

Must-see Rotuma pools

Geraldine Panapasa

Fiji Times, Sunday, June 10, 2012

YOU can never really say you've been to Rotuma until you've visited swimming spots that make the island a 'hidden paradise' - and I'm not just saying that because of my heritage and link to the island.

In fact, the moment you set foot on the island, either at the airstrip in Malha'a or the docks at the jetty in Oinafa, one look at the pristine waters that surround the island is all it takes to get you excited.

The scenery on the morning we arrived was something out of that Johnny Lingo film. The sun was at its peak, its rays glistening off the surface of the turquoise waters, white sandy beaches one can barely look directly at and coconut fronds dancing away to the rhythm of a light breeze.

This was the Rotuma many had come to see and the Rotuma many would never forget. Some teachers and civil servants that had come to the island for a Technical, Vocational Educational and Training (TVET) workshop were clearly taken aback by the islands 'warm' welcome.

"Your island is very beautiful," was the compliment throughout the docking process from the Fiji visitors to some of the islanders on board the MV Iloilovatu.

If you're an eager beaver or first-time visitor, the thought of jumping straight into the water without a care in the world would definitely have crossed your mind. There are a lot of swimming spots around the island - almost every district is proud of a certain beach or freshwater pool that's frequented a lot by visitors or locals.

There are some pools, though, that are quite different with restrictions like the freshwater pool at Lopta called Vairama.

It's quite an intriguing story, one that has been observed by the people of Lopta for many years and much similar in nature to taboo places in Fiji where only men and women can bathe or swim.

The pool is a short distance behind Lopta. Unlike Sisilo and the ancient burial grounds at Noatau, Vairama was well-looked after, trimmed hedges and a neat path leading to the stony walls that hugged the freshwater pool.

It was a Thursday and Ahau was filled with civil servants hosting workshops and awareness programs for the community. LajeRotuma Initiative volunteer Rupeni Fonmanu had planned the days walk from Ahau to Lopta where the two pools - Vairama and Fuliu - lie in wait. We met up with our guide Visoni Mitchell at Mea in Hapmak then began our 8.5 kilometre walk on the

sandy road through two districts - Itutiu and Malhaa, sightseeing like local tourists, before reaching Oinafa where the natural beauties are prized.

It took us about two hours to cover the exhausting distance on foot at midday when the sun refused to show mercy. It was only when we reached Lopta that a light drizzle fell upon us as if to say we deserved it.

As we made our way past the dirt bush road to Vairama, the sight of the still, lucid waters made me wish the pool wasn't restricted to men. There was no 'men only' sign to warn off the ladies because the taboo was somewhat 'general knowledge' on the island. But after a tiresome walk that left me pink all over, the temptation to brush aside culture and dive in to cool off was so great it took a lot of self control and common sense for me to realise this was a place held in high regard by the people of Lopta - no susu madrai from Suva was going to break a tradition upheld for so many generations.

"The men use the pool for washing their clothes or to have their bath. Its always been tradition that the pool is for men only - its been that way for a long time. I cannot recall the history of the pool but I know this taboo has been observed for many years," says Oinafa mata (spokesman) and Rotuma Council chairman Tarterani Rigamoto.

Meanwhile, Fuli'u is another pool by the seaside that would simply take your breath away. We arrived to find a shallow mass of water and charcoal black stone steps leading down to the natural wonder. The clear, turquoise water against the white sand at the bottom was a picturesque view of why such areas should be protected and kept pollution-free.

Legends

Sometimes when history isn't written, oral tales passed down from an elder are what many depend on and recognise as part of their identity as a people. Noataus sub-chief Fonman Inoke took time out to share with us stories of the past.

"This is a story about two men from Noatau who went to a place called Ana, a cave up in the bush. Its quite a deep cave. Now, the story was told to me by an elder. These two men decided to explore the cave to see where it would lead to," Gagaj Fonman began.

"In the old days, when people say they're going to do something, they do it. So they began exploring and came to an intersection. One path led to the right and the other to the left. They agreed to go in different paths saying whoever survives the journey would tell the others what happened.

The one who came out at a cave near here told the people his story but he did not know what became of his friend. Some believed the other man could have ended up at Vaitoka, its another place with cool freshwater.

"I've tasted it and the water is so fresh. At one time, I approached regional development office to propose a reservoir be built to pump water from there to Noatau but I don't know what happened."

Gagaj Fonman says the freshwater from Vaitoka could be the same source supplying water to Fuliu in Lopta but no one dared to explore the cave because of the superstition that once you go in, you never come out.

"In Ituti'u, there's another place called Fapufa. I believe there's a cave there too and the water is very cold. When I worked in Fiji in the tourism industry, I visited caves in the Yasawas. Those caves are big but the one at Fapufa is small - it doesn't look like a cave to me though more like rocks that fell and settled over the years," he said.

Mr Rigamoto added freshwater at Fuliu could also have been sourced from Kufesi, about 400 yards (some 365 metres) inland.

"Some believe the pool at Kufesi, which is much bigger than Vairama, supplies freshwater to Fuliu. Kufesi is located at Taolo Village. Fuli'u is a bit shallow but that's what the belief is," he said.

These places are a must-see for anyone visiting the remote and isolated island. My only suggestion is to take a picnic basket when you decide to visit because swimming often makes the tummy grumble.