

# Lomaiviti Group



Lomaiviti (Middle Fiji) is the heart of Fiji. It's the place where the Fijian nation came into being. The islands lie just off the east coast of Viti Levu, but they feel like another world in another time. They are rustic and peaceful, and travellers tend to stay here far longer than they intended.

Historic Ovalau is the closest island to Viti Levu. Its rugged volcanic landscape, sharp peaks and central crater have a prehistoric beauty. Picturesque Levuka, Ovalau's main town, was Fiji's earliest European settlement and the country's first capital. It is definitely worth a visit, as is Lovoni village, deep in the extinct caldera. There are plenty of opportunities for diving, snorkelling and island hopping – and even more for afternoon-napping, people-watching and drinking *kava* (a narcotic drink) – so you can easily spend a few days here.

The sea south of Ovalau is sprinkled with the tiny coral islands of Leleuvia, Yanuca Lailai and Caqalai. Each has beautiful white sandy beaches, good snorkelling and simple, budget resorts. Hawksbill turtles visit their beaches to lay eggs. To the north, wedge-shaped Koro rises abruptly from deep water. It has lush rainforest and great diving nearby. The resort island of Naigani is northwest of Ovalau.

The annual migration of a pod of humpback whales brings them along the east coast of Ovalau between May and September.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Eat the breakfast that goes on forever at **Levuka Homestay** (p177)
- Drink in the atmosphere – and the cheap Fiji Bitter – at the **Ovalau Club** (p179), Levuka
- Hike around **Lovoni** (p176), the village in a fractured volcanic crater
- Wander Levuka's **colonial streets** (p174), bumping into the ghosts of the first colonists
- Snorkel around **Caqalai** (p180), the almost-perfect budget resort
- Exchange *bula* (a greeting) and fall into conversation with the locals in **Levuka** (p174)
- Dive the **Levuka Passage** (opposite), just minutes from the shore, if you're an experienced diver
- Watch for **whales** (p176) in Levuka's harbour, from May to September



■ POPULATION: 15,000

■ AREA: 409 SQ KM

## History

The town of Levuka in the 19th century was a bolthole where embittered sailors jumped ship, escaped convicts hid out, polygamous drunks took strings of island brides, and disputes were settled with the musket.

As early as 1806, European sandalwood traders stopped at Levuka in search of supplies, but they did not begin to settle here until the 1830s. They built schooners, traded for *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber), turtle shells and coconut oil and settled down with several Fijian women, explaining to the local people this was the custom where they came from.

The Lovoni people, warriors of the caldera in the centre of Ovalau, saw the settlers as interlopers, and repeatedly burned down their timber town. The whites lived under the protection of the chief of Levuka, who was murdered by raiding Lovoni in 1846.

Levuka grew and by the 1850s it had reputation for drunkenness, violence and immorality. It attracted beachcombers and freebooters, comen and middlemen, dreamers and crooks. In the 1870s a flood of planters and other settlers came to Fiji, and the booming town reached a population of about 3000 Europeans, who drank in 52 hotels. The cotton boom was brief and its aftermath bitter. A short-lived Ku Klux Klan was formed in Levuka with the (quickly frustrated) aim of installing a white supremacist government.

In 1825 the coastal villagers ended their alliance with the chief of Verata (a village on Viti Levu's Rewa Delta), and gave allegiance to Ratu Seru Cakobau, the powerful chief of Bau (an island off the southeast coast of Viti Levu). Cakobau attempted unsuccessfully to form a national government in 1871, and in 1874 Great Britain acted on an earlier offer by Cakobau and Fiji was ceded to the Crown. Fiji thus became a British colony and Levuka was proclaimed its capital. (For more information see p29.) The government was officially moved to Suva in 1882. By the end of the 19th century, trade was also shifting to Suva, and with copra markets plummeting in the 1930s, Levuka declined further.

While the northern end of town was swept away in the hurricanes of 1888 and 1905, many of the boom-time buildings remain.

## Climate

The climate of these islands is sunnier and drier than the east coast of Viti Levu, al-

though Levukans say that if it doesn't rain for a week, it's almost a drought.

## Information

All facilities for tourists in the Lomaiviti Group are in Levuka, Ovalau. Fast, cheap Internet is available at Ovalau Watersports, and the Royal Hotel also has a computer in its office where you can get online.

Dial ☎ 911 for the ambulance or police. **Colonial National Bank** (Beach St, Levuka) Exchanges travellers cheques and currency.

**Levuka Hospital** (☎ 344 0221; Beach St, Levuka; ☎ outpatient treatment 8am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, emergencies only after hr) A good, new hospital at the northern end of town. Efficient doctors will treat tourists for \$5.

**Ovalau Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 330 0356; Community Centre, Morris Hedstrom Bldg, Levuka; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri, Sat till 1pm) Features friendly staff who will do their best to help you hunt down any information you're after, or they'll bat you to Ovalau Watersports.

**Ovalau Watersports** (☎ 344 0166; www.owfiji.com; Beach St, Levuka; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, till 1pm Sat) A dive shop cum information centre cum Internet provider cum tour-booking office.

**Police station** (☎ 344 0222; Totoga Lane, Levuka) **Post office** (Beach St, Levuka) Near Queen's Wharf at the southern end of town; there's a cardphone outside.

**Westpac bank** (Beach St, Levuka) Has the only ATM in Lomaiviti; also exchanges travellers cheques and foreign currency, and gives cash advances on Visa or MasterCard.

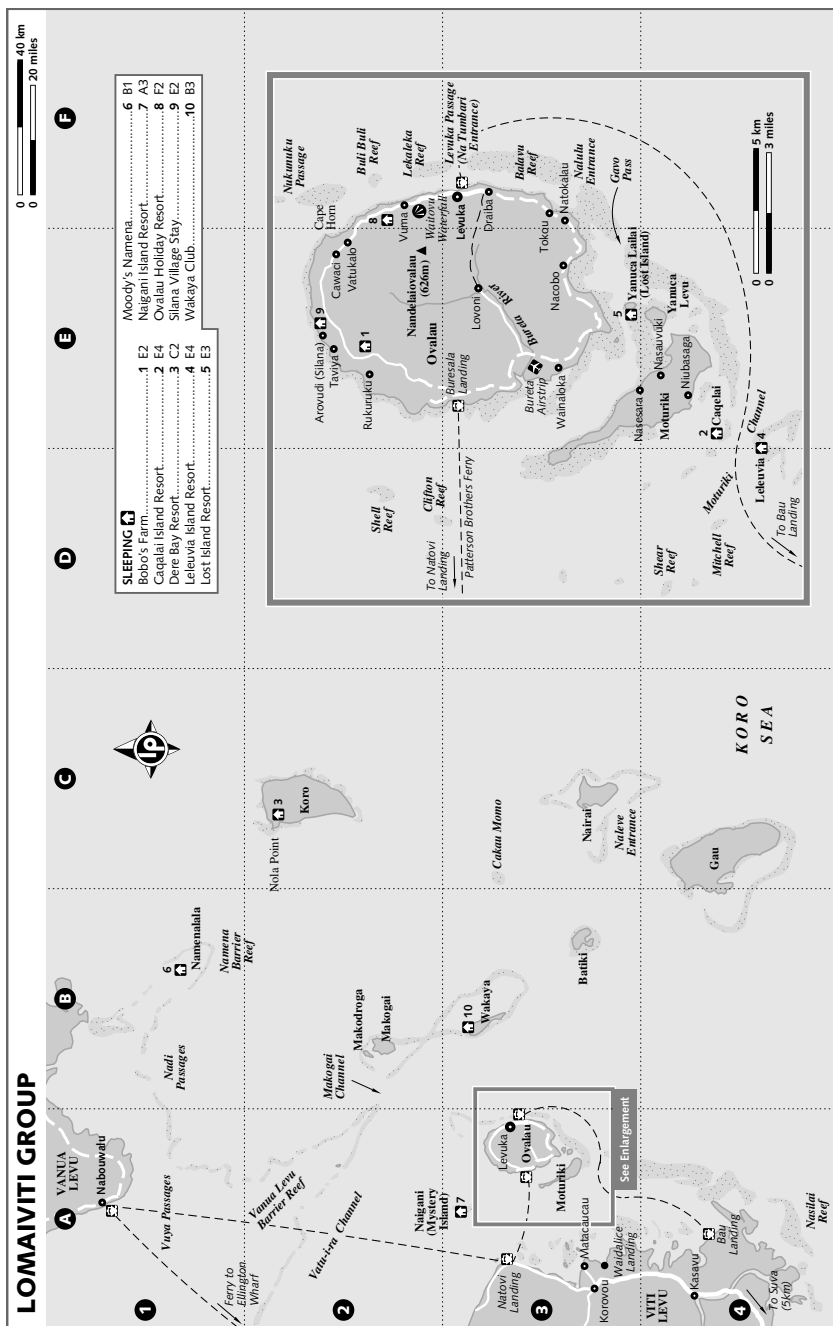
## Activities

### CYCLING

Cycling is a good way to explore Levuka and its surrounding area. The road to the south is fairly flat, and the north is OK until about Cawaci, after which it gets very hilly. It takes about a day to cycle around the island. Mountain bikes are available from **Levuka's Ovalau Watersports** (Beach St; half-/full day \$10/15).

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

The Lomaiviti waters offer some great dive sites where you can encounter manta rays, hammerheads, turtles, white-tip reef sharks and lion fish. There is stunning soft coral at Snake Island and Shark Reef in the Moturiki Channel, and excellent hard coral at Waitovu Passage (the best snorkelling spot – although most dives are suitable for snorkellers). The Pipeline, two minutes by boat from town at Levuka Passage, is for experienced divers only. Here, the fishy waste from



the Pafco tuna plant attracts giant groupers, eagle rays and bull sharks. **Ovalau Watersports** (☎ 344 0166; www.owlfiji.com; Beach St, Levuka) offers two-tank dives/PADI Open Water Course for \$150/460, including gear (minimum of two divers). Instruction can be in English or German. Reef snorkelling trips, accompanying divers, cost \$40 per person including equipment.

## Tours

As a general rule, phone ahead to arrange pick-ups from your hotel.

**Epi's Midland Tour** (☎ 602 1103, 923 6011; epitours@hotmail.com; full-day per person \$35, minimum 4; ☎ departs 10.30am-11.30am Mon-Sat) takes you into the crater of an extinct volcano, which sits in the centre of Ovalau like a giant, upturned, broken eggshell. This is the site of Lovoni village. The tour is run by Epi, a Lovoni married to an Englishwoman. It is very popular, because the scenery is stunning and Epi is a fantastic storyteller. Epi's version of the history of Fiji has the Lovoni as the prime movers in almost every epoch. He tells how they were the only Fijians undefeated in battle and the only Fijians sold as slaves. The one thing he says they didn't do is burn the Masonic Lodge in Levuka.

The tour is a combination of trekking and transport on local carrier. Epi will point out many medicinal plants during your trek. Once you've reached the village and presented your *sevusevu* (gift for the village chief) – assuming the chief is around – you can take a dip in the river. A delicious lunch is laid on in one of the village homes. You can book the tour through the Royal Hotel. Price includes transfers and lunch.

The next three are organised through **Ovalau Holiday Resort** (☎ 344 0329; ohrfiji@connect.com.fj).

**Fishing trips** (per hour \$40) leave Ovalau Holiday Resort in search of rock cod, trevally and Spanish mackerel in Levuka Passage, Waitovu Passage and Toki Passage. The resort will barbecue your catch for free.

**Round Island 4WD Tours** (per person \$35, minimum 4; ☎ departs 10am) takes in the entire island, including the major historical sites around Levuka, the village of Lovoni, and the Solomon Islanders' settlement at Wainaloka. You drop in for refreshments at Bobo's Farm in Rukuruku, hike out to a waterfall and swim in the Bureta River. The tour includes

a picnic lunch. You can also book through Ovalau Watersports.

A **Waitovu Tour** (per person \$15) is also offered from time to time. Travellers hike to the peak of Gun Rock, through pine forests and *kava* plantations, then swim in Waitovu waterfall. It takes about 3½ hours.

The following three can be booked through **Ovalau Watersports** (☎ 344 0166; www.owlfiji.com; Beach St, Levuka).

**Silana Village Tour** (per person \$30, minimum 6) runs every Wednesday and includes a *meke* (traditional dance), a *lovo* (feast cooked in a pit oven), and a chance to make your own handicrafts from coconut and pandanus leaves. Book at Ovalau Watersports or the Royal Hotel before 4pm Tuesday, but double check the situation by phone with Silana Village (see p178). The guide, Seru, will also take you around his village any time for \$15 (including lunch). Before you set out, ascertain whether you're getting the full package or just a look around the fairly ordinary village.

**Talanoa** means 'have a chat', and with **Tea & Talanoa Tours** (per person \$15) you can have a chat with Fijian grandmother Bubu Kara or long-term expat resident Duncan Chrichton ('Mr Duncan'). Bubu makes delicious scones, and Mr Duncan has a fabulous garden.

Town tours (per person \$10) of Levuka are available from Nox, the personable gardener at Levuka Homestay. Nox also runs a Waitovu tour, similar to that described earlier (\$15). There are also town tours (\$8) that leave from Ovalau Tourist Information Centre at 9am and 2pm weekdays.

**Wainaloka Tour** (per person \$30; ☎ departs 10.30am Sun) Attend an Anglican church service and tour this settlement of Solomon Islanders, the descendants of people blackbirded to work Ovalau's plantations. The tour can be booked with, and departs from, the Royal Hotel and includes transfers and lunch at Wainaloka.

Day trips to **Leleuvia** (p189) or **Caqalai** (p180), including lunch, cost \$50 per person.

## OVALAU

Ovalau is the largest island in the Lomaiviti Group. The capital, Levuka, is the only town, and the only place with significant shops and services.

The Bureta airstrip and Buresala ferry landing are on the western side of Ovalau,