

HEART OF THE HIGHLANDS

Hiking Fiji's rugged highlands reveals a different side to the archipelago and a closer connection to people and land. »

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LOOKING INTO THE DISTANCE, HE POINTS OUT THE WELL-WORN TRAIL THAT WE'RE SETTING OUT ON TOMORROW



with water, strains it through cloth, then pours a little into each coconut-husk bowl we hold out. The kava numbs my mouth and I can feel a little of its purported sedative effect. All the better for getting an early night before tomorrow's trek.

Over four days in Fiji's highlands, I experience a different side to the "fly and flop" model of tourism that dominates its coast. Talanoa Treks, which is part of Duavata, Fiji's sustainable tourism collective, is a leader in centring iTaukei culture through guided trekking experiences in the interior. Each time I set foot on the land, whether hiking to a waterfall or exploring a pre-Christian worship site, I am in the company of community members who not only lead the way, but share their language, traditions, stories – and sometimes a little flattery. "I can see your fitness," said my guide Adi Beranadetta at my first stop, Nabalasere village, as I clung to her while she nimbly led me across a rocky river.

Talanoa Treks, says Ben, "is empowering [highland] communities and getting them to have a piece of the pie". The Fijian government likes to brag that tourism makes up 40 percent of its GDP, Ben explains, but "the pie", as he calls it, "is all on the coast". Slowly, a shift is happening. Because village chiefs worried about its diluting effect on local culture, iTaukei "were never expected to participate [in tourism]" says Matt Capper, who cofounded Talanoa Treks with his wife Marita Manley. But now "communities are finding their voices about what they want to share".

That means sharing authentic culture, not following the beachfront-resort model of cultural tourism. "Should we dress up as warriors?" That's one of the first questions Marita remembers hearing when she

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The lush landscape of Fiji's highlands.

THIS SPREAD: Travelling through the highlands with Talanoa Treks enables visitors to experience and engage with traditional village life.



If it could, the land would talk. Where I see rolling green hills stretching across the island's interior, my guide Ben Semira sees stories that have been passed down over generations. It's from these tales that his hiking company, Talanoa Treks, gets its name. Talanoa means to talk, explains Ben, who is iTaukei, as Indigenous Fijians are known. His trips are "not just about the landscapes," he says, "but the stories tied to the land."

Our small group has just arrived in the tiny village of Naga, bang in the middle of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu. Via a bumpy two-hour drive from the coast, we've swapped the palm-fringed beaches that

define the Fiji of postcards for a rugged, mountainous landscape that few visitors see. Keen to catch a glimpse of the new arrivals, kids, calling out "Bula!" in greeting, pour out of Naga's handful of homes, some traditional thatched-roof *bures*, others clad in corrugated iron. Sairusi "Sai" Rokomatu, who tells us he's a father, farmer and rugby player, rounds them up and welcomes us with a quick tour of the village. Then, looking into the distance, he points out the well-worn trail that we're setting out on tomorrow. We're going to walk around seven miles to the next village, Nubutautau, because the trail has a story to tell. But that story will have to wait, because first comes *sevusevu* – traditional protocol.

Sai leads us into Naga's community hall, where most of the village has gathered. We slip off our shoes and join them, sitting down

cross-legged, *sulu* (sarongs) covering our knees on the *ibe*, a large mat woven from pandanus leaves. Ben, as our representative, addresses the community. The exchange is entirely in Fijian, but thanks to our chat earlier on the drive here, I'm able to follow along. Ben explains who we are and asks for permission to spend the night and for villagers to accompany us on the walk tomorrow. He presents them with a bundle of kava roots, humbly calling it "a small gift". The men protest: "Big! It's big!", they insist, accepting the gift and thanking us for hewing to tradition. "You are welcome. Please stay the night," says one. "We will carry you on a good journey tomorrow."

While his young son looks on, intently watching his movements, Waicevata Matalau, aka Snow, pounds the kava roots to a powder in a giant bowl. He mixes the powder





WE'VE SWAPPED THE PALM- FRINGED BEACHES FOR A RUGGED, MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPE THAT FEW VISITORS SEE

began approaching communities. "Even in very remote villages, that had been their impression of what hosting tourists was going to mean." With the assurance that ceremonial dress and dances would remain for special occasions away from tourists' eyes, one by one a tourism co-operative of villages was formed.

I wake up on a mattress on the community hall's floor, to the sound of cockerels. It's early, but the village women

have already prepared breakfast in another building. We eat and quickly get ready to depart, hoping to make it to Nubutautau before the afternoon heat. The trail begins with a long, unforgiving climb up a bare slope to a patch of trees. Snow tells us that this is our last chance to catch a ride with Ben, who is driving (the long way around) to Nubutautau. We all agree we're up for the challenge and so forge ahead on foot. Over the top and heading downhill, an

emerald-green landscape of river valleys opens up. Reaching a shaded riverbank in an abandoned village, Snow invites us to sit down so he can tell us the story we've been waiting to hear. In 1867, the missionary Reverend Thomas Baker offended Fijian custom by touching a chief's head. His punishment, while walking along this same trail, was to be killed with a rock, Snow explains, pointing to the weapon that still lies across the river. Baker and his seven Fijian companions were then cannibalised.

It's a story that hung heavily over Nabutautau for more than a century. Villagers believe that the long run of bad luck – failing crops, kids dropping out of school – after the killings was a "curse". But that feels like distant past when Adi Losana, a spirited woman in a vibrant purple dress greets us at the end of the trail as we stagger into the village. "Welcome to the real Fiji!" she cries out. "Our own slice of paradise".

Later, after changing out of our grimy clothes, we present our sevusevu to village elder Vilitati Rokovesa (who goes by Mr Roko). Afterwards, as we rest our aching bodies on the ibe, he explains that much has changed since 2003, when the villagers invited Baker's descendants to a reconciliation ceremony. Mr Roko believes

ABOVE: The rugged mountain interior of Fiji provides some staggering views.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Hiking through the varied landscape with Talanoa Treks.



Need to Know

GETTING THERE

Fly into Nadi International Airport (NAN) on Viti Levu. Journeys from London typically require a layover in Los Angeles or Hong Kong. Upon arrival, Rosie Holidays (rosiefiji.com) can pick you up at the airport and take you to your accommodation.

GETTING AROUND

Fiji's highland villages are very difficult to reach independently, so a tour is your best bet. Talanoa Treks arranges all transport via their own 4WDs or a partner. Be prepared for a bumpy ride once you leave the coast's paved roads.

BEST TIME TO GO

Fiji's dry season, from May to October, promises the most pleasant, and least muddy, hiking conditions.

WHERE TO EAT

All meals (mostly vegetarian) are prepared by villagers using produce from their fields. Dishes are spread out on a mat on the floor and everyone digs in. Expect curries served with roti and *rourou* (taro leaf stewed with coconut milk). Back on the coast, don't miss *kokoda*, a ceviche-like dish of marinated fish. The Coral Coast's Crab Shack Fiji and Flying Fin Restaurant and Bar are two good seafood spots.

WHERE TO STAY

Trips with Talanoa Treks include rustic overnight shared dorm-style accommodation in the villages. Imagine indoor camping and cold showers, but with provided bedding. If you think you've earned a little pampering afterwards, book a beachfront villa at First Landing Resort (firstlandingresort.com) in Lautoka.

FURTHER INFORMATION

fiji.travel
talanoa-treks-fiji.com



the curse was lifted because their fortunes soon turned around. Around ten years after the ceremony, Matt and Marita, two keen hikers, came through. After a few visits, Mr Roko suggested they bring some companions with them next time, and so the seed of what would become Talanoa Treks was planted. What "hit the spot", Ben explains, "was the story" of the trail that not only historically connects the two villages but was also the setting for such a momentous event. Offering multi-day hikes between the two villages proved to be a way to immerse visitors in the Fijian culture of storytelling: *talanoa*.

By limiting visits to two days a week, Nabutautau can continue to practise its authentic way of life and ensure that the trickle of tourists that make it here never becomes a flood. But the community has embraced tourism warmly for the good it can do.

The highlands are a cradle of traditional Fijian culture but villagers are often compelled to leave to find work, a threat to the preservation of that culture. Tourism, says Ben, is a way for people to stay in their villages. "They realise, 'I don't have to leave to find greener pastures. My village is already green.'"

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Nabalasere village; Hiking to Nabalasere waterfall; The pool at the bottom of Nabalasere waterfall; Nabalasere waterfall.



Photos: Talanoa Treks Fiji, Dreamstime, Elliot Wright, Anriban Mahapatra