

## **Impressions of Fiji after 49 years**

*by Sarah Maclean*

In 1969 I went to Fiji as a VSA school leaver volunteer, working for the YWCA of Lautoka for a year. I went back in 1973, 1976, 1997, 2008 and 2018 to see friends I'd made as a volunteer.

### **What I saw on my visit to Suva in April 2018**

#### **Race and culture**

Officially everyone is a Fijian now – the government decided there'd be no cultural/racial categories in the 2017 census. Cultural and racial identity is still big for ordinary people, however, and they tend to live in their own cultural groups as they do in many countries, including Aotearoa New Zealand. But there is a bit more intermarriage in 2018.

Many more Fijians work in shops now, whatever the owners' race. Earlier most shops were owned and staffed almost entirely by Indians.

I asked an Indian taxi driver about the changes and he thought 'Indians and Fijians get on better now'.

#### **The political scene**

In 1969 I wasn't very aware of political or administrative matters. Fiji was still a British colony but not for much longer. By the end of 1970 it was an independent nation using the Westminster parliamentary system.

Today Fiji is a democracy with the ex-dictator and coup leader as the elected prime minister. Institutions still have democratic names such as 'parliament' and 'city council' but they are centrally controlled. Elections are due to be held soon and new parties are emerging.

#### **Prosperity**

The middle class has grown. More people are better off, though large areas of poverty remain. Middle class people are serious about exercise such as jogging, whereas in the past only sports people did that. Couples now go out for meals, something else that wasn't common in 1969.

I was pleased to discover that the drains of Suva don't stink now. There are more public toilets and they're cleaner.

An example of the increasing prosperity is the Grand Pacific Hotel. Built in 1914 by the Union Steamship Company, the Grand Pacific catered for the rich and famous. In 1969 it seemed a glorious relic of the imperial age. The staff were all local Fijians and Indians, the owners and clientele wealthy Europeans. The hotel's location on the waterfront near Parliament and the CBD seemed to guarantee prosperity.

By the time I came back to Suva in 1997 it was closed and derelict, a true relic of a long-gone era. Now it has been beautifully restored and is once more the smart place to be. However, there are significant differences. The staff are still locals but so are many of the clients, and it is owned by a consortium of Papua New Guinea and Fiji businesses.

## **Traffic!**

Suva was always busy but the traffic was largely buses and taxis. When I returned after nearly 30 years the taxis looked as though they hadn't been replaced since 1969.

Now the city has over 300,000 people and many Japanese cars. Rush hour is frantic. Because of all the cars there are fewer buses, some with glazed windows.

The city has a busy, bustling feel. Another taxi driver said he thought Fiji is a 'place of opportunity'.

## **What people wear**

Hindu women in the 1960s wore saris once they reached their 20s and certainly when they married. Now saris are only worn on special occasions, sometimes as corporate uniforms, and by old ladies. Women now can wear tight clothing like t-shirts and leggings in a way that would have been forbidden then.

Fijian women's clothing is also less traditional. In contrast to when I lived here, on my latest visit I saw some women wearing sulu ira, or the more formal sulu jaba, but many more were not.

Now women wear shorts too and everyone, regardless of cultural identity, wears clothing with Fijian patterns such as bula shirts. On a previous visit a local said to me, 'It's cool to be Fijian now', and that's still the case.

Each time I visit Fiji I see fewer traditional handcrafts. They used to be sold everywhere, not just to tourists, and used in every home. Now there seem to be fewer handcrafts in use and fewer rounds of dried pandanus leaves (used in weaving) at the roadside stalls too.

## **Changes in both Fiji and Aotearoa New Zealand**

Many changes in Fiji have also occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand. Some are positive, some not. For example:

- An awareness of the need to preserve historic buildings; a real challenge in a tropical climate.
- Climate change awareness was unknown 49 years ago but is a big issue now, especially in Fiji. When I arrived in 1969 the country was recovering from a cyclone, as it was when I visited four years later. This year has seen three cyclones already with parts of the country hit very hard, partly because of deforestation.
- Obesity; more people are fatter. And recreational drugs, non-existent in the 60s, are in Fiji now too.
- Coconut oil and water was big for everyone in Fiji 50 years ago and it still is. It's used for skin and hair health and in food and drinks. But now everyone thinks coconut oil and water is wonderful. The rest of the world is finally catching up with what Fijians have always known!

## **Reflecting on an 18-year-old**

I was just out of school in 1969, an 18-year-old from a sheltered background and a family involved in church and the community. Hard work and service to others were highly valued at home and at school.

It's hard to imagine now what anyone thought I, or any other school leaver, could offer. The school leaver programme was the foundation of VSO in England and therefore of VSA here. On reflection I can see it was a product of its time and since then it has often been an embarrassment for VSA. Like many aid programmes the idea probably seemed great, first of all in England and then in Aotearoa New Zealand. Presumably for a while it even seemed OK to government officials in the host countries. But it must have been really challenging for those who directly employed us because we knew so little.

For example, like other YWCA volunteers I was expected to teach English. One-on-one or in small groups, I learnt to share my skills through conversation and things eventually went OK. But in one place I had a 'class' of more than 30 women ranging from babies to old ladies, who met under a large tree. I had no idea what to do. I had no resources and no-one to ask for help. It was a disaster and fizzled out fast, disappointing the women and leaving me wondering why I was there.

Volunteering in another country is complex and being a school-leaver adds to that. So it's even harder to imagine how anyone thought a young woman would cope in a country where she knew no-one. Several times I was in real danger of assault from men and was lucky to escape. I also had to get myself out of emotional situations I hadn't intended to get into, without harming myself and others – a big ask for any young person a long way from home.

Of course, school leavers aren't expected to have experience. But that meant we could contribute much less than older, qualified volunteers and it's no wonder the scheme lasted only a few years.

Most school leavers were paid for by the host country. Community groups in Aotearoa New Zealand paid for me so at least I was a cheap option for my hosts. And after all these years I still feel that, despite my inexperience, I was able to make some contribution to the YWCA there.

Fiji didn't gain any particular benefit from my work though, certainly nothing tangible or long-lasting. No dams, fish farms or roads. There were possible benefits in the breaking down of stereotypes, however. People who got to know me saw that Europeans weren't all racist colonisers.

### **The biggest beneficiary**

From this distance I can see that I was a microscopic drop in the ocean of Fiji's social development. It may have been unintentional but I'm sure I was the biggest beneficiary. Most importantly for me, I spent the year battling the corrosive effects of Eurocentric racism from my upbringing. In doing so I learnt to look beyond stereotypes and see people as they really are.

My year learning Fijian set me up for a lifetime of learning te reo Māori me ōna tikanga. It gave me a lasting interest in Fiji and in the Pacific. I have been more interested in cross cultural relationships, in countering racism, in understanding the sources and workings of privilege and power. I'm happy to have had an ordinary life and my contributions as a result of being a volunteer have been correspondingly ordinary and on a small scale.

Now I am a grandmother and I look back at my time in Fiji as a major experience in my life. We can see now that the school leaver scheme was not a well thought-out aid programme. However, I was lucky. I enjoyed my job and learnt a lot. After all these years I'm still so glad I had the privilege to be invited into the lives of so many people in Fiji.