling excursions a day and half an hour on the volleyball court is not in keeping with Fiji's famously languid sense of time, there is more to these isles than can ever be seen from a deck chair or swim-up bar.

Beyond the beaches of the Mamanucas and Yasawas, a wonderland of lush mountains, hidden villages and a spirited capital await back on the mainland. Village life beyond the resorts is alive and kicking and, armed with a *sevu-sevu* (gift) of kava for the chief and a single word, '*bula!*', you'll be amazed at the friendliness and unaffected warmth of the locals. Furthermore, the beautiful Hindu temples and rich traditions of the large Indo-Fijian community add a vibrant splash of colour to the cultural soup.

As you would expect from 1100km of coral-fringed coastline, the Fijian waters offer some truly world-class diving and snorkelling. Spectacular coral gardens are often only a short waddle in flippers down the beach and there are plenty of dive shops on hand to whisk you out to fantastic drop-offs and swim throughs.

In a (coco)nut shell, Fiji is arguably the easiest place in the South Pacific to travel around. The population adopts you on arrival, and there's two robust cultures, a surprisingly diverse landscape and accommodation to suit most budgets.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Grab your favourite swim suit, slap on the factor 30 and wallow in the cobalt waters and somniferous sun of the **Mamanuca** (p135) and **Yasawa** (p141) islands
- Quell your knocking knees and remember to breathe when the first bull shark swims into view in the waters off **Pacific Harbour** (p122)
- Drink to the past at the old colonial pub in Fiji's first capital, **Levuka** (p148), or around the tanoa bowl at **Navala** (p135), Fiji's last traditional village
- Drop anchor with the yachties at **Savusavu Bay** (p151), Vanua Levu's prettiest town and first port of call for many touring boats
- Don a mask, fins and maybe even a tank to explore Taveuni's **Somosomo Strait** (p151) and Kadavu's **Great Astrolabe Reef** (p164)



CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Fiji has a mild, tropical maritime climate, with average temperatures of around 25°C throughout the year. Hot summer days can reach 31°C, but during the coolest months (July and August) the temperature can drop to between 18°C and 20°C. Humidity averages 70% to 80% in Suva year-round and 60% to 70% in Lautoka.

The wet season (summer) is November to April and coincides with Fiji's cyclone season when, although fairly rare (around 10 to 12 per decade), hurricanes are most likely to occur. The dry season (winter) lasts from May to October and is the best period to visit Fiji. The temperatures are cooler and humidity at this time sits a comfortable distance below stifling. November, February and March are also good as there are fewer tourists and you're more likely to find bargain accommodation. Conversely, dates that coincide with Australian and New Zealand school holidays are invariably busy and prices are high.

Diwali (p168) is held in late October or early November and this can be a fun, if manic, time to visit.

Although rainfall occurs throughout the year, you have the best chance for fine weather in the drier regions such as the Mamanuca and Yasawa groups. Suva gets significantly more rain than Lautoka. For general climate information and Suva's climate chart, see p27.

COSTS & MONEY

Although cheaper than many Pacific countries, Fiji is not a US\$30-a-day destination and travellers are often surprised to find themselves paying more for accommodation and food than they would back home.

On average, budget travellers can expect to pay between F\$90 and F\$150 a day if they stay in dorms, travel on local buses and eat at cheap eateries or buy their food at produce markets.

Solo midrange travellers can expect to pay around F\$190 per day, and couples can expect to pay around F\$150 per person per day. These costs are based on using local transport, comfortable hotel accommodation and eating out three times a day. To reduce this, look out for accommodation with self-catering options and places where kids can stay free, and by avoiding island hopping and the expensive boat fares this entails.

Resorts usually include all meals and plenty of activities in their tariffs, and hover around F\$300 to F\$600 per night for a room suitable for a couple or a family of four. Top-end options can cost anywhere up to F\$3000 a night for accommodation, food, alcohol and activities.

All rates quoted in this book are peak season rates, which tend to be 10% to 20% higher and include the 12.5% VAT (value-added tax) and new 5% hotel turnover tax.

HISTORY

Vitians

'Fiji' is actually the Tongan name for these islands, which was adopted by the Europeans. The inhabitants formerly called their home Viti.

Vitian culture was shaped by Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian peoples over 35 centuries of settlement. The Lapita people arrived from Vanuatu and the eastern Solomon Islands in about 1500 BC (see p37), and for about 1000 years they lived along the coasts and fished to their hearts' (and stomachs') content. Around 500 BC they became keen on agriculture and as a result the population shot up, tribal feuding got nasty and cannibalism became common.

European Arrival & Settlement

In the early 19th century Fiji was known to European whalers, sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* traders. By the 1830s a small whaling and beachcomber settlement had been established at Levuka on Ovalau. It became one of the main ports of call in the South Pacific, and was the centre of the notorious blackbirding trade (see p44). Blackbirding originally encouraged the emigration of labourers from throughout the South Pacific (mainly the Solomons and Vanuatu) to work on Fijian plantations, but eventually the trade involved the kidnapping of islanders to work as labourers.

The introduction of firearms by the Europeans resulted in an increase in violent tribal warfare, particularly from the late 1840s to the early 1850s. The eventual victor, Ratu Seru Cakobau of Bau, became known to foreigners as Tui Viti (King of Fiji), despite having no real claim over most of Fiji.

By the mid-19th century London Missionary Society pastors and Wesleyan Methodist missionaries had found their way to Fiji, having entered the Southern Lau Group from Tahiti