

2000 FIJI AND NEW ZEALAND

Friday, December 8, 2000. Caught a 4:00 PM Delta Flight to Los Angeles and, after changing terminals, boarded the Air New Zealand flight to Fiji. A most pleasant first class with seats that opened up to a passable bed, and a separate compartment to hold the roll-on. My seatmate was an Englishman on his way to visit his daughter in New Zealand. He had come from Frankfurt in business class but in Los Angeles found they had no seat for him to continue. The non-rev next to me was booted out to make room for him. He didn't seem to mind the bump from business to first at all. I went to sleep almost immediately after take-off and eight hours of the eleven-hour flight later woke to find we were almost to Nadi. I don't usually sleep 8 hours at home!

Cross International Date Line.

Saturday, December 9, 2000. Fiji has two large islands and 330 smaller ones. It is part of the British Commonwealth. I was met by ATS (Australian Travel Service) and taken to the deluxe Sheraton Resort on Denarau Island, which is connected by a bridge to the large island of Vita Levu. There is lots of tropical vegetation around and lots of humidity - it is pouring buckets. Let's hope it blows over. The Sheraton tried to give me an upstairs room but since there is no elevator, I pleaded my tendonitis and they switched me to a large ocean front room big enough to have a party! A mongoose family is living in the shrubbery by my patio. Through the rainy mist I see what looks like a freighter off shore but later it turned out to be an island. Once in my room a bath and nap seemed to be in order.

The hotel has an attractive lobby with water gardens and restaurants and shops all around. Also local ladies who have spread their wares of wood and straw on the floor for us to examine. In a corner of the bar a local band is playing Fijian music. I had a sandwich at the cafe in the middle of the lobby and watched the soggy tourists milling about. It seems to be the rainy season. (The other season is hot!). I also have learned my first two Fijian words: "Bula" which means hello or good health and is used by all the friendly employees whenever they pass. The other word is Vanaka or thank you.

All was going well until my granddaughter, Meg, called me from Cairns. She has been taking a college year abroad at the University of Otaga in Dunedin, New Zealand, and when school let out had gone to Australia to backpack a month ago. How I envy her freedom to do that. I would never have been allowed to do such a thing by myself when I was her age (21). The rest of her family will meet us in New Zealand where we shall celebrate Christmas. We had wired Meg a ticket to come to Fiji but Susan and her mother thought it would be safer if I carried the ongoing ticket to Auckland. The problem was that Qantas wouldn't let her on the plane from Melbourne until she had proof she was going to leave Fiji. I went to reception and faxed a copy of her ticket to Melbourne and was on pins and needles for three hours not wanting her to call and say she wasn't on the flight. By 6:30 I assumed all was well and went to the Verandah Restaurant for a sumptuous buffet. I was so happy when Meg walked into the hotel room.

Monday, December 11. It was pouring rain when I went up for breakfast leaving Meg still sleeping. According to the weather report there is no hope of this storm system letting up in the near future! Finally Meg got up and had breakfast and we went to the room to pack. Having no idea what to expect on the boat I had packed to leave a bag at the Sheraton. We left by taxi at 12:30 and drove to Lautoka City Port about 45 minutes away. Here was a comfortable lounge where we could buy snacks and rent snorkel gear. They gave us a briefing and at last we boarded a mini-bus for the trip to the dock and the Mystique Princess. The ship was built in Peru and is five years old. We are assigned Cabin 2, a spacious stateroom with large bath. There are 52 people on this cruise but the ship's capacity is 72. We set sail for the Yasawas Islands and then went to tea where Captain Leli introduced his all male crew. Each crewmember came forward and shook everyone's hand to show their warm welcome. Since we are all wearing nametags, they are also learning our names and within a day they could call almost everyone by name! They blew the ship's horn for lifeboat and life preserver drill and Passenger Service Director Faisu gave an amusing talk on how we could abandon ship in an emergency. We could always jump!

The passengers are interesting, most of them from Europe. Very few Americans since last spring there was a nasty incident where the legislature was taken hostage forcing the elected prime minister to resign. There have been some instances of violence since then and we had been

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warned not to go to Suva, but there was no sign of any trouble where we were. The sad part is that tourism has been almost stifled and with it a lot of Fiji's economy. Usually Blue Lagoon Cruises has several boats cruising the islands. Now there is only this one. Many of the hotels in Fiji have closed for want of guests. Among the people on board is a Travcoa group of four led by an attractive Australian escort named Maureen. The group is small because many didn't want to come to Fiji and will join the group in New Zealand. We talked with an English couple and Meg really enthused on how she loved Rugby and all things British. She even has a faux British accent! She is thinking of doing her graduate work in Australia and doesn't seem to want anything to do with the United States again. She also is never going to get married or have children!

After a nap it was time for cocktails and dinner. Complimentary champagne and dancing where the crew made sure we all got up and learned the Fijian dances.

Tuesday, December 12. We woke to (what else) rain. We had been scheduled for a 6:00 AM swimming stop but the swells were so bad the captain had to move the ship to the lee of an island. We went ashore in the launch after breakfast to try the snorkeling but it was not a good spot. Too shallow so you could hardly maneuver without touching the coral. The coral was hardly spectacular but there were a number of interesting fish. Perhaps this spot was picked to allow the beginners to get comfortable with snorkeling.

It didn't matter that it rained. We were wet anyway. A hot shower and shampoo felt very good. We got under way headed for Nacula Village. We arrived about two but the seas were so high it didn't look for a while if we would get to go ashore, but at last they decided to try it. I bundled up in my plastic parka for the splashy ride to shore. 103 people live in this village in traditional straw huts and tin shacks. The town used to make its living from the coconut products but a storm destroyed the trees three years ago and now they are dependent on tourism. The villagers entertained us with the traditional kava ceremony and then demonstrated some of their dances and songs. The chief was a dynamic figure leading the dancing. Fiji is trying to preserve their historic culture (with the exception of cannibalism of course). After the performance the ladies set up a shell and handicraft market. When we headed back to the ship we found the wind had picked up and the boat really had to maneuver to get back to the boarding platform! The Travcoa group was too timid to try the trip and had stayed on board. They also don't plan to swim making me wonder what the appeal of the cruise was.

Wednesday, December 13. Wonder of wonders, a front came through last night and pushed out all the rain clouds. A beautiful blue sky and sunshine makes everyone happier. Blue Lagoon Cruises owns a large part of Nanuya Lailai Island, which has an immaculate white sand beach and manicured grounds between the palm trees. It even has cold showers and flush toilets! They had promised a trip to the reef to snorkel but first they had a glass bottom boat for those that don't snorkel. Having nothing better to do, I took the boat ride but we didn't see many fish. Finally it was time for midmorning tea and to go to the reef. Joe guided about 15 of us along the reef. It was a new experience to be on a guided snorkeling expedition and it has several disadvantages. You never had time to just float and watch the wonderful world below you and I kept running into people and they into me, and all those flippers put a lot of air bubbles into the water. On the positive side, I saw much more of the reef than I would on my own and periodically our guide would dive down to show us something like a sea cucumber. Toward the end the current got very strong and I decided to head for the nearby launch. To my embarrassment it took a lot of pushing and pulling to get me into the boat. I'm just not very agile anymore. The launch set out for the beach and I was told I could not go back to the ship since lunch was being served ashore. The only seats on the island were picnic tables with no backs so I curled up in my towel in a futile attempt to stay out of the sun until the barbecue was ready. Having eaten, I then asked to be taken to the ship and was told I couldn't go because the ship was maneuvering. They were still moving around shifting anchor cables an hour later and I was exhausted and baked in the sun. I finally told them that if they didn't take me back to the ship I would be sick and they got the ship to stop what she was doing and brought me back to it's comforts. I'd had enough beach to last a long long time. There was to be a lovo (luau) and entertainment on the beach that afternoon and evening but I said no way. Fasiu kindly sent a plate back from the party

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on the shore, which I enjoyed along with a Swiss couple and the Travcoa Group. Meg reported later that it was a good Lovo with lots of food, passenger entertainment and prizes.

Thursday, December 14. Another gorgeous day for us to steam back to Latouka. After we packed, we went to the dining saloon for group pictures and a farewell serenade by the crew. They went around and shook our hands as they said goodbye. I have never seen such an attentive and personable crew. It really made the cruise!

We had a transfer back to the Sheraton to find our room would not be ready until 3:00. We lunched then caught a taxi into Nadi so that Meg could look for some books to read (the hotel selection was very small). However, the Fijians don't seem to read. All we found were textbooks and there weren't many of them. We browsed the shops for a while but didn't find anything we wanted. Took the cab back to the Sheraton and found we had been given a lovely first floor ocean front room. They remembered I don't do stairs and also I have joined the Sheraton's club which entitles me to upgrades and so forth. Meg and I ate out by the pool enjoying lobster tails.

Friday, December 15. We had signed up for an all day tour to the interior of the island and a nice guide named KC picked us up in a four-wheel drive Toyota. We drove up the coast to Sigatoka, where KC lives, and picked up some soft drinks and fruit. Also heard the bad news that the road over the mountains has been washed away in the flooding rain. We continued up the road to what they call the "salad bowl" where they seem to grow everything from tobacco to okra to beans to asparagus and also tropical fruits. The valleys are very lush because the volcanic soil is very fertile. As soon as we left the main road, the roads were unpaved and badly rutted but KC was able to drive the Toyota through them. Signs kept warning us to watch for loose animals on the road, for cows, chickens and so forth are all allowed to run loose. A number of mongoose scurried across the road and we learned they have become a bad pest. Introduced to rid the island of snakes, they did the job with dispatch, and now forage on the farmer's chickens and other small pets. It just proves you should not interfere with the natural balance of nature. We had a picnic of the usual fried chicken, hard-boiled egg and a cold sausage. I was glad to have bananas to supplement it. We drove almost back to Nadi and then struck inland toward the mountains again. Lovely views and at one point we stopped to watch a logging operation. The beautiful mountains have been shorn of all their trees to supply Japan with wood chips. There is a no apparent effort to reforest and no law against clear cutting. It was an interesting day but strenuous as the four-wheel drive bounced all over most of the way.

Dinner at the Verandah and then early to bed to prepare for our 4:00 AM departure.

Saturday, December 16. My day started long before 4:00 when I woke up with a mild sore throat and diarrhea. Somehow I got my act together and we went to the airport but I felt worse and worse and could not eat breakfast on the plane. In fact I slept most of the three-hour flight to Auckland. I was so sick they got me off the plane in a wheel chair and after ensconcing me in the lounge got the paramedics to come examine me. These nice men took my blood pressure and temperature and told me they didn't think it was food poisoning (They were wrong). Even though they did nothing I did start to feel better and managed to get some food down. We were on a five-hour connection and eventually Martha and Dowell arrived. They have been touring the North Island on their own. The plane to Dunedin had a 8-seat business section and we had it all to ourselves and like the three bears we tried every seat! After a stop in Wellington, the stewardess invited Meg out of the coach section to eat her special fruit plate lunch with us.

We got to Dunedin and Corey Kulczinski, Meg's boy friend, met her with flowers. And then things started to go wrong. Thrifty had closed for the evening and when we called they said the car had been booked for the previous day and we should have reconfirmed. Fortunately Avis was able to give us a large car but there was no way the five of us plus baggage would fit in. Martha and I took a taxi to the Best Western Trinity Court Motel and the rest followed in the car. The motel was a real disaster. I don't know when I have stayed in such a bad place. We entered through a garage to a tiny lobby and were shown to small sparsely furnished rooms lit by a florescent light in the ceiling and having no windows. I was ready to leave but we found that because we had guaranteed our arrival we had to stay for the two nights. Meg left to go crash with Corey so we were even responsible for her room, but they did reduce the charges on that room so we only

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paid for one night. This was an inexpensive lodging ... it just wasn't cheap enough, so we were forced to stay. It was clean; although that's the only good thing I can say. Worst of all it was a mile or so from the University where we wanted to be.

Corey had invited us to lasagna at his house but I was ready for bed and had to decline. Martha and Dowell reported that his college housing was even worse than our motel since Corey is only in the process of moving in.

Sunday, December 17. After a continental breakfast, complete with instant coffee, we set out to explore the town. Dunedin is an old name for Edinburgh and Scotsmen settled the town. Many of the businesses and streets have Scottish names. It is an attractive university town. One of the main sights is the Victorian railway station. There are lovely rolling hills and a long fjord to separate the Otago peninsula from the mainland. We drove some 30 miles to see the Moerski Boulders on a beach frothy with surf. These huge beach ball appearing formations are made from compressed mud that has eroded from the nearby cliffs. On the way back into Dunedin we stopped to admire Trotter Gorge with its twinkling stream and granite rock wall formations.

After lunch we headed out to the end of the Otago Peninsula where they have a Reserve for the nesting Royal Albatross. We climbed to an observatory to see these huge birds soar by. Three or four nests are occupied, the only place in the world where these birds nest on a mainland. Then it was on to another nearby Reserve for the yellow-eyed penguin, one of the rarest penguins in the world. They have built a series of connected covered trenches for bird blinds. These birds are not sociable like other penguins and the nests are scattered about. We watched one father penguin come back from the sea with food, which he regurgitated, into his chick's throat while the mother looked proudly on. One penguin walked over our trench like over a bridge as he tried to get to his home. It was all great fun.

For dinner we went to Speight's Brewery in the basement of the brewery. The food was delicious but I wasn't too impressed by the beer, perhaps because I am a wine drinker at heart.

Monday, December 18. By the time we got to the airport, I realized I was very sick. More diarrhea and nausea. Somehow endured the flight to Christchurch where we were to meet the rest of the family. Exton came from the University of Northern Arizona with his large 6 foot 2 frame crammed into a middle seat. Not easy. Alta had an even worse trip from Cincinnati because her plane was canceled. Delta switched her to a later flight and she barely made to flight to Auckland. They gave her the last seat on the plane, which was also middle, and closed the door behind her. Needless to say we were not surprised that her baggage will come onto a later flight.

They took me to a 24-hour clinic where Dr Young examined me and felt I had either a virus or parasite. They checked me into the Heritage Hotel where I went to bed for two days, thinking I was going to die and then being afraid I wouldn't.

Wednesday, December 19. At least all this time in bed makes my tendonitis better. By Wednesday afternoon, they had finally had the result from the cultures and said I had salmonella poisoning. At last they prescribed medicine and I rallied enough to check out of the hotel when the family returned from their sightseeing in Acaroa. We drove about an hour over the Canterbury Plain to the Gonyah Lodge, where Catharine and David Letter run a bed and breakfast in their charming country home. Gonyah is an aborigine word meaning hut or temporary place to stay in the bush. Sheep and deer graze in the field behind the gardens. Catharine is a wonderful cook and dinner started with poached salmon in filo dough that you could die for.

Thursday, December 20. David drove us into town and we caught the Southern Alpine Express train to Greymouth. We started out across the Canterbury Plain with its patchwork farms tastefully dotted with sheep. There are supposed to be 20 sheep for every person in New Zealand. 25-foot windbreaks of pines planted close together and then trimmed like a privet hedge divided the otherwise treeless land. Then we started up into the foothills of the Southern Alps following rushing rivers and through beautiful valleys. There are over 30 tunnels to help you through the mountains. A narrative was given telling the stories behind some of the things we

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were seeing. It takes four hours to cross the South Island. At Greymouth we were given an hour to poke around through the shops, many of which specialized in the local jadeite (jade), but were not tempted to buy anything. It started to rain and we returned to the train. Unfortunately the trip home seemed very long, as it had all been seen before. I started to feel badly and was very glad to get back to the Gunyah lodge for another of Catherine's wonderful meals. This time smoked salmon, followed by venison. It's a shame we have to leave tomorrow!

Friday, December 21. I woke up feeling much better. Obviously the medicine (or Catharine's food) is starting to take effect.

Murray, our driver, picked us up and we headed south through deer and sheep farms, and, after a stop at the Tin Shed, an old shearing shed converted to a store of New Zealand goods. I bought a pair of socks with sheep on them. Most of the sweaters, etc were decorated with kiwi or sheep. Then we continued to Cricklewood Farm near Fairlie where Gyneth and David Robins run a bed and breakfast and provide lunch to groups like ours with a reservation. Gyneth's garden was lovely with many varieties of roses and lunch was good and hearty with a main dish of eggs and asparagus and many side dishes. Dave took us out in his four-wheel drive to show us his small farm. He has about 350 sheep. Since it is hard to make money in sheep anymore he is converting to raising deer, which require higher fences.

It was just a short drive from there to Lake Tekapo in Mackenzie Country. Jack Mackenzie was born in Scotland in 1820 and came to New Zealand in the 1850s where he carved out a reputation as a sheep rustler. He is even said to have had a barkless herding dog to help him. He was arrested and escaped many times claiming he was innocent. He was ordered to leave the country but no one knows if he did.

All of a sudden we encountered tour buses and tourists in sharp contrast to what we have been seeing before. Everyone stops to see the bronze statue of a herding dog near the lake and the charming stone church nearby. Sitting in the church you look out over lovely Lake Tekapo. The village is quite small with several small tourist hotels and a souvenir store. The Lake Tekapo lodge is on a bluff overlooking the town and lake and we fill all four of its guest rooms. I even have a whirlpool bath in my bathroom! The proprietors, John and Lynda van Beck serve us dinner, good, but not as good as Gunyah. I am feeling much better.

Saturday, December 22. We had hoped to fly over Mt Cook today and land on a glacier but it was stormy and windy and the flight was canceled. We drove south and the countryside became rockier and drier and the bare mountains reminded us of the American west. In places nothing grew. We passed a series of artificial lakes, which supply the hydroelectric power generators. After a couple of hours we came to a fertile plain, which is the fruit basket of the South Island. We stopped at a roadside market. Further south we came upon vineyards and finally stopped at the Gibbston Valley Winery for lunch in the winery's attractive restaurant. We sampled their excellent Pinot Gris 2000 and Dowell talked them into giving us extra bottles of wine for the rest of our food coupon, which allotted 45 NZ \$ per person for our lunch. This is about \$25 American and since food is not expensive in New Zealand, more than enough to feed us well with money left over.

The kids had been asking to go bungee jumping. I don't think they thought we would agree to let them try it, but they got their wish. You couldn't pay me to do it but it is really quite safe. A. J. Hackett opened the first professional bungee jump operation in 1988 on the Karawa River. The sport has spread elsewhere but we were at the original site, which actually had a line of people waiting to jump. Exton and Alta each stepped off the bridge for the 141-foot death dive and everyone cheered until they ended up swinging upside down over the river. It only takes a few seconds and they have a certificate, video and t-shirt to prove they did it. I guess the shot of adrenalin as you fall is something else but I wonder if they will ever do it again.

Then it was on to the small community of Arrowood, an old gold rush town with small shops and at last we came to the luxurious Millbrook Resort nearby. The Clinton's stayed here last year when they visited New Zealand. This golf resort nestles next to the Remarkable Mountains, a range of the Southern Alps, whose six or seven peaks are truly beautiful. The resort has several types of accommodations and Martha and Dowell and I shared a large 2-bedroom suite; a living room with fire place, dining room and kitchen, even our own equipped laundry. To our surprise, Exton and Alta were each given nearby suites too which did make us feel a bit decadent! The

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kids thought it wonderful to have their own suites! One side of our suite had a patio in a lovely garden and the other side was a patio that overlooked the golf course and the Remarkables. I no sooner lay down for a rest than Martha called to say Corey and Meg had arrived. They weren't expected till tomorrow but their sea-kayaking trip was canceled because of weather. We offered to let them camp in one of our many suites but they preferred to go to a nearby campground. Tomorrow they will check into the hotel.

They did take Exxon, Alta and Dowell into nearby Queenstown for dinner but Martha and I ordered a delicious pizza in our suite and sipped wine and watched the sunset on the Remarkables, The air was perfumed from a nearby jasmine bush. Our view is so spectacular it defies description.

Sunday, December 24. Everyone else went off to take a jet boat ride but I opted to remain behind with hopes of a massage and manicure. Unfortunately they were all booked solid so instead I took a walk through the gardens that envelop the various buildings. A wonderful combination of pools, gardens and everywhere fragrance from roses, jasmine and so forth. Everyone has a view of either mountains or golf course and water runs everywhere through it. The resort has two swimming pools, one a large indoor one, tennis courts, a spa and health club. About the only negative is that the buildings are not connected so you must go outside to get from one to another. When it rains, which is frequently, you call for a golf cart to jitney you around. The only shop is a golf pro shop and there is a free shuttle into Queenstown. I caught the noon shuttle and walked around for a while but the rain caused me to seek shelter. At one I met the Howards and we went to an Irish pub near the water for lunch. They told me the jet boat ride was fun but cold and wet. We window-shopped the many shops and finally Corey, Martha, Meg and I went to the grocery store while the rest caught the shuttle back to the hotel. Martha cooked some delicious salmon for Christmas Eve dinner and, with a fire in the fireplace, we had a small gift exchange. It was really nice to be just family after so many restaurant meals.

Monday, December 25. We were up at dawn to drive the 200 odd miles to Milford Sound. All of us slept in the van the first two hours! After Te Anau the road passes through some farmland and then enters Fjordland Park. Majestic mountains ride on both sides and their sides are awash with waterfalls of all descriptions. Because the rain last night was heavy, there are many trees down over the road and we seemed to be following the road crew with their chain saws. It was a slow trip but we did make the 11:00 AM boat. In fact were the first ones on board since everyone else was also slowed by the roadblocks. They had reserved a somewhat undesirable table on the lower deck but Dowell was able to find us a window table on the upper deck, which had a better view. The Fjordland Monarch left the dock about 15 minutes late in rain, but later in the two-hour cruise we did have a half hour or so of sunshine. The Fjord is beautiful even in the rain. Cliffs rise straight up and our boat goes right up to them giving us views of waterfalls seeming to cascade over our heads, and fur seals playing on a rock. We went to the opening of the fjord and poked our nose out into the rolling Tasman Sea. I remember how rough this body of water was when I came here on a Royal Viking cruise about 15 years ago. That day, when we came into the fjord, it beautiful and clear but of course the big cruise ship could not get so close to the cliffs. The Fjordland Monarch had a buffet lunch on board, which was nothing to brag about, and then the cruise was over. Our plan had been to fly back to Queenstown but the weather was still very overcast and rainy so we had to drive 3 1/2 hours back. I was very tired but got cleaned up and we went to the hotel's formal dining room for Christmas dinner. It is in an old mill house preserved from before they developed the resort. Of course it rained and it had gotten really cold. We found everyone else wanted to call a golf cart and the wait was long so we finally walked back to our rooms getting quite chilled in the process.

Tuesday, December 26. We woke up to find it had snowed covering the tops of the Remarkables. A White Christmas, even if it is the beginning of summer. It was time to pack and go home.

A long long December 26. First flew to Auckland and after several hours waiting boarded the 12 hour Air New Zealand Flight to Los Angeles. We crossed the date line so we woke and it was still December 26! After a couple of hours in LA we got on the Delta flight for home. It was one of the

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planes with an overseas configuration so I was able to rock my seat back and sleep much of the way. Got to Atlanta about 9:00 PM and I never saw such a mess of people and baggage. The carrouseles were so full the bags covered them to the top. It is also very cold so I changed into my thermal underwear for the trip home. Of course I could not sleep that night. In fact walked around like a zombie for three days. Have never had such jet lag!