

Rotuma

Far flung and isolated, the tiny volcanic island of Rotuma drifts in the Pacific 460km north-west of Viti Levu. The vast distance between its tiny frame and the mainland is an accident of geography, but the divide that separates is also the schism that nurtures, and it is this isolation that has allowed the Rotumans to develop such an inimitable culture.

Ethnically and linguistically distinct from Fiji, the Rotuman culture more closely resembles that of the Polynesian islands to the east than the Melanesians on the mainland. Strong emphasis on communal sharing and *kainaga* (kinship), combined with a slow pace of life, mean that visitors encounter a close-knit people with an elastic sense of time. And that is how the Rotumans prefer it to remain.

In 1985, wary of Western influence, 85% of Rotumans voted against opening the island up to tourism and while it's perfectly feasible to visit, genuine travellers here are few. Most who do so have been invited or are returning residents visiting 'home' to renew ties with families and friends.

There are more than twice as many Rotumans living abroad than there are left on Rotuma. Most have left to find work and opportunities in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, and this mass exodus means that young people can seem relatively scarce on this beautiful island outpost.

Physically, Rotuma resembles a whale, with the larger body of land linked to the small tail end to the west by the Motusa isthmus. Like bubbles in a fish's trail the seabird island rookeries of Uea, Hatana and Hofliua follow in Rotuma's wake. Uea is a high, rocky island and the spectacular Hofliua is also known as 'Split Island' because of its unusual rock formation.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Share a bowl of *kava* and a slice of **Polynesian culture and hospitality** (p224)
- Join the dancers traversing from house to house 'asking' those inside to join them on the street and celebrate the summertime festival of **Fara** (p224)
- Stare out at an endless ocean from **Mt Suelhof** (p224), Rotuma's highest peak
- Explore the ancient graves of kings at **Sisilo Hill** (p224)



■ POPULATION: 3000

■ AREA: 43 SQ KM

HISTORY

Tongans invaded Rotuma during the 17th century and the Tongan influence is evident to this day in its language and dance. In 1791 Europeans on the HMS *Pandora* stopped here to search for mutineers from the *Bounty* and by the mid-19th century Rotuma had become home to traders, runaway sailors and escaped convicts. Following closely behind came the clergy, in the form of Tongan Wesleyan (in 1842) and Marist Roman Catholic (in 1847) missionaries, although their good intentions did not last – 30 years later the various Christian factions were warring. In response to the unrest, the Rotuman chiefs decided to cede their home to Britain, and Rotuma became joined politically to the Fijian colony in 1881. Today Rotuma relies on subsidies and copra, which is processed at the mill near Savasavu on Vanua Levu.

INFORMATION

The driest and most comfortable months to visit are between July and September, although the best time to visit is during the Fara festival (December to mid-January). There are no banks on Rotuma, but in Ahau there are shops and a **post office** (☎ 889 1003), which also acts as a Western Union agent.

The island's first **internet cafe** (☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Fri) opened in May 2008 in the Post Fiji building in Ahau and an insightful and informative website designed for Rotumans can be found at www.rotuma.net.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Rotuma's volcanic curves offer excellent hiking and there are spectacular views from **Solrora Bluff** and **Mt Suelhof** (256m), Rotuma's highest peak. Between Losa and Solrora Bluff is **Mamfiri**, a volcanic vent that drops around 25m.

Twenty stone tombs were recorded at **Sisilo Hill** in 1824 and this archaeological site is also

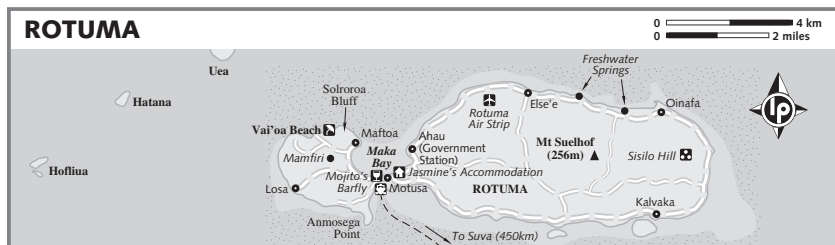
known as The Graveyard of Kings. The area is largely overgrown but the huge Ki ne he'e ceremonial platform and Tafea Point stone walls remain. With the help of a guide (recommended), you should be able to find the cannon that was used as a headstone for the last man to be interred here. Before visiting Sisilo Hill seek permission from the town elders and during your visit remember that it's a cemetery, not a playground. If you're lucky, you may spot some endemic wildlife including the Rotuman gecko and the red-and-black Rotuman honeyeater.

Rotuma also has some of the loveliest **beaches** in Fiji. The best are at Oinafa, Losa and Vai'oa, west of Solrora Bluff. There are also some fine surfing areas around the island; locals will be able to point you in the right direction to best exploit the conditions. Between Else'e and Oinafa are two *fuliu* (freshwater springs), which are popular swimming holes.

This beautiful remote island is not just for outdoors addicts though, and one of the most rewarding experiences is simply staying with villagers. An annual festival known as **Fara** begins on 1 December, during which the strong work ethic adopted throughout the year is replaced with six weeks of dancing, parties and general revelry. The festival coincides with Christmas and the emphasis is on hospitality and celebrating friends, family, visitors, life and love. At this time the population increases by around one-third; it's undoubtedly the best time to be on the island.

SLEEPING & EATING

The easiest way for you to stay on Rotuma is to organise a homestay through a Rotuman contact. If you're lucky enough to be invited to the island, discuss with your contact how best to compensate the family during your stay. Failing that, contact the Fiji Visitor Bureau in either Nadi or Suva (see p239) for updated information and their advice. Staff



will be able to provide you with the appropriate contact details for the Rotuman Island Council – the body you should approach if you want to visit.

Another option would be to post a message on www.rotuma.net. This online forum is used by Rotumans to keep in contact across the globe and somebody there may be willing to offer a homestay.

Mojito's Barfly (☎ 889 1144; Motusa) has simple rooms with shared facilities but they are generally reserved for government workers. Mojito's will provide meals on request, but you need to give them plenty of notice.

Travellers stay at **Jasmine's Accommodation** (Motusa) from time to time in simple rooms. Phone the **District Office** (☎ 889 1011) to arrange in advance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Fiji (☎ 331 5055; www.airfiji.com.fj) flies from Suva to Rotuma on Wednesdays for \$375 one way and the trip takes two hours. As this is a turnaround flight you have to stay for at least a week and from time to time scheduled departures have been cancelled. Adopt a Rotuman attitude and be flexible.

Boat

Western Shipping (Map p116; ☎ 331 7484; Yellow Shipping Container on Muaiwalu Wharf, Suva) operates

THE ORIGIN OF ROTUMA

Rotumans believe their ancestors came from Samoa. The spot where the island presently lies was nothing but open sea until the arrival of Samoan chief, Raho, and his favourite grandchild. The little girl was unhappy in her homeland as her cousin was always annoying her. To escape his torment, she convinced her grandfather to take her away to live on another island. For days and nights their entourage sailed westward in an outrigger canoe, but failed to find land. Eventually the chief threw some Samoan soil overboard. The soil grew to form a beautiful, fertile island, which he named Rotuma. Some of the soil scattered, forming the other small islands. Rotumans commemorate this legend in their dance and song.

the *Cagi Mai Ba* to Rotuma (deck/seat/cabin \$125/155/190) once a month. The journey takes 36 hours and the conditions on board are very basic.

Yachts occasionally visit the island and to anchor they must obtain permission from the Ahau government station in Maka Bay, on the northern side of the island. Note that yachties can't make Rotuma their first port of call; see p239 for details.