

Fiji – April 2013

An opportunity arose to spend 10 days in Fiji, mainly on a lovely small cruise ship, the Captain Cook Cruises (<http://www.captaincook.com.fj>) vessel *Reef Endeavour* taking their Discovery Heritage cruise. As we had a couple of weeks between commitments, we took advantage and had a wonderful time, with lots of interesting visits as well as plenty of time to do absolutely nothing.

Easter Sunday: Auckland to Fiji

The flight was good, especially as Martin got his requested upgrade, so we were both in business class. The seats were comfy, the food and wine were good and the flight smooth and fast, so an excellent start, thanks to Air New Zealand.

We got a taxi from Nadi on the west coast of the main island *Viti Levu* to the Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa on Denarau Island, arriving at about 2pm, and were very impressed. The gardens are beautiful, the pool spectacular and the rooms really nice and modern (with air-con!). We had an afternoon swim and dinner in one of the hotel's three restaurants, Salt, overlooking the sea. Not cheap but excellent food and very nice, friendly, cheerful and prompt service. The evening ended in the bar for coffee before turning in for an early night.



Sofitel pool and gardens

Easter Monday: Denarau Island

Day two dawned hot, sunny and blue-skied. We really lucked out as it only changed the day before, having rained solidly for weeks before that... they must have known we were coming!

We had our early morning tea on the little terrace outside the room and were visited by a dear little frog; he was smaller than my thumb! We had a good look round the hotel and liked to see all the lily ponds everywhere - no doubt where Froggie sprang from. We later saw a heron lurking near one pond and hoped that he wasn't looking for an amphibious lunch.



Two of the three restaurants were open for breakfast: Lagoon, which only serves full buffet breakfasts and dinners, or Salt, which served same breakfast dishes but at the table, with children banned for breakfast (how civilised!). The price wasn't too bad for the amount of food on offer but we don't normally want such a huge breakfast so repaired to the small café for coffee, croissants and *pain au chocolat*. The next day, as we expected to miss lunch and so wanted a more substantial breakfast, we went back to Salt and were allowed to share the set breakfast for one, with just an extra coffee; an example of the willingness of the staff to accommodate guests' requests... and they didn't even charge for the extra coffee. The third restaurant, V, is only open for Silver Service dinner and was too rich for our blood (or bank balance) but was reportedly excellent.

Denarau Island is a very modern, select mixture of top-end luxury resorts, classy private houses and apartments and a golf club; there is also a commercial and retail centre at the port and it is all about as far removed from the 'real' Fiji as it is possible to be. We had to go through a security gate at the bridge to get onto the island but it was all very relaxed. We decided to explore the island and hopped on the thatch-roofed 'Bula Bus' to the port and commercial area. It's Fiji\$7 (Fiji\$1.00 = NZ\$0.66, US\$0.55 or £0.37) each for an all day ticket for as many journeys as you want and it also serves the golf club and the other hotels.



Thatch-roofed Bula Bus

The traffic-free port and commercial centre offered lots of shops selling 'island' clothes and rip-off Ralph Lauren, Lacoste and Burberry shirts - cheap if you wanted them and Martin did succumb to one 'Ralph Lauren Polo' shirt. There were also supermarkets for those who prefer to self-cater, a pharmacy, a post office and a newsagent/books shop. The port building houses numerous agencies offering fishing and diving trips, boat rides (glass-bottomed and otherwise), helicopter and seaplane trips and days on outlying islands.

Bars and restaurants also abounded, serving everything from Fijian exotica to good ol' fish n chips and everything in between, with a good selection of Indian inspired dishes which reflected the influence of the large Indian population of Fiji. We stopped at a bar for beer, where a 'handle' (i.e. mug for you non-Kiwis out there) of draught Fiji Bitter was Fiji\$4 as against a 'special' at the hotel of Fiji\$7 for a smaller glass. The menu was interesting so we ended up staying for lunch. Szechuan chicken and pork chow mien were around Fiji\$20 each. They had fish, steaks, burgers, curries, Chinese dishes and everything else you could think of and all at about half the hotel prices.

Most of the cafes and bars seemed to offer free wifi so we could take the computer to use there. The hotel gave 30 minutes a day which was OK for checking emails, etc. but not enough for Martin to work online.

Back at the hotel for a swim and a snooze and something we noticed was that there didn't seem to be any drunkenness or over-boisterous behaviour. It is quite family oriented and the hotel's bars don't open till the evening, though you can get sodas and ice cream by the pool and Salt, the cafe/bar/restaurant, is open all day for drinks and meals. They don't come round the pool offering drinks and we didn't see many people drinking during the day - the odd beer of course, but no serious drinking.

There were quite a lot of children, it being Easter holidays, and they seem to be having a great time. There's a water slide and paddling pool for the little ones and also a Turtle Club with lots of activities, so the hotel is well equipped for families. There is a babysitting service, for a charge, which means that parents can go off for a trip or just down to the port for dinner. The sitter has the key to the room and makes sure the children get their meals and then to bed, etc. if it's an evening job, and then stays with them until mum and dad return - worth it for an evening's sanity.

It seems all the island hotels in the South Pacific have the same torch-lighting ceremony and fire dancing ritual at sunset each evening and the Sofitel was no exception - 'Warriors' in raffia skirts run round the outdoor areas with flaming torches lighting up the beacons along



the pathways, to the sound of 'native' drumming and much whooping and leaping about... all great fun! They also have loads of activities for adults and children, such as coconut picking and eating/drinking, rush mat weaving, shell jewellery making, pool volleyball, etc. There were also kayaks and jet skis off the beach which could be hired with or without a guided tour. They had story time telling the old myths and legends and an historian talking about Fiji's past, to name but a few of the diversions available.

Lighting up time

We took the bus back to the port in the evening and had cocktails and a lovely dinner at a waterfront restaurant - very reasonable and huge portions. Martin couldn't finish his marlin and I couldn't finish my rib-eye steak, delicious and perfectly cooked though they were.

Tuesday: We put to sea on the *Reef Endeavour*

Boarding the ship at Denarau port was easy, assisted by 'Captain Cook', who must have been very hot in his full uniform, especially those long, wool socks! We had a nice surprise when we got on board to find that we'd been upgraded. We had booked the cheapest cabin (rabbit hutch) on the lowest deck, with just a porthole, but we were allocated a much bigger one on the top deck, with two windows! We didn't query it but it later transpired that the lower deck had been swamped in a particularly fierce cyclone which had hit the area around Christmas time and it's still being refurbished, so can't be used. We felt that it was compensation for that awful trip we had being chased by cyclones a couple of years ago!



There were only 38 passengers although the ship actually has room for 130, so it was really sociable - it's a bit like having your own private gin-palace! There's plenty of sitting out space and shade on board, as well as a small pool, which is fresh-water and decidedly 'refreshing' - even Martin said so! The beer is reasonable and so is the espresso machine coffee - though there's a machine doing Americano style coffee which is free.

We anchored off the small Tavua Island in the Mamanucas during the afternoon where lots of people (all but four of us) went snorkelling. The ship provided everyone with properly fitted masks, snorkels and fins for use during the voyage and there was also diving with the resident dive master and instructor. They offered try-dives and PADI open water and advanced dive courses. Although most of us on board were older, there were two younger couples and two or three families with slightly older kids (children have to be able to swim unaided to be allowed on board) who took full advantage of all the water activities on offer. Soft coral gardens are the main attraction for divers, however the cyclones of late last year have caused a lot of damage and, sadly, much of it has been destroyed

At the Welcome Dinner, rather than free-seating which was the norm on board, we were allocated places. We were on a table with the Chief Engineer Harold, his wife Anita, and an Australian couple, Carol and Steven (very keen divers). They are all very pleasant people

and a congenial time was had by all. Before dinner was served, everyone was given glasses of champagne, which seemed to come from a bottomless bottle - very generous. The menu was interesting and varied and we all ordered, only to be presented with a different menu a few minutes later... they'd given everyone the wrong one. We could just imagine the chef's horror at being given all the orders for food she hadn't prepared! We found just as nice choices on the second menu and the food came up hot and fast.

After dinner the Captain introduced the crew who then sang a couple of songs and, before we had time to disappear, grabbed everyone for the obligatory Audience Humiliation Dance & Conga! Even Martin had to join in as the lady who grabbed him (the Purser) is roughly the same height as him and about half as heavy again... poor man didn't stand a chance! My partner was a cheerful chef with two left feet, and as I have the same, we got on fine without treading on each other's toes!

Wednesday: Nananu-I-Ra Island (off the north coast of Viti Levu)

A comfortable night was spent at anchor, so it was very quiet, and then suddenly it was morning and breakfast time. What a spread! They had an egg station where you could order whatever you wanted and such an array of hot and cold food from six or seven varieties of fruit to frazzled bacon (yum!), cheese, crudités and everything else you could think of, together with fruit juice plus toast and chocolate croissants. They could serve that lot for every meal and not go far wrong! Lunches were normally buffet style, too, and usually out on deck.

We had a marine biologist on board, who gave us an interesting talk about the area and what can be seen snorkelling and diving. The diving is extra, of course, but apparently isn't too



expensive. We went ashore for a swim after lunch and enjoyed the ride over to the island. The ship's tenders are a dive/snorkelling boat and a glass-bottomed boat, in which we took a trip to see the coral before our swim - all included in the fare and we were the only people who took this boat trip so got the best seats on board! It is all very well organised and supervised.

Reef Endeavour with glass bottomed boat on the beach

Thursday: Levuka, Ovalau Island

Levuka was the original capital of Fiji. Today the economy of the town is largely reliant on a tuna canning factory (Bumble Bee brand if I remember rightly) which employs around 500 people from the town. We were fortunate that the wind was in the right direction and we could detect no fishy odours but are told that at times it can become quite pungent.

They have the 'oldest hotel in Fiji', but it's very run down and like a ghost-building. We went in for a look around and it was quite interesting to see the old furniture, photos and guest book, but apart from the atmosphere it had little to recommend it as a place to stay.

We walked through the town and along the seafront being greeted by smiling locals going about their business or just sitting admiring the view. There were lots of pigeons pretending to be seagulls, perched on the rocks; they periodically all took off, circled round, and returned

to their original resting place. There was a small drinking fountain monument on the lawn near their rocks and we saw that it was to commemorate the old Fiji Pigeon Post; these birds were obviously descendents of those homing pigeons of the early 20th Century and this location was apparently locked in their DNA. Messages would be flown across the island to Suva in about 30 to 40 minutes; today it takes Fiji Post 4 to 6 days to make the same delivery!

There were many historic buildings to explore including a church with an impressive stone tower but otherwise built of wood in the Fijian vernacular. The classically-styled Masonic Lodge had been burned down in 2000 during the coup, though its skeleton was still an imposing sight. A large, imposing white building proved to be the Marist Convent, a co-ed school for older children and the old colonial style governor's residence was nearby, too.



Truck bus & wooden church with stone tower



Remains of classic Masonic Lodge

On the main street are the old, wooden, art deco style shop fronts, which remind us somewhat of New Zealand's 'frontier towns'. A quick visit to the small but informative



museum was followed by a refreshing fruit juice at a cafe called 'The Whale Tale', which had been recommended... very quaint and atmospheric, not to say musty and laid back, but enjoyable and several locals came in for their morning tea and we were greeted kindly by them all. It was very hot and steamy so by the time we got back to the ship we were ready for lunch.

Art deco styled shop fronts

After lunch we all boarded a bus to a Methodist primary school which is supported in part by Captain Cooks Cruises and their passengers. We were greeted at the beautifully decorated school with considerable ceremony, conch shell fanfare and all. Every child in the school lined up and shook hands before putting a necklace they had made themselves round our necks ... Martin's greeter was about the smallest boy in the school and he had great difficulty reaching over Martin's head, even though he was stooping as low as he could go! We were given coconuts to drink and seated on the shady verandah adorned with coconut palm fronds and very effective decorations made from tightly folded magazine pages tied with shiny ribbon.

The children (aged 6 to 11) then sang and danced for us for nearly an hour. They were terrific and we were so impressed - we've seen less polished performances from so-called professional artistes and one little girl told me that they had been practicing for "three whole weeks!" The poor souls must have been melting as they were performing in the bright sunshine on a hot concrete surface. The non-dancers sat under a blue plastic tarpaulin which gave them a little shade as they sang all the songs to which the others danced as, well as many others.



See the little boy in the raffia skirt; a future warrior?



Magazine paper decoration in the foreground



Dancing and singing



A lively floor song and seated 'dance'

Our little friend then 'adopted' us and insisted on showing us every class room and within moments we had gathered an entourage of young people anxious to show us their work and practice their English. They wanted to know about our family so I showed them some of the photos I had on the camera of Toby and Charlie and they were fascinated by their fair colouring, especially Charlie's very blond locks. Some of the children offered to walk us back to our ship but we declined as we discovered they came from an outlying village and would miss their transport home if they had; the transport was a truck which doubled as a bus, like the one in the photo of the church on the previous page.

I was interested to see on the old-fashioned blackboard, written in chalk, the same writing exercises and maths 'problems' and tables that we studied at that age - the 'Three 'Rs' are important elements of the education system as well as 'Health & Hygiene'. The photos need no explanation. The principal was very grateful for the pencils and felt tip pens and donations we and other members of the party had taken and asked us to sign the VIP visitors' book.

Back on board, we went for a dip in the spa pool then enjoyed an Asian buffet dinner. Later there was a Kava Ceremony... interesting to see but we really did not want to drink any of the noxious-looking, khaki coloured liquid. Some other, braver souls actually had two helpings, in

spite of the warning that drinking it numbed the mouth and more than two cups could lead to who-knew-what. Some of the crew told stories about their home islands or the way of life in Fiji, one chap having an agonisingly slow delivery and he also kept losing the thread of his story. The next day I was chatting with him and he confessed that he had been so nervous that he had taken three cups of kava to give him courage but all it did was slow him down - he said that he knew he was performing badly but couldn't do anything about it. That'll larn 'im!

Friday: Savusavu, Vanua Levu Island

The township of Savusavu is quite different to Levuka, being predominantly commercial in nature and with a thriving luxury yacht anchorage and marina. There was a ferry in at the only berth so we had to go ashore in the glass-bottomed boat, but that was fun so we didn't mind at all. The town is not as neat and tidy as Levuka and the businesses were mainly Indian-run, which meant they were probably more efficient but not so charming and smiley. It has become very noticeable that it's the Fijians who greet everyone, including strangers, with a big smile and a big shout of "Bula!" whereas the Indians tend to keep their heads down and not acknowledge anyone unless they are customers. Apparently the Fijians don't like this as they don't want visitors to think that's the Fijian way, as if we could!

The town runs along the waters edge and is quite colourful and bustling, especially the fruit and vegetable market, which was well stocked with citrus fruit (a cross between a lemon, orange and lime), coconuts, papaya and bananas as well as some smooth, shiny, green fruit which looked a bit like a pear and I wondered if it was a variety of guava. There were lots of lovely spices and chillies and ginger roots, all for a few cents, so we were very frustrated that we couldn't buy any to bring home to New Zealand. There was a lot of shell, coconut and raffia handicraft available, some of it quite attractive, but again, we couldn't buy any as we would probably not be able to bring it home; it was quite crudely made and I doubt that it had been properly sterilised so couldn't guarantee there'd be no living organisms left in it.

We were amused in the market to be asked if we were from the ship, which only calls there every two months, and when we said we were, they asked where all the other passengers were - they were astounded when we told them there are only 38 of us on board and we felt some sympathy for them as the passengers are clearly an important source of income.

We went to a nice cafe right on the waters edge, overlooking the river estuary and sea inlet, with lots of very expensive, fancy yachts in the basin. We ordered fresh lemon with water and the girl brought us a do-it-yourself kit with some squeezed lemon juice, a jug of water a bowl of ice and some sugar, saying that we could mix it to our taste and just let her know if we wanted more of anything! All for Fiji\$ 2.50 and very refreshing it was, too. The temperature was 35C and the humidity about 95% so we were extremely hot and sticky.

We decided to get a taxi back to the jetty for the tender back to the ship, but just after we got there the ferry left the main wharf so the ship moved alongside, which meant no more tenders. We made it to the wharf in time to watch as the gangway was lowered from the top deck, using our on-board crane... the thing was swinging about madly and we were sure someone would get their head knocked off, but as always, the chaos was organised and all was well. We got back on board just in time for lunch as it really worries the crew if you miss a meal!

In the evening after a very good dinner, we had the James Bond 'Skyfall' as the 'Movie under

the Stars', complete with paper cones of popcorn! Martin lasted through the pre-title intro and I lasted about half an hour longer... even Judi Dench and Daniel Craig couldn't make the dialogue sound anything but wooden. I might have stayed with it if the guy sitting next to me hadn't seen it before and kept telling us what was coming next and talking to his wife at the top of his voice, as though they were in their own lounge!

Saturday: Bouma Waterfall and Naselesele Village, Taveuni Island

We anchored at Prince Charles Beach at the northern tip of Taveuni Island and watched dolphins playing near the ship at breakfast time (and we have also seen flying fish during the cruise). I had a lazy morning on board but Martin joined the tour to the beautiful Bouma Waterfalls, a 45 minute bumpy ride from our anchorage with a longish, slippery walk to the falls. The falls have been used as a film set for such block-busters as "Return to the Blue Lagoon" - no, we hadn't heard of it either but the Fijians are very proud of this claim to fame. Martin survived the visit and didn't find the climb too exhausting, though it probably helped that the grey sky and a cool-ish breeze stopped it being too hot and sticky and he didn't feel the need to jump in the freezing swimming hole below the falls. However, he did jump in the ship's marginally less than freezing pool as soon as he got back on board!



That evening, which we spent as guests at Naselesele village, was extremely 'local' and gave us an insight into Fijian customs and, especially, hospitality. There isn't really any tourism to



speak of and they put on a lavish lovo (food cooked underground, like a Hawaiian luau or Maori hangi) and show every two months, especially for the Captain Cook passengers. As with the school in Levuka, Captain Cook Cruises sponsors the village and its school with the passengers and crew of the ship providing the major input to the village coffers. We were certainly received with a great deal of ceremony. It reminded me a bit of going onto a Marae with many of the same protocols. We were all given lovely flower and raffia

necklaces (though some people got frangipani leis - not sure how it was decided who got what) and Martin's was particularly beautiful, as you can see in the photo. You will also see he's found a beer he likes, Fiji Bitter, which tastes very like British bitter, so he was happy, even though they do serve it cold! Actually, served cold it certainly hits the spot after a hot and sticky day of sight-seeing.



A village representative (centre) and our Cruise Director (left) explain the protocol before we enter the beautifully decorated hall

A very solemn and formal kava ceremony marked the beginning of the evening, with the young men of the village, dressed in the now-familiar raffia skirts and leaves woven into wrist and ankle bands, performing the ritual. The kava powder was put in a huge bowl and then water was added from a big, bamboo pole, stuffed with a grass stopper. The main man then stirred it around with his hands and took a bundle of straw or raffia which he swirled around in



compulsion so we hung back.

it and then folded into a wad and squeezed the kava out of it back into the bowl in a formalised manner. It all looked most unappetising and we felt very sorry for the dignitaries from the ship who had to drink it. Harold, the chief engineer, who took the place of our 'Chief' and therefore guest of honour, told us afterwards that it was very strong and he was horrified to be given a second cup - and afraid of the consequences if a third had been proffered but luckily they stopped there. We were then apprehensive that we would all be given some but although everyone was invited to imbibe if they wished, there was no

After dinner, which comprised chicken, fish, lamb and pork cooked in the oven-pit, wrapped in



Anita and Harold with their garlands

banana leaves, a pumpkin hollowed out and filled with onions and root vegetables (surprisingly tasty) and various fruits and salads, there was singing and dancing. Everyone from the tiniest tot to the oldest grandma gave their all to provide an exuberant and colourful show while some of the men-folk played various musical instruments to keep the dancers' feet flying.



We then had to get back to the ship... we had landed in the tenders at high tide, in daylight, right onto the beach and hopped off the boat without too much difficulty, though no great dignity. However, the return journey was a very different matter. Of course it was pitch dark and the beach was unlit. No one had a torch so we were told to take flash photos so the boatmen could see where we were (only half joking here!). Eventually a boat arrived but as the tide had gone out, there was an expanse of rock to clamber over. The boatmen hauled the boat as far as they could and we were able to wade only shin deep to get onto the boarding ramp. Once we were on, however the real fun began as the weight of the boat plus passengers meant that they were grounding on the rocks, so a great deal of pushing and shoving by the boatmen and two of the fitter of our fellow passengers was needed to get us afloat and able to put the outboard motors back in the water. Two boat loads had been enough to take us over but it took three to bring us all back as they had to lighten the load. All good fun in retrospect but a bit less so at the time as it started to rain and we had visions of being stranded for hours on a wet beach in the dark until the tide came back in; the evening had been memorable enough without any added drama!

Sunday: Wairiki Dateline, Taveuni Island & Whispering Tide, Vanua Levu

Lots of people went to the church at Wairiki on Taveuni Island off which we were moored. The singing was reputed to be wonderful and we would have liked to experienced it. However, although it was a Catholic church, the services were held in the Fijian style so there were no seats, just standing or sitting on the floor, as the ritual of the service dictated. Unfortunately I can't stand for that long and nor can I get down onto the floor (much less up again) so we decided to forego the service. People who did go said it was quite interesting for a few minutes and the singing lived up to its reputation, but most left before the end as the

sitting down and standing up was too hard... so it's not just me, then!

We, together with some others, caught a later boat ashore and joined those who had made it to the church in a trip to the 180 degree line of longitude - the true Meridian and the original International Dateline. We were told that Captain Cook Cruises used to call our journey the Dateline Cruise (it's now called the Heritage Cruise) but they had to change the name because the Dateline changed course to avoid cutting countries in half and hadn't passed through Taveuni Island for a long time. They also said that they had a number of potential customers who thought they were going to be meeting their new life partner, having confused the International Dateline with a dating agency of the same name... hmmm, not sure we believe that, but it's a good story!



Sarah's in today but Martin's still in yesterday!

After the International Dateline photo opportunity, we were taken on a tour of the local police station... no, we don't know why, either, but they were very welcoming and proud of their facilities. They even had a bod behind bars, though whether he was a real criminal or a fellow officer playing the part for our benefit we will never know as the station's chief officer told us it was "some time" since they'd had to arrest anyone for a jail-able offence. This visit was another example of the many things which set the cruise apart from the normal tourist-orientated excursions offered by large lines.



After a splendid curry lunch on deck, while we sailed back to Vanua Levu, we were taken ashore again, to a place called Whispering Tides. It's an isolated private estate owned by an American billionaire who only visits once a year, and not even that often lately. There is a huge, beautiful house, all closed up with dust sheets over the furniture, and a solitary ceiling fan going night and day to keep the air circulating and prevent mould forming. All this could be seen through the single un-shuttered window and it gave the place a somewhat haunted appearance. It would make a good setting for a mystery novel.

There were also several thatched bures (traditional huts) dotted throughout the grounds which are used as a games room and guest houses. Captain Cook Cruises seems to have some connection with the caretaker, Henry, (and his delightful grandchildren). He is a very interesting man who talked to us about the history of the property, which he has cared for



since he was a young man. An added bonus is that he allows the ship's passengers to use the palm-fringed beach and also the bathroom in one of the bures; such luxury is not available on many 'desert islands'! The sea was lovely and warm and the coral better than at some of the other place we visited, and much more colourful. The divers reported that it was the best they'd seen, it having not been so badly damaged by the cyclone.

Henry with some of his grandchildren watching the coconut frond weaving

One of the crewmen from the ship cut down some coconut palm fronds and made a basket and also a very clever canoe with six paddles, which went back and forth when you move the base poles. You can see him, and the canoe, in this picture. He also demonstrated opening coconuts and talked about how the tree is useful from the roots to the branches, not just the fruit. All the crew members seem to be skilled at different things: crafts, marine biology, singing, dancing, you-name-it and they really are the most delightful, helpful and kind hearted people. The Reef Endeavour's crew was totally Fijian excepting the cruise director who was German but had lived in Fiji for 10 years.



Dinner was another huge feast with the best and biggest eye fillet steaks I've ever seen! I managed about half and wished I could have finished it - it was cooked to perfection, no mean feat with so many people all with different requirements. Martin's was perfect, too, and he did manage to polish it off. We had huge prawns for our entrees and crème caramel for pud - the perfect meal! All the food has been excellent and there have been three choices for every course, making it really hard to decide. In addition, a fruit buffet was provided each evening after dinner for the still-peckish... it was rarely broached.

After dinner the crew put on a show of the different types of national dress, from those raffia skirts of the young men, to the orange coloured tapa cloth robes of a village chief; a couple dressed in traditional wedding clothes - all made of highly decorated tapa cloth and raffia (it looked really uncomfortable) and then there were the formal sulu (men's tailored skirts), the informal version (sarong to you and me) and the different fabrics, colours and styles of the women's clothes, formal and informal. They sang three lovely hymns (remember it was Sunday) and then Manasa, one of the crew who regularly serenaded us during our informal lunches, got out his guitar and we all sang some golden oldies (Sweet Caroline, American Pie, etc.). He then sang some Fijian songs - all very pleasant. Unfortunately we didn't get any photos because it was out on the pool deck and the light wasn't good enough - nice memories, though.

Monday: Manava Cay and a Mystery Island on Sali Sali Reef, north of Viti Levu

Our last day on board dawned bright and sunny. We had a BBQ lunch on the top deck and a traditional Fijian farewell feast was scheduled for the evening. We took bets that it would be the menu we were given by mistake the first night!

We moored off a sandy cay for the morning and the snorkelers and divers went off to it but as the two and a half coconut trees that used to provide the only shade got lost in the cyclone, we stayed aboard - can't take that strong sun mid-morning though most of the others ventured ashore. We sailed on for an hour or so during lunch until we came to another 'mystery' island after lunch. We thought we might take advantage of a final swim off this cay but although there was some shade, it was still too hot so



we stayed on board and had the spa pools and swimming pool almost to ourselves. Apparently the dive that morning was the least good of the several which have been done (two a day for the real enthusiasts) as the cyclone caused a lot of damage to the coral and the visibility was also poor.

The photos below show some of the exuberant crew members dressed 'Island Style'. Florian is the Cruise Director, Harvey is the Captain (both wearing the sulu, or formal skirt for men) and Harold is the Chief Engineer, wearing a more informal version, akin to a sarong.



Traditional dancing



Florien, Harvey and Harold



Two pretty crew members

I have to confess I was wrong and the dinner wasn't the one we'd been offered on the first night but was a buffet of lots of Fiji/Asian dishes. After dinner the crew put on another show and the men, dressed in the now-familiar raffia skirts, did a couple of dances, one of which was obviously extremely suggestive, not to say filthy; the actions weren't obviously questionable but the Fijian girls in the crew were doubled up in hysterics and when I told Anita we'd need a translation she fled, blushing! The girls finally collected their wits enough to perform some songs and dances. Then we all (yes, us too) got up and were taught a traditional Fijian farewell dance. We hadn't a clue what was going on but from the actions it appeared to relate to forms of transport: swimming, canoeing, flying and even hitch-hiking seemed to be being indicated, but on the other hand they may have got us unwittingly doing another filthy dance and be killing themselves laughing at our gullibility! It was all good fun and as there were so few of us we had all become friends and there were no inhibitions or embarrassment at making fools of ourselves. Another sing-song brought the evening to a conclusion and we all went to bed sad that this was our last evening together.

Tuesday: Farewell to Reef Endeavour

After the usual enormous breakfast buffet, the crew gave a final, farewell performance of some lovely songs as we disembarked and we felt genuinely sad to be leaving this lovely 'family' who had looked after us so well for the last week.

An interesting post script to the cruise... We remembered that we had a mail order customer from Lautoka in Fiji when we had our music shop in England all those years ago. He and his wife actually came into the shop once to meet us when they were in England on holiday, which was lovely. His name is Dr Michael Sorokin and we happened to mention him to Harold and Anita, who immediately said they not only knew him but that he had been their family doctor and that she and the Sorokin's daughter had been a classmate and good friends! If there are six degrees of separation between any two people in the world, there are two in NZ, and in Fiji there's only one it seems!

A shuttle bus took us back to the Sofitel where we checked back in at and had a swim. I went for a pamper session at the hotel's spa had a special half-price offer and I got what turned out to be a full body massage as well as a scalp massage and half an hours use of the steam room (no thanks, it's steamy enough outside!) and the Jacuzzi... absolute bliss!

We dined at the hotel that night and had a relaxing evening before packing for the flight home the next day. No business class on this plane but we were comfortable enough with a row to ourselves - or as comfortable as can be when the plane has square wheels and bumps along for almost the entire three hour flight!

We arrived home with many fond memories of the people we had met, our fellow passengers and all the delightful Fijians who, together, had made this trip such wonderfully fulfilling experience.

(Apologies for the poor quality of some of the photos; inadequate lighting and swift action often conspired against us)