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10730 Pacific Street

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General Inquiries: 402-551-5810

www.HeartlandHealingMagazine.com

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Producer/Editor: Michael Braunstein

Art Direction: Jared Cvetas

Art Production: Ethan Bondelid, Eric

Stoakes

Editorial Contributors: Jeanne Barzydlo,

Randall Bradley, Michael Braunstein,

Meredith Busher, Andrew Delany, Gina

Moss, Brad Olsen,

Distribution: Ben Heaston

Delivery: Best Delivery Staff in Omaha

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Sacred Destinations: On the Road with Brad Olsen



Riding Primeval Waves in Fiji

I am talking to the Fijian Prime Minister of Tourism, Mr. Pita Nacuva. We're at the kickoff party for the first annual South Pacific World Music Festival at the Jean-Michel Cousteau Beach Resort on Fiji. If anyone should know the answer to my week-long question, the Prime Minister of Tourism should.

As the title of my book series — and this column — might suggest, I was interested in sacred destinations and Mr. Nacuva was pleased to add his knowledge. He spoke of the earliest Polynesian Lipita Culture, the original Fiji settlers who left behind characteristic pottery designs and the interred bones of their dead. The latter-day Melanesian people, with their fierce war-like posturing, eventually forced all the Polynesians to migrate westward. Mr. Nacuva told me of the “special forts” on the islands of Vanua Levu, Taveuni, and Koro that stand out in the Fijian archipelago of 330 islands. Several rings of defensive walls surround a central fortification built to be the last stand if the warriors failed to ward off invaders.

The “special fort” designation refers to the inner sanctuary where women and children would hide during a siege. Rituals were also performed here, including cannibalistic sacrifices, usually of captured warriors. What distinguish these forts are the intact, mortared walls, some standing over 14 feet high. The ingenious Melanesian Fijians created mor-

tar by mixing sand with crushed live coral. This slight technological edge in warfare may have given the Melanesians the necessary military innovation to push the Polynesians out of Fiji.

Over a millennium ago South Pacific Islanders sailed their open canoes across the Pacific, using stars, wind, wave rolls, bird sightings and the warm Pacific Ocean currents as navigational aids to move from one island to the next. Every Fijian knows the migration story of their ancestors arriving from the west. Since childhood, Fijians listen to the subject of many songs, recounting and glamorizing the approach of the original canoes from Vanuatu. The first landfall for

the earliest Melanesian arrivals would become known as the “Sacred Islands.” Just as Americans venerate Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts as the arrival point of the Pilgrims, the Fijians look upon the Sacred Islands as the dawn of their nation.

The tiny islands of Eori, Navadra and Navanua Levu in the Mamanuca Group were merely stop-overs for the founding families. After a few days the looming bulk of Viti Levu became visible in the east, where founded the first permanent settlement called Viseisei. Since then the Sacred Islands have remained uninhabited, an important refuge for nesting sea turtles and rare land birds.

A small traditional village remains on Navanua Levu but it is “tabu” to fish the surrounding reefs, inhabit, develop a resort or even speak of the Sacred Islands. The superstitious Fijians feel it is only in the realm of the chief to speak in detail of these special islands. Every December the chief goes to the Sacred Islands to observe a certain sandbar that forecasts a weather-related prophecy. If waves breach the sandbar then hurricanes will be coming with the rainy season. If the sandbar remains intact there will be no hurricanes. This tradition has proven quite reliable over the years.

Ask a tourist or ex-pat what they regard as sacred in Fiji and you'll likely get a variety of answers.

For surfers it is the world-class waves, especially Cloud Break under the exclusive dominion of Tavarua Island Resort. For adventure junkies there is nothing like a trip on the Tui Tai ship that packs several adrenaline-packed excursions into each day over the course of four days. Underwater enthusiasts claim it is the diversified sea life living along some of the most pristine reefs in the world. Indeed, Fiji is worthy of the title “Soft Coral Capital



Set of three islands, from top to bottom: Nananu-i-Ra, Yanutha, Nananu-i-Cake This string of islands is just off the northern tip of Viti Levu, the largest island in Fiji. These islands are also distinguished as being in the Vatu-i-Ra Channel, in the larger body of water know as the “Bligh Water” where the eminent captain of the HMS Bounty fled with his loyal crew.



Bouma Falls, located on the eastern side of Taveuni, the third largest Island in Fiji. Taveuni is unique because it catches the higher elevation rain clouds with its mountains. As a result the island is very wet and lush, nicknamed the "Garden Island." Taveuni was never ravaged by feral mongoose so the island contains many native land bird species, rare in the rest of the South Pacific.



The Sacred Islands, from left to right: Vanua Levu, Navadra, Eori as seen from the Tokoriki Island Resort.




of the World," displaying a multitude of brightly colored varieties that sway gently with the ocean currents.

My final conversation with the Prime Minister of Tourism was to encourage him to support the proposed World Heritage Seascape that would forever protect a large part of Fiji's 4,000 square miles of reef. Although a World Heritage designation would disrupt shipping lanes and traditional fishing grounds in the short term, it would put Fiji squarely on the map as a preserved dive destination for the lucrative tourism industry in the long term. My enthusiasm piqued when I related the story of encountering a school of spinner dolphins while diving the Somosomo Straits. Mr. Nacuva smiled. "I will try," he promised, "for the sake of future Fijians and for the biodiversity of our oceans." As he walked away I felt as if I may have helped in some small way to make the Seascape dream come true. It was my turn to smile.

Getting to Fiji

Nonstop flights to Nadi International Airport are available from Los Angeles aboard Air Pacific. Only Captain Cook Cruises have permission to make day trips to the Sacred Islands. Independent travelers need to inquire about permission and transportation at the Tokoriki Island Resort, the closest hotel to the Sacred Islands.

Brad Olsen is author of the Sacred Destinations book series, a world traveler and regular columnist for Heartland Healing Magazine. 



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