

A Fijian business surviving COVID without tourists or government help – just



Savusavu in Fiji

Photo Credit: Anne Moorhead

by Anne Moorhead

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The small and stunningly beautiful town of Savusavu on Vanua Levu in Fiji played host to the TV reality show *Australian Survivor* for its last three seasons. The local economy did well from the filming, with many local contractors hired to help, and Australian TV crews a regular sight at the town's restaurants and bars. But, like all international visitors, the show has stayed at home this last year. Instead, a very real game of survival is being played out, as the small tourism operators in and around the town struggle to keep their businesses afloat in the absence of almost any income.

It's the same story across Fiji, where **894,000 international tourists together contributed about FJD 3 billion to the national economy in 2019.**

I am co-owner, with my partner, of a micro-enterprise in Savusavu. We registered our small cocoa farm and chocolate factory business in 2018, and began commercial operations, running 'tree to bar' tours and selling our fine-flavour chocolate, in mid-2019. Nine months in, all was going amazingly well. We had a small team of four Fijian staff and we were almost breaking even on our weekly payroll. We are not young entrepreneurs, and our ambitions were always modest – we viewed our business as something of a social enterprise and 'demo project', showcasing sustainable agroforestry and agritourism. We planned to keep things small-scale and fun. Then COVID-19 took the fun out of everything.

We've managed the crisis on a day-by-day, then week-by-week, and then month-by-month basis. Like everyone else, we had no idea how long the crisis would last and how difficult things would get. After the first couple of months, when the immediate health threat of COVID in Fiji was receding, we dared to speculate that flights would start again within about six months. We worked out how to hold things together, with reduced staff hours and additional personal funds, based on that timeframe. It seemed unthinkable that we wouldn't have tourists back a whole year later. (We didn't imagine two category 5 tropical cyclones trashing the cocoa farm

and losing us several harvests, either.)

Here we are, a year later, with still no end in sight.

We are just one of many participants in this bitter real-life Survivor show. We're still in the running, at least partly because we have some advantages – personal funds that we can draw on, for example, and a product that we can sell in the local market (albeit at a much lower price). Others less fortunate have already been eliminated from the game. How many of us will be left standing when the planes finally take to the skies again? It's anyone's guess at the moment – if this were a TV reality show it would be exciting viewing, with millions tuning in to watch!

Rich governments around the world are supporting their small businesses through the crisis with direct grants. In the UK for example, tourism businesses have been given regular hand-outs to ensure their survival. As restrictions are tentatively eased in the UK, the businesses are dusting off and reopening.

Fiji has introduced some measures to help reduce the financial burden – employers' pension contributions for their employees are down from 10% to 5% for example – but these are token for a small business that has lost almost all its income.

The Fiji government can't afford to bail out individual businesses. So where are the donors when we need them? Helping the Fiji small-scale tourism industry survive the COVID crisis would surely tick almost all the development aid boxes – alleviating poverty, supporting the economy, addressing food security, building resilience in the face of climate change, etc.

There has been much talk among donors about supporting COVID recovery, but it seems the message of urgent need isn't getting through. The results of the many (many) surveys are in – **we won't survive much longer**. We need what the UK businesses are getting – modest amounts of cash to help us keep our staff in their jobs, maintain our infrastructure, pay the bills, etc. And we'd prefer to not have to jump through too many hoops to get these urgently needed funds – we're exhausted from a year of playing Extreme Survivor.

The large hotel chains and big cruise lines have deep pockets and will bounce back when the borders reopen, rehiring the staff that they readily terminated early in the crisis. The small, locally run tourism businesses are far more vulnerable. These are the ones that most directly support the local economy, and arguably have the least negative (and even positive) impacts on environment and culture – the more sustainable end of the tourism spectrum.

Our company is proud to be a member of the **Duavata Sustainable Tourism**

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Collective – a group of like-minded small tourism operators in Fiji, who have founded their businesses on values articulated as responsible and sustainable tourism. We've been genuinely delighted with the opportunity provided by COVID for the **bigger industry to pause and reflect** on how it is evolving in Fiji and across the Pacific, and whether it can be reoriented towards a more sustainable future. If these efforts can be turned into real change on the ground, we can even envisage one day looking back on this time and saying it was worth it.

But will we and other pioneers of grassroots sustainable tourism in Fiji be there to take part in that future? And without wanting to exaggerate our importance, can it even happen without us? How much harder will it be to re-build from scratch small-scale, local and community-based tourism if the existing hard-earned foundations are lost to COVID?

In this game, there's no immunity attached to demonstrating best practice – and sometimes the opposite. So a final suggestion for donors: link funding to more sustainable tourism. Help small-scale sustainable tourism survive COVID.

Author/s:

Anne Moorhead

Anne Moorhead is a freelance writer and editor specialising in sustainable development with a focus on the Pacific islands region. She works as a consultant editor for Devpolicy Blog. Anne is also co-owner and chocolate maker at **KokoMana** in Savusavu, Fiji.

Link:

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