



RESILIENCE
THROUGH CRISIS

TOURISM STORIES PACIFIC

2022



UNWTO
World Tourism Organization

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Forewords	4
Introduction	7
Ainuu Tupai Saleimoa Vaai, Owner and Managing Director of Va-I-Moana Seaside Lodge Savaii, Samoa	8
Bob Bates, Managing Director of Trans Niugini Tours Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea	16
Edelene Albert, Owner of Yogi Dives B&B Koror, Palau	24
Eretia Monite, Hotel Owner of Tarabuka Hideaway Lodge Buariki (Tarawa), Kiribati	32
Kaboua John, Hotel Owner of Terau Beach Bungalow Abaiang, Kiribati	40
Kasimiro (Kasi) Taukeinikoro, Director of Rivers Fiji Southern Viti Levu, Fiji	48
Setareki Ledua, Captain of the Drua Experience Viseisei, Fiji	55

Acknowledgments

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) would like to thank its partners, the Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre (APTEC), the UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific (RSOAP) and the Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO) for their diligent coordination and support. Special recognition is made to Rachel Jones and Andrew Cavallaro from HELM and their associates for the implementation of this project.

The UNWTO Tourism Stories for the Pacific publication and video series would not have been made possible without the collaboration and investment from the following key contributors:

- Emma Campbell and Stephanie Robinson, Tourism Fiji
- Robert Ah Sam and Sheena Ng Lam, Samoa Tourism Authority
- Sarah Teetu Reymond, Kiribati Tourism Authority
- Alice Kuaningi and Joel Keimelo, Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority
- Ms. Onorina Fugawai, Pacific Trade Invest Australia

Acknowledgment is further due to UNWTO, RSOAP and SPTO colleagues for their coordination and involvement.

For UNWTO and RSOAP: Harry Hwang, Hompo Yoshiaki, Suzuki Hiroko, Marcelo Risi, Ishizaki Katsuhisa, Alcinda Trawen, Orianne Derrier, Marian Magsino, Junko Yoshida, Alberto Garcia, Juliana Contreras and Alba López Gete.

For SPTO: Chris Cocker, Christina Leala Gale, Zaheer Hassan.

Finally, UNWTO would like to show its uttermost appreciation to the champion storytellers of this project: Ainuu Tupai Saleimoa Vaai, Bob Bates, Edelene Albert, Eretia Monite, Kaboua John, Kasimiro Taukeinikoro and Setareki Ledua.

Foreword

World Tourism Organization.

UNWTO is proud to present 'UNWTO Tourism Stories for the Pacific, Resiliency Through Crisis', a project which illustrates the resilience of the travel and tourism sector in the face of crisis through the voices of the unique and resourceful Pacific Islands nations.

As the world slowly begins to recover from the pandemic's unprecedented impacts on our societies and economies, tourism's role in supporting livelihoods and contributing to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has regained momentum. This is especially true in Small Island Developing States such as the Pacific Island Countries who rely heavily on the export revenues generated through international tourism.

The seven stories presented in this book and its accompanying video series are vibrant testimonies of ingenuity, determination and solidarity from across the tourism sector. Through their own unique experiences, each storyteller offers a window into their lives: showing how important tourism was for them and their community, the challenges brought about by the pandemic and how they managed to overcome them, often with a renewed passion for tourism and a determination for sustainable growth.

These Pacific voices you are about to hear bring us hope and confidence in the recovery of international tourism and in the transformative shift of tourism into a more responsible and resilient sector. They showcase the exceptional resiliency of the Pacific Islands people and make clear how the global tourism sector can endure and built back better.

I am sincerely grateful to the Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre, the UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific and the Pacific Tourism Organization for their commitment and hard work, without which this project would not have been possible.

Zurab Pololikashvili
Secretary-General
World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Foreword

Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre.

I am delighted to release this UNWTO Tourism Stories Pacific book and its video series. As the supporting body of the UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific, the Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre (APTEC) is pleased to have contributed in leading this beautiful project to fruition.

The challenging times brought by the COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly strenuous effect in the tourism industry of our Asia and the Pacific region: we lost 94.2% of our international tourists in 2021 compared to 2019. This is no trivial fact for our Pacific Island neighbours whose population and economy rely greatly on international tourism revenue. The stories will give you a good insight into the hardships met by each of the interviewees from Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, Papua New Guinea and Samoa.

However, the most compelling part in the stories comes when our storytellers dig within their Pacific roots, resilience and strong sense of community to reflect, plan and rally around innovative ideas in preparation of the reopening of their country to international tourism. Many turned to the domestic tourism market to keep their business running, often merely to be able to sustain the jobs of their employees. Traditional handicrafts along with agricultural techniques and productions are also a key feature in these stories, a reminder of the enduring and rich identities one can encounter in the Pacific.

Finally, sustainable tourism practices are in each storyteller's mind and actions have often been already implemented to achieve their long-term goals towards the preservation of their environment and culture, and the prosperity of their communities.

I hope that these voices will appeal to your desire to travel back to the beautiful Pacific Islands and discover or re-discover again its diverse cultures and remarkable people.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the World Tourism Organization and the Pacific Tourism Organization for their unwavering support and collaboration to make this project possible.

Yoshiaki Hongo

President, Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre
Chief, UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific



Foreword

Pacific Tourism Organization.

COVID-19 has had serious and unprecedented impacts the world over but its effects on tourism have been particularly devastating. In the Pacific, the tourism industry is a lifeline for countless communities, contributing more than 20% of gross domestic product for many Pacific Island Countries (PICs). The Pacific economy contracted by 5.3% in 2020 and the more tourism dependent economies contracted from between 8% to as high as 15%. Asia-Pacific has been recognized as the hardest hit sub-region, registering an 84% decline in tourism growth, with forecasts predicting that international tourism will need between two to four years to return to pre-covid levels.

The general outlook is indeed stark but what it does not account for is the resilience of our Pacific people that drive the industry. Being at the forefront of climate change, Pacific islanders have long experienced catastrophic natural disasters which have in turn dealt significant blows to Pacific tourism. Yet, time and again, we have rebuilt, we have stood strong.

The response to COVID-19 has been no different. Whilst it has undoubtedly crippled economies and brought tourism to a standstill it has also presented us with a valuable opportunity to regroup, re-think the future of tourism and re-strategize towards a smarter, stronger, more sustainable and resilient Pacific tourism industry. It is with this faith, perseverance and optimism that we have weathered the pandemic and now begin to work towards welcoming the world back to our paradise, our Blue Pacific.

Throughout this e-book you will find truly inspiring stories, of everyday people, the heart and soul of our industry, that perfectly encapsulate the true Pacific spirit of innovation and strength. From Samoa to Papua New Guinea, Palau, Kiribati and Fiji, these tourism businesses offer awe-inspiring insight into the unique offerings of the Pacific and more importantly the people that characterize Pacific tourism with their determination, passion, commitment, pride and resilience.

It is our honour to have been able to contribute to this publication that shares important Pacific stories. We would like to thank UNWTO, the Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange Centre and the UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific for initiating and leading this project to fruition. It is my hope that these stories will inspire people to visit our islands and experience first-hand the magic of the Pacific and her people.

Christopher Roy Cocker
Chief Executive Officer
Pacific Tourism Organization

About this book

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit tourism operators in the South Pacific the immediate damage was devastating. The region shut its borders on international tourism, an industry with huge export revenue benefits and socio-economic potential for the Small Islands Developing States, and its local tourism operators and community suffered.

However, this book is proof of the resilience of these tourism stakeholders. Rather than giving up, closing doors and leaving the industry that they love, they used the pandemic to ensure their businesses would return better, stronger and with more sustainable development goals than they had ever had before.

In the following pages, we celebrate these operators, who in a time of global calamity, re-evaluated the way they did business to ensure they would come back on top, with a new and refreshed level of cultural and environmental understanding.

When Fiji's Drua Experience and Kiribati's Tarabuka Hideaway Lodge had to temporarily close their businesses, they used the time to understand more about their cultural and natural heritage. Drua Experience, a sailing canoe operator, visited communities across Fiji to learn more about ancient seafaring and boat building techniques, and worked hard to safeguard this fast-fading heritage for future generations. Tarabuka Hideaway Lodge in Kiribati invited its local community to learn and participate in cultural activities, encouraging more traditional ways of life, in the hope of becoming more self-sustainable in the future.

Rivers Fiji helped reach remote villages located deep in their rafting terrain in a vaccination push, ensuring the safety of local inhabitants. The business also remodelled its entire strategy to target a domestic audience, which helped sustain some income and allowed them to continue the unique conservation co-operative they had helped set up to protect their river from logging.

This approach resonated with Trans Niugini Tours in Papua New Guinea, who also devised alternative strategies and found success in pivoting to a domestic market. This turn of events enabled them to continue supporting the local community through the Rondon Road building project and hydropower system.

Other tourist operators sought to promote sustainable agriculture when COVID-19 affected the profitability of their businesses. Terau Beach Bungalow in Kiribati used the downtime to work on initiatives to plan for a more sustainable future by helping shift local agri-tourism towards organic practices. They led cleaning campaigns and helped their island achieve 100 percent organic status.

For Va-I-Moana Lodge in Samoa, sustaining jobs while diversifying skills was at stake as they transferred employees who had lost their jobs in tourism to work on the owner's sustainable cocoa plantation.

Finally, Yogi Dives B&B in Palau took a digital turn with its own online booking system while exploring sustainable practices with the production of organic food in its hydroponic gardens.

We invite you to dive into the following pages to discover all these stories for yourself. These are true testimonies of the Pacific region's resilience, solidarity and cultural pride, paving the way for a brighter future.

VA-I-MOANA
SEASIDE
LODGE

AINUU
TUPAI
SALEIMO
VAAI

SAMOA

On Savaii – Samoa’s ‘Big Island’ – locals use life skills they have earned from working the land and the ocean since they were children to get them through any obstacle thrown at them.

Whether it be cyclones, sharks in the sea as they spear-fish or food shortages. But no-one, anywhere on the Big Island of Savaii saw COVID-19 coming. And dealing with its effects has been something no local had a blueprint for.

But Savaii has an industrious population – their people have always been survivalists – so they were prepared to fight this new battle with everything they had.

Savaii, Samoa / Coordinates 13.6598° S, 172.4319° W



Like Ainu'u Tupa'i Saleimoa Vaai – owner and manager of Va-I-Moana Seaside Lodge on Savaii's spectacular sunset coast. He's also the owner and managing director of the Island Grill Bar & Restaurant in Apia – on the more populated island of Upolu – President of the Samoa Hotels Association and is on the board of directors for the Samoan Tourism Authority Board.

Saleimoa Vaai depends on tourism more than just about anyone in Samoa. Prior to the arrival of COVID-19, he was happy to be receiving the highest number of international travellers Samoa had ever seen. In 2019 – immediately before COVID-19 – Samoa had experienced a 4.8 percent increase in the number of international tourists from the year before, with 180,858 international tourists coming to Samoa throughout 2019.

“
Pre-COVID, we had about 34 workers with us at Va-I-Moana Lodge and we were heavily involved in a lot of community-based initiatives.



Ainuu Tupai Saleimoa Vaai

“Pre-COVID, for the tourism sector in Samoa we were on a high and trending towards a very good year,” he says. “Pre-COVID, we had about 34 workers with us at Va-I-Moana Lodge and we were heavily involved in a lot of community-based initiatives. We would always ensure that tourism was a big part of our lives out in this side of the island.”

Then in March 2020, as the pandemic began to rage around the world, Samoa shut its borders to international travellers. Overnight, international tourism became a thing of Savaii’s past, and the change was hard to swallow.



“To say that (COVID-19) has been challenging is an understatement,” Saleimoa Vaai says. “Post-COVID, we’ve seen a lot of losses job-wise from our own businesses. I think we’ve lost about three quarters of our employment, which is quite a lot in terms of losses, especially jobs in a community like ours where there are not too many jobs readily available, being so far away from the urban areas”. He says, “The hardest part was losing people. And a lot of our tourism workers, they are more like family.”

Though it wasn’t just Saleimoa Vaai and his employees who were affected, COVID-19’s effects were felt throughout the entire community.

“Pre-COVID, our communities were very involved and connected to our tourism business because it provided a lot of our farmers with income, who provided a lot of the vegetables and fruits,” he says. “A lot of their produce comes to us and we use it for our restaurants. The fishing community too, we take in quite a bit of their produce as well. And a lot of the youth groups, they used to come in and entertain so there were a lot of ties and connections within our community to our businesses.”

The Va-I-Moana Seaside Lodge was not the only tourism business on Savaii’s Sunset Coast. There is another hotel, Vaisala Hotel, and two beach fale operations – all in all, tourism provided a good deal of the jobs on the Sunset Coast. But when COVID struck, tourism came almost to a complete standstill, providing zero income for the community.

Saleimoa Vaai and the Savaii community, at large, were faced with a choice – to give up, or to come up with a way of moving forward through unprecedented economic times. Savaiians do not give up, no matter how big the waves around them, they paddle through every crisis. COVID-19 was no different.

“I think the tourism sector has been really resilient,” Saleomai Vaai says. “We had to start looking at other opportunities for our workers. We knew we couldn’t sustain and maintain the whole workforce, so we had to look at other opportunities, and that came with a lot of assistance from the Samoa Tourism Authority and our government.”

Samoa’s borders did not look to be opening to international tourists any time soon, so Saleomai Vaai looked at other opportunities to keep as many of his staff employed as possible. As co-owner of the Savaii Koko Plantation – which is Samoa’s largest exporter, including supplying top-quality cocoa to New Zealand premium chocolate manufacturer, Whittakers Chocolates (for a product called Single Origin Samoan Cocoa) – he was able to deploy the majority of his village’s youth and his laid-off staff to work and harvest the cocoa plantation. He also transferred some of his staff on Savaii to spend time in Samoa’s capital, Apia, to work at his restaurant, Island Grill Bar & Restaurant, on the neighbouring island of Upolu. He wanted them to gain extra skills, and to experience city living in case they needed to move to Apia for employment later.

“
Pre-COVID, our communities were very involved and connected to our tourism business because it provided a lot of our farmers with income, who provided a lot of the vegetables and fruits.

“We started a program whereby we are putting out some of our workers through RSE (Recognised Seasonal Employer), not only in the tourism side of things but also in the agricultural side,” he says. “Agriculture is part of our lives here in Samoa, especially in the rural communities.”

“We moved a lot of our workforce around to our other businesses, so coming and working at the restaurant in Upolu, to give them a bit of experience in terms of the differences in paces, where the business moves from a relaxed atmosphere that we have in Savaii, to the hustle and bustle of the urban areas of Upolu. Not only that, we moved a lot of our workers out towards the agricultural side of our business with the cocoa, teaching them various skills. This decision was primarily based on a financial perspective, where myself and my wife sat down and said we need to do something: it’s either we close down our tourism side or put it in hibernation, or we relook at how we can redirect our resources, especially our people.”

Saleimoa Vaai says, “We’ve really changed the way that we operate, to ensure that we can survive what’s happened with Covid, but also build ourselves up to be a bit more resilient to when these kind of events happen.”

To also revive the tourism industry – and to try to booster local morale and generate income – Saleimoa Vaai worked in close collaboration with the Samoa Tourist Association to start a Night Market initiative featuring hotels, restaurants, small business food vendors, handicraft makers and plant growers working together to sell their products at market, while at the same time creating a fun new family outing for people in Savaii. With so many countries in lockdown with people confined to their homes, these sorts of small events were designed to keep Savaiians’ spirits up. Samoans are, after all, very social people.

“I think we’ve had to change the way we think in tourism and how we do things because I think collaboration is now the key,” Saleimoa Vaai says. “I think prior to COVID, everybody had their own lane and niche markets that they worked with and they did well. But with the changes that COVID has brought across, it’s changed a lot of the way we think and as an industry we’ve had to work together in more ways than I’ve seen prior to all this. The classic example is the night market initiatives where we’ve had to change the way hotels and restaurants and handicraft people and everyone looks at selling their goods. We had to combine and change the ways we do things so that we work together. Hopefully when things return to some sort of normality, that partnership and collaboration continues. That’s hopefully the biggest change that will come out of all of this.”

Above all, Saleimoa Vaai remains optimistic and determined. He says, “All we can do, especially at these times of uncertainty and the challenges we are all facing, is bear with it, persevere, as there is a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“
We’ve really changed the way that we operate, to ensure that we can survive what’s happened with COVID, but also build ourselves up to be a bit more resilient to when these kind of events happen.



TRANS
NIUGINI
TOURS

BOB BATES

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

You won't find a foreign-born person in Papua New Guinea who knows more about Papua New Guinea than Bob Bates. But then, having spent over 50 years in the country, these days you would have to call him a local.

For the past 35 of his 50-plus years in the country, this Australian-born engineer has devoted his life towards establishing the most impressive collection of award-winning wilderness lodges across the country. His lodges attracted luxury-seeking foreign tourists – mostly from the United States, Australia and Europe – keen to discover the planet's last great wilderness, all without missing out on a hot shower and a gourmet meal.

He was not only the owner of Papua New Guinea's most impressive luxury lodges (including the award-winning Ambua Lodge, Sepik Spirit Lodge and Rondon Ridge Lodge), but his company, Trans Niugini Tours (TNT), was the only inbound operator that not only owned and managed wilderness lodges, but also owned its own fleet of aircraft, vehicles and boats.

Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea / Coordinates 5.9000° S, 144.2642° E



When it came to showing off Papua New Guinea to the world, no-one came close to Trans Niugini Tours. And then COVID-19 struck and everything changed in a heartbeat. International travel was cancelled, and overnight, 95 percent of Trans Niugini Tours' business disappeared, just like that.

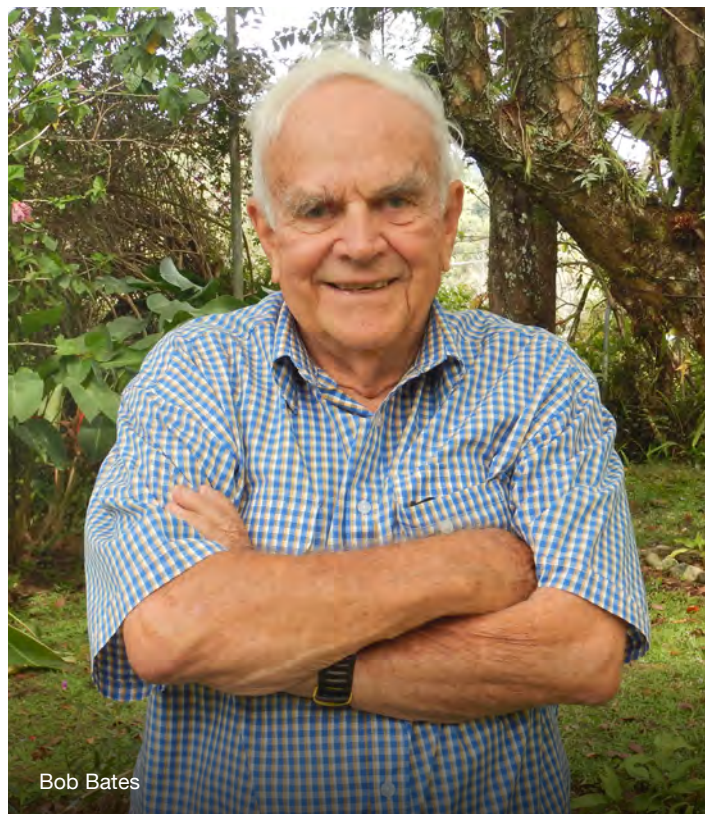
"It (the affects of COVID-19) was absolutely devastating," Bates says. "We went from a company that had 95 percent of its business from the international market to zero revenue."

“

We went from a company that had 95 percent of its business from the international market to zero revenue.



Pre-COVID, TNT employed 250 nationals at the company’s lodges. They worked in management, food service, housekeeping, gardening, security, driving, tours and bird guiding; and the company also supported local businesses by buying supplies and using the services of local suppliers.



Bates was forced into damage control. With zero revenue, the company had no choice but to scale down to about 10 percent of the size it was before March 2020. They had to put off staff they couldn’t afford to keep on: around 200 workers in total. There simply wasn’t any money coming in to pay them. Most went back to their village to wait until TNT could employ them again.



With no international travellers allowed into the country, Bates and his team had to think quickly to steer the company towards a new marketing strategy which catered for a complete change of market. Now, they only had Papua New Guinea nationals and expatriates living in Papua New Guinea to aim at.

Bates decided to target the capital of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby, campaigning hard to attract this new market to his lodges through social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, digital advertisements and email marketing, using a staff of just 50.

“We had little choice but to go after the domestic market,” Bates says. “And we did it fairly seriously. We marketed to the domestic market quite strongly, and the result exceeded all our expectations. The number of people that we got from our domestic market was far greater than what we expected.”

TNT discovered a whole new way their lodges could be enjoyed by guests. Where international guests came for the wilderness experience, locals also came to be married, or to have birthday parties. It has forced a rethink for the way TNT does business, even after international tourists are allowed back into Papua New Guinea.

“There’s a whole new market out there that we never got before and we’re getting now,” Bates says. “The domestic market could become our main market. And no doubt, our international market is going to come back. And the international market is going to be the cream on the top for our domestic market. I can almost see that taking place in the future. We have learned that both the domestic and international markets are important. We will now market to both groups.”

Though TNT’s pivot towards the domestic market wasn’t the only initiative to take place during these COVID-affected years. TNT stayed busy during the entire period, working hard to ensure they kept as many jobs for locals as they possibly could. It meant Bates worked long hours, starting his day at around 6am.

One of the projects he is proudest about is the near completion of the Road to Rondon (though it hasn’t been officially opened, the road is now accessible) – a road building project he has funded which employed local workers to construct a road through the forest to one of his signature properties, Rondon Ridge Lodge.

It provides a new eight kilometre road from the centre of Mount Hagen to Rondon Ridge – including the construction of bridges – built to replace a walking track that existed for people going to town.

“
We have learned that both the domestic and international markets are important. We will now market to both groups.

Rondon Ridge Lodge is located on the outer fringes of Kubor Range in the Western Provinces of Papua New Guinea at 2,350 metres above sea level. This is a wild part of the country, and getting guests in from the city of Mount Hagen has been a tricky task.

The road building was stalled because of COVID, meaning workers had no employment, but Bates soon got the project back up and running.

“Once we changed our marketing strategy and started to welcome national guests, we created the funds to continue with the road,” he says. “The work on the road has continued as an ongoing project and continues today. We redeployed existing staff to do this work (on the road).”

The continuation of the road was necessary to keep good access to the lodge, but also to allow the local people to go to school easily and to travel to and from the township of Mount Hagen. There are now buses traveling between the local community in the Rondon Ridge area and Mount Hagen. And those with gardens who grow food can now get their produce to market much easier. Previously, the road was only a walking track and people had to carry their produce. TNT has also continued to ensure power is provided to the local community through a hydropower system created by the company.

TNT has worked with a local company since COVID-19 struck in an effort to allow for more sustainability in its operations, with the addition of beehives added to Rondon Ridge Lodge.

“During the COVID period, we had a local company approach us and ask us to put in some beehives, as there is a shortage of bees in this country. To help pollinate other produce,” Bates says. “Long term wise, maybe we can also get some honey we can sell.”

While he has long considered sustainability an important factor in its business operations, the effects of COVID have made Bates understand just how important caring for the local community and environment is.

“Positive relationships with the villages and people are integral to our success,” he says. “We will continue to work with the local villages and communities, providing jobs, income, and hydropower. We will also work to bring tourists to the villages so that they become aware of the different customs and purchase local products.”

Bates is even more determined since COVID hit to continue to maintain the wilderness aspect of his lodges. The addition of the beehives – and using solar power, hydropower and filtered water systems in his lodge, and getting rid of plastic bottled water – has him thinking more about sustainability to help future generations after he is gone.

“It was very difficult to suddenly experience zero revenue and then try and build the business up again,” he says. “It’s been challenging times but we’re still around and we’re likely to be in another 40 years too.”

“

We will continue to work with the local villages and communities, providing jobs, income, and hydropower. We will also work to bring tourists to the villages so that they become aware of the different customs and purchase local products.



YOGI
DIVES
B & B

EDELENE ALBERT

PALAU

Palau local Edelene Albert (Edee) was getting very comfortable before COVID-19 hit. The trilingual yoga enthusiast had travelled the world before returning to her island paradise to run a business, Yogi Dives B&B, in an industry she had got to know well through her travels.

She started small, running a simple Bed & Breakfast with just one bedroom after she repaired her mother's house. She kept working on the property with the profits she made from the business – her room for let was listed on Airbnb.

In the lead-up to March 2020, she had worked patiently to increase the number of rooms to three, and her business was really starting to take off within an island group known internationally for the pristine reefs and lagoons it offers travellers, especially snorkelers and divers. Her business name – Yogi Dives B&B – reflected which segment of the market she aimed most at.

Koror, Palau / Coordinates 7.3376° N, 134.4889° E



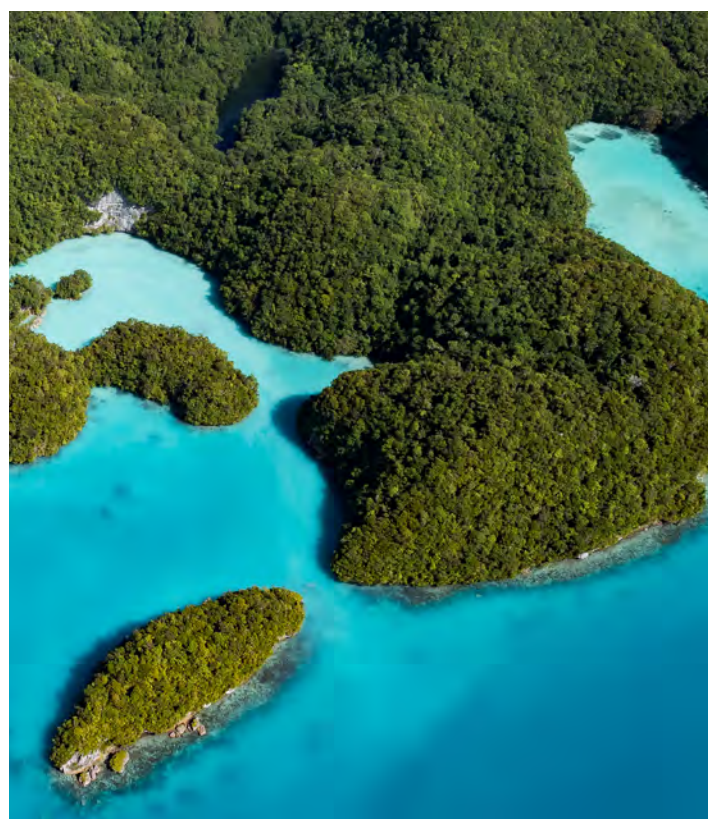
Palau is an archipelago of around 200 mostly volcanic islands surrounded by a stunning blue lagoon. Diving is the number one tourist activity here, with its hugely diverse marine life attracting keen divers by the plane full – it is so diverse and bountiful the islands earned themselves the nickname: ‘the underwater Serengeti’ after the African wilderness area famous for its wildlife. Koror is home to two-thirds of the population here, and it is where you will find most of the country’s tourist facilities, and its best restaurants.

“We had so many more tourists coming in before COVID,” she says ruefully, thinking back to the days before the pandemic. Then COVID-19 hit the world in March 2020 and the island nation of Palau closed its borders to international travellers to keep them safe from the virus. Her business changed overnight.

“Once COVID hit, the number of tourists coming in was close to zero and then got to a point where we had no tourists whatsoever,” she says. “I really had to take a few steps back and contemplate what was going on.”

“

It (COVID) made me think about new innovations and how I could move forward in the future and how I would stay afloat during this time.



With the borders shut, there was no revenue from travellers to keep Edee going. “It (COVID) made me think about new innovations and how I could move forward in the future and how I would stay afloat during this time,” she says. “It’s so fortunate that our COVID situation here has been so much milder than any other countries in the world. I know and understand that a lot of other nations were facing hardships, we’ve been fortunate to not have as many COVID cases here.”

But Edee could not just sit back and hope COVID would soon be over – though she says she initially thought the isolation caused by the pandemic would only last a very short time.

“I realised I needed to make a change the first month that COVID hit,” she says “But I remember I thought to myself: COVID is not going to last long, it’ll be over and we’ll be back to normal.”



Of course, that was not to be the case. So Edee set about being as constructive and innovative during COVID as she could be. She was able to access COVID relief funds to continue with the repairs and renovations on her B&B, adding four more rooms to the original dwelling.

She was able to maximise these funds by hiring her uncle, cousins and some of the locals who were now unemployed because of COVID to work for her. This way, she was able to plan for her future, while providing much needed income for her family, and for other locals in Koror.

But her plan wasn't simply to build more rooms – the changes were all part of a much bigger picture, one in which Edee identified a different market would emerge once people could travel again.

“When COVID hit Palau, I was thinking that some time in the future people would be travelling on a more economical basis and I needed to address that issue with my B&B,” she says. “I know that prices for accommodation are high, especially in the hotels. So, what I thought about doing was creating a hostel room where people who are solo travellers, and on a budget, would be able to visit Palau. I'm now able to provide that service.”

She says, “From the one bedroom I had when I first started, I now have seven bedrooms and I am able to accommodate 29 or more people.”

Yogi Dives B&B now has two whole levels dedicated to accommodation, including seven bedrooms with six bathrooms. The B&B with the room offerings she has been able to now add is the first of its kind in Koror.

What is more, with help from Pacific Trade Invest Australia – through the Digital Tourism program – she has been able to create a website with a booking engine, so that her business will be much more visible to outside travellers when they can return to Palau than it was before COVID. “I'm so fortunate that I was able to find Pacific Trade Invest Australia's Digital Tourism program on the island,” she says. “Their presence here has given me so much support in what I'm doing. I was able to create a website and with it, they provided a booking engine and a channel manager for me to be able to market my B&B. The online presence that I have now is so important for the tourists that I have coming in to my island.”

She has also moved towards making her business more environmentally sustainable in an island nation celebrated internationally as a global leader in the protection of fragile marine ecosystems. Palau has a history of strong environmental conservation policies, ever since the 1950s with its creation of wildlife preserves which last to this day. It even created the world's first shark sanctuary in 2009 to protect an asset valuable to its tourism industry – Palau's shark dives are famous throughout the planet. Like most low-lying Pacific nations, major environmental threats like rising sea levels will affect it drastically if nothing is done.

“
When COVID hit Palau, I was thinking that some time in the future people would be travelling on a more economical basis and I needed to address that issue with my B&B.

With the help of a friend, she used the open space on her roof-top after repairs to build a hydroponic farm with enough planting holes for 300 plants. With fresh fruit and vegetables in Palau hard to come by on an island nation that is just 466 square kilometres in land area, Edee can now provide guests with their own vegetables straight from the garden.

“I love and I have a passion for health and healthy eating,” she says. “And so I was able to create a hydroponic system, which I hope in the future would help to build a more sustainable future in terms of produce here at my B&B place and with my family.”

She has planted lemon, papaya and pineapples in her garden too, which can be frozen to be used for fresh juices when she starts to receive guests again, and she has planted different herbs to use in her meal preparation.

Edee has also been able to sustain a small income through these long months of COVID isolation by providing yoga classes to the local population of Koror. Where she once taught yoga and qi gong to international travellers, she now markets her classes to locals, hoping that the mindfulness yoga offers relief, and exercise for locals.

Edee still has a lot of bills to pay from the renovations and knows that it is going to take some time before tourism returns to its pre-COVID levels, especially while variants of the virus continue to play havoc on the industry world-wide. But she is positive that she will soon be able to receive more guests again, particularly with innovations such as travel bubbles between countries – the travel bubble between Taiwan and Palau created in August 2021, provided income for tourism operators while it lasted, and may be reinstated soon.

Her property has the tick of approval for ‘Safe For You’ from the Palau Government and she has updated her website as part of local tourism’s ready and recovery process to make sure guests feel safe in her property.

“I enjoy so much the people I meet coming through to my B&B,” she says. “I’ve had some wonderful people come through here. And I’ve learned so much from them that I will never forget. There is so much potential here with what the future has to offer. And I think that as long as we stay positive, we can do anything we endeavour to do. If we continue to look at change in a positive way, whether it’s COVID or anything else, we will have a bright future ahead of us.”

“
I’ve had some wonderful people come through here. And I’ve learned so much from them that I will never forget. There is so much potential here with what the future has to offer. And I think that as long as we stay positive, we can do anything we endeavour to do.





TARABUKA
HIDEAWAY
LODGE

ERETIA MONITE

KIRIBATI

When COVID-19 struck the world and international travellers could no longer come to Kiribati, local tourism operator Eretia Monite is the first to admit: she panicked. “We were very scared of this COVID-19,” she says.

“We were not sure of what to do, whether to keep the business running or to close. We were really, really worried.” For four years Eretia had owned and ran one of the only accommodation lodges in Buariki Village, a community of around 1,000 locals, 30 kilometres north of Kiribati’s capital, South Tarawa. She employed 12 local staff and 60 percent of her guests came from overseas from 2018 to 2020.

Life for Eretia had been simple and peaceful before COVID-19 hit the world: the island group’s glowing reputation for its beaches and lagoons that offer world-class diving and fishing had kept a steady flow of international visitors coming through her accommodation. Visitors spent their days out on the water or just enjoying the simplicity of life in Kiribati. “People help each other and they share resources,” Eretia says. “And they live according to what the day provides.”

Buariki (Tarawa), Kiribati / Coordinates 13.6598° S, 172.4319° W



Kiribati is an island nation comprised mostly of ocean – so there were plenty of quiet places for visitors to explore by themselves. Kiribati is only 811 square kilometres in land mass, but it's surrounded by over three million square kilometres of ocean, home to some of the planet's best deep sea and bone fishing. Tarawa itself is home to a huge lagoon – at over 500 square kilometres in size – that was a popular spot for tourists.

Visitors also came to see where one of the biggest and bloodiest battles of World War Two took place – in 1943, 6,000 soldiers died when the US Marines took Tarawa back from the Japanese forces. Buariki Village itself marked the final battle – the Battle of Buariki marked the end of the Japanese occupation of Kiribati.

“
I had to be a mother, looking after one of my daughters who is epileptic. With the closure of our borders, we had no overseas guests and no income.



Eretia Monite

But come March 2020, the Kiribati Government closed its borders to protect its people from a worldwide pandemic. And overnight, Eretia’s business came to a grinding halt. With no tourists to accommodate, she had no way of making revenue.

“The hardest moment was to let go of some of my staff and to try and keep the business going,” Eretia says. “We received very little revenue and the saddest part of it was to let go of our staff. I also had to do most of the work. And at the same time, I had to be a mother, looking after one of my daughters who is epileptic. With the closure of our borders, we had no overseas guests and no income. And I could not pay my staff. All of this made me realize I needed to make a change”.



Eretia was at a cross-roads, one that so many businesses across the world faced: should she struggle to keep going with her business, or close up altogether? She weighed up her options and decided to push on, but she knew she would have to change everything about the way she ran her lodge, with no international tourists to attract any longer.

Realising she now had only a domestic clientele to draw from, she decided to completely change the way she marketed her accommodation. “A big change we made to our business in response to COVID-19 was to change our target audience to domestic tourism,” she says. “And part of that change was we had to offer very discounted rates. We also added small business activities that involved our local community to participate, like cake baking, making local houses, building kennels and planting and cultivating resilient crops.”

In a time of global calamity, Eretia decided the best way to deal with the situation was to engage locals to value their traditions and cultures through training in everything from handicraft making to building local houses to teaching them traditional dances that had been ignored in modern times. If the world was imploding around them, they had to dig deep into their historical ways to move ahead. Sustainability became her focus, and rather than bemoaning the calamity of a global pandemic, she saw an opportunity to help teach local people just how rich they were in many other ways that had nothing to do with international traveller’s expenditure.

“I’m most proud of how I tried very hard to keep the hotel survive in time of this pandemic and in starting to re-engage some members of my community in the new business,” she says. “I think what I have done, I have helped encourage domestic tourism to grow by having local visitors to come to my hotel. This has in turn provided opportunities to my local community who work and supply local foods and materials for the hotel.”

One of the activities Tarabuka Hideaway Lodge offered domestic guests after COVID hit was learning to build local traditional sailing canoes. Eretia worked with traditional canoe builders from her village and involved the local people, teaching them to build canoes using local materials and knowledge passed down through generations of Kiribati people.

“One of the activities we have done during this COVID times is starting to building traditional sailing canoes,” she says. “This is very important because it’s about the people learning and rediscovering their culture. There is a lot of importance in having these canoes which they can use for fishing, and also to learn how to survive in the sea, because this is very important for them.”

“
I’m most proud of how I tried very hard to keep the hotel survive in time of this pandemic and in starting to re-engage some members of my community in the new business.

“COVID-19 has made us realise the importance of our traditional way of life,” Eretia says. “Our young people must learn local survival skills like growing their own food, planting resilience crops such as giant swamp taro, and building canoes, and fishing. All these local community engagements better prepared us and locals for tourism developments and a sustainable future.”

It has also helped locals to appreciate and to learn more about their scarce resources, and to allow tourism in the area to develop totally from the natural environment around them.

Eretia also worked to ensure the local community of Buariki Village’s history and its myths will be kept alive by involving local storytellers from the community, and providing a place for them to come and tell their stories to locals, especially young people, to ensure they understood their unique history.

“The future looks promising with local tourism now,” Eretia says. “During COVID-19, there was virtually no business because I had concentrated on overseas visitors. So my advice to other tourism operators is to never give up even with COVID-19, as there are always opportunities that can arise. If there is a will, there is a way.”

“
Our young people must learn local survival skills like growing their own food, planting resilience crops such as giant swamp taro, and building canoes, and fishing. All these local community engagements better prepared us and locals for tourism developments and a sustainable future.



TERAU
BEACH
BUNGALOW

KABOUA
JOHN

KIRIBATI

Close your eyes and picture a Pacific Island paradise: you are seeing azure-blue seas lapping onto white sand beaches, fringed by coconut trees, right? Well, that's Abaiang in Kiribati you're visualising, traditionally known as the land in the North.

Close enough to Kiribati's capital, Tarawa, to make for an easy boat trip or even shorter plane trip, Abaiang is the epitome of South Seas Utopia. Measuring barely 16 square kilometres in land mass, it is surrounded entirely by one of the Pacific's most beautiful lagoons – a body of water which dwarfs the island. Measuring 25 kilometres by eight kilometres, it is as beautiful as Bora Bora's much more famous lagoon – ringed by silica-sandy beaches, filled with coral and plenty of fish.

In this era of modern tourism, no paradise like Abaiang ever remains a secret. And so it was that tourists seeking a watery tropical escape came here in increasing numbers: to fish, kayak, snorkel, dive or just to loll in its pristine waters. Abaiang is also known as the cradle of Christianity in Kiribati and the first Kiribati island to have been introduced to the Christian faith following the arrival of Protestant missionaries, Dr Rev. Hiram Bingham in the 1857: tourists could come to observe the first tall building in the country, a tower cathedral church built right beside the water; and other early European Protestant Missionary history dating back to the mid-1800s.

Abaiang, Kiribati / Coordinates 2.0000° N, 173.0000° E



Kaboua John grew up here and decided in 2013 to build a guesthouse – Terau Beach Bungalow – to provide accommodation for this growing market of international travellers, and to help provide employment for others on the island.

By 2014, his bungalow had become one of the country's best known and was a magnet for travellers seeking accommodation beside arguably the country's prettiest lagoon. Most of his business came from international visitors – between 70 and 80 percent of his customers and he employed six locals. He ran cultural village tours, island tours and organised fishing tours for guests, snorkelling, kayaking or head out on day tours by boat to tiny islets throughout the lagoon.

“

It didn't only help me as an individual but Terau Beach Bungalow was known to really improve the village's livelihood.



“It didn't only help me as an individual but Terau Beach Bungalow was known to really improve the village's livelihood through income generation for transport operators, fishermen, farmers, handicraft makers and the whole community in Abaiang Island,” Kaboua says.

And then, COVID-19 came along and changed everything overnight.



In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and the Kiribati border was closed to all international travellers. “I felt concerned about my business knowing that most of our guests were from overseas,” he says.

But Kaboua decided this would be a fine time to come up with an even bigger plan. Rather than curse the deadly virus and wait till Kiribati's borders opened to travellers again, Kaboua worked on initiatives to keep his bungalow running.



“When I knew there was no profit at all, I decided to build a small retail store and use this pandemic time to do renovations, and attended the online virtual training organized by the Kiribati Tourism Authority to learn more on how to deal with guests in the new normal era and to help us sustain our business during the pandemic,” he says.

Besides owning a guesthouse on Abaiang, Kaboua by profession serves as Assistant Agricultural Extension Officer within the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agricultural Development for the Kiribati Government. His passion for agri-tourism and community agriculture and tourism projects is part of a larger fight that Abaiang and Kiribati are up against – it is one every bit as formidable as dealing with a worldwide pandemic.

Climate change has already begun to affect the island of Abaiang. As has been the case for many low-lying coral atolls throughout the Pacific. Some islands in Kiribati have felt the impact of climate change and thus some houses and villages have been abandoned as more frequent storms and higher tidal surges have eroded parts of the island closest to the lagoon. Some locals have been forced to relocate inland.

During COVID-19, Kaboua has been one of the major players in the island’s shift towards becoming a certified organic island, ensuring 100 percent of its agriculture is produced organically and sustainably. Kaboua did the majority of the work on Abaiang to make it a bona fide organic island.

As part of this push, he organised and led cleaning campaigns in each village on the island. And he worked hard on educating locals about looking after their island – particularly in regard to plastic litter.

“As part of living the sustainable dreams I’m so passionate about, I started advocating on cleaning campaigns from our hotels,” he says. “Then I extended this to villages in Abaiang promoting and raising awareness on plastic littering for the villagers to practice living plastic litter-free in their homes because I understand that the grassroots level should be the one very important group of society we need to work with. They’re the ones that can advocate this through home education to their young generations. I believe this will be a key supporting factor to encourage the communities to heavily rely on organic food and less on imported foods and goods which is one main contributing factor to increasing plastic waste on the island.”

He also conducted agricultural hands-on training to communities on the island to enable them to plant organic food – so they can also sell it to hotels as income generation as tourists begin to come back. As a huge believer in home-based gardening for communities on Abaiang to make themselves both sustainable and profitable for the future, he encouraged the communities of Abaiang to plant coconut trees to continue producing coco sap sugar – sugar made from toddy juice – as one of their income streams, without having to rely quite so much on copra (dried coconut kernels from which coconut oil is extracted). He was a major voice in supporting the growth and the promotion of virgin coconut oil made entirely from organic produce.

“
I believe this will be a key supporting factor to encourage the communities to heavily rely on organic food and less on imported foods and goods which is one main contributing factor to increasing plastic waste on the island.

Kaboua has also worked with local communities in Abaiang through partnerships to ensure all materials to be used for constructing bungalows and renovating existing bungalows are supplied from local communities, such as pandanus leaves and trunks, and coconut tree trunks. His own bungalow was built using locally grown materials and Kiribati traditional building skills – he has worked to ensure local builders gain employment in this area, utilising knowledge handed down through generations of local builders.

“It’s true that there may be challenges to come across in the future,” he says. “But you need to try and work really hard to address them and refrain from fearing your challenges. I know my business will start growing again as there will be an increase in the number of travellers in future when our border opens, and I’ll experience revenue flows into my business like before. I believe that there will be an increased number of visitors to Kiribati when the border reopens. I want to encourage all I-Kiribati – all the communities and households – to start preparing and beautifying their islands and homes before this reopening. They need to make use of their local skills and knowledge and talents which will support them and their livelihoods through income earning from cutting toddy, navigation, making a thatched roof made from dry pandanus leaves, or string making from coconut fibre, gardening, coconut husking, cooking and many more things that will help them generate income when travellers come back.”

Abaiang is one of the Pacific’s most beautiful destinations, but Kaboua said he knows keeping it this way as climate change becomes a bigger issue, is an important task as dealing with anything a global pandemic throws at the island. He thinks the time off from international tourism during the pandemic will be beneficial ultimately to the island, when the environmental standards put in place during this down-time – like litter campaigns and making the island 100% organic – will help to boost Abaiang’s appeal to tourists from all over the world. He wants tourists to now feel they are part of the solution to climate change, not part of the problem.

And sometimes it’s the simple things that stay with travellers the longest. “At Terau Beach Bungalow, one of our guests’ activities was encouraging guests to plant one coconut tree and put their name on it,” he says. “I believe this will help ensure our guests come back to check on their tree. As part of retaining guests’ interest to visit again, we keep communicating with them and updating them on their coconut trees, sharing videos and photos of how it’s growing. That way they feel they leave something of themselves on Abaiang and it might give them a reason to return.”

“
I know my business will start growing again as there will be an increase in the number of travellers in future when our border opens, and I’ll experience revenue flows into my business like before.



RIVERS
FIJI

KASIMIRO
(KASI)
TAUKEINIKORO

FIJI

When you think of Fiji, it's the beaches and blue ocean that come to mind. All across the world, Fiji epitomises the very idea of the tropics. Everyone from Hollywood hot-shots to value-seeking families come here looking for the ultimate South Seas getaway.

But Fiji's beaches and ocean are only a sample of what Fiji offers. For a completely different take on paradise, travellers should head inland from the coast on Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, for a rafting or kayaking journey through one of the Pacific's most pristine conservation areas. Here the Navua River flows for 65 kilometres from the highlands of Viti Levu to the island's south coast, where you'll find over 50 waterfalls.

Narrow canyons 50 metres high slice straight through volcanic rock where passage seems barely wide enough for rafts to pass. The surrounding forest, with its huge banyan trees and gigantic sago palms and ferns, block out the sunshine.

Southern Viti Levu, Fiji / Coordinates 17.8483° S, 178.0118° E



Rivers Fiji operates in this stunning wilderness. They are Fiji's only river rafting company that operates classes 2 & 3 river section. This is one of the South Pacific's most pristine rivers, protected by one of the most unique conservation co-operations in the world. Land-owning clans (mataqali), local villages, Government and Rivers Fiji came together to protect the Upper Navua River, within the Upper Navua Conservation Area (UNCA).

In 2006, the UNCA became the first Ramsar site in Fiji. The Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty to protect fragile wetlands, which is extremely vital for the preservation of the biodiversity and subsequently the health and well being of the local communities.

Kasimiro Taukeinikoro was instrumental in helping to bring everyone together to preserve this special part of Fiji – creating a 615 hectare protected wilderness.



Kasimiro (Kasi) Taukeinikoro

Rivers Fiji director Kasimiro Taukeinikoro was instrumental in helping to bring everyone together to preserve this special part of Fiji – creating a 615 hectare protected wilderness, spread across 24 kilometres of river, with a 200 metre wide forest buffer on each side. This area is home to some of Fiji's rarest endemic plants and animals, including at least three that are endangered.

The arrangement had worked perfectly. Remote communities received an income from the rafting business, and locals from the villages trained to become river guides, while the protection of the area ensured food and water sources stayed pristine.



Rivers Fiji is also affiliated to the Duavata Sustainable Collective. Taukeinikoro says. “The Duavata Sustainable Collective is a group of tourism operators and they all have the same thing in mind; to protect and preserve the environment, and be a voice for the communities.”

By March 2020, the company employed 18 river guides and three office staff. Rivers Fiji operated raft and kayaking tours on two sections of the river – the Upper Navua and the Middle Navua River – operating three days a week on each river. They also ran multi-day camping and cultural experience trips for larger university groups to interact with these remote villages, learning about their way of life.

And then COVID-19 hit, and Fiji closed its borders and international visitors, who had been Rivers Fiji’s main customers, couldn’t enter Fiji.

“When COVID happened, it really struck us in the gut. The hardest moment was sending people home and seeing everyone struggle, but you can’t do anything about it,” says Taukeinikoro.

Taukeinikoro knew he had to think on his feet. Throughout the company’s 24 year history, they had faced obstacles. This pandemic, Taukeinikoro figured, was just another.

“The great challenge was that we had bills to pay, even though we were not operating,” he says. “We have the property to take care for and the insurance and the loans.” Forced to sell some of the company’s assets, Taukeinikoro made the decision to target the local tourism market by dropping prices for rafting and kayaking trips by 75 percent.

“We were just doing it to get the boys (guides) working and that was fine with us,” Taukeinikoro says. “So that’s what we did. We sent out fliers quickly and to the organisations and the locals and put an ad in the paper to say ‘hey, this is a 75 percent discount’, and then... boom! It exploded and people were coming from everywhere.”

Though they were only making enough money to pay the guides, what mattered to Taukeinikoro was that money was still flowing into the remote villages and the landowning units (mataqali) of the Upper Navua Conservation Area.

Then, when COVID-19 hit Fiji itself in July 2021, the business had to close down completely. Even that didn’t stop Taukeinikoro’s committed involvement in the region.

As part of a collective health initiative, Rivers Fiji stepped up to help Fiji’s Ministry of Health in their vaccination campaign to reach the most remote villages of the region. He and his wife offered up their services to drive all-terrain vehicles deep into the Sigatoka River Basin to reach remote villages.

“Everyone was scared of COVID, but I said to my wife – we’ve got to do this for the boys (guides),” Taukeinikoro says. When some of the designated drivers for the mission were too frightened to go into infected villages, Taukeinikoro opted to take over the driving himself. They would have to isolate afterwards, be tested weekly and often not see family and friends for weeks.

“
When COVID happened, it really struck us in the gut. The hardest moment was sending people home and seeing everyone struggle, but you can’t do anything about it.

They would have to visit many villages multiple times to ensure they vaccinated everyone who wanted to be vaccinated “Some of those villages we visited like 7 to 8 times just because, after we left the clinic, someone else wanted to get vaccinated, but we had to do it,” he says.

It became a tough task to track down Taukeinikoro, as he moved through the wilderness visiting villages. With his company not earning any income, he devoted most of his time as a volunteer. Taukeinikoro moved the operation of his rafting company to his house to keep costs down, but Taukeinikoro kept the business alive online to keep interest up for when international customers could return to Fiji.

As an environmentalist at heart, he knew the survival of Rivers Fiji should ensure the conservation of the river region the company operates on. He is passionate about working with the tiny remote communities that exist in the region, and knows their economic activities and potential is limited without the income and jobs the company offers.

He has worked with other members of the Duavata Sustainable Collective in the area to find new tourism activities to ensure remote villages are provided for, and to ensure the Upper Navua Conversation Area stays the same for generations to come.

Part of the new initiatives have been working with the collective to create a series of adventure races in the region to showcase the beauty of the river and its surrounds. Rivers Fiji was part of the team that brought the successful EcoChallenge series of races to this part of Fiji. Now they have set up a series of races with a local youth leadership program, Invisibilia, to promote the conservation of the area.

However, Taukeinikoro’s proudest moment since COVID-19 struck the world was the day he opened his rafting business back up when international travellers were allowed back into Fiji in December 2021.

“The best moment of the last 18 months was when we opened again,” he says. “All the guides came back. Even some guides who had found work elsewhere even came back, they wanted to be here on the day. It was a very proud moment for us because some companies didn’t make it, and we were one of those companies that did well. We have to carry on. But we have to have remember one thing; we have everything to lose, so we have to protect this. This is our golden egg.”

“
**We have everything to lose,
so we have to protect this.
This is our golden egg.**



© 2023 All Rights Reserved. Photo by [illegible]

DRUA
EXPERIENCE

SETAREKI LEDUA

FIJI



Setareki Ledua sailed a traditional sailing canoe right around the world using nothing but the stars to guide the way.

Part of a group of youth adventurers selected to represent the Pacific nations during the Te Mana Te Moana World Expedition, Ledua faced every obstacle Mother Nature could throw at him as he made his way from Fiji to New Zealand, and back to the West Coast of North America via French Polynesia and Hawaii.

He spent two years at sea raising awareness of our ailing oceans and the threat to the way of life in tiny islands communities throughout the Pacific. All this he did before he turned 21.

Viseisei, Fiji / Coordinates 17.6798° S, 177.3898° E



He handled storms and waves the size of apartment buildings, and so when a worldwide pandemic came along in March 2020, he used the calm he found on his journey to deal with it. What does not kill you makes you stronger – Ledua knows a lot about that.

Ledua comes from a long lineage of traditional canoe builders in Fiji. In fact, it was his family who was part of the team who built the traditional canoe presented to Queen Elizabeth II a few years ago.

Ledua comes from a long lineage of traditional canoe builders in Fiji. In fact, it was his family who was part of the team who built the traditional canoe presented to Queen Elizabeth II a few years ago.



Setareki Ledua

Ever since he was little, Ledua has always been a passionate advocate of his people's seafaring ways. Tracing his ancestry back to Fiji's remote Lau Group of Islands, he grew up in Vulaga, his home island before moving to Fiji's capital, Suva, with a thirst for adventure and the ocean.

His experience sailing the Pacific Ocean in 2011 and 2012 as one of a handful of I-Taukei traditional navigators chosen to circumnavigate the globe on a traditional sailing canoe using nothing but celestial navigation fuelled his desire to teach his own people more about their proud seafaring history.



It also made him want to teach about sustainability in an age of excess – our ocean, he assessed, is what connects the Pacific nations with each other – and the wind is the only fuel we need.

Using the strong bonds he built with others who he sailed with on his circumnavigation, Ledua helped build a traditional Fijian Drua sailing canoe to operate out of Vudu Marina on Viti Levu's stunning west coast. He wanted to run his sailing canoe business using some of the lifelong friends he made on his epic journey. He gathered together some of his original crew to help run a sailing business, called Drua Sailing Experience, building the only I-Taukei designed Drua canoe on the water. Drua means two hulls, one of which is male, the other female, and wherever one goes, the other goes with it.

He set up sailing tours – sunset tours and half day tours which sailed along the coast – teaching tourists the ways of his seafaring people, while hosting kava and other cultural ceremonies on board.

"Guests would experience how our ancestors used to sail," he says. "One of the reasons we ran as a business was because we wanted to keep the traditional sailing culture alive in Fiji and to inspire the youth by teaching them about their sailing culture and about traditional navigation."

Guests came in great numbers, keen to understand more about local sailing culture, but also to hear Ledua and his vibrant crew tell stories about their culture and about how they too navigated the Pacific as their ancestors had sailed before them.

Soon Ledua was running at least two or three full tours of 15 passengers per day, while employing a steady crew of 10. Ledua was also an instructor during Drua holiday camps for kids from local schools, who wanted to find out more about their traditional seafaring past.

And then, COVID hit the world, and Ledua's successful business came to a grinding halt.

"We had booking coming in almost every day. We were just taking off and then when COVID hit, it all just came crashing down," he says. "And so we had to move back to Suva. We had to release all the staff, I lost my job."

Fortunately, Ledua's wife still had employment and Ledua was able to support the family by working in his family's plantation and working with his family to carve traditional tools and implements to sell.

But Ledua's passion lies within the sea, and you cannot keep a true seafarer from the ocean for long. Though some of his staff had moved to find work wherever they could to survive, those who remained were committed to the idea of gathering more understanding of their ancestor's sailing knowledge and ways. They began visiting local communities all across Viti Levu – Fiji's main island – to find out everything they could about traditional canoe construction techniques, documenting all the various techniques used in weaving and carving the canoes. During this time, Ledua was also accepted onto UNESCO's Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage Training of Trainee (ToT) course, which helped to advance his knowledge and skills in this area.

“
We had booking coming in almost every day. We were just taking off and then when COVID hit, it all just came crashing down.

This took up most of Ledua and his crew's spare time. He figured the time off because of COVID should be used on making their business better – and on better representing the history and the traditions of Fiji's seafarers.

But the crew wanted to embark on something even bigger. Ledua's ancestry can be traced back to the Lau Group of islands, a remote archipelago of 57 islands in eastern Fiji spread across 114,000 square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean. He wanted to take the Drua canoe back to the Lau Group, to meet with the traditional canoe builders of the islands, to learn techniques fading fast from their villages in these more modern times. And he wanted to show them what he had learnt on Viti Levu.

"The tourism industry was closed altogether," he says. "When we were sailing on the Utoniyalo around the world, we would talk to each other and say we have to sail to every village and every island that we came from, where all the crew comes from. And now there were no tourists and no planes and no bookings coming in and I just said: we should sail to the Lau islands."

The men decided to open up a GoFundMe page to get them there and the owner of Vuda marina supported them too. Centuries before, some of the best boat builders lived in these remote islands of the Lau group in an area considered by some as the canoe building centre of the Pacific, where boats were built and sailed into areas of Polynesia to the east.

The expedition was to take two months and would be ground-breaking – both for the local people, and for Ledua and his crew. "The trip was a homecoming sail," he says. "There's a recording of a Drua sailing out of the Lau group, but there's no recording of a Drua sailing into the Lau group, and that's been in over 200 years. We wanted to go and collect more evidence about traditional sailing and canoe building, we wanted to meet the locals and record the people who have all that knowledge and pay honour and respect to our ancestors in the Lau group."

In two months spent sailing across the Fijian islands, Ledua was able to ignite conversation and excitement in the local people about their traditional seafaring ways. The talk now has turned towards sustainability and rebuilding forests for the species of tree needed for Drua building. They also got locals excited about relearning weaving techniques and gardening staple foods, which are necessary to stock canoes for long voyages. Ledua has helped the Lau people and other Fijians to remember just how proud they should be of their past.

“

The passing down of traditional knowledge won't happen if there's a gap between the old people and the young people," he says. "And whatever foundations we set up today, will determine the future of our little kids. So, it is really important for us to keep these traditions alive."



Copyright © 2022, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
Tourism Stories Pacific 2022 – Resilience Through Crisis

ISBN, printed version: 978-92-844-2375-0
ISBN, electronic version: 978-92-844-2376-7
DOI: 10.18111/9789284423767

Published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Madrid, Spain.
First published: 2022
All rights reserved.

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
C/ Poeta Joan Maragall, 42
28020 Madrid, Spain

Tel.: (+34) 915 67 81 00
Fax: (+34) 915 71 37 33
E-mail: info@unwto.org

www.unwto.org

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinions whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

UNWTO does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this publication and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of their use. The mention of specific companies or products of manufacturers does not imply that they are endorsed or recommended by UNWTO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

Citation:

World Tourism Organization (2022), *Tourism Stories Pacific 2022 – Resilience Through Crisis*, UNWTO, Madrid,
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284423767>.

All UNWTO publications are protected by copyright. Therefore, and unless otherwise specified, no part of a UNWTO publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, microfilm, scanning, without prior permission in writing. UNWTO encourages dissemination of its work and is pleased to consider permissions, licensing, and translation requests related to UNWTO publications.

Permission to photocopy UNWTO material in Spain must be obtained through:

Centro Español de Derechos Reprográficos (CEDRO)
Calle Alcalá, 26, 3º
28014 Madrid, Spain

Tel.: (+34) 913 08 63 30
Fax: (+34) 913 08 63 27
E-mail: cedro@cedro.org

www.cedro.org

For authorization of the reproduction of UNWTO works outside of Spain, please contact one of CEDRO's partner organizations, with which bilateral agreements are in place (see: www.cedro.org/english?lng=en).

For all remaining countries as well as for other permissions, requests should be addressed directly to the World Tourism Organization.
For applications see: www.unwto.org/unwto-publications.

Photo credits:

Cover page: photos from featured stories in the publication

Samoa Story:

© Samoa Tourism Authority (pages 8, 11, 12 and 15)

PNG Story:

© John Crux Photography | Getty Images (page 16)
© Trans Niuguini Tours (pages 19, 20 and 23)

Palau Story:

© Ippei Naoi | Getty Images (page 24)
© Norimoto | Getty Images (page 27)
© Pacific Trade Invest (pages 27, 28 and 31)
© Colors and shapes underwater world | Getty Images (page 28)

Kiribati Stories:

© David Kirkland | SPTO (pages 32 and 40)
© Kiribati Tourism Authority (pages 35, 36, 39, 43, 44 and 47)

Fiji Stories:

© David Kirkland | SPTO (page 48)
© Tourism Fiji (pages 51, 52, 55, 56, 59, 60 and 63)

RESILIENCE THROUGH CRISIS

WITH THE KIND
SUPPORT OF

