



A holiday with heart

Guests at a Fiji resort have found inspiring ways to enrich their travels, writes **Sheriden Rhodes**.

It's a wet, soggy day as we bounce along the muddy dirt road from Sigatoka to Conua School, dodging potholes as we go. We pass two farmers riding horseback; one sporting a toothless grin. Further on, we see another farmer training two young bulls to use stocks. They all carry machetes. "For Fijian men, the machete is like a woman's handbag," Kini Sarai tells us.

"Everyone has one." Kini points out an ancient Tongan fort high up in the hills overlooking the valley all the way to the Coral Coast where they first landed in the futile hope of expanding their territory.

In the short distance we have travelled from the market town, I feel like we have wound back the clock 100 years.

We're travelling with Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort general manager Peter Hopgood and Kini, the five-star resort's activities manager. Seven years ago when the resort first approached Conua School, there were only 55 students. Hopgood was a guest at a ceremony on a rainy day. He was curious about why those in attendance stood to one side of the old hall, until it was pointed out there were gaping holes in the roof. The decision was made to help the struggling school.

Today, the school's numbers have swelled to 125 students and 25 kindergarten school children. Conua School now has large, dry meeting bure (built to cyclone-proof standards) and also a new

library, computer lab, and a newly opened kindergarten. This is largely thanks to the resort's volunteer tourism initiative which not only benefits the small rural community of Conua but guests, the resort and staff, too.

We are ushered into various composite classes and introduced as special guests from Australia; thrilled when the students burst into song. My daughter Ella, 8, going on nine, and increasingly self-conscious, is blown away by the students' enthusiasm as they stand barefoot and proud, some in school uniform, others not, belting out songs in powerful harmony.

"What's been great is how guests that have visited the school have returned to help," Hopgood says as he shows us around. "We have young guests back in Australia fundraising to help the school, while last year the library was sponsored by an American guest."

The library is a heart-warming story. The American guest came to Fiji after her husband died. After visiting the school through one of the resort's community outreach programs, she decided to fund the refurbishment of the library because her late husband had been an avid reader. Today, the cosy library with its impressive collection of books is named after him, and is an inviting place for

students to sit and read. There are other inspiring stories, too. A father of one of the boys from Sydney's Newport Rugby Club, which visits the school annually

and helped build a fence around the school's perimeter, organised the donation of laptops when the resort wanted to set up a computer room.

But my favourite story is of an Australian truck driver, a resort guest who came to Fiji for the first time with his wife and daughter. After two days lazing by the pool, the man signed up to the resort's community project at the school

and got to work digging trenches. On the way he saw a broken down tractor and volunteered to fix it. Every day for the rest of his holiday he returned to the village and worked on the tractor until it roared into action.

After returning home the man thought the farming community also needed a plough so they could make more of an income and, in turn, help the school. He asked around his home town in country Victoria and, to his surprise, found plenty of unused agricultural equipment, including a plough sitting in a front yard as an

ornament. The man collected everything from rakes, hoses, gumboots and a tractor, and paid for it all to be shipped to Fiji.

Chris Hamilton, the resort's executive assistant manager, said the voluntourism project is self-perpetuating. "The more we do, the more we get back," he says. "The community are happy, locals want to work for us because of the outreach work we do; it's great for marketing and it's a fantastic experience for guests with many



Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

25 Feb 2017, by Sheriden Rhodes

Traveller, page 14 - 587.00 cm²

Capital City Daily - circulation 181,113 (MTWTFS-)

ID 732559382

BRIEF OUTRIGGER

INDEX 1

PAGE 2 of 3

saying it's the highlight of their holiday. All round, it's a win, win, win." **T**

TRIP NOTES

MORE

traveller.com.au/fiji

MyFiji.com

outrigger.com/Fiji

STAY

MyFiji is offering a discounted package for Outrigger Fiji Resort from \$2090 a person including return flights with Fiji Airways from Sydney and Brisbane, eight nights in a deluxe ocean view room and

\$2000 in bonuses. Bonuses include a \$FJ1000 wine, dine and spa credit, one tour, nanny package or two, one-hour spa treatment, MyFiji VIP Concierge Services and transfers plus kids stay and eat free. Book by March 31, 2017. Phone

1300 788 668. See myfiji.com/outrigger-fiji-beach-resort

VISIT

Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort guests can visit the project on Tuesdays or Thursdays. \$FJ100 for adults and

\$FJ60 for children. Includes return transport to the school, lunch and a visit to the Tavuni Hill Fort on the way home.

Sheriden Rhodes was a guest of MyFiji.



Helping hands: (Clockwise from main) Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort; Conua District School; repairing its roof.