

Small steps for sustainable tourism in Fiji

by Anne Moorhead

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A cruise ship 'in town', pre-COVID
Photo Credit: Anne Moorhead

Fiji's international border reopened to tourists on 1 December, to a **PR fanfare**. It's been a long 20 months for the country, where tourism was the single biggest industry before COVID-19 struck.

Everyone in the tourism business has been working towards the reopening for months. At our **agritourism micro-enterprise** in Savusavu on the island of Vanua Levu, we've been finalising our COVID-safe protocols, and building up chocolate stocks ahead of the return of international visitors.

We have survived the tourism shut-down. Most of the other businesses we work with under the **Duavata Sustainable Tourism Collective** – a group of small tourism operators in Fiji, who have founded their businesses on values of responsible and sustainable tourism – have also managed to weather the storm.

I speculated **earlier this year** that small tourism businesses were more vulnerable to the sudden cessation of income than the much larger businesses. But I've realised I was at least partly wrong.

Many small tourism businesses in Fiji, especially those built on respect for Fiji's environment and cultural heritage, are not 'in it for the money'. If you take away the money, it's hard – very hard – but we still have the other drivers, and motivations, for what we do.

The Duavata members have used this opportunity to focus on some of these other interests. While the large resorts and other big businesses took a purely economic decision and mothballed their operations, we've been busier than ever – just doing different, and in many ways more rewarding, things.

The **Duavata Conservation Leadership Programme** is a grand name for a simple idea developed as a response to the international tourism hiatus. Several of the Duavata members reoriented their tourist experiences to appeal to young Fijians.

For example, groups of young people spent a day snorkelling in Natewa Bay, learning about its ecology from marine biologists at [Ocean Ventures](#). Another day they visited our cocoa farm and heard about the benefits of agroforestry. They sampled our chocolate, and considered the advantages of diverse farms that include high value crops, but don't destroy the basic ecology in order to grow them. They returned home with tales to tell, and we were delighted when community elders requested the same experience for themselves a few weeks later.

The German Embassy in New Zealand deserves a special mention, as a forward looking donor who helped get the program off the ground. With their financial support, we received much needed funds to pay staff and bills, while the young people had a fun, practical learning experience.

The program has been successful, and will continue alongside international tourism in 2022. The next phase will have more emphasis on community-based tourism, and exchange visits between communities that are currently working to develop tourism experiences. In the spirit of social enterprise, the Duavata businesses plan to integrate these sorts of activities into their regular work as their profitability recovers.

These activities are all very much in line with recommendations from a [2020 study](#) by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), on tourism in Vanua Levu post-COVID. The report notes that “Policy guidance from all major global and regional development agencies impresses the need to focus tourism recovery efforts on ‘building back better,’ with an emphasis on a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism sector.”

While small sustainable tourism businesses have been busy at the grassroots, there has also been progress at higher, strategic levels. The [Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework](#) was developed during 2020–2021, and was [endorsed](#) by Pacific tourism ministers a few weeks ago. On 27 September, World Tourism Day, Fiji's Minister for Commerce, Tourism, Transport and Trade Faiyaz Koya [confirmed](#) Fiji's commitment to sustainable tourism.

Progress has been made at the top and at the bottom, but there appears to be something of a vacuum in the middle – at the operational level of most of the tourism industry. No new policies for more sustainable tourism have been put in place, and with a potentially huge influx of tourists over the coming months, there's a fear that the tentative steps towards sustainable tourism may be lost in the rush to recover economically.

This worry isn't unique to Fiji. Coastal residents in Australia's New South Wales are

concerned about the environmental impacts of a higher volume of cruise ships returning to their bays. They are asking why the two-year break hasn't been put to better use, to address areas of conflict between the cruise industry and locals.

In the year or so before COVID, we watched the massive cruise ships arrive in Savusavu Bay, dwarfing the town. Even then, a cruise ship in town created tension. As hundreds of tourists spilled onto the streets for just a few hours, small business owners almost came to blows in their efforts to capture some of the trade. Ironically, there wasn't very much money available anyway – most of the tourist dollars were siphoned off by players higher up the chain long before the visitors disembarked. We learned that our own tour, for which we charged F\$25 (around A\$16.50), was being sold on board for up to A\$110.

When cruise ships return to Savusavu, will it be back to this (rather shameful) 'business as usual'? The IFC report recommends measures "to improve community benefits, focus on higher value expedition cruises, and reduce anxiety around cruise tourism". Some form of regulations, or a code of conduct, might also be useful.

The international tourists are back, and are very welcome – but let's hope the small shoots of sustainable tourism nurtured during the last year and a half aren't trampled underfoot in the rush back to the resorts. The pressure is very much on for businesses to recoup lost earnings, and occupancy rates are reportedly high for the coming months, as holiday-starved tourists meet desperate airlines and resorts in a frenzy of offers and deals. It would be a good time to push through some practical policy in support of a more sustainable tourism industry in Fiji.

Disclosures:

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