

The veteran Australian travel writer, the late Jack Butters, once wrote:

"In the ultimate cruising getaway, it all comes together; blue skies and beautiful anchorages, good companions and good food, enough stimulation and enough leisure, fascinating ports of call and comfort on board, easy doses of another culture and conviviality."

He was writing about Fiji, of course, where small-ship cruising has been in vogue since the 1950s and today's operators have turned what was once cottage or indeed, village, industry, into big business. For the holidaymaker, that's perfect.

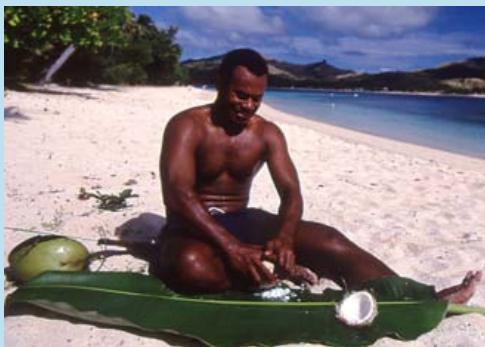
To cruising in Fiji you can add spectacular snorkelling, windsurfing, swimming, beachcombing, frequent contact with laid-back and welcoming villagers, their crafts and spell-binding island music, traditional lovo feasts and meke performances, a succession of glorious sunsets over multi-hued lagoons and long, pristine beaches with obligatory coconut palms swaying in the trade winds and kids splashing in the shallows.

There is much laughter on a Fiji cruise; a great deal of affection is generated by local crew who giggle at anything and sit at the stern and play guitars and sing when off duty. "Fiji versus The World" beach volleyball generates laughter, so does catching a big fish. Add to this a vision of smiling, rotund village ladies rounding up passengers for a simple dance universally known as The Fiji Shuffle, and you can't help but laugh.

There are two major small-ship cruise operators in Fiji. The original is Blue Lagoon Cruises, first cruising in the 1950s. The "newcomer" but now a veteran of Fiji waters is Captain Cook Cruises. Blue Lagoon Cruises' 'Club' and 'Gold Club' itineraries offer a relaxed and informal experience ideal for independent travellers, groups, families, honeymooners and those looking for an affordable way to experience Fiji's remote Yasawa Islands.

A fleet of five Lautoka-based luxury vessels operates a variety of programs with plenty of departure options. These include three-day/two-night 'Club' itineraries and four-day/three-night 'Club' programs. 'Gold Club' cruise vessels and itineraries offer a more refined and luxurious cruise experience with four-day/three-night cruises and a seven-day/six-night option.

Next year there will be three sailings of the extremely popular seven-day/six night 'Historical and Cultural Gold Club' cruise to Fiji's north-eastern reaches, via the International Dateline, the 180 Meridian. These cruises showcase three different South Pacific cultures - Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian - while exploring remote island locations.



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Blue Lagoon Cruises also has specialised 'Dive in Paradise' adventure diving itineraries. All Blue Lagoon Cruises include accommodation with private ensuite facilities, all meals, cruise activities, coral viewing, sightseeing, village visits, beach parties and cultural activities.

Captain Cook Cruises offers three, four and seven night cruises to the Yasawa Islands and Northern Fiji.

Passengers cruise aboard the MV Reef Escape, a 120-passenger, fully accommodated small cruise ship offering the features and comfort of a resort. Apart from excellent snorkelling, guests can laze on warm sands, bask in crystal clear waters, dive in spectacular blue lagoons or take part in traditional Fijian rituals as they experience a timeless island culture.

Captain Cook's "Northern Fijian Islands Dateline Cruise" is an awardwinner, visiting the remote north-western tip of the Fijian archipelago and the International Dateline.

If sailing "before the mast" appeals, Captain Cook Cruises operates the historic Fiji brigantine Ra Marama and the Spirit of the Pacific on weekly three-day "soft adventure" sailing safaris. The Lady Geraldine operates day cruises from Denarau Marina to the coral-encircled Tivua Island.

There's day cruising with South Seas Cruises and a host of others out of Denarau Marina near Nadi. Beachcomber Island Resort & Cruises is about to launch a new day cruise from Fiji's third largest city, Lautoka, to Savusavu, "capital" of its second largest island, Vanua Levu.

Whale's Tale is a big schooner available for day charter or extended charter. Several privately-owned ocean-going yachts charter from Musket Cove in the Mamanucas, and there are also dolphin and whale watching cruises.

The schooner Tui Tai, once seen regularly around the Mamanucas, now operates adventure cruises from Savusavu. From this vessel, which takes 25 in airconditioned comfort, you can paddle a kayak or ride a mountain bike, snorkel, swim or finish that book you started last Easter.

If motor cruising appeals, there's the well-appointed Nai'a, the MV Quest and Cdreamer, a 44-foot twin-diesel charter yacht, one of Fiji's finest private cruise vessels. More information from: www.cdreamerfiji.com

Laughter and song, brilliant corals and fish, shy children and handsome villagers, broad beaches and warm turquoise waters, languid days and fresh seafood contribute to one of the South Pacific's most memorable experiences.

