

## Youth and Community in Fiji – An LIA Experience

I was ecstatic to get onto the Youth and Community in Fiji for my LIA. The thought of full cultural immersion along with groups of young people felt compelling and like a perfect end to an undergraduate degree. I was not wrong.

Arriving at Nadi airport on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 I was greeted by cheerful Fijians who were more than willing to help. It was easy to cross paths with volunteers on other Think Pacific projects and chat about where we were going whilst waiting for transportation to our accommodation. After reaching the hotel, I met others on the same LIA project. Throughout the preparation days, we got to know each other more and were taught about the lifestyles and beliefs held in Fijian villages.



On moving in day, we perched on the edge of wooden benches in the back of a people carrier truck for 1.5 hours, sight-seeing the Fijian highlands before reaching Toga village. Upon arrival, a welcome ceremony was held for us in the community hall with Kava, the village Chief and most of our Fijian families. We were introduced to our families in high spirits with flower garlands and children who were obviously intrigued about the newcomer visitors. The rest of the first evening involved dancing, laughter, more kava and small talk to connect more. This theme followed the next 6 weeks of the trip.



Specifically, the youth and community project involved building a health dispensary in the village, facilitating of workshops based on climate change and learning about traditional Fijian culture and Toga's history from the youth group in the village. The build was first on the agenda. We worked with the men in the village and built friendships by working as a team. They were obviously more physically able than us and more apt at building, I found this to feel quite safe when most of the LIA team did not have much prior experience when it came to the building. The building period coincided with the culture workshops where we got to immerse ourselves further in the nature of the Fijian lifestyle.

Mountain climbing, caving, swimming, volleyball, rugby, rounders, dancing, meke (traditional Fijian dancing), tea time with loads of cake, netball, family trees, Kava grounding, tree climbing, acute gastroenteritis, coconut eating, seeing human bones, fishing, river cruising, campfiring, and of course eating loads of good food, are some of the things that we got to experience whilst there.



A couple of differences took time to get used to, for example, gender roles and relationship etiquettes in Fijian villages are quite orthodox. This was important for us to learn to ensure we were not disrespectful whilst settling into the village. Women must cover their shoulders, knees and always wear a sulu in the village. Men and women are not to be seen walking alone together at night or on their own. Also, most children ran around barefoot, a habit that us volunteers adopted which felt very freeing. The biggest difference I recognised in the village was the sense of family stretching across the whole community. The phrase 'Hom chi' stands for 'come in and eat' which was shouted multiple times a morning from each household whenever someone walked past, no matter who they were. We all had about 8 tavales (cousins) and maybe a couple extra Nene's (mothers) and Tou's (fathers) too. Personally, I was immensely grateful for this when settling into the foreign environment. Everyone knew you and wanted to ensure you were looked after and felt at home.



The accumulation of these activities and the times we shared together as a community created powerful bonds between us. Personally, the feelings of these for me crept up at the end when our group left in tears at the realisation that we were finished in Toga. The values, skills, and connections I gathered here will stick with me forever. The memories I have created still come to me in awe for the shared experience I have had.