

Roman and Antje's Island Quest - Episode #2

Dear friends,

Another four months have passed since we sent out the first episode. We can now happily announce that our exploration phase is accomplished with a lot more opportunities than we could have dreamed of when still in Los Angeles. After 4 months of non-stop travel, we have visited a total of 14 islands in three different countries, some of them completely unspoiled. We have seen places untouched by man's hand, magnificent primary rain forest, breathtaking waterfalls, sugar sand beaches, colorful coral reefs and, of course, ate the most delicious fruits the South Pacific has to offer. The travel conditions were sometimes exhausting, especially in remote locations, but we are doing very well and the spirits are up.

Despite the already incredible options we had found in Fiji, we decided to still check out the neighboring countries, just to make sure we would not regret our choices in any way later. We spend 2 weeks in a small island group under French jurisdiction just north of Fiji. One of the islands was truly magnificent, but we were confronted on one side with the worst of French bureaucracy and on the other with a customary land owning system that entirely refuses any legal contract or document. Rapidly changing kings and chiefs are in charge of the land and even though the current chief of the island would have loved to work with us, it would have been a project without any long term stability. So we had to pass for once.

Originally, this was supposed to be our last exploration trip, but during our travel Vanuatu was recommended to us several times as being ideal for our project. Vanuatu used to be under a split french and british colonial governance, but reached independence in 1975. Since then Vanuatu has become a Republic. To some degree exhausted from our travel to ever new places, we originally had not planned to visit this island group, but destiny had other plans. When reentering Fiji for the second time, the immigration officers who had given us 4 months of stay previously now said that according to the Fijian immigration law for the purpose of investment or business, only a 2-week visa could be given. Unaware of this, we had marked "business"

as purpose of our visit on our entry cards and not "holiday" just like before. Somewhat outraged, we hoped to be able to correct our status in Suva, but even there the immigration department would have only been able to extend our stay for an additional two weeks. The most reasonable option was ironically to leave the country and come back on a new renewable 4-month visitor/tourist visa. We were eager to finalize our agreements with the so far scouted locations, but knew also that the time was too short to allow final negotiations without pressure. Eventually, driven by the Fijian immigration department, we decided to take this last voyage to the Vanuatu islands —as time would show, the trip was entirely worth it.

We spent the first two weeks of our stay in Port Vila, the capital. Compared to Suva, Port Vila is considerably smaller and cleaner. The country is a tax shelter and quite obviously has attracted considerable foreign capital. Even though most of the locals are extremely poor, things don't seem to be just before falling apart like in Fiji. Cars are more up to date with catalytic converters and the air is breathable even during rush hour in the center of town. The french/english occupancy has left the country tri+ lingual, meaning a lot of people speak their native tong, almost every island has a different language, bislama is the name of the official language which sounds like a phonetically written slang version of english and english or french depending if they had been in an english or french school growing up. For us knowing french and english was very helpful and we kept flipping back and forth between the two. The Ni-Vanuatu are of more melanesian influence than the Fijians and even though they are wonderfully friendly once you talk to them, they seem a bit more "wild" at first sight. Traditional or customary culture seems far more present and valued especially in the outer islands where some communities intentionally reject modern influence and believe it or not even Christianity.

One of the first places we would explore in depth after arriving in a new city has always been the produce market and even here the traditional way of presenting food or of using leaves and natural material for food packaging was impressive. Plastic bags were quite rare and we ended up with baskets made out of coconut leaves that turned out way more practical than any shopping bag we ever possessed. Like in Fiji, diversity was not as great as in some places in Asia, but the quality of the food was extraordinary. The most incredible avocados, peanuts

fresh from the earth in a bundles, different nuts presented on the central stick of the banana leaf, bananas in all shapes and tastes, papaya, passion fruits, great citrus and to our big enjoyment, custard apples and soursop where in full season. We had never tasted better ones before. We discovered some new vegetables, bought lettuce also on the stick, found excellent cucumbers and much more. Everything was just a bit more rustic than in Fiji and definitely free of fertilizers or pesticides.

After intense research about the different outer islands, a specific island captured our attention and we decided to visit. The island has several layers of majestic plateaus of exceptional beauty and the saying that the older the island the more pristine the beaches certainly holds true for this one. As you can all see on the pictures, the beaches are absolutely breathtaking and the water is so clear that 150 feet underwater visibility allows for unbelievable snorkeling and diving in the surrounding coral reefs. This particular island as well as the neighboring islands are so far off track that only very few cargo boats pass per year, which forces the villages to be almost entirely self-sufficient. A small plane serves one of the neighboring islands once a week for mail and passenger transport. This plane is the main link to the rest of the world. The area used to have abundance of lobsters and crabs. Fishing these two and sending them to resorts in Vila and Santo is the main income for the islanders. Unfortunately, the more eager the villagers were to make money, the more the prices collapsed and the crustacea on these islands got endangered. To protect the two species, the fishery department just recently banned all sales.

When seeing all the problems western influence has brought to the islands, it is tempting to simply want to turn back to clock and encourage people to go back to their traditional ways of life. The reality is however that it is too late. The customary traditions and a lot of customary wisdom is disappearing to the regret of the villagers, but the attraction of the modern world is too strong. The younger generations have an insatiable thirst to learn about other countries and to understand what is happening in the world. Especially in Vanuatu, villagers would often gather around us and listen to us telling them about the US and Europe. Surprisingly September 11th was a main subject of interest. After a long evening they left happily thanking us for having shared the "stories". We, by the way, were surprised to see that

even in villages where barely any electricity was available, people would save the little fuel they had for a small generator to be able to watch Hollywood movies once in a while. As they have neither television nor radio, this is for many the only bridge to the modern world...

Change is unavoidable and the only question is how can this change happen in the benefit for the people and their land. Will it be the destruction of these few last pieces of paradise or can the mistakes done in so many other countries help to allow progress while preserving the land, the ocean and the people living from it. With our project we are strongly committed to do whatever we can to preserve these forgotten paradises.

To see the latest series of pictures, please use the following link: <http://www.genefitnutrition.com/Quest/Quest.html> .

We spent the last four months in Suva, Fiji's capital. We had meeting after meeting and lot of waiting time in between. Things here happen on Fiji time. The work (and the wait) finally paid off. An agreement for an island has been reached. The papers are now on the desk of the relevant governmental departments ready for the final signature. Should be no more than a simple formality, so we have been told. Please stay connected as this is still just the beginning! In the next newsletter, we will most likely be able to finally disclose the name, location, pictures and map of our island of choice.

Our work in Fiji being done for now, we are leaving Fiji today with much resistances. Our stay here has been truly incredible. The kindness of the Fijian people makes those 300 something oceandots in the middle of the Pacific a true haven of peace. We are now heading to Central America to pick up Honky Tonk, a 46 feet yacht we purchased for the project. The plan is to prepare the boat for the Pacific crossing over the winter. We will be sailing up and down the Mexican, Costa Rican and Panaman coast in search for seeds for the island. We decided to make the passage back to Fiji by the end of the Pacific hurricane season in April next year. In case some of you want to spend some time with us on the boat while we are a little closer to the US, send us an email. Also, we will need crew for the big passage in April, so please all interested parties apply now.

We thank all of you for your compassion and the many sweet e-mails we received in response to our last newsletter.

Much love et a bientot,
Antje and Roman

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