

## **See Kayaking in Fiji**

*The Yasawa Islands of Fiji, Melanie Ball found, are a dream holiday. (edited version of article in Sunday Herald Sun and Sunday Telegraph)*

They may be slow, but sea kayaks are the best way to visit Fiji's Yasawa Islands, become fit – and find romance.

It begins at the Waterfront Hotel in Lautoka, on Viti Levu (Fiji's main island). A post-dinner briefing brings together Australians, New Zealanders and four Americans, one of whose suitcases has decided to holiday elsewhere.

A high speed morning boat transfers us on Tavewa Island, in the northern Yasawas. We pitch tents amid colourful crocus and coconut palms scored with machete cuts from many harvests, then venture into the aqua shallows to practise paddling two-person sea kayaks.

The next day we head off, paddling 15km to Navotua, a pretty village with a white church, brick nurse's station and two dozen houses. All clustered around a rugby pitch.

Late afternoon, the cheeky kindergarten children who have been perfecting head-high tackles will make way for adolescents playing a fast and furious game (competition among the island's six rugby teams is fierce). But first we don sulus (sarongs) for a guided village tour.

Northwest of Viti Levu, the Yasawas comprise 20 hilly volcanic islands and one limestone island, which thrusts out of the water opposite Navotua Village. Our shoulders and arms are aching by the time we beach our kayaks on Sawa-I-La's sandy shore. Snorkelling in the shallows reveals five-legged sea stars, small red and yellow fish, and huge boulder corals studded with feathery Christmas worms.

We venture around the island to a cave filled with water painted blue-green by sunlight streaming through its cathedral window. We plunge in and explore the chamber's high, valuted ceiling. Our guide, Stuart, ushers us through a low passage into smaller, darker caverns whose submerged walls and projecting stone are black against the blue.

We paddle back to Navotua with a tail wind. In no time, we have carried boats ashore and numbered off for a shower.

Tonight is party night, and we congregate in the main bure after dinner, taking the front row while youngsters sit behind with fathers, uncles and Chief Sione Sadrugu. Darkness heralds the arrival of an all-singing-and- strumming group of men and women wearing floral prints and grass skirts.

Four women come forward to dance in a line, moving hands and bodies to swaying island songs. Bare-chested youths pretend aggression, stamping bare feet and thrusting spears at us while grinning and whispering “Bula!”

Then it is our turn. Frangipani leis around our necks, arms around Fijian waists and sand between our toes, we prance in and out of the centre of the bure. Then, after our guide presents yaqona (kava) and Fijian tobacco to the village, it is kava time. The village men are still discussing community affairs over half coconut shells of brown liquid hours later.

Several of them are in the crowd that farewells us in bright, morning sunshine. Our kayaks packed with tents, food, clothes, water and crockery, we paddle to an uninhabited island, our home for two nights.

On Vawa, watching the sun sink into the sea, I realise these islands are so romantic you don't need a dream date to spark you. You need only a kayak.