



Journey to a lost world

Craig Tansley decides it's time to leave the beaches and islands behind and discover the mountains of Fiji.

Jay Whyte is far from the preacher type, but right now his face has taken on the maniacal glaze of a TV evangelist.

"Australians should remember there's more to Fiji than the beaches and the islands. There's much more in the mountains," he says.

We're sitting outside a cafe in Sigatoka – the busiest town on the Coral Coast (on Fiji's main island, Viti Levu). It's not a pretty town – few towns in Fiji could ever be accused of being picturesque – but there's a bustling south seas charm

about the place; with a busy market place where mountain folk peddle what they harvest and don't eat, and where the elderly and mothers with babies take shelter

from the Melanesian sun in the shade of frangipani and flame trees.

Most visitors barely notice Sigatoka and its mountainous hinterland in their beeline to their resorts on the Coral Coast or at Pacific Harbour from Nadi's international airport.

Whyte, however, is seeing that change. Repeat visitors, he's telling me, want to see what's beyond the beaches they've already "done".

"People in the hinterland missed out on the money that comes with tourism," he says. "Their life expectancy is still barely 60; till recently most people never went to school. But money is coming into the region. Tourists want to see what's up there."

He's pointing at the green

mountains behind town that we can only glimpse through shrouds of low-lying cloud.

Whyte discovered Viti Levu's hinterland as a 13-year-old after befriending a security guard at a Coral Coast resort where his family were staying. The guard took him to his village in the mountains, where Whyte was welcomed like family. He was

smitten. Whyte moved to Fiji at 25, and started a business that brought visitors deep into the villages of the hinterland.

He's accompanying me today into these mountains. First we board a bilibili (punt) to get across the Sigatoka River. Then a barely passable mud track leads us between mountain passes and right through basic villages.



Locals only had access to the outside world five decades ago and even now life seems entirely different from that lived on the coast. Children ride past me on horseback, farmers use water buffalo to till their soil, and homes are mostly wooden shacks, or slab concrete huts.

As we pass through, Whyte asks

**I pass
by
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*Craig Tansley
travelled
courtesy of
Outrigger Fiji
Beach Resort.*

permission from the bete (priest) of the village to go on, and we sit together and drink kava as he does this. All around us, tiny children run around our legs and farmers water their buffalo at creeks that pass through the village. The village's laundry is strung out on fishing line hung between coconut trees. Our tour here is limited to 10 guests, so it doesn't feel intrusive.

I'm fascinated by the lives of those who live here – there are no locals spruiking handicrafts and everyday life seems to go on as it always has.

"We've involved around 18 villages in tourism," Whyte tells me. "We didn't want locals here to feel they had to move to bigger towns to survive, we thought why not bring people to them."

Whyte runs an off-road cave safari tour that takes guests into Fiji's largest cave system, here in the hinterland, showing them

where local tribes hid from their enemies, and where they cooked their enemies in ovens at cannibalism ceremonies. He also runs a jet boat tour that takes visitors into parts of the hinterland previously inaccessible to outsiders.

There are other ways to access Fiji's unexplored hinterland. The next day, I'm driven along a precarious logging road that climbs deep into the highlands. Fog sits on top of the surrounding rainforest as we pass over old wooden bridges that barely hold our weight. Eventually, when we can go no further, we hike through woods to the Upper Navua River, the South Pacific's best kept secret.

This is one of the world's most pristine rivers – land-owning clans (mataqali), local villages, a logging company and a rafting company came together almost 20 years ago to protect the river within the Upper Navua Conservation Area.

The Upper Navua River flows 65 kilometres from the highlands through 50-metre-high volcanic canyons until it empties out at the coast below. There are more than

50 waterfalls in this section of the Upper Navua. I paddle past basic villages and past subsistence farmers in their fields. Nothing here suggests the modern world has infiltrated.

Locals live in simple houses fashioned out of corrugated iron, their children get to school by longboats powered by noisy, decrepit outboard motors. Round each corner I see a waterfall as impressive as any I've seen in the South Pacific.

I won't be merely observing life here in Viti Levu's wild interior. The next day, I'm driven along a winding, bumpy dirt road behind Sigatoka to Conua District School. I pass by more goats and pigs than people; and as I draw up outside the district school I watch a 10-year-old boy ride a horse bareback at full speed. The horse is galloping and the child's head is

thrust forward, focused on the path ahead. When he gets to school, he stops the horse in its tracks and dismounts, then walks casually into the school grounds.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, volunteers join a program to help build new classrooms for the school. As more parents from the mountains seek education for their children, the pressure to accommodate them all has increased dramatically.

When the volunteer program began in 2008, 55 children attended Conua District School. It is expecting 180 students in 2019. I'm led through the school grounds, passing children playing on the football pitch, to classrooms built beneath 200-year-old fig trees. You don't have to venture into the hinterland to discover some parts of wild Fiji previously off limits.

Just west of Sigatoka an expat couple have discovered a way to make use of Fiji's disused rail network.

The railway lines were built for the sugar industry by 30,000 locals over many decades but by 2010 the trains stopped running throughout Fiji, leaving an unused trail through some of Viti Levu's most pristine coastal wilderness areas. New Zealand couple Ben and Alexa Herron developed the world's first e-bike tram-line adventure, welding e-bikes onto tram carriages so visitors could power their own way along the tracks.

I take off from an old corrugated maintenance shed built in 1911 and make my way along the tracks. There are more than 500 kilometres of sugar train tracks on Viti Levu, although I'll be riding across just 11 kilometres, then back again. We pass beneath rainforest that forms cathedrals of greenery above the tracks, and between rock faces, where a path was blasted a century ago. We pass over creeks on narrow railway bridges and past farmers working their fields.

There are no other tourists in



these parts and I glimpse life by the coast that doesn't rely on tourism. I pass through a village (there are no more than 10 houses in this community) where goats block my path and cows are tied to coconut trees. Four men tend to an underground oven, preparing it for today's feast for the Sabbath.

They push logs onto the fire to create coals to slow roast pork, chicken, fish and vegetables under a canopy of banana leaves. The roads into the village are dirt and hard to find, and most locals here still live subsistence lifestyles.

We pass by old Methodist churches and entire escarpments of rock shrouded in bougainvillea before we come to a deserted white beach bay where waves smash the shore. We're close to the resorts of Coral Coast, but most of this is almost unreachable by car.

For a week I barely pay Fiji's beaches and islands any attention at all. I keep my gaze fixed north of the Coral Coast and discover a world within its mountains every bit as fanciful as the Fiji I knew so well already by the sea. Up here in these mountains, it's Fiji as it's always been, far away from any semblance of how the modern world should be. **T**

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Off the beaten track: (Clockwise from main) Traditional bamboo bilibili raft; the first e-bike tramline; local children; horse power in the hinterlands. Photo: AAP Image, Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort



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Trip notes

Fiji Airways fly to Fiji from Sydney and Melbourne from \$500 return.

See jetstar.com.au, virginaustralia.com.au,

FLY

Jetstar, Virgin Australia and fijiairways.com

STAY

The Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort is well placed to visit Viti Levu's hinterland; book now for the Outrigger Fiji Voyage Special from \$FJ327 a night. See outrigger.com/hotels-resorts/fiji

DO

Take a rafting trip down the Upper Navua River (see riversfiji.com), or attend volunteer programs at Conua District School which are run Tuesdays and Thursdays (book through the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort).

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