

***Elaine Prior went paddling in Fiji in 2001. She wrote this article for “New Zealand Adventure” magazine.***

## **Paddling a Sea of Fijian Song**

Exploring Sawa-i-Lau’s coastline, we glided along, admiring intricately weathered limestone formations bordering an idyllic sheltered jade green lagoon. Then Stu explained that we’d take a dogleg course back to Navotua. “The wind’s a bit stronger now. The prevailing winds funnel around this island, and we could get hit by some big gusts if we take the direct route.” Once past the lee of the island, the winds and waves picked up, and with it our concentration. Surfing down waves with a following wind, our kayaks were propelled back towards Navotua. Though straightforward for our guides, for a novice like me conditions were challenging – and I was in a single kayak without a paddling partner for balance and moral support! At times waves converged from unexpected directions, and my kayak surged sideways. Beyond Honeymoon Island, the seas became more predictable, and the surfing exhilarating. I was sorry to reach Navotua so soon!

This adventure was a highlight of our week-long sea kayaking expedition in Fiji’s Yasawa Islands. Al, our kayak guide, told us that in the early years of his trips here the 70 kilometre voyage to Tavewa, where our paddling began, took ten hours in a local boat. Now, bouncing over the waves in a high-speed dive support boat named “Aftershock”, in two hours it seemed that we travelled back a century in time. We felt ourselves unwind as the bustle and grime of the Fijian mainland gave way to crystal clear aquamarine water, coral reefs exposed by the low tide, and then traditional villages and plantations.

Seventy-year old Amelia and her son Henry welcomed us to their family property at Tavewa on the edge of the Blue Lagoon. Tents were allocated and sites carefully selected amongst scented frangipani and coconut trees. My doorway looked over Henry’s fishing boat anchored in the lagoon, and proved a perfect spot for savouring the sunset. “Don’t pitch your tent directly under a coconut tree,” Al warned, “you could end up with a nasty headache”.

A traditional thatched bure, built from coconut trunks and pandanus leaves, provided welcome shade for lunch. Then paddles, life jackets with whistles, spray skirts and other kayaking paraphernalia were handed out. By the time guides Stu and Al had given us some kayaking tips

and run through the capsize drill (which we never needed in earnest), we were itching to get afloat. Rudder peddles and seats were adjusted to fit, and the fleet of single and double kayaks was launched. Whether complete beginners or experienced paddlers, these sheltered turquoise lagoonal waters were the ideal place to become acquainted with our craft for the week ahead.

Next morning we stowed our gear on the support boat that was to accompany us on the first leg of the expedition. Kayaks were floated into thigh-deep calm water and we slid, less gracefully than we would have liked, into the cockpits. Once around Savutu Point at the southern tip of Tavewa, the stiff easterly wind hit us. Tops blew off choppy whitecaps, keeping us refreshingly cool despite the bright sunshine. We paddled fast and continuously – no time to rest as the wind would blow us backwards. Crossing the four-kilometre gap to the island of Nathula, it seemed that maybe this holiday wouldn't be so relaxing after all. Feeling pleasantly challenged by the time we broke for lunch on a deserted beach, some swam and snorkelled while others sliced mounds of tomatoes, cucumber, capsicum, cheese and exquisitely sweet Fijian pineapple and papaya for a well-deserved feast, before continuing our passage to Navotua.

We were expected, and the villagers had gathered to greet us. Excited children jostled each other as they rushed into the water, arms outstretched for dry-bags and camping gear. Expertly hoisting huge loads on to tiny shoulders, even the youngest kids defiantly resisted help from their older siblings. Meanwhile, the village adults sang the melodic “welcome to Navotua” song, accompanied by ukuleles. Sione, the dignified chief, looked on as ten youngsters lined up on each side of a heavy double kayak and hauled it up the beach, like a gang of tiny ants. We watched in amusement and appreciation as our mountain of gear was ferried ashore.

As we explored, villagers smiled and called out “Bula”, the Fijian greeting. Accompanied by several children, Averosa, one of Navotua's 150 villagers, took us on a tour of the plantations, explaining how coconuts, papaya, yams and cassava are cultivated and harvested. Visiting the village kindergarten, amongst posters and paintings adorning the walls were several photos of children and teachers posing with kayak guides taken over the years. Youngsters sang, practiced writing and played with colourful bricks and beads. Relaxing beside our tents pitched on the village playing field, we became spectators for the daily football game between an energetic bunch of fit and muscular young Fijians. Poor Thomas' excuses about a tough day's kayaking were to no avail. He was hauled from the ground to join one of the teams, later escaping to collapse as an exhausted sweaty heap.

A village woman brought a live mud crab to our dining bure and spoke with Stu. A few hours later, she returned with a delicious bowl of crabmeat cooked in limejuice and coconut milk. As we ate the succulent flesh, Al explained “We pay fees to the village to stay here, but we also look for opportunities to pay different families for other small things – we try to be fair and spread it around.” He discouraged us from handing out money to individuals, but had established a “school fund” so that donations could assist the children’s education.

At the “meke” performance that evening, traditional song and dance portrayed island life. The stately Sione sat in the back corner, surrounded by wide-eyed pre-school children, and eating a bowl of pears in port, smothered in chocolate sauce. Our guides produced huge pots of food, and any leftovers were distributed amongst the village families – nothing went to waste. As he danced, a fearsome grass-skirted warrior thrust a makeshift spear close to my face, only to break into a white toothy grin and whisper “bula”. Lithe young men and buxom women hauled us from our seats on the ground and swirled us vigorously to the music. Al, who has led trips in the Yasawas for 14 years, had advised us to tie our sulus (sarongs) tightly or wear shorts underneath – in case a dance partner should playfully loosen the knot.

The “kava” ceremony involves a sequence of hand clapping, by the host, the recipient and the rest of the party. Much hilarity and confusion, as we slowly learnt when to clap and when not to clap. When my turn came, Averosa, our host, mischievously asked “high tide or low tide?” Stu grinned and answered “high tide” and I struggled to down a dauntingly large half coconut shell filled with the dubious liquid. Made from pounded yaqona root, kava causes numb lips and eventually drowsiness. The quietly murmuring cluster of village men beside us, imbibing a second huge vat of kava, was testament to its soporific effects. We slept soundly that night, despite the permanent cacophony of Fijian roosters.

The uninhabited island of Sawa-i-Lau lies four kilometres from Navotua. While we snorkelled and munched our picnic lunch, Stu paddled off alone towards the nearby village of Tamasua. “In Fiji, even land that looks deserted is owned by somebody” Al explains, “so we can’t simply set up camp where we like. We’ve got permission to camp on Vawa tomorrow night – it’s uninhabited. Stu’s gone to pay our fees to the family that owns it.”

Gaining access to Sawa-i-Lau's caves called for a sense of adventure. Donning masks and snorkels, we dived under a seemingly impenetrable limestone cliff, surfacing two metres later into blackness. Swimming and clambering through passages created by water over geological time, flashlights revealed cathedral-like caverns yawning overhead. Eventually we scrambled onto a jagged narrow ledge and peered into a black void. "Hold onto your snorkel and jump" Stu instructed. On surfacing, I saw patches of pale blue daylight shining through the water beneath the cliff and realised we were back at the exit. Eyes adjusted slowly as we emerged into bright sunlight. Picking up our paddles and launching our kayaks, a following wind and sea propelled us back to Navotua.

Leaving the "full on" village experience at Navotua, we paddled fully loaded kayaks north to Vawa – our own private wilderness for the next two nights. On route, we rafted up in a sheltered bay and dived into the water for a refreshing swim. Passing between extensive fringing coral reefs as we approached Vawa, a stiff wind-chop developed on the shallow water. The tide was low, so we gingerly threaded our boats through a narrow gap in the reef to reach the long sandy beach.

Tents were pitched at the top of the beach, in the shade of small trees and bushes. Flat slabs of dead coral collected from the beach made perfect door steps, keeping gear out of the sand. Relaxing in the late afternoon, we watched the tide rise, knowing that our tents perched in safety, well above the recent high water level. But what about the influence of the full moon combined with the equinox and unusually high swells? Suddenly a bigger wave rolled in, stopping an inch from one tent. All hands sprang into action, and several tents were rapidly relocated. By the time the tide turned their original spots were flooded – luckily it wasn't the middle of the night.

At Vawa, we hiked, snorkelled, explored by kayak or simply relaxed with a good book in the shade of a coconut tree. Panoramic views of the Yasawas from the island's summit were worthy reward for a morning hike through steep and humid forest. Vawa's reefs are home to an amazing variety of fish of every colour of the rainbow. Snorkelling here, swarms of fish darted amongst the pink, purple and blue coral, stopping to nibble and then disappearing into small caves or deep dark canyons. Paddling to Yasawa Island (after which the Group is named), the lunch spot proved an ideal place for me to practice "wet exits" and clambering back into the kayak from chest deep water. Onlookers watched the antics in amusement.

On our final evening, a tropical pink sunset painted the perfect backdrop for sipping rum punch before a gourmet dinner of Indian-style curry, pappadums and traditional accompaniments. We were sorry to strike camp and pack our kayaks for the last time. This time the gear fitted easily and our kayaks floated higher in the water. Over the week, we had devoured a mountain of fruit and vegetables, and our drinking water containers were almost empty. Arms and shoulders strong after a week's paddling, the final day's 18-kilometre paddle back to our base at Tavewa seemed satisfyingly easy.