



Welcome to Fiji's Bula island life

Come for the luxury but stay for the culture at the five-star Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort

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Fiji is renown for its beautiful scenery and weather, but one of the best things about these Pacific islands is the warmth of the locals

It's 10am on a Sunday and I'm sitting in a rusty tin shed on Fiji's Coral Coast. It's already a sweltering 30C. There's a hot breeze blowing through as the parishioners file in, cross their legs and sit patiently for others to arrive.

As we sit on benches at the back, sarongs covering our knees, half our group is feeling a little worse for wear after a late night of karaoke fun and the fact that most of us have been awake since Friday morning. We'd boarded the 10pm Fiji Airways direct flight to Nadi from Adelaide and then proceeded to have a full day out before finally getting some much-needed rest.

Luckily a few of us, myself included, chose to leave the party early and I'm glad I did as we sit fanning ourselves against the heat at the back of this makeshift church at Korotoga, near the southern end of Viti Levu.

This is all the locals have at the moment after their church and much of their village was badly damaged by Tropical Cyclone Winston in February

2016. We sit quietly as the villagers and visiting resort guests filter in, in their Sunday best, shoes off, men to one side, women to other, children holding their well-worn bibles.

"He works at the resort," a large but gently-spoken man whispers to me as he leans over, gesturing to one of the men who is singing in perfect harmony at the front of the church. I laugh as I recognise him as the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort's security guard with the booming voice who greets guests with a loud "Bula", his hands and arms raised in the air in welcome. It's infectious and makes you smile every time.

It takes a few minutes to realise the man I've just spoken to is the chief, the highest rank in the village and, as he goes up to address the congregation I feel privileged to be allowed inside the locals' church service.

This church is the second of two villages our group has visited in the past 24 hours and it's part of the authentic experience the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort offers its guests, to show them the true face of Fiji.

Not that five-star resort life isn't enough, because here



it's full of indulgence. And I'm definitely all for the manicured gardens, sparkling blue pools and happy-hour cocktails at the poolside bar.



Many of us go overseas looking for culture but we're also looking for relaxation and, if there's resort luxury to be had at a reasonable price, all the better.

Here rooms start at about \$230/night but, if you want to indulge, opt for a beachfront or garden bure – stand-alone bungalows set between palm trees and lush gardens which come with Talai butler service. The high ceilings are painted in traditional motifs, while timber furniture and fresh flowers add to the tropical feel.

Another softly spoken villager is my butler for the afternoon, and she hands me a cool towel as she welcomes me in and shows me the amenities in her gracious, kind manner. When she asks if I would like to have pre-dinner champagne and canapés delivered to my room, I feel like I have just won the lottery. She then tells me part of the service will include an after-dinner nightcap, which will be waiting for me when I return later in the evening.

She, like many of the resort's staff, is a local villager and it's easy to see that the Outrigger Fiji is like their second home. Their own village life is in vivid contrast – not that anyone seems to mind.

It's not surprising that both the resort and villages have the same relaxed vibe. You can't go past a local without them calling out a welcoming "Bula" and, when we visit one of the remote villages far up the Sigatoka River, we are ushered into the hall for a banquet lunch with the entire village. As we sit on the floor cross-

legged surrounding the feast, the locals start singing, again in perfect harmony. It's wonderful to see men, children and women embracing song and music without hesitation.

We are handed fresh flower necklaces and then bowls of kava to drink. It would be impolite to not try this (mildly narcotic drink from crushed tree root) at least once.

With my lips still tingling from the kava, the music ramps up and dancing begins. A local villager grabs my hand and I struggle to get up from my place on the floor in one gracious movement. But it's all good fun as we dance around.

It's all over too quickly, as we are on a schedule. We head back to the river to the Sigatoka River Safari jet boat that got us here in the first place. It's a thrilling ride with high speed turns, skimming over river rocks and heading at speed toward jaw-dropping cliffs ... if you can bear to keep your eyes open to see them. And, unlike cold climate jet boat rides, the tropical climate makes the high-pressure rush and obligatory drenching easier to take, even if it comes as a shock at every turn.

Later, there's the choice of a walk down the beach, snorkelling out to the giant clam or you can retreat up the hill from the resort and relax with a treatment at the Bebe Spa. I opt for the Tropical Escape body wrap and exfoliation. My skin comes out super soft and smelling like a pineapple.

But a hint for the prudes among us: this salt scrub treatment requires you to shower on an outside deck in a paper G-string. There's a frosted window as a screen but, when the deck is on the hillside with the road down below, this is an exhibitionist's dream. I have a quick panic and try, but fail, to cover myself up. All you can do is get in and out the shower as quickly as you can.

Then all you need to do is move on to dinner at the Ivi restaurant or head back up the hill to the Kalokalo bar, sit back as you sip on a cocktail, regain your composure and watch the sunset.



Fiji Airways operates direct non-stop flights from Adelaide to Nadi twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays. See fiji-airways.com.au and outrigger.com/Fiji/Resort

Fiji Airways representatives will be at stand 4 at the Expo.





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