

-- For travelers, there's a very specific image of Fiji that comes to mind: flawless white stretches of sand, overwater bungalows perfect for honeymooning couples and bright blue sea in every direction. Mani, the PR professional, grew up in Sigatoka, a town on the southwest side of Viti Levu's "coral coast." She relocated to Suva for college and has been based there ever since. With temperate weather, it's not surprising that many Fijian hobbies involve fitness. Mani enjoys an aerial silks class, as well as running and boxfit, an exercise program that combines elements of aerobics and boxing. Reden made friends through her gym and hiking, swimming, diving and other outdoor activities.

THIMPHU, BHUTAN – JUNE 14 : Bhutanese teens are seen hanging out using mobile phones as monks stroll by on June 14, 2018, in Thimphu, Bhutan. While many are expected to wear the "Gho" which is the traditional and national dress in Bhutan, the younger generation tends to wear western clothes when they are off work or after school. Ben Hussain, a mixologist, describes Fiji as "a giant melting pot," and says that it's still common to show Bollywood films on TV and have big multigenerational get-togethers for Hindu holidays like Diwali. Cagi (pronounced "Tagi") Ratudamu at the Fijian resort where he works. Courtesy Chantae Reden

Chantae Reden, an American expat who moved to Suva with her German husband in 2017, says she loves many elements of the Fijian communal mindset, even if they took her some time to get used to. One of Reden's favorite things to do in Fiji is the same as in the US: going to the movies. The islands and the world Because Suva is the capital and Nadi home to the airport, these two cities share elements with other major hubs – international brands, tall buildings and busy office workers. Restaurateur TJ Patel is a native of the city of Nadi, home to Fiji's international airport, and is used to meeting people from around the globe at his restaurant, Vasaqa.

Marquesas Islands: This group of French Polynesian islands are called Te Henua Enata in their native Marquesan language. Radutamu works at a luxury hotel, the Nanuku Resort near the town of Pacific Harbour on the southern tip of Viti Levu. Globalization, urbanization and new modes of mass and interpersonal communication have rapidly and radically changed the way young people interact with each other, with their families and with society as a whole. "So you're always saying, 'north of New Zealand, east of Australia, southwest of Hawaii.'" That "needle in the haystack" is a South Pacific archipelago of 900,000 people, about half of whom live in the capital city of Suva. It just scored a huge international recognition. It's perhaps this geographical obscurity that leads many to make incorrect assumptions about what life is actually like in Fiji. "I think that perception is that (Fijian) people are always at the beach," says Evelyn Mani, a local PR professional and lifestyle blogger.

The coconut wireless The word that comes up the most when Fijians describe themselves is "community." It's a close-knit nation where "everybody knows everybody," says Patel, and those who leave are still expected to return to their hometown for big holiday celebrations, no matter where they live now. The country's men's rugby sevens teams claimed gold in the Olympics in 2016 and 2020, the first-ever medals for any Fijians. "We need to make all these institutions more accessible to our people at the grassroots. One of the main problems we face as everyday Fijians is that you have a lack of access to all of these things. You have a lack of funds. We have parents who can't pay (school) fees, and who knows, that could be the future prime minister who just didn't go to school there." "If you can't find Australia, one of the largest continents on earth, on a map, fat chance finding a needle in a haystack of the Pacific Ocean," he tells CNN Travel. Formerly a British colony, Fiji has three official languages:

English, Fijian and Fiji Hindi. Many Indians were brought to Fiji during the days of British colonization as workers, and they have remained to form a sizeable community. Many native Fijians, Ratudamu included, wear a hibiscus or frangipani flower behind one of their ears – behind the left ear means someone is single, while behind the right ear is the opposite. Radutamu says that Fijians have their own way of blending Christian beliefs and local traditions. Perhaps the last great Himalayan kingdom, where a traditional Buddhist culture carefully embraces global developments. (Photo by Paula Bronstein/Getty Images for Lumix) Related article This country has a national happiness index. However, local policies that prioritize hiring Fijians can mean it's difficult to bring in foreign workers, even ones with specialized skills. "It has created this thing where Fijians who are very educated and very qualified for certain roles, often leave to Australia because they wouldn't be paid well in their own country," says Reden. "You're basically presenting your kava as a gift to the villages. And then we will welcome you. And then we'll also present a kava. Some people present traditional whale's tooth." "If you play rugby, you could befriend every single person in Fiji pretty much," laughs Reden. "There's an art exhibition. Recently, there's a sip-and-paint thing that started in Suva that's becoming quite popular. There's live music. We have great local singers and local bands." "While lots of things are pouring into Fiji from overseas, many others are seeping out – namely, people." Then that creates a vacuum where then a Westerner comes in and then they're paying the Westerner that wage almost, and the Fijian who could have done it gets moved to another country. "Fiji understandably really keeps a lot of its roles strictly for Fijians," says Reden. "This expat situation in Suva has driven up the prices of a lot of things because expats are known to be super well paid, that it creates a higher cost of living for everyone else," she notes. "They don't really understand that there's more to Fiji than just those sandy beaches and the cocktails with those cute umbrellas in it." According to data from the US State Department, about 57% of people in Fiji are Indigenous, and of that group the majority are Christian. "But once you go outside the city, even just 10 or 15 minutes, you will see more settlement-looking houses. They're just put together by someone from the community even. They could be corrugated metal or wood and just assembled, not necessarily built with concrete and a construction company." "The main island, Viti Levu, where we're on, you can drive around in five hours," says Patel.