

FIJI

Our trip to Fiji from Cairns, Australia seems to last for ever, OK, it is not the 38 hours it would have taken us to travel home, but it is tiring none the less. Our day starts at 3pm when a taxi takes us to the airport, a drive of around 20 minutes. We are in plenty of time for the flight, and spend the next couple of hours wandering around the shops and eateries in the airport.

Our flight to Brisbane is a short one, just a couple of hours, and then we have a monorail journey to the international airport, and finally another flight across the Pacific to Fiji. We arrive in Fiji airport at 5.15am where a taxi is waiting to take us to the Van Gogh. The international airport in Fiji is almost 4 hours away from the port of Suva, where the Van Gogh is berthed, so we are very relieved when we finally arrive at the quayside.

The journey across Fiji shows us what a desperately poor country this is. People live in a haphazard collection of tin shacks which are clustered together with no boundaries or gardens at all. They are surrounded by old rusting vehicles, and other junk, and it looks as if nothing has ever been thrown away. Some of these vehicles have obviously been here a long time as the rainforest has grown up around them.

On the side of the road we see people selling fruit and vegetables from makeshift stalls, or herding their animals along the roadside. The surrounding countryside is beautiful, very lush and green, but with no flat land at all. The only pasture land appears to be the narrow verges along the roadside, hence the many animals grazing here. We see pigs, cattle, horses, goats and chickens, who wander across the road, in front of the cars, to find some better pasture.

Our driver shows us a multicoloured Hindi temple (the largest in Fiji) and a simple Mosque nearby. Apparently the main religion here is Christian, with a smattering of Hindu and Muslim.

Our taxi is a death trap, obviously no MOT here in Fiji, and we listen in amazement as the prop shaft whines, the clutch bearing complains, and hot steam escapes from the air conditioning vents. In fact, after an hour or so, our driver pulls over to the side of the road, to fill up the radiator with water that he carries in the boot for this purpose.

A "comfort stop" is made at a western style souvenir shop, where we are tempted to buy some T-shirts and other small hand made items. The cost is very

reasonable, we are able to use their toilets, and they even make us a welcome cup of coffee.

On the next part of the journey, our driver shows us some of the very large expensive hotels here. Like so many other places around the world there is a great divide between the rich and the poor in Fiji.

When we arrive at the quayside, we are met by large numbers of Van Gogh passengers, who are disembarking in order to get on their tour buses. Most of them stop to hug us and to welcome us back. It is good to see everyone again.

Later on we find out that most passengers had chosen a trip to a local village where they were shown the famous "fire walkers". These men have the knack of walking on hot stones. Local children entertained the passengers and showed them their basic homes. A number of the more adventurous tried the local Kava, a drink made from a kind of pepper root. One passenger described the taste as "similar to dishwasher"; we did not ask how she knew this!

After a welcome afternoon sleep, we awake in time to see the Van Gogh sail out of Suva on its way to the small island of Niue, a coral atoll belonging to New Zealand. As we have found no information about mobile phone signals in Niue, it looks as though we may not be able to receive an internet signal here.



We anchor off Niue on November 29th, and can immediately see how rough the weather is here. In fact our cruise director has just informed us that, due to the weather, we will not be able to go ashore here at all. We will set sail for our next port of call, Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, arriving one day ahead of schedule. Let us hope the weather is better there.

Our next port of call is one of the Cook Islands - Rarotonga. Alas there is no luck in here either - the island looks beautiful, but because of the dangerous sea conditions we will not be going ashore today. The Master of the Van Gogh makes the decision to take up the anchor and go immediately to Tahiti. We know that we will be able to dock there, although we will be 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ days ahead of schedule.