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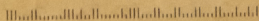


VIA AEREA

Jeremiah A. Gilbert

PLAN C

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On to Plan C: A Return to Travel



by
Jeremiah A. Gilbert

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Cyberwit.net

HIG 45 Kaushambi Kunj, Kalindipuram

Allahabad - 211011 (U.P.) India

<http://www.cyberwit.net>

Tel: +(91) 9415091004

E-mail: info@cyberwit.net

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A goal without a plan is just a wish.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Contents

Near Death in Fiji	5
On to Plan C	32
Christmas in November	121
West of the Indies	174
Afterword	243
Acknowledgements	247

Near Death in Fiji

May 2022

So, this is how it ends. I expected hiking on a sand dune in the heat and humidity wouldn't be easy, so I anticipated my heart would be thumping and my breathing would be heavy. I didn't expect the chest pain. My wife is about a minute behind me and we're about halfway into an hour's hike. And we're the only ones here.

I figure that if I drop, then by the time she reaches me and heads back for help and that help arrives, I'm a goner. As we're alone, our only chance of help is the ranger who collected our entry fee and suggested I photograph the map of the trail. Good news: I know exactly where I am on the trail. Bad news: This isn't where I was planning on dying.

Years ago, I developed a travel rule: If it would make for an enthralling obituary, then I'd be okay going out that way. Dying after being hit by a bus while avoiding a cyclist in London would be an example of an ending I would not be okay with. Likewise, having a heart attack in the middle of Sigatoka's sand dunes during an incline does not satisfy this rule.

So, I start breathing deeply and try to calm myself. I'm middle aged and out of shape, I tell myself, and besides, it's probably just gas causing the pain. I'll start taking better care of myself when we return home, but in order to do that I need to return home. I resolve that no obituaries are going to be written about this today.

* * *

As Fiji was the first trip we had to cancel in 2020, it made sense it should be the trip that resumes our foray into travel in 2022. That April 2020 trip would have seen us going to Fiji for a few days followed by two weeks in New Zealand. First the New Zealand trip was cancelled by the tour operator and a travel credit issued. A few days later, the flights from Nadi to Auckland and Queensland back to Los Angeles were cancelled.

The second flight was refunded while the first was issued a flight credit. Then Fiji Airways emailed to say our flight from Los Angeles to Nadi had been cancelled and another flight credit was issued. Their email made it clear that there was no need to call, the credit had been applied to our account and was good for a year.

Just about the time that a year was going to pass on the flight credit, another email from Fiji Airways letting us know the flight credit had been extended, no need to call. In December 2021, Fiji opened travel with the United States, two weeks before resuming travel with Australia. I received another email letting me know that when I was ready to resume travel to Fiji, there was a form I could complete online, no need to call.

I'd contemplated going during my Spring Break in March but that's during their rainy season when a hot and humid country is even hotter and more humid. So, I decided on the end of May, between my spring and summer terms.

Once I figured out the dates, I used the form to convert my previous one-way flights into roundtrip flights. Then I waited. And waited. While Fiji Airways seemed adamant about not calling, after a week I figured it was time to call. The morning I was going to call, an email arrived confirming my

booking. There was some additional information they needed, but I could just reply to their email, no need to call.

The flight set, I booked our hotel and then began monitoring entry requirements. When I began checking, there was the need for a Covid test taken 24-48 hours before departure, another 48 hours after arrival, purchase of their FijiCare travel insurance, and downloading an app that you used to check in and out of everywhere you go, making contact tracing easier should a positive result occur during your visit.

As these requirements seemed to change every few weeks, I decided I'd wait a week before our departure to check again. Luckily, the pre-departure testing requirement had been lifted along with the need to download the app.

Normally I would drive to the airport and use a nearby lot to park for a trip of this duration, but as my back has been acting up, I decide to use a service to take us there and back. Our driver is very quiet and drives aggressively, often tugging the car back into its lane. His silence reminds me of my barber. We've developed a three-word exchange whenever I go in for a haircut. "Good morning," I say when I arrived. "Done," he says when he's finished. I wonder if he's an aggressive driver too.

Along with changing entry requirements, masking was another unknown. We don't need one for the ride, but I've read we'll need them for the airport and during the flight. While most people are masked at the airport, not everyone is. I notice those that are not all mostly white, which has been my experience since mask mandates began back in early 2020.

Security is also different. First, we're queued to walk two-by-two past a drug sniffing dog. Then, other than liquids, gel, and aerosols, everything stays in the bag and shoes stay on.

“Everywhere is different these days,” the woman behind me in the security line notes. This is my first time in an airport after two-and-a-half years, so I’ll take her word for it.

On the flight, we have a new flight attendant overseeing our area. We have exit row seats, which means we must place our bags in an overhead compartment for takeoff and landing. The compartment right above ours is slim. When asked if we can use it to stow our carry-ons, she says yes, but then the attendant across from her lets her know that we can’t.

When my wife asks about a blanket and pillow, she gets them for us only to be informed by the other attendant that we can’t have them until after takeoff. She then seems very confused by the safety check of the exit door. Thankfully, the more experienced attendant does the cross check and I’m a little less worried about being sucked out of the fuselage.

* * *

There’s only one flight from Los Angeles to Nadi, which takes off just before midnight and, thanks to the time change and crossing the international date line, arrives around 6:00 a.m. two days later. In reality, it’s just an eleven-hour flight and we’ll regain our lost day when we return.

As I’m not up to killing nine hours until check-in at our hotel, I booked the night before and let the hotel know about our situation. This way, I figure, we have a place to get some rest after breakfast. In the past I would have filled the day with some sightseeing but, as this trip is meant to resume our travels after so long away, and most of that time has spent teaching online from an office chair, I’m not sure of my stamina right now.

The driver from the airport to the hotel is high pressure, trying to sell us on tours he offers. “Better prices than booking

at the hotel,” he tells us. I let him know I’ve already booked two day trips with a different local provider but it doesn’t seem to faze him. He rattles off the same itineraries and tell us again that he’s offering better prices than the hotel. I take his card, hoping that will end the sales pitch.

Hotel check-in is smooth, and our room is waiting for us. We’re staying on a peninsula and our room is about as far from reception as one can get while staying on land. We’re onto a golf cart and driven to our room. Our bags dropped off, we walk to the restaurant nearest us for a very good breakfast before heading back to the room for some rest. We’ll explore the property later in the day.

Our hotel offers a Fijian show with song and dance on Tuesday nights, and we’ve arrived on a Tuesday, so we book the show and accompanying buffet. The buffet is what you’d expect from a hotel buffet, though the show is enjoyable. Most people are out of their seats to circle the dancers, phones in hand recording the experience rather than experiencing it. I stay seated and soon my waitress is asking those standing in front of me to move so that I can see. That’s earned her a nice tip.

In the morning we’re off on our first of two day trips. As I’m using a local company, I’m paying in cash, so I ask the woman I checked in with yesterday if it’s possible to get some change as the ATM I’d used yesterday only gave me hundreds. “Would you like some seven-dollar bills?” she asks.

The seven Fijian dollar banknote was issued this year to mark the achievements made by the Fiji national rugby sevens teams at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. There had been a prior one issued in 2017 to commemorate the Fiji rugby sevens gold

medal win at the 2016 Summer Olympics held in Rio de Janeiro. Here's hoping for another one after the 2024 Olympics.

“Be careful,” she warns me when returning my change. “The 7-dollar bills are the same color as the 100-dollar bills, so you don't want to confuse them.” I guess I'll know I made a mistake if the person I hand the money to is either very excited by my overpayment or very upset at my underpayment. I thank her as I start separating my 100s from my other bills.

Our initial stop is Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple, the largest Hindu temple in the Southern Hemisphere, situated in the heart of Nadi. The temple is a towering and colorful structure adorned in ornate carvings that depict several Hindu gods. A modest fee allows us entry along with a guide to tell us about the temple and answer any questions.

When asked about the temple's origins, we are told that Fiji has long been home to a large community of Indo-Fijians whose ancestors migrated to Fiji in the late 1800s to work in the sugar plantations. In 1926, eight craftsmen were commissioned to build the impressive structure, featuring gods that were important to the southern Indian population that commissioned it, including Lord Murugan, the god of seasonal rains.

Next up is Nadi's Municipal Market. Every city, town, and village in Fiji has a fruit and vegetable market. The one in Nadi takes up an entire block, although it's not as big as the one in Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city. Still, there are hundreds of stalls inside the metal framed complex, with dozens of people outside selling their produce. The ones outside don't rent a stall in the market and are often people that may have come miles to sell a few garden-grown vegetables. Prices are cheap inside and out and there is no pressure to buy.

The Garden of the Sleeping Giant sits at the foothills of the Nausori Highlands about a thirty-minute drive north of Nadi. It is set beneath a mountain known as the Sleeping Giant and was started in 1977 by the late actor Raymond Burr, star of the classic television shows *Perry Mason* and *Ironside*, to house his private collection of tropical orchids.

Now open to the public, these landscaped gardens specialize in Fiji's native plants as well as showcasing more than two thousand different kinds of orchids. A jungle walk takes visitors past a large lily pond and through native forest. Best of all, a glass of tropical juice awaits us upon our return to the entrance area.

While driving here, we notice a few churches and ask our guide if we can stop by one to photograph it on our way out. The first one we stop at has a local sitting outside it along the road and our guide asks him if we can photograph the church. He says we would need to get the chief's permission. However, he says after a moment, it would be okay to photograph it from the road, so that's what I do.

The last official stop of the day is Viseisei village, credited with being the oldest settlement in Fiji and home to a former Fijian president. A small entry fee allows you access, though you're first shown various wears for sale before properly entering. You can pick anything you'd like to purchase, and they'll gather the fees, regardless of who you buy from, and hold your purchase until you're down with the visit. Then a fellow who has been holding a baby this whole time hands the baby off to the woman who collected our entry fee as he's going to be our guide.

The village is not too distinct from other villages we've seen from the road, though it still has a traditional thatch-roofed bura house where the chief resided. We're told there is a clan that chooses the chief and a ceremonial hall beside the bura for this to happen. There's also a large white church near the center of the village. Today there is a ceremony and ethereal singing can be heard from the open windows. Our tour complete, I give our host a tip and we retrieve our purchases—a colorful ornamental mask and a cannibal fork, now only intended as decoration.

* * *

No day trip today as we're headed for a rapid Covid test after breakfast. While the entry test has been removed from travel requirements to Fiji, a scheduled test 48 to 72 hours after arrival is required and I've scheduled ours at our hotel 54 hours since we landed on the island. As the test is being administered in Fiji and not the US, it's a fraction of the cost and I wouldn't have gotten the sea view complete with sailing ships back home while waiting. Once the test is administered, we're told to go back to our room for thirty minutes. If the test is positive, they will call. Otherwise, after thirty minutes we're free to explore and will receive a negative certificate by email.

“What happens if we test positive?” my wife asks while we wait in our room, hoping the phone doesn't ring.

“I didn't look it up,” I reply. “I suppose some sort of quarantine, though I guess there are worse places to have to be locked up.” Of course, I doubt the accommodation would be as nice as our current one. Thankfully, no need to find out as the phone doesn't ring.

As we're staying on Denarau Island, my plan for today is simply to visit Port Denarau. While our hotel offers a complimentary Bula Express, an extended golf cart that takes guests up and down the peninsula our hotel is on, the island offers the Bula Bus. A small fee gives you a day pass to the bus, which hits the major hotels on the island, culminating in the port. The good news is that our hotel is the last before the port. The bad news is the return trips means hitting every other hotel before ours.

The port itself is a hodgepodge of shopping, services, and restaurants. There is also a supermarket and pharmacy, along with boating services offering sailings out to private islands and sunset cruises. We're here just to explore, have some lunch, and to buy a few provisions from the market for our room. We'll circle back on the Bula Bus for dinner as there's an Indian restaurant I have my eyes on.

I also decide to exchange some more money as everywhere seems to require an entry fee in cash and there is an exchange at the heart of the center. Thankfully I'm not in a hurry as this is probably the longest currency exchange I have ever participated in. After handing over my crisp \$100 bill, I'm asked to show ID. I only have a scan of my passport's photo page on my phone, which seems to be acceptable.

Now in possession of my money and my phone, the man behind the counter enters some things into an ancient looking computer, writes some things on a pad, types a few more things into the computer, writes some things on what appears to be a receipt. Once the exchange is finally complete, I'm tempted to frame the receipt as a memento to surviving the longest money exchange in history.

* * *

In the morning is our second day trip, booked with the same local provider. I was half expecting to see our previous guide, but it seems he's out on a run to Suva today, about a four-hour drive from Nadi. I contemplated that tour myself, but it seemed a long way to drive after such a long flight to get here. Instead, we're heading out to Sigatoka, for their sand dunes and pottery village.

On our way out of town, our guide notes that he needs to stop for gas. While he's filling up, I noticed a young man approaching our car. He opens the passenger side door and starts to get in. For a second I'm thinking the worst, but it turns out to be the owner of the company and the one I'd been emailing with to set up our day trips.

"Everything good?" he asks. Our first guide had mentioned that his boss had called him a few times while we were out asking the same question.

"Everything has been great," I honestly reply.

Then comes the inevitable questions about when we're returning and if we have a ride to the airport. Our driver from the airport asked the same along with our first guide. I let him know we're leaving the following day but I'm not sure of our departure time yet as I'm hoping to get a late checkout from our hotel.

"I'll call you," he says. I probably won't answer, I think, mentally calculating international rates against any savings as a repeat client.

My wife loves sand dunes, so I try to find them for her when we travel. We explored some dunes one winter while

visiting Death Valley. My father had died a few months before and I wasn't up for international travel, so we rented an SUV and drove the four hours, partly in homage to my father's love of driving. I'd also found some in Colorado when we were out for a visit a few years later, basing ourselves out of Denver and Aspen. So, I was pleasantly surprised to come across Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park while researching things to see and do in Fiji.

The Sigatoka Sand Dunes were the first national park declared for the country of Fiji in the 1980s. The dunes are thousands of years old and are comprised of a fine greyish brown colored sediment rather than the traditional fine, sandy tan dunes. The dunes also have vines and shrubs covering much of them.

After paying the entry fee, I'm shown a large map on the wall and told there are one- and two-hour hiking options. I'm expecting a map as this is a national park with an entry fee but instead told to take a picture of the map with my phone. Given the empty Coca Cola branded refrigerator behind the entry desk and the fact that we're the only people here, I'm guessing tourists haven't quite returned in pre-Covid numbers.

It's the final ascent up a sandy trail just before reaching the dunes that brings on the pounding heartbeat and chest pain. Once able to calm my breathing, the pain resides, and I'm rewarded with dunes that lead to the ocean. It's not until the following night, when I'm awoken by a pounding heartbeat that I think to look up the side effects of a muscle relaxant I'd been prescribed to help with my recently sore back. Buried within the "rare" side effects I find pounding heartbeat. I'll be giving those pills a break for a while.

Along the beach, one comes across teepees of various sizes made from driftwood. Some are alone, others are in groups. All together they form a miniature village. Apparently, this is part of a children's program run by the park that makes for a sort of open-air art installation.

Another "installation" comes as you enter the mahogany forest near the visitor's center, where "tree huggers" have been made from twigs fallen from the trees. The waist high figures start at the base of each tree, back turned to the viewer with their twig arms hugging their trees. While the figures could be said to be making a gesture toward the importance of nature to the Fijians, I get a distinct *Blair Witch Project* vibe from the scene.

The village of Volivoli has a myth about a small valley in the dunes that they call Nadrio, meaning "darkness." They believe that this valley is a gateway to the underworld. The villagers of Kulukulu also claim to hear and see spirits of the villagers that were buried alive in the sand after the Snake God, Degei, was angered by the villagers and sent a tidal wave that hit the beach, burying the village in sand and killing all its inhabitants. Gives a darker symbolism to the driftwood teepees set along the beach.

Our next stop is Lawai village, known for its pottery made from nearby clay deposits. Our guide tells us that before the pandemic, he used to take guests here two to three times a week from Nadi, but that we are his first guests he's taken since Fiji has reopened to visitors. He is greeted warmly by the villagers when we arrive, and we are led into a waiting ceremony hall. Shoes left outside, my wife and I sit on a small bench before a group of villagers.

We are welcomed with a kava ceremony before a female villager gives us a demonstration of how they construct their pottery. All done by hand without a wheel, two hemispheres are molded and then joined to form a perfect sphere. The top of the sphere is then elongated slightly with an opening made at its top, which will form the top of a vase, in this case. Another woman shows us how they use traditional tools and coloring to decorate their pottery.

There is then a dance by two of the women. We are then asked to join them for two dances, one dancing beside our partner and another leading a sort of conga line. The dancing over, we're asked for a donation and then given five minutes to look at all the wears for sale, starting at one specified corner and ending at another.

My wife tends to collect small animals during our travels, including a llama made of salt from Bolivia's salt plains and a painted wooden Guineafowl from Namibia. We've been on the lookout for a small turtle to join her menagerie as turtles symbolize fertility, wellness, and protection in Fijian mysticism. Turns out my dance partner had the one that caught my wife's eye.

We then head off to the Coral Coast for lunch. The forecast for the past two days has shown a mixture of clouds, rain, and thunderbolts, but nothing had yet materialized. During lunch, the clouds build, and the rain starts. We take our time dining hoping it will pass, but it stays constant and intense.

We make a dash back to our car and our guide asks what we'd like to do next. I tell him we'd already seen what we were most interested in seeing, so we can head back to the hotel. "I

was hoping you'd say that," he smiles while beginning the slow drive back to Nadi in the downpour.

* * *

It's another Covid test along the beach in the morning as the US still requires a test within a day of returning to the country. I was hoping it would be lifted by now but remain thankful for the view and non-US price. We're again instructed to wait in our room and again no call is received. Our flight isn't until 9:40 p.m. and I've gotten us a late check-out of 1 p.m., so we head for a late breakfast at the hotel before heading to wander around and photograph some of the mansions scattered around Denarau Island.

After packing, checking out, and stowing our bags, we're back on the Bula Bus and back to the port for lunch. We'd previously seen a restaurant with air conditioning that we hope we can kill a few hours at. Then back to the hotel where we have a taxi waiting to take us to the airport. I booked a 5 p.m. ride and am glad I did as there is only one window open at the gate for economy class and, while we're only behind seven people, it takes us nearly an hour to get to the window while a long line of other fliers grows behind us.

Our driver tells us we're his last booking for the day, which started at 5 a.m. He's then off to pick up his three children who are at a movie. Having heard many Aussie and New Zealand accents while in Fiji, we ask him if other nationalities come for vacations. "Americans," he says. In fact, he tells us that Fiji first opened back up to the US two weeks before Australia. "No Europeans since the pandemic," he notes.

We're behind two younger couples in line at the check-in counter. They note that they were both staying at boutique

hotels as that's more authentic than staying at a resort. Didn't realize there was a ranking. I have enough Fijian currency left to warrant an exchange and notice one just before entering security. Thought of my epic exchange two days prior haunt me as I approach the counter. This time goes much more quickly, though thankfully my wife has some coins as the woman needs twenty cents to make an even transaction.

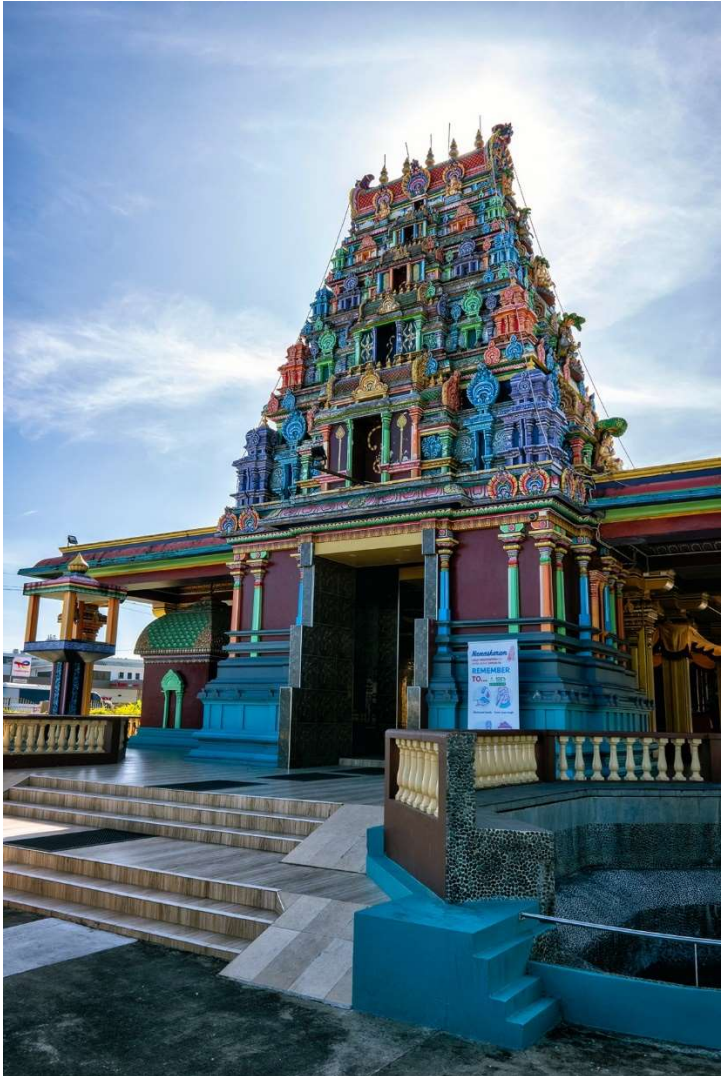
Security is tighter here than in Los Angeles, with electronics coming out of bags and many bags being searched, including my wife's. Also, everyone is wearing a mask. Our driver noted that Fiji had been able to reach such a high vaccination rate by paying everyone eighteen and older to get both shots.

While two of his children are under that age, his daughter is eighteen and the payments received for her, his wife, and himself helped pay for groceries while he was unemployed. The government also used 4x4s to take vaccines to inhabitants in remote areas. Even with such a high vaccination rate, I'm glad to see everyone taking risks seriously.

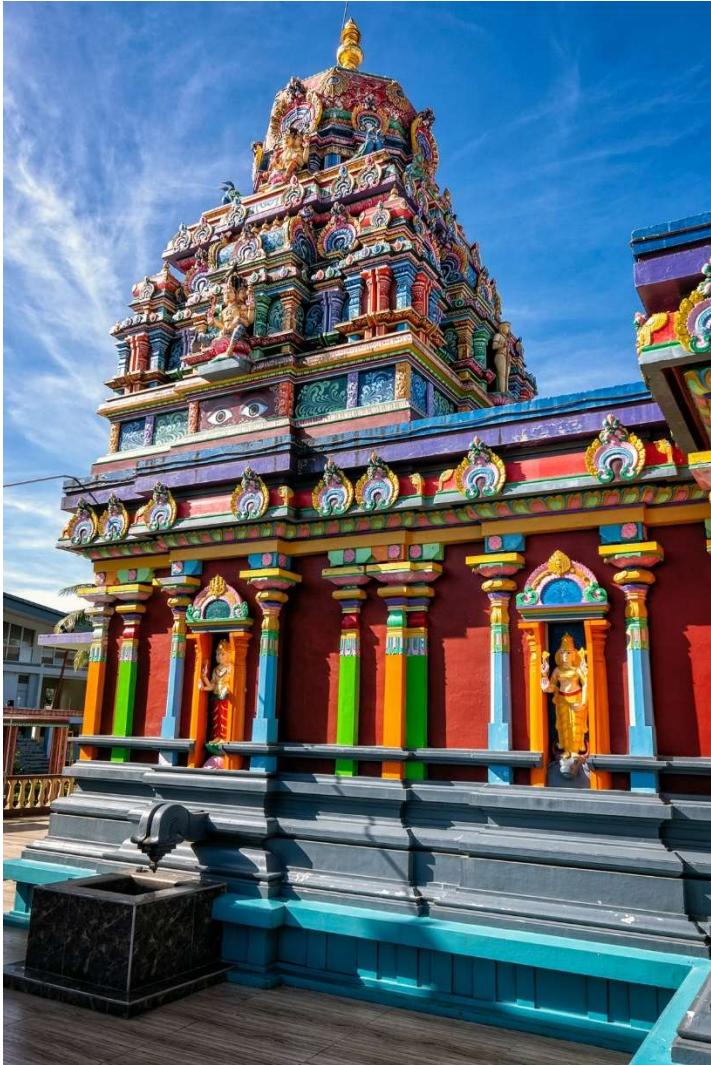
Knowing that Nadi was a rather small airport, I booked us access to the Fiji Airway lounge in order to relax and have some dinner. One of my favorite airlines flying from L.A. to London used to provide lounge access with their premium economy tickets, before Covid shuttered their long-haul flights last year. I notice one of the couples we were behind in line in the lounge. I guess "authenticity" ends at the airport.



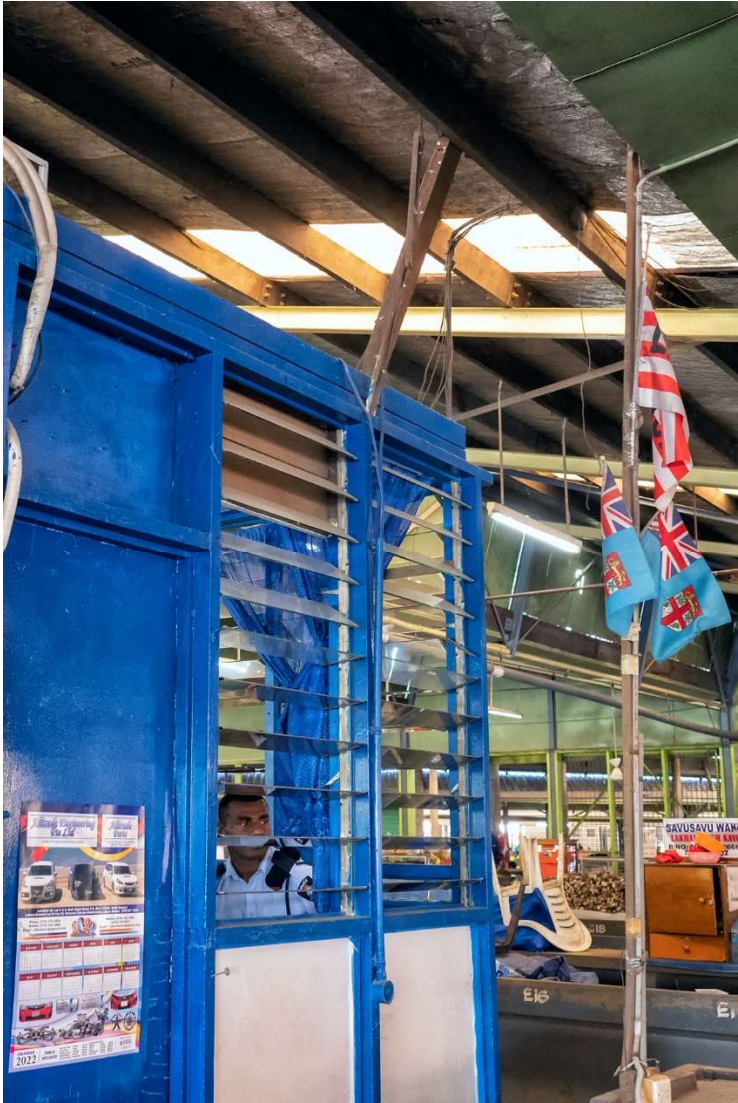
Denarau Island



Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple



Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple



Nadi Municipal Market



Nadi Municipal Market



Nadi Municipal Market



Nausori Highlands



Port Denarau



Viseisei Village



Viseisei Village



Viseisei Village



Sigatoka Sand Dunes



Sigatoka Sand Dunes



Sigatoka Sand Dunes



Denarau Island



Denarau Island

ABOUT



Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning travel writer and photographer based out of Southern California. His travels have taken him to over a hundred countries and territories around the world. His photography has been published internationally and exhibited worldwide. He is the author of *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel* and *From Tibet to Egypt: Early Travels After a Late Start*. He can be found online at www.jeremiahgilbert.com.

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