

## Fiji - 2006

Introduction/Background: It's, or could be, a long story but the short form is that several years ago Doris came from Fiji to Cupertino to live with our neighbor (a distant relative) and take care of her two girls and also go to Junior College and get an education. Dawna befriended Doris and kept in contact as Doris moved out from Mary's, established her own world here, graduated from DeAnza, married Marc, etc. At their wedding I walked Doris down the aisle because her father was not able to come to the US. Well, actually it was a strip of grass since it was an outside affair, Helen did the catering, Dawna helped out in many ways, etc. And, Doris announced that her goal/plan was to have their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Fiji since she had not been able to afford to have the wedding there. We, of course, said "go for it and if you do we'll be there." Well as the 10<sup>th</sup> approached Doris got pregnant (with twins yet) but still didn't give up on the idea. The boys were born and everyone was healthy so the grand plan stayed in place even with 4-month-old babies.

Since we'd be going to Fiji we investigated doing some other things in the South Pacific but it became clear this really wasn't the right time of year (March) for that area of the world so we decided to just do Fiji. We made some of our plans in conjunction with Doris and the rest of her gang (8 folks or so) and some on our own; the latter often being made over the internet after we decided the gang wasn't making theirs soon enough or they were planning on items that weren't our style. One of the preparations for the outing was to pack 8 or so bottles of champagne in individual "cartons" and then all of them together in a rather heavy box; hoping that the airlines wouldn't make us unpack it too far as part of their security checks.

Saturday-1: Nathan picked us up, actually swapped his car for the Honda and off to the airport we went at about 1 PM. Arrived plenty early and were surprised that Doris and some of her gang were already there. Our flight was SFO-LAX on United and then LAX-Fiji on Air New Zealand. They are a United partner, which meant we got the equivalent of United's Economy Plus seating being Premier Members; so extra leg room. Plane to LA was quite uncrowded so I moved to a better window seat and looked at the landscape and across to the snow-capped Sierras as we flew down there. Had quite awhile to transfer to the other plane in LAX and used a bunch of it getting between terminals with the gang of people and coping with an accident – Uncle Lawrence fell while part way up an escalator and got a fairly nasty cut. The whole incident was scary in that he was falling towards Marc who had one or two of the boys; I ran down the up escalator to grab him, etc, etc. The other item that took a long time was discovering that we needed a different boarding pass for the LAX-Fiji leg than the one they had given us at SFO and it took forever and a day for the single agent who was issuing them to get this done. But we still made the flight, which is what really counts of course. The flight itself and meal and wine were all OK; albeit it did leave about 45 minutes late or so.

Monday-1: We arrived a bit late (like 2:30 AM) and it was Monday since we had crossed the international date line. Picked up our baggage. By now I had read the local rules as opposed to what the book said and decided we must declare the liquor so we did so. We then partially unpacked it to show the customs folks what we had and they said fine. Got some local currency and then went to our hotel via a hotel bus. It was like 4 AM and we had decided to take the place

for that “night” in order to get some rest. The others were going to a fancier (Sheraton) hotel and not checking in until that evening. Unpacked a few things and headed to bed but when in the bathroom the plug that is OK for both 110V and 220V razors had a button to push to verify it was functioning and for some reason I pushed it. All the lights went out. Couldn’t get them back on, had to get folks from the office, our section of the hotel was now out of power, so moved to a different room, and finally got some sleep/rest.

Got up around 9 or 10 AM, had the breakfast that was a buffet with lots of items although nothing especially great. Best was probably chicken livers with onions and the turmeric potatoes. The made-to-order omelets were also OK. Twas hot and muggy but not terrible by their standards and also not raining. We headed out on foot, turned the wrong way out of the hotel (long) driveway, met a fellow who corrected us; and he also aided us and himself in catching a minivan to down town. Our hotel was like 3-4 miles out of town towards the airport.

An aside about the local transportation. There are of course regular taxis but also white minivans. The latter are much, much cheaper but only go along certain major routes and stop and start as needed to keep full (and only go if they are full). Plus, some regular buses.

Once downtown we slowly walked the streets, did some shopping, actually bought some gold earrings for D and a Fiji-appropriate shirt for me, had a small Indian lunch, visited a Hindu temple, and eventually took a minivan back towards our hotel. Although our hotel was not on the main drag the folks got quite friendly with Dawna and did take us right to our front door. I hit the pool and then we went to dinner at an Indian place "down the roads" a mile or two. Took a cab to get there, had a good meal (lamb curry) and then walked home in a drizzle. Good night's sleep followed, albeit I did wake up pretty much around 3-4 AM (what with it being 4 hours later in California).

Tuesday-1: We had debated whether we'd spend the day on a boat checking out a variety of islands or stay inland and do some jungle hiking at Koroyanitu National Heritage Park. Decided on the latter both because it is more to D's liking and also wouldn't take the full day and eventually we wanted to hook up with the gang. In asking the ladies at the main desk and then at the travel desk about getting to the National Park the latter said "Oh, a group of 8 is doing this with Turtle Tour Company and you can join them if you hurry." We did. The van picked us up first and within a minute it sounded like too much of a wimpy tour to a nearby orchid garden/jungle (Garden of the Sleeping Giant) and village and something else, so we explained maybe it didn't fit us, but the tour guide lady assured us we could split from the others and do the hiking, etc, etc and we sort of figured "will we're in it now and if we bail we might not do anything so we'll give it a try." Our van picked up the others at the Sheraton Fiji, which took a fair amount of time, and off we went. The tour guide lady was quite informative with her narration and it was nice to be seeing some countryside. Got to the orchid place and while the others slowly toured the orchids we headed into the countryside back behind them; not that we dislike orchids but our goal was the hiking and we already planned on doing the orchid bit with the gang in a couple days. The hike was nice but quite limited in where we could go and definitely did not get into the National Park we had been planning on. We did see fine jungle, some workers who told us where to get the best views, got some nice views, (Dawna) ate bananas right from the tree, and things like that. When we got back down there was a driver to

take us to “The Highlands” since the others had gone on to a local village and we had said that wasn’t what we wanted. So, they were doing a semi-reasonable job of making up to us for not really going where we wanted and they had said. The drive to the highlands was filled with good views and when we got to “the top” we did some walking/hiking to better see the area and views.

Then it was back to town and we had the driver drop us at the Sheraton rather than our hotel. There are a couple Sheratons and a few other high-class hotels all out on an island connected by a short bridge to the mainland; all several miles from town. This is The Resort area for Nadi. We had been trying to call the kids/gang earlier in the day but failed so figured we’d do it in person. First went to the Sheraton Royal and tried to locate them only to get a mixed story about them already checking out or never checking in or something. Finally learned they were at the Sheraton Fiji instead so took a little run-around bus and went there. The desk folks said they were to be checking out today but their luggage wasn't gone so maybe they weren't and gave us their room numbers. No one answered the phone at any of their 3 rooms. We went to the rooms, no one there, and left notes. A maid let us into two of the rooms and at the third we left a note in the card-lock slot. Asked about getting back to our hotel, was told the price was \$22 for a taxi; learned that there was a spot 50 feet away where the workers caught a minivan (for \$0.50 to town), and did that (it took a few extra minutes but again we got into discussing things with an interested local person or two). Almost seems like the most connecting we do with local folks in foreign countries is on their local transportation systems. The minivan took us to town where we caught another one to the roundabout a couple hundred yards from our hotel and walked the rest. I did my swim thing and as I got back from the room we got a call from Doris and arranged to meet them for drinks in their room and then dinner. This time we were proper people and took a cab back over there. Enjoyable drinks and chatting and an OK sunset and then, via the roving bus, we went to dinner at a relatively nearby (still on the island) place. Kinda a fun place but nothing great about the food, with my fish (Mahi Mahi) being much better than Dawna's steak. Actually the best thing was an excellent hourdeover, but I’ve forgotten what it was.

Cab back to our hotel and there was a note on the bed saying that because the power was out we should change rooms yet again. Well the power wasn't out, but we went over to the desk and learned that it would be out later that night. So, changed to yet our third room in barely more than 2 days! Had AC all night, however, so it was worth it. And to complete the day I did complain at the travel desk about how our outing had not been what they said it would be; and they refunded half of our cost.

Wednesday-1: As part of the whole anniversary/renewed vows deal they had said we’d all go by bus to Suva today leaving at 9 AM and first visiting the orchid portion of the Garden of the Sleeping Giant. The night before, they said 9:30 was more likely. So, we were up and ready and they showed up more like around 11 AM. Tis Fiji time my friends plus not only were Doris and Marc taking care of twins but to a fair extent Doris was taking care of all the whole gang (except us). So, no visit to the Orchids and it was too bad we hadn’t looked at them a bit more slowly yesterday. Anyway, they showed up with a rental van and a rental car and off we went. Enjoyable seeing the island as we drove around the south side with Doris at the wheel; but didn’t take time to stop for any of the sights. Did stop at a resort place for lunch and it was a much needed stop since the van’s air conditioning wasn’t very good, the twins needed to be changed, and everyone needed a break. A long/relaxing lunch and on we went into Suva. They dropped us

at our accommodations and went on to theirs. We had, via the Internet, reserved a room at the Suva Homestay, which was about the only B&B on Fiji and quite nice. The others were staying in a relative's empty house while Doris and Marc and twins were at a different relative's. Neither of the latter had air conditioning, which turned out to be quite important, but we did. Anyway, after settling in and having a short swim we gave Doris a call to see how things were going and they were going to have dinner at her brother's, along with his wife to be in less than a week, and they invited us over. Taxi over we went and had a grand time with the local/real people. The lack of AC was tolerable by the use of fans and the outdoors and her brother cooked fresh fish in a traditional manner that we thought was great. There was some other traditional stuff that Doris enjoyed more than we did but it was neat to try these things. Eventually we taxied back to our (air-conditioned) bedroom.

Oh, yes, our place had like a half dozen rooms and the other people there tended to be business folks who found it more enjoyable than a regular hotel. The place was run by a very efficient lady named Jodi and as we talked with her that day we learned that the brother's wedding was going to be done at her place, that she serves meals when asked, and stuff like that. So we arranged with her to do a meal the next night for our gang (on us).

Thursday-1: Doris/people had talked about doing some rafting or kayaking or snorkeling or whatever but that didn't take hold so we talked to Jodi and arranged to go on a commercial outing that would involve seeing some of the back country in a 4W drive vehicle, some kayaking, and some getting wet at a waterfall. Our group was the two of us and two policemen from Australia and we learned they were doing a hike as well so we said "us too" and off we went. Drove back towards Nadi a half hour or so and then into the countryside. They dropped we 4 and a guide (or two) off at a spot in the backcountry and we hiked a couple of hours through the jungle. Pretty wet/slippery but good fun with the guides pointing out some local items of interest. Ended up at a small village where we rested, ate a picnic lunch, looked around (saw a snake for example) and then got into our one-person kayaks and headed down the river. Neat/nice/enjoyable and a bit wet and occasionally exciting what with some small rapids. After a couple hours we pulled up to a spot where an offshoot came into the main river and we "hiked"/swam up it, climbing up one waterfall with the help of a rope, climbing up some rapids with the help of rocks, and got to the main waterfall with a big pool below it where we played/paddled around a bit. Then we cruised down the rest of the river in a larger (like rowboat) boat, changed some clothes and went back to town. Cleaned up, relaxed, and waiting for our guests to show for dinner. They were late (what else is new) which meant the Chicken Kiev wasn't as good as it could have been but a nice time was had by all as the 10 of us or so sat around a large table out on the deck in fine weather eating and drinking and talking. Was quite neat to be able to host this thing at "our house."

Friday-1: Checked out the town, getting there by a local bus that ran from our place on the hill. It's major attraction is the Fiji Museum, which was quite decent. We also did our typical walking around everywhere checking things out. This was done slowly as it was certainly hot and humid (by our standards at least). Had lunch downtown and am not sure but probably had simply had hamburgers for dinner right at our house.

Saturday-2: The big/main day. The plan had been we'd be picked up at like 8:30 - 9:00 AM for a 10:30 boat out to Toberua Island, site of the party. But word came through that it would be 8 AM; so we ate breakfast and waited. Eventually the van showed up quite late. We assumed we were just victims of more Fiji-time, but actually they had had trouble with the van or the van driver plan or something so were catching up. It was a fair distance, and a bumpy road through one village, to where we got on a boat that could handle a dozen or so people and then we zoomed over to the island. A rather scenic ride. The island, by the way, is quite small with the resort being the only thing on it (this is typical of many of the islands/resorts). Upon arrival we were greeted by some of the staff as well as some of our own gang who had come over a day earlier. The former did a short kava ceremony with us - it is a drink made from the root of a type of pepper plant and you do a bit of a clapping ritual and then down it in one swallow. Sort of like drinking dishwater with a somewhat interesting aftertaste. It is non-alcoholic but in theory has some narcotic in it and that makes you relax/sleepy if you have enough of them. We realized that the gang who had come out the night before were about to go snorkeling so I quickly put on my suit, grabbed some equipment, and went with them. Boated out to a nearby reef and then snorkeled an hour or so. Quiet good coral and fish in nice clear water. Back to our bure (what they call their small homes and also call our individual "cottages" at a resort such as this) for a shower and then to the dining area for lunch. Had a very nice fish among a few other things.

Although I can't prove it, I imagine this resort was similar to dozens of those throughout the Fiji Islands. Caters to people who want a south-sea island experience of sun and beach and water and dedicated service for meals and other activities. The staff was certainly attentive and friendly but not really our sort of place. Plus, although the ocean breeze was refreshing and nice, we still missed air conditioning, especially to have relief from the humidity. I think everyone else felt the place was a piece of paradise, however.

By the time lunch was over there was a short restful break before the ceremony began. First (3:30 PM) the guys gathered in one bure and the gals in another. Each had plenty of drinks available and the nipping began. In addition, each bure had its own kava ceremony going on and different folks had different amounts of the stuff. I, for example, being that sort of person didn't have any, while Dawna was the good sport/party person and had five or so. In concept the ladies were getting Doris finished dressing/preparing, and after an hour or so the two groups got together for the ceremony. Basically it was a wedding, with preacher and vows and all. Took place in the dining/bar area next to the beach as well as on the beach. The rain had stopped, luckily, but there was little air movement and it was hot and very sticky. Humm, I didn't mention that shortly after the snorkeling it rained like hell for an hour or so as we did the lunch bit. Anyway, back to the "wedding" where after vows were finished there were photographs, champagne, toasts, hordoevors, etc, etc.

Speaking of champagne. Yet another saga. As previously mentioned, we had packed a larger box with 8 bottles of well-protected champagne and shipped it through as luggage. Worried a lot about what if they opened it for security, how would they reseal it, etc, etc.; but no problem (other than being heavy/awkward). We also sent through an empty, and much smaller, duffel bag so that after the champagne got done traveling by air we could put it in something much easier to handle. Our documentation had said we could bring in 4 liters each, but the Fiji entry papers asked if we had more than 2 liters. After much thought, we marked down yes. So when clearing

customs we got pulled aside so they could open the box. As they were opening it, I was saying the rules said 4 each were OK and by the time they had unwrapped one bottle, they seemed to now agree so it got sealed back up and we went on our way. At our hotel we transferred the champagne from the box to the duffel and disposed of the box. Then when we went to Suva we handed the duffel over to Doris/Marc, who had it with them at brother Raymond's when we ate dinner there. Well somehow with their changing from sleeping at relatives to sleeping in an air conditioning hotel it got left at Raymond's and never made it to the Island! Sigh. But the upside was that Ray was going to get married the following weekend so we just ended up leaving it for them to enjoy at their wedding; and we liked the couple so not such a bad deal overall; just rather crazy. Oh, yes, we had planned to use that duffel as a return bag with our general junk in it and throw away the el-cheapo small suitcase Dawna had picked up and we used for the junk we brought over on the flight. But somehow the duffel didn't make it back to us before we left Suva although we were assured it would. So we kept using the junky suitcase. Low and behold, at the airport for flying home the duffel reappeared with Andrew, one of Marc's brothers; so everything ended up back with us! Just another trivial example of having to be able to just go with the flow when it came to this outing.

Let's see, where was I? Back to the Doris/Marc wedding perhaps – after the ceremony and more drinks and nibbles there was dinner and after that more drinking and eventually we went off to bed leaving some of the younger ones to carry on. One highlight after it got dark was finding a sea snake and Dawna picking it up and sharing it with lots of people who got more unafraid of touching it as she was holding it. Quite a pretty snake and lots of them come up onto the land to digest their food.

Sunday-2: No hurry getting up, followed by a relaxing breakfast. We had decided to not rush back on the 9:30 AM boat but rather hang out and catch the 4 PM one; and we had no real plans connected with the hanging out. Actually, the prior night I had semi signed up for going fishing with a local chap who was going back to the mainland after the party but said he'd be back at 9:30 AM to take a few of us fishing. Unfortunately he could only handle 4 which left Dawna out so I decided we'd try to do something together instead. Their literature talked about possible short trips to Bird Island or to a large Mangrove area. We expressed interest in this and after a couple of such expressions the chap who runs the place, Hudson, said a boat and captain were about to show up to take us to Bird Island. I announced to various folks that we were about to head there and nearly a dozen folks joined us; guess everyone was looking for something to do but not looking very hard. Had a 20 minute or so boat ride and Yes, there were lots of birds in the trees as we approached the island. We wadded ashore at the island, walked around on a sort of trail, saw a couple more snakes; and listened to "stories" being told by our Captain/Guide. A reasonable outing. When we got back we learned that the fishing trip never happened; so I had made a good choice that AM. Lounged around a bit, had lunch (excellent tuna), lounged some more, did some book reading, some socializing and then got into a game of Bocci ball. Fun, but hot. Came 4 PM, just finished winning one game, and onto the boat we went. Landed and went back to our Homestay spot. Boy did the air-conditioning feel good. Simply had a small dinner (we shared fish and chips and lasagna) right there.

Monday-2: Usual breakfast and by then we'd about decided to not go Tavenui Island (a nature lovers place) unless it turned out that Jodi had booked us at discussed spot; in which case we'd

let fate rule. She hadn't so we got on the phone and after a couple of tries rented a car (from Budget). They thought they had a small, 4WD Suzuki but turned out they didn't and they'd give us a regular/larger car for the same price. Probably should have tried yet another rental agency but since Avis had no cars at all and Budget had this one, we took it. Our game plan now was to bum our way around the north side of the island seeing things as we went. This is a less developed area and in fact had like 56 km of gravel road on this, the major/only road that circled the island in total. So, we went slow and enjoyed the scenery of farms, modest mountains, jungles, etc. Went through lots of villages, everyone waved back to Dawna who was waving at everyone. By mid afternoon we were at our semi destination, the most northern village (Rakiraki), and we checked into a hotel/motel that was the best in town and just acceptable. We then walked the village, ate a bit of BBQ stuff from a street vendor, checked everything out (the village is quite small), did a quick bit of Internet, went back to our hotel, and had a very useless Indian dinner.

Tuesday-2: Had some coffee in the room. Went into the village and got a treat at a bakery. Then headed on. At the village of Ba we took off toward the interior to a village named Navala – “Fiji’s most picturesque village, set in a superb landscape ...”, All of the houses in Navala are traditional bure ...” and so on in LP. Quite a rough road and we had to go very slow and worry a few times about rocks that hit the bottom of our rental care (where was that 4W drive Suzuki when we needed it), but we made it there and it was just like the book said. Got shown around by a local (the only way you can do it), had a small kava ceremony, saw school children galore, ate lunch with some locals, etc. Sure it was for tourists but also real. The drive back out didn’t seem as hard as going in, which is always the case I think because you know what to expect. Continued on down the main road taking in fine scenery and stayed at a regular, businessmen’s like hotel in the small city of Lautoka. Did some investigating about boat trips from there for the next day but without success. We ate at a coffee shop adjacent to the hotel that night.

Wednesday-2: Although most people didn’t know what we were talking about we eventually worked out how to get to Koroyanitu National Heritage Park (finally). The decision was to not drive ourselves but rather we had a fellow drove us there in a 4W drive, which turned out to be required, and left us to hike on our own and he’d be back to get us at a given time (2:30 PM) in the afternoon. There was a small visitor center and we bought a trail map with 40 marked items on it so it seemed straightforward to do a nice loop out through the jungle and by a couple waterfalls. So off we went by ourselves even though they tried to have us take (hire) a guide. It was muddy and slippery and slow going but real jungle and fun. Only a couple of trail markers actually existed; so after a bit we got lost. Recovered in an hour or so but that meant we were no longer way ahead of schedule. Continued on and got to the neat waterfall. About a mile beyond it the trail seemed to peter out and we couldn’t find it. After a couple tries decided we had to backtrack, which we did. By now it was also raining lightly to add to the mud and slow us down even more. Got back almost at the planned time (we had started on our hike at 9:45 AM), however, quite wet and quite muddy and rather tired to be honest. Back to town (probably a 45 minute rough drive) into our car and onward we went the last little way to Nadi where we went to our prior hotel and they had a room and we took it. Cleaned up and went to that good Indian place for dinner. Returned the car (yet another nice person at the rental agency) and hit the hay. Our plane wasn’t until early evening the next day so we arranged to keep the room until then by paying a half day rate. Also arranged to do a boat trip the next day.

Thursday-2: Our old friendly buffet breakfast and then we were picked up (8 AM) to go to our boat outing; which left from near the Sheratons as did many other boats. The boats went to various resorts for the most part or for day outings or for combinations of the two (like ours did). First stop was at an island the boat people basically own and there you/we (a) did a pseudo submarine ride with lots of windows so you can look at very nice coral and fish from your dry (but tight) seat, went snorkeling (fine coral and fish yet again and Dawna went this time and enjoyed it a lot), had lunch (bbq with fish and chicken and meat) and mucho drinks, etc. Back onto the boat and then it was sightseeing amongst a variety of islands (the Mamanuca Group) with the stops at several of them being out in the water where a small craft would come up to drop off or pick up people from the resort on that particular island. Fine weather and I do enjoy such boat riding. Dawna liked it OK but she stayed inside where the AC is while I stayed outside trying to keep in the shade. Eventually we got back and they delivered us to our hotel as part of the deal. Boy were we glad we had been big spenders and bought the extra half day there because it let us take a bath/shower, clean up, pack totally, relax, and then go to the nearby airport feeling moderately refreshed after a long day in the Sun. Even had some fine fish and chips for dinner at the hotel.

Summary: It was a good trip. The key was, of course, Doris and Marc's 10th anniversary party and that went very well I'd say. It was nice to be a part of it. We had known from the start that this was not the right time to visit (too hot and humid and rainy) the area but were pretty darn lucky in terms of not having rain ruin hardly anything. The humidity definitely slows us down, however. Given that we (especially Dawna) aren't beach/island/Sun people) we still had a fine time what with villages and people - they are extremely friendly. And the couple of times (and one for D) I was in the water it was excellent for snorkeling. Although I expected little in terms of food, in retrospect we had a lot of good fish meals. Oh, and the coffee was usually quite good as well.

The start of this trip letter was done on the airplane (Palm plus keyboard) but since we were flying home eastward most of the airplane time was spent trying to get some sleep. At home life was too busy to do more on it until late May (between the trip and then I went to England, we went to Colorado, we went to Morocco (and wrote that trip letter), etc, etc, so just never got back to it. When I finally did I could no longer find my notes; so don't know what great things I left out of the letter, but it would only have gotten longer if I had found the notes so "you" are lucky. As mentioned, the next major trip was Morocco, which is now also in the past; the next upcoming trip (in 4 weeks) is to New Hampshire and then a bit of Canada.