



A DREAM ADVENTURE

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

If you're looking for paradise, try Fiji. And while you're there, treat yourself to a trip aboard the Tui Tai for the adventure of a lifetime. It's a cruise ship with a difference.

I HAVE JUST RETURNED from an unforgettable family vacation in Fiji with my sister, my woman child and my sister's six-year-old daughter.

There is so much to love about this place. Nothing seems to bother the Fijians. They are always laughing and smiling. I admit to being a little anxious when I first saw a local man coming towards me with a machete, until I learned that they all carry them to cut down coconuts. This is a peaceful country where cases of violence are few and far between. This is why so many Westerners buy homes there.

Most people live off the land as fruit and fish are plentiful. If you lose your job here, you won't starve.

Unlike the Caribbean, where the locals seemed to resent visitors, every Fijian you pass will smile warmly, wave and shout: "Bula!" This means "life" but it is also used as a greeting.

The landscape is magnificent, lush and

verdant. That's because of the tropical (occasionally biblical) rain. Rest assured, there's still plenty of sun.

Not being the seafaring type, I wasn't convinced the Tui Tai trip was for me, but my three travelling companions - who jumped at the chance to drop anchor and snorkel, swim and scuba dive in stunning secluded bays - assured me there'd be plenty of other things to do and enjoy.

I felt no shame in staying on board to read my book in the shade of a cabana after a massage while my tribe learned the ins and outs of scuba gear. I have never felt more relaxed and content. The food is superb. The best vegetable stir fry with noodles I've ever tasted, fish cooked on the grill with delicious vegetables and salads, and the impossible-to-resist desserts.

Even my woman child, who claims not to like coconut, couldn't resist the passion fruit ice-cream covered in dried coconut. And I still wake up dreaming of the chef's lemon pudding.



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Our shipmates Lisa and her niece Kerrie go on adventures around the world together every year and agreed this was their best trip ever. We have become real friends and even Facebook friends.

Meals are eaten at one long communal table. Lots of meals. Cold breakfast at 7am, hot breakfast at 9am, lunch at 1pm, tea and homemade cake at 4pm and a three-course dinner at 7pm. After all those activities, we were always ready for the next meal.

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Instructors Sam and Gemma (a Brit and an Aussie) have dived just about everywhere and insist these waters are the most incredible, with pristine coral reefs and diverse marine life.

Apart from these two, the rest of the 16-strong crew are Fijians who know this part of the South Pacific better than anyone. Our diving master, Isoa, knew exactly where to find manta rays.

I didn't get into the water but I watched with excitement and wonder from the tender as we followed these strangely beautiful creatures.

I didn't jump off the side of the Tui Tai either and I was fine with that, despite everyone's coaxing. I kayaked for the first time in my life and felt joy in my heart. I hiked up to the spectacular Bouma Falls and was so proud that I didn't scream when we met a big blue crab en route. And



I was ready in case we met a spider the size of a dinner plate, safe in the knowledge that none of the creepy crawlies here are poisonous.

The great thing about this adventure is there's something for everyone with diverse interests and adventure levels.



One of the pupils played (brilliantly) a set of drums donated by a previous Tui Tai passenger. These kids were so happy and healthy. We have much to learn from other cultures.

Anyone can come on this trip and do as much (or as little) as they want and certainly more than they would have imagined.

I was especially impressed how patient and accommodating the crew was with our six-year-old who tried and thoroughly enjoyed all the activities (apart from the scuba diving).

When she was tired, which wasn't often, Sam took her shell collecting or pulled her along on a boogie board. Or she just lay back under a cabana and read or coloured. If you don't like kids, you can request not to vacation at the same time as a family with children.

The highlight of the trip for me was visiting the island of Rabi (pronounced Ramb), where local schoolchildren put on a breathtaking song and dance display for us.

A European charity re-built two classrooms that were destroyed by Cyclone Thomas two years ago. The classroom walls were covered in better work than I've seen in many Western schools.

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As well as being the diving supervisor, Gemma is the Tui Tai's photographer and videographer who makes personal films for every family, in case we needed to be reminded of how amazing the trip was.



This culture is actually preserved and enriched by the Tui Tai, since the operation is committed to eco-tourism. Villages share in the economic benefits; Tui Tai has funded schools, purchased medical supplies and sponsored community development projects. By taking part in this adventure, you make a contribution to raise the standard of living in the more remote islands of Fiji.

See and hear for yourself what a fantastic time we had. As well as being the diving supervisor, Gemma is the Tui Tai's photographer and videographer who makes personal films for every family, in case we needed to be reminded of how amazing the trip was.

Pacific Sun, the sister airline of Air Pacific, flies from both Nadi and Suva to Savusavu, where the Tui Tai departs from. Five-day Tui Tai expedition cruises start at \$2,567 (USD) per person for a double room, \$3,851 for single occupancy. The ship takes up to 22 passengers per trip in seven cabins and four staterooms.

Rates are valid until March 31, 2012. Prices include the cruise, all meals, coffee/tea/juice/water, and adventure/culture activities. Scuba diving, spa treatments, bar bills are extra.

• For more information: www.tuitai.com or visit airpacific.com for flight details.



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