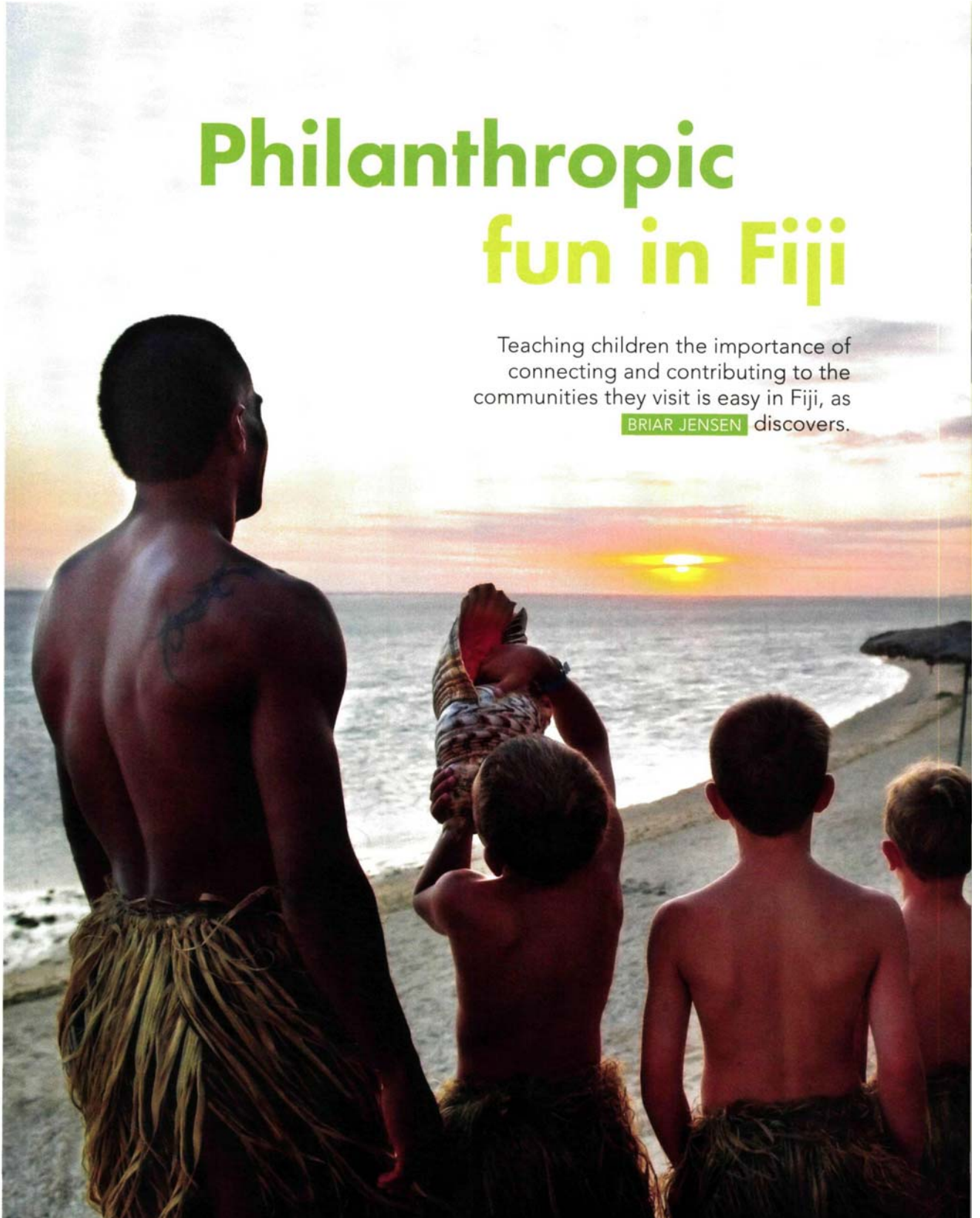




Philanthropic fun in Fiji

Teaching children the importance of connecting and contributing to the communities they visit is easy in Fiji, as

BRIAR JENSEN discovers.





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"Bula!" Shy smiles burst into broad grins, coy giggles spurt into laughter and excited chatter morphs into boisterous singing, encouraged by 'Mr Peter', as the Fijian children affectionately call Peter Hoggood. General manager of **Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort** on Viti Levu's Coral Coast, Peter's leading the hotel's annual Walk for Kids fundraiser.

"If you're happy and you know it," chorus the kids as our motley crowd of 150 strides out optimistically for the 10-kilometre walk along the waterfront to Sigatoka township. We absorb a roadside view of daily life: tethered cattle, barking dogs and crowing roosters, villagers gardening and children fishing.

Responsible travel

It's a fun way to introduce kids to the concept of responsible travel and giving back to local communities where we holiday. Donations from the walkathon (a whopping FJ\$42,000 or AU\$27,600 this year) goes towards Conua District Primary School and Sigatoka School for Special Education, where our walk ends amid a party atmosphere of music, face-painting, a jumping castle and sausage sizzle. But it's the joyous performance by the special needs students that brings home how much can be achieved with a little helping hand.

The walkathon occurs in April, but the hotel conducts twice-weekly excursions to Conua District School where guests help the hotel engineering team on the latest project (currently additional teacher accommodation). Through the resort's support, the rural school has grown from 55 students in 2010 to 150, with a soaring pass rate.

It's school holidays on our visit, but students come to welcome us, many of whom we met at the walkathon. They cackle gleefully on recognising themselves in photos of the event in the local papers we bring, before proudly showing us their library and computer lab, furnished from donations.

Resort recreation

Children hold a special place in the hearts of Fijians and Outrigger's staff dotes on their little guests. Activities for kids include tie dyeing, hair braiding, crab races, basketball shootouts and pool games. The lagoon is perfect for teaching kids to snorkel and

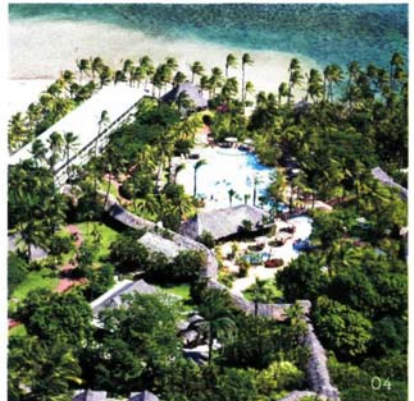
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01 Children hold a special place in the hearts of Fijians
02 Outrigger Fiji conducts twice-weekly excursions to Conua District School. 03 The critically endangered Fiji crested iguana
04 The lagoon at Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort makes for splash-tastic family fun



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How to support locals in Fiji

Participate in hotel community projects if available. If not, ask your hotel GM to suggest legitimate projects that are the most deserving of assistance.

Donate educational items like library books and stationery, or sporting goods, from equipment to clothing.

Help clean up Fiji. Pick up 10 pieces of rubbish wherever you go (if practical) and encourage others to do likewise. 10pieces.com.au

05 The lagoon is perfect for teaching kids to snorkel.
06 Donations from the walkathon go to local schools.
07 Racket-kniving is a traditional Fijian handicraft.
08 Sunset ceremonies at the resort give kids a glimpse of local culture.

when the tide is out, good old-fashioned beachcombing reveals blue sea stars, scuttling hermit crabs and pulsating worms.

With Meimei nannies and engaging kids' clubs, you can rest easy knowing the children are well cared for while you sip a cocktail at the swim-up bar in the adults-only pool or relax in the hilltop Bebe Spa Sanctuary.

Cultural engagement

Taste a slice of island life at **Sigatoka Market**. Learn about strange-looking produce like huge pimply jackfruit and craggy roots used for kava. Buying juicy pineapples or sweet-smelling bananas from the colourful displays spread on tarpaulins on the pavement helps support the subsisting farmers.

At a nearby village, fragrant blooms mingle with wood smoke as we join a Sunday church service. Splendid in white shirts and dresses, I admire the family dynamics of older siblings occupying the younger ones while their parents sing with the choir in an uplifting harmony.

Rainforest fun

At **Kula Wild Adventure Park** we 'snake' a boa constrictor around our necks like a scaly

scarf, face-off with an endangered Fijian crested iguana, tour the aviaries and learn about medicinal plants. Kids aged seven to 12 years can become a 'Park Ranger for a Day' and, for a minimum FJ\$20 donation, you can sponsor a school class on an educational visit.

The park includes a children's splash pool and 110-metre water slide swooshing and swirling through the forest. But my favourite is the exhilarating **Krazy Canopy Flier**, a hybrid rollercoaster-cum-zipline. Seated in a sling hanging from an overhead rail, we plunge through the trees, twisting, turning and whizzing squeal-inducingly close to the trees.

Less adrenaline-pumping, but equally fun is **Ecotrax**, a new 'cycling' adventure on old sugarcane railway tracks. Two bikes mounted side-by-side sit atop a platform that glides along the tracks with a combo of pedal power and solar battery. A bench seat caters for the less abled or for kiddies in a car seat.

The track meanders through bush tunnels, seaside villages and across rickety bridges, dodging grazing cattle and inquisitive kids before culminating at secluded Vunabua Beach, where we cool down with a refreshing swim. As our gorgeously funny guide, Brittany, prepares fresh coconuts and fruit,

we return the favour by collecting washed-up rubbish from the high-tide mark – a small gesture we hope will inspire others. ●

Fiji Report Card

Info fiji.travel

Getting there Fiji Airways regularly flies from major Australian cities to Nadi International Airport. fijiairways.com

Stay outrigger.com

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