

Roman and Antje's Island Quest - Episode #1

Dear Friends,

Its been almost two months now that we started our island quest and we heard that many of you have been very curious to get some news.... here is the wrap-up of this first segment of our journey.

We left Los Angeles January 26th seriously exhausted by a month of intense preparations. To give the island project a maximum chance of success, we had organized ourselves to be able to stay in Fiji the time it would take to create a solid foundation for the project. One more time a huge THANK YOU to the Pure Tropical Foods team that assisted us to the last minute and who took over the Purefood Network in the most reliable way we could have imagined.

The preparations during the weeks before departure didn't give us much time to think. As we were quieting down in the plane, we finally realized that all our dreams and planning efforts of the past years were becoming an exciting reality. We arrived in Nadi International Airport early in the morning (5AM to be specific). A group of Fijians welcomed us with traditional music while we were standing in line for passport control. We felt the gentle warmth (around 80F) and the tropical humidity around us. It all seemed simply surreal especially after the little sleep we got on the plane.

More Fijians welcomed us with necklaces made out of sea shell and directed us towards the bus to Suva. We took the luxury version with air conditioning for the over 3-hour bus ride. Our eye scanned quickly the landscape around us, we were partly curious partly fearful to see what Fiji looked like in real. We had seen the perfect pictures on the many websites, was reality up to it? The Nadi area was rather on the dry side and the gentle hills were mostly pastures with little virgin forest. Huge mango trees caught our eyes everywhere, unfortunately barely any fruits were left on the trees, we had just missed the season as we found out later.

Once we reached the south of Viti Levu (the largest island), the landscape got more lush. During the last two thirds of our trip, we were pleasantly surprised to find virgin forest as far inland as the eye could see with a few very simple villages here and there—all this on the most developed island of Fiji! The low level of development is truly amazing and we are very pleased that there is so much untouched land.

We would find a village wherever a nice size river would cross the road. The Fijians use the river water for drinking, washing themselves and their cloths. We even saw kids bathing as we passed. Most houses are covered with corrugated metal and surrounded by either wooden walls with old paint or corrugated metal sheets—not much left of the traditional thatched roofs. We learned that despite the fact that the thick thatched roofs are quite durable (up to 10 years) and perfectly water tight, most don't want to go through the effort of finding the right grass to build such roofs. Ironically, some of the only thatched roofs left on Viti Levu can be found in the resorts.

Despite the obviously very simple living conditions and poor housing, almost without

exception we saw huge smiles on the villagers' faces. Everywhere people were waving at the bus as we drove by. There are such joy and open-hearted smiles on people's faces that it is impossible to miss them. The more our trip went on, the more we understood why the Fijians are sometimes called the friendliest people on earth. There is a level of attention for others (and even for strangers) that we only rarely experienced in a similar way in other countries. To give a few examples: in Suva (the capital of Fiji) if you are looking for something, even without asking anybody, the Fijians will pick up on your thought, come to you and offer their help. They will literally take you by the hand and bring you where you need to go. Instead of being self centered and acting out of calculation for their own personal benefit, people seem to put others needs first. They are masters in reading your mind and always respond with a huge innocent smile.

It would be very interesting to discover the secrets allowing an entire nation to be so friendly. Of course there are a few exceptions here and there. People have warned us that theft especially in the big cities has become more of an issue in the past years. The Fijian society, despite its amazing features, is still not perfect. The huge gap between wealthy tourists and the locals living at the bare minimum of existence unavoidably results in tensions and eventually crime, which compared to US standards, is still extremely low. While we are comparing Fiji to the US, it is interesting to mention that except for the military no firearms are allowed in Fiji, not even the police carries any guns or rifles!

We eventually made it to Suva. It was hard to breath, so many cars and buses were driving around polluting the air. Most of them had black smoke coming out of their exhaust, catalytic converters seem nonexistent in Fiji and some vehicles are so old that it is surprising they are still running up the steep hillsides. To get to our final accommodation, the Raintree Lodge at Colo I Suva, we took the regular bus with open windows and tarps to role down on the sides in case there should be too much rain. These buses became later a regular means of transportation and we learned that being a bus-driver in Fiji means being a mechanic in the same time. The buses seem always just before breakdown and they get fixed as they go with all means possible and imaginable.

At the Raintree Lodge, we rested for the weekend to get ready for a series of meetings with different government officials the following week. The original plan had been camping, but we did not have the courage yet to put up our tent on a soggy and muddy lawn. Before we arrived, Suva experienced two weeks of straight rain. We became more courageous in this regard once we realized that the meetings in Suva would take at least 2 weeks instead of a few days. We were very happy to find out that our Eureka expedition tent was fully up to challenge coming from the heavy, tropical rain. Suva seems to be the rainiest place in all Fiji and as we are still in the rainy season —which lasts from November until April, we enjoyed at least 2 heavy tropical showers a day quickly cooling down the heat.

Generally, a quick comment to the weather. Different places present quite different weather patterns, Suva has been the wettest, Savusavu one of the hottest with streamroom like humidity thanks to the famous hot springs from which the water is

pouring into in the ocean still steaming. Despite the rainy season, across the country rain has always been followed by beautiful sunshine and as long as there is some wind, the heat has been bearable and even fairly pleasant. Our biggest surprise has been that again despite the rainy season, there are very little mosquitos compared to other tropical places like Asia or Hawaii. We would be camping next to a lake or spend an entire day hiking in the thickest rainforest next to streams and sometimes standing water - mosquitos barely bothered us! Not even having dinner outside at night was a problem.

Back to our first two weeks in Suva, day after day, we met with different ministerial officials from Ministry of Health to Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry etc. We established excellent contact with the department of applied sciences at the University of the South Pacific. We met with other organizations like Conservation International that are working on preserving Fiji and putting in place large conservation areas. Wherever we went to present our project in person, we found vivid interest and support. We learned a lot about how Fiji is "functioning" politically and demographically speaking, where the problems are and how our project could positively impact this beautiful country. We learned that 50% of the adult population in Fiji is now suffering from diabetes which later results in leg amputations and blindness if not treated adequately in time. Unfortunately, medication is expensive and often not available in sufficient quantities.

During those two weeks we felt more in the rhythm of a 9-5 job than we had for years, dressed in official cloths (despite the heat!). Antje's voice started getting scratchy at the end of the second week after all the taking, explaining, presenting of our ideas. After these intense two weeks we felt it was time to get out in the field. All necessary arrangements were made for us to visit our first two potential islands.

Even though, we still don't entirely exclude this option, it had become obvious that any island smaller than at least a few thousand acres would present serious challenges when it comes to fresh water supply. This is of course essential for growing a tropical food paradise. Therefore, we started out with the islands in the larger acreage categories.

Island option #1 was several bus, ferry and boat rides away. We experienced our first trip on an open 15 feet long fiberglass boat with 40-hp engine. The ocean was rough that day, as a hurricane was just passing by a few hundred miles south of us, but the trip went fine and we were very happy to be on shore in the quietness of a barely inhabited island (about a 100 people). To give just a quick overview; this first option presents beautiful mountains and elevation, pristine rainforest, with huge mango trees that had been planted at the turn of the past century with a few last mangos left in the trees. The beaches are nice, but not yet entirely up to our expectations. Especially at low tide, the sand is mixed with broken corral and rocky formations —a little on the rough side. A year-round spring is on the island and with not too much work, it could supply enough water to start a decent tree nursery. All over the island, the topsoil is incredibly rich and humid thanks to the never cut rainforest. Planting young tress should be very easy. Some trails already exist on the island however they overgrow very fast if not constantly walked and maintained.

With a local guide, we explored the existing trails and went further into the rainforest. We hiked up to the high points to get a general overview of the island. There really is no lethal land animal in Fiji, which allows the indigenous people (and us eventually) to walk barefoot even in the forest. So, there is not much to worry about, but the rainy season is also hornet season in Fiji and these hornets taught us some respect. They are not aggressive if undisturbed, but whenever their nests, which are all over the rainforest, are shaken they come after the invader. Antje got stung in the butt, Roman just under the eye. Luckily after a first very intense pain, the swelling was not too bad and only some itching followed in the next days.

After days of jungle trekking we identified an ideal site for a first tree nursery and got a good overview on how the island could fit our project. The beach situation was probably the main downside, other than that the island was a true piece of paradise with a beautiful lagoon of turquoise waters on the north side.

Off to our next potential island (Island option #2), we spent plenty of more hours on more and more bumpy roads in buses far off the beaten tourist tracks. Generally speaking our stay was and continued to be very untypical for tourists. Most tourists either follow organized adventure tours or fly straight to their resort. We constantly mixed with the indigenous people, stayed in accommodations where only Fijians stay and traveled with them on the local buses (no windows and no air conditioning) and ferries (with a good deal of cockroaches) —an experience we can only recommend if you really want to get a feel of the country (the good and the bad).

Here just a few impressions to the food situation in Fiji. We had heard lots of different often contradictory comments from rawfoodist before arriving here. This is what we found: There is a lot of food grown in Fiji and there are beautiful markets in the cities, the only down side is that the diversity is very limited. The market in Suva is a huge hall of the size of an entire street block. There are literally tons of delicious fresh fruits and vegetables, but not as much variety as for instance Hawaii or Asia would offer. On most markets we would find lots of bananas in all kinds of shapes and colors, papaya, breadfruit, small pineapples sweet from top to bottom and passion fruits. Fruits like soursop, sugar apples, jackfruit can be found on the big market like in Suva. The general quality has been amazing. Only tomatoes, citrus and watermelon obviously don't seem to be doing as well in the tropical climate as in California for instance. We found the first really good avocados in Savusavu on Vanua Levu, the second largest island in Fiji. Coconuts were of course omnipresent even though, you had to come early to the market to get some young ones. The main vegetables consumed in Fiji are Cassava, Bele and Tarot. We learned to appreciate the two first ones in a raw state, but Tarot is a lost case when it comes to eating it raw.

To keep our balance with vegetables, we also found sweet potatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, different greens, some tiny lettuces. We generally tried to stay away from imported foods from Australia and New Zealand as they are far from being organic. The Agricultural department of Fiji is in the beginning steps of offering fertilizers to the Fijian farmers, luckily only simple mineral supplement at this point. If our project takes off as fast as anticipated, it might still be time to have an impact at this level before the

western chemical farming style takes over. Luckily, there is still a lot of awareness to keep chemical pesticides away. Our best bet has been to buy from the small farmers producing in more family garden style rather than large scale production.

The food situation of almost uninhabited islands is of course, a different story. There are no organized markets and most Fijians eat their fruits as they ripen. We ended up with all kinds of different stages of coconuts: young sweet ones full of juice and soft meat, the old ones, sprouted ones where the juice has transformed in a fluffy sponge that tastes like sweet sugar. We even enjoyed the coconut sprouts at times. In addition, we found papaya almost everywhere. With no exaggeration, we never ate as many coconuts and papayas as we did in the past weeks. The excitement when telling people that we would grow the largest possible diversity on the islands was pretty impressive. Unfortunately, the government is more concerned to promote crops that can be easily exported than to improve the food diversity for their own people. A lot of work is to be done in this regard to improve food diversity for us and the Fijians themselves.

So finally, back to Island option #2. Much larger and with more elevation than the first one, fresh water truly was to be found in abundance with beautiful streams, small rivers, waterfalls and natural swimming holes. We toured the entire island with a boat to find the best spots and this is where we found the beauty we were dreaming of: crystal clear water, colorful fish and coral, impressive rock formations, fine white sand beaches bordered by pristine rainforest and palm trees offering shade right on the beach, valleys with back fertile soil, clear springs you can drink from.... With this second island, we really have the impression of having found a forgotten pearl. The owners of the island are very open to our project and the potential for collaborations is excellent. We spend the most of our stay with our tent in a beautiful, idyllic valley and again we hiked with experienced guides many days up and down the forest and the streams. The first island was nice, this one was purely amazing. Unless it can get even better than this, we most probably have found what we came looking for.

Island option #3 except for the fact that it is slightly smaller in size, is very similar to our last jewel. There is a twist though, breathtaking high mountain cliffs add some edge to the general landscape.

We are now back in Suva to get on track with our communication with the US (broadband internet is almost inexistent outside the capital). In almost two months of travel we have visited three island one more beautiful than the other. We have one more to go and then we have to make a decision about which one is the most suitable for the project. It won't be easy, but luckily we already have a favorite.

To allow all of you to also get some visual impressions, we put in place a link on our website that we will regularly update with the pictures we take from Fiji and the islands we visit. Check out <http://www.genefitnutrition.com/fiji/fiji.html>

So far we have found Fiji to be way beyond our expectations. We love the people, the weather, the beautiful nature and the islands. As mentioned before, there is some work to do to increase the food biodiversity on the islands, but this is what our project

is all about anyway and with the openness for collaboration we have experienced up to this point it seems absolutely doable.

We can't wait to share all this with all of you on-site here in Fiji!

COMING SOON: We will soon post a short video clip of us saying hi from our island of choice on our website. So, stay tuned, there is more to come...

Much love to everybody back in the US,
Antje and Roman

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