

The Fiji Islands

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We were not really in a hurry to leave the friendly Ha'apai Islands, so different from what we saw of the Kingdom of Tonga in Tongatapu, but the weather window was there: 25 to 30 knots of South-East turning East, this was perfect to cross the 450 miles gap to the Fiji in less than 3 days... So did we, after a pleasant downwind passage with our 2 jibs set as a butterfly's wings.

We chose to make landfall in Levuka, Ovalau Island, for several reasons. First, it is a small town, and we do not like big towns. Second, we read that it was a nice picturesque town with friendly people. Last but not least, we hoped that the paperwork and the formalities would be simpler and quicker than in any other big town in the country. We were quite happy concerning the first two points, but really disappointed concerning the last one: after 6 return journeys in a rather choppy sea between the boat and the wharf (without engine...) to bring the Biosecurity and Immigration Officers on board and back, it was done. 'Done', it's maybe a big word: we « only » had to run after the Health Officer during 2 days so that we could pay him (172.50 F\$, yes we know we are too honest) and we had to go to Suva to pay the Biosecurity Officer (90 F\$).

As we had arrived on a Friday, without knowing which Islands of the archipelago we wanted to visit afterwards, we only did the check-in... which prevented us from checking out – and therefore from going away – from Levuka before Monday. This was our first experience of the annoying administration of the Fijian Republic: you can go wherever you want in Fiji, but you have to provide the Administration with a very detailed schedule of what you plan to do, where and when. Don't they know that the weather influences our plans, and that on a cruising yacht you never know what you will do in the next month ? Furthermore, if you wish to visit other anchorages than the official Ports of Entry, you need a 'Cruising Permit'. It is – surprisingly – free to get one, but it takes one hour to obtain it in an office that is obviously not opened all the time. It only consists in a letter, written in Fijian, to the village chiefs on the islands we would wish to visit. The Fijian Authorities probably think that we have nothing to do except filling forms, papers and waiting in their Administration's offices. We have obviously no laundry to do, no repairs to make on the boat (or the dinghy outboard), no plane to catch a few days later...



Once these annoyances were carried out, we were happy to discover that, as expected, Levuka was a very nice town. The buildings seemed to come straight away from a Far West town of the mid-XIXth century. Everyone said « Bula, bula » (= Hello in Fijian) to us, smiling. Some people, seeing that we were strangers, said « Welcome! ». We obviously do not consider this as due, but it is always nice when the people make you feel they are happy to see you come and visit their place. Samu, for example, took us along the paths above the town, showing us the plantations and the viewpoints on the lagoon. Would we have had the time, he would have taken us to the waterfall a little further, and would have been keen to do it. Nothing asked in return, no one begging for the money we don't have and cannot give, no one trying to take advantage of our status of white european visitors. Mostly really nice and friendly people, eager to help and to make us enjoy our stay.



We would have been happy to stay more, but the uncomfortable anchorage facing the easterly trades and the passing time made us set sail towards other islands (which islands? when? where? with who? asks the Administration): Wakaya first, where we could not go ashore (it is a private island) but saw a turtle and lots of fishes in the water, and, after a quick stop in Suva, Yanuca which lies in the Beqa lagoon. We could go ashore there, and after a short « Sevusevu » ceremony, Josef – the chief of the only village on the island – guided us among the houses, the beaches, the school, the rugby ground where I was invited to play with the men (and even scored a try... but could not run anymore afterwards!!)... Everything was clean and tidy, there were even small yellow rubbish containers everywhere! We really enjoyed the place and would have, once more, loved to stay (the chief wanted to take us spearfishing and eventually catch octopus – Clairette dreams of catching an octopus!), but unfortunately we couldn't as we had to be near Nandi airport two days later.



A pleasant night of sailing later, we arrived in Lautoka where we could do all the paperwork (yeeeeees!!! paperwork!! had we already written that we do all this sailing only for the joy of filling multiple copies of diverse absurd forms??!): clearing in, officially disembarking our 2 guests who were leaving by plane the day after, and giving our (invented) plans for the next 2 weeks... One day of spearfishing with Josef lost because of such a finicky Administration.

We finally anchored near Denarau Marina, a resort which seemed completely artificial after what we had seen in Ovalau and in the small islands, but in which we found a very nice Fijian restaurant where we enjoyed very good traditional meals and which was a nice place for our friend's last evening in Fiji. A few hours later, we were waving at their plane while it was taking off from Nandi Airport. Because of the bad weather, we stayed 2 days more near the marina. We were starting to watch closely the weather between there and New Zealand, and as no weather window could be expected for at least one week, we decided to explore the neighbouring islands. Willing to avoid the crowded Malolo Island (there is a big resort and a marina there), we headed to a group of three uninhabited islands in the north of the Mamanuca Group. Very nice place, but roly anchorage, especially when the wind starts to blow from the East and the big chop manages to make its way around the small cape supposed to shelter us. We therefore moved to the calmer anchorages of the scenic Waya, which mountains had been attracting us since we had seen them on the horizon from Lautoka. After one night in Yalobi bay, protected from the North-East, the wind shifted unexpectedly to the South-West, and therefore we had to move on the other side of the island, in the equally nice Nalauwaki Bay. We did not go ashore on Waya. We felt good on our boat, in pleasant anchorages, as if we were on holiday, and slowly getting ready for the passage to New Zealand, regularly watching the weather forecasts... and anyway, the beautiful mountains were almost always covered by thick clouds.



As a weather « porthole » was tempting us, we decided that we would leave on Monday, September 12th. We therefore had to go back to Lautoka in order to obtain our clearance out (we met there three very nice Australian Grandpas who really knew how to behave in boring Customs Offices: one had borrowed a very comfortable armchair from an officer and fell asleep in minutes, almost snoring, while another was writing his postcards on the desk of another officer... a great moment!) and we filled our tanks and jerricans with all the diesel we could carry. A busy day later, everything was ready and we weighed anchor for our final destination: New Zealand!!

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