



class ACT

Peter White goes to school to find the real Fiji

IT IS NOT always easy to find the real Fiji on a week's package holiday. You will definitely not find it lazing by a pool in Denerau or any of the resorts along the Coral Coast.

But any trip to a real Fijian village, such as the award winning Sigatoka River Safari, will get you in touch with the ticking heartbeat of Fiji.

Coral Coast's Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort has gone a step further than most.

Seven years ago an idea was hatched by resort general manager Peter Hopgood and activities manager Kini Sarai, after they attended a prizegiving at the Conua District School hall disrupted by rain pouring through holes in the roof.

The unique concept they came up with was to get the guests to be part of funding and helping to build new classrooms and other development work at the school. Since then a security fence around the school, a large meeting bure, library, computer lab and kindergarten have been built with the physical labour and financial help of guests.

Twice a week a bus leaves Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort with paying guests on a memorable off-road trip beside the Sigatoka River. Seven years ago when the Outrigger project began the Conua District School had only 55 students. Today that number is more than 120 with the addition of 25 kindergarten children in their new classroom. Two other classrooms were opened late last year mostly funded by Outrigger guests.

School principal Asivorosi Toviri says the improved facilities and resources have played a key role in the educational improvement in the children.

"The children have been able to expand their knowledge with the resources we now have. Looking at our pass rates over the past few years they have improved to 86 per cent compared to about 40 per cent in previous years.

"In the past many kids from here used to go to town schools because of better facilities and better resources. Now their parents are opting to bring their children here due to the improved facilities."

Kula Tora teaches the kindergarten age group and gives them their first taste of learning English.

She says her job is easier now with the resources that

the Outrigger programme has provided.

"It has made a real difference. Other schools, particularly rural, are finding it hard to provide what the kids need because they don't have the financial resources to do that. For us, our kids

are very lucky to have this."

When I visited with an enthralled group of Kiwis and Aussies, we were impressed by the enthusiasm and vocal prowess of the little kids plus the beautiful English language skills of the polite older students.

The only scowl I saw was when I asked three 12-year-old boys if New Zealand was better at sevens than Fiji. After they quickly corrected my error by reminding me of Fiji's Olympic gold medal, they said how much they love their school and how grateful

they are to have a computer lab and well-stocked library. A few years ago the school had neither.

The growing roll at the school needs new teachers. Under construction are two houses for them to live in at the rural location before another project will be undertaken. We left the school to resounding cheers from the delighted kids.

Real Fiji? You bet.

■ Peter White travelled to Fiji courtesy of Tourism Fiji and Fiji Airways

IN A NUTSHELL

What: Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort
Where: Sydney Drive, Off The Queens Highway, Sigatoka
Website: outriggerfiji.com
Getting there: Fiji Airways flies from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch to Nadi International, and from Auckland to Suva.
Freephone: 0800 800 178
Web: fijiairways.com



LIFE CHANGING:
The new library and computer block at Conua District School.



REAL FIJI:
Peter White and students at Conua District School.



UP CLOSE:
Outrigger
guests meet
students and
swap stories.
PHOTOS/PETER
WHITE