

Clap Three Times

By Jim and Barb McConn

Cyclone season was bearing down and it was time to get out of the tropics. Several weeks had passed since we'd seen another yacht and it was reassuring to see three familiar boats as we sailed the Spanish Stroll into Cucuvou Bay and dropped our anchor. The previous year we had avoided the cyclone season by joining the hundreds of boats sailing over a thousand miles from the tropics south to New Zealand. It was a rough journey both down and back up. This year we'd made our call. We would stay in Fiji and continue to explore through the cyclone season. As the others headed south we sailed off in the opposite direction to begin a clockwise circumnavigation of Vanua Levu, the northern most of the two big islands of Fiji.

There are many good cyclone holes in Fiji and we'd been told by the local residents that the big storms always begin with three days of torrential rains before the winds hit. We'd have plenty of warning but in the pouring rain, with the reefs hidden by the muddy run off, getting the boat into a safe hole would be nearly impossible. So we devised a plan. Our first stop was Koroinasolo Inlet on the northwest tip of Vanua Levu. The deep narrow bay seemed perfect on the chart and with its surrounding tall hills and mud bottom it looked even better in person. We settled in for a good nights sleep then pulled out in the morning with a trail on the GPS chart plotter that would lead us back into the bay, even with zero visibility. With any threat of a cyclone while on the north coast we could run and hide. A bit risky perhaps but it gave us just enough peace of mind.

Each day we sailed between nine and two, with the sun overhead and good visibility. The reefs were well charted and easy to spot. Many had small boats parked alongside with people busy hunting-gathering while kids and dogs ran around laughing and playing. With the easy navigation, stiff trade winds and flat water the sailing was fantastic. Perfecting our tacks we were sailing within just feet of the steep sided reefs before flipping her around. Now and then we'd catch a Walu and with our fridge already full it was fun to flag down a passing punt and watch the faces light up as we offered them the big fish. We were having a great time.



Eventually the inevitable happened. Sailing between Nodogo Island and Vanua Levu a tough beat into the strong headwinds slowed us down. Just three miles short of Basa Bay, our planned anchorage, we lost our light and couldn't continue. Slowly and carefully pulling into the nearest bay we dropped the hook just as the sun set.

The following day began with the sound of an outboard motor. Popping out and waving at the couple in a passing punt we exchanged "good mornings". Soon we were all sitting in the cockpit drinking coffee and eating biscuits. Sam and Miriam were on their way to gather coconuts but would be back in the afternoon and, gesturing toward the opposite side of the bay, invited us to join them for dinner and a tour of their village. We said sure! After they'd gone, although we saw no signs of a village, we moved the Spanish Stroll a little closer to where Sam had pointed, pumped up the dingy and got our kava ready.

When Sam and Mariam returned from their gathering we hopped in our dingy and followed them to shore. Walking through the bush on the small trail leading to the village we learned that Sam was the head man and his father Henry the chief! Sam, having been in the Fijian Army, had served in peace keeping forces around the world and as a result was very fluent in English. As head man he would present our gift of kava, called sevusevu, to Chief Henry in a ceremony of the same name.

Kava, the root of the pepper plant is used to make a mildly narcotic drink. Formed into cornucopia shaped bouquets and sold at all the markets, it's use permeates the Fijian culture. Traditionally a visitor to a Fijian village, even another chief, brings the sevusevu of kava as a sort of peace offering. During the sevusevu ceremony the headman will place it on the the ground before the village chief. If the chief picks it up he has accepted the guest into his village, if he doesn't the visitor has been politely asked to leave. Later, assuming he's been welcomed, he'll share news and the stories of his travels with the village during a kava drinking session.

Some cruisers claim that this custom has understandably grown somewhat 'tired' in the more heavily visited areas but what a wonderful experience it was for us in this remote village. Chief Henry took it very seriously and with Sam interpreting we listened as he welcomed us to his village, invited us to stay as long as we liked and blessed our journey.



There were no cyclones in Fiji that season. Coincidence? We think not! Afterwards Sam's children, Raki and Josephine, took us for a tour of the village. As we went from house to house meeting the families, all the kids joined in and we wound up with over thirty of them laughing and talking as they followed along competing with each other to tell us

about their village.

Returning to Henry's house we found several young men busy preparing the kava. After pounding the root to a fine powder, it was mixed with water and sifted through a cloth into a large ceremonial bowl as the men of the village gathered on the porch. Once they agreed that the mix was just right a half coconut shell, called a bilo, was filled and passed to each person in a very specific order. Henry, as the chief, was served first in his own, personal bilo. As honored guests, we were next. We learned to clap once before taking the bilo, meaning "ready", drink the entire contents down in one go, then, after passing it back to the server to clap three times meaning "finished". It was a great time with with lots of talking, clapping and laughing.



Aside from a slight numbing of the mouth the kava seemed to have little effect but these 'sessions' would become wonderful opportunities for us to get to know our hosts. We would discuss everything from our home, family and travels, to Fijian life and the challenges of modernizing it without sacrificing the beauty of their culture. Through these fun but often heart to heart discussions we quickly formed a deep bond with our new friends.

During our ten month stay in Fiji we visited Navidamu five times including a road trip with our



daughter Tracy and son-in-law Todd, a highlight of their two week visit with us. Twice we rented a four wheel drive vehicle and traveled overland from Savusavu on Venua Levu's southern coast and three times we anchored the Spanish Stroll just off shore from the village.

Raki and his uncle, the master fisherman Steven, taught Jim to fish with a net from a moving punt. In return he was able to repair a couple of outboard motors that had been out of service for years due to minor problems. Be forewarned, if you fix an outboard motor for a Fijian fisherman expect your boat to be filled with fish!



On the pretense of washing clothes, Barb joined the village women as they relaxed and bathed in a nearby stream. Doing laundry on stones in the cool water gave her a new perspective on those “National Geographic” photos we’ve all seen. Who’d of thought washing clothes in a stream could be so much nicer than feeding them into a machine?

Returning with Sam's family one night after a visit to a nearby village it really hit home. We were riding down the Dreketi River in an open boat through the mangrove forests with the Milkyway lighting our way. The air a balmy 85 degrees, twelve year old Raki standing on the bow checking the water depth with a pole and Sam's Indian friend, Sarda, steering with the outboard. It was so far out yet as natural as if we were back home, returning late with friends on an empty freeway. Most amazing is that we were experiencing it, not as tourists, but as part of the family!



During our last visit we were deeply touched when Chief Henry purchased kava and presented his sevusevu to us. Some of the women had woven special sleeping mats for us and a beautiful, hand woven “lei” for Barb. Leaving the people of Navidamu was the most difficult thing we’d done since saying goodbye to our own family. Who could have guessed that this small village discovered by accident would be one of, if not *the* highlight of our world cruise?

Clap Clap Clap