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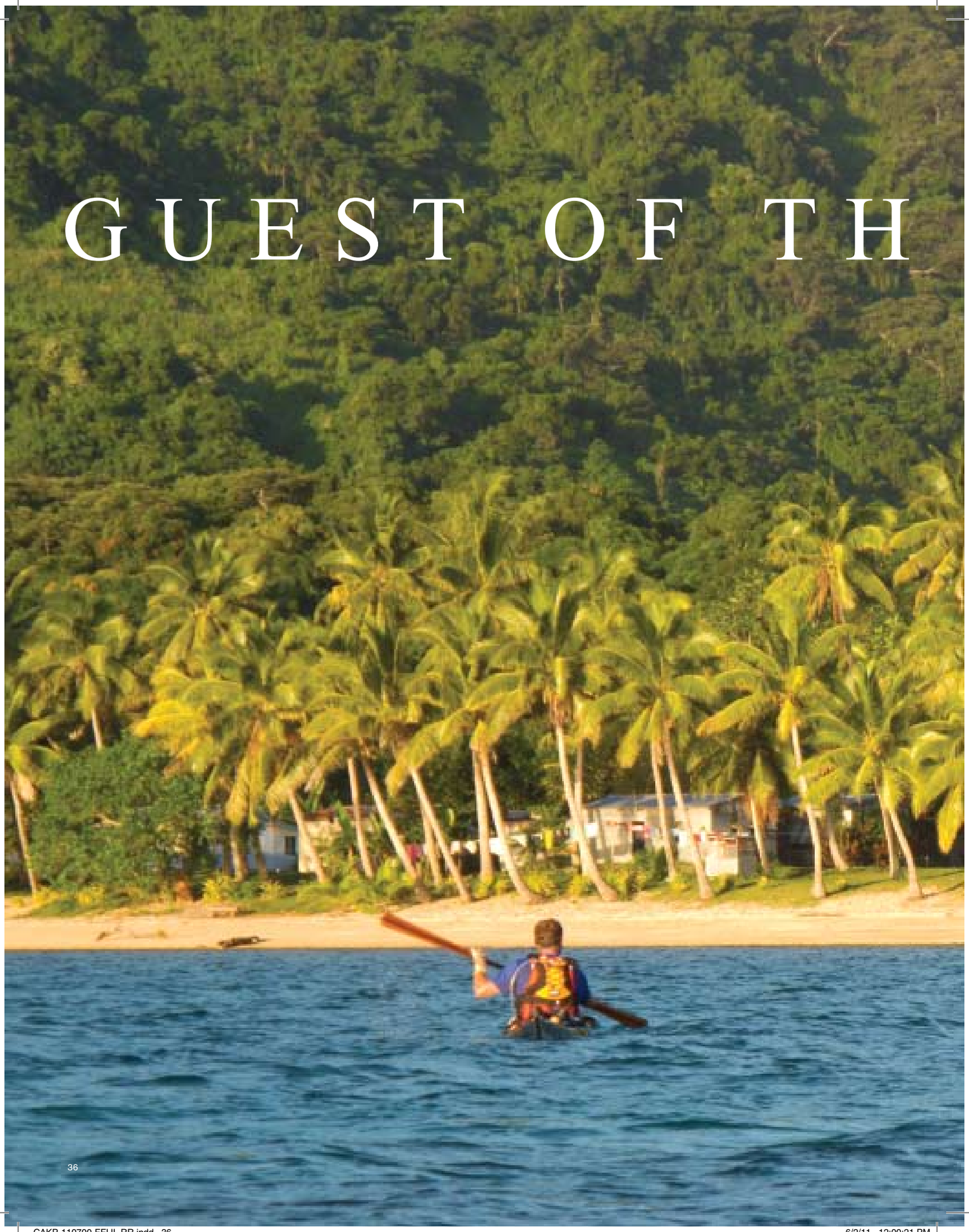
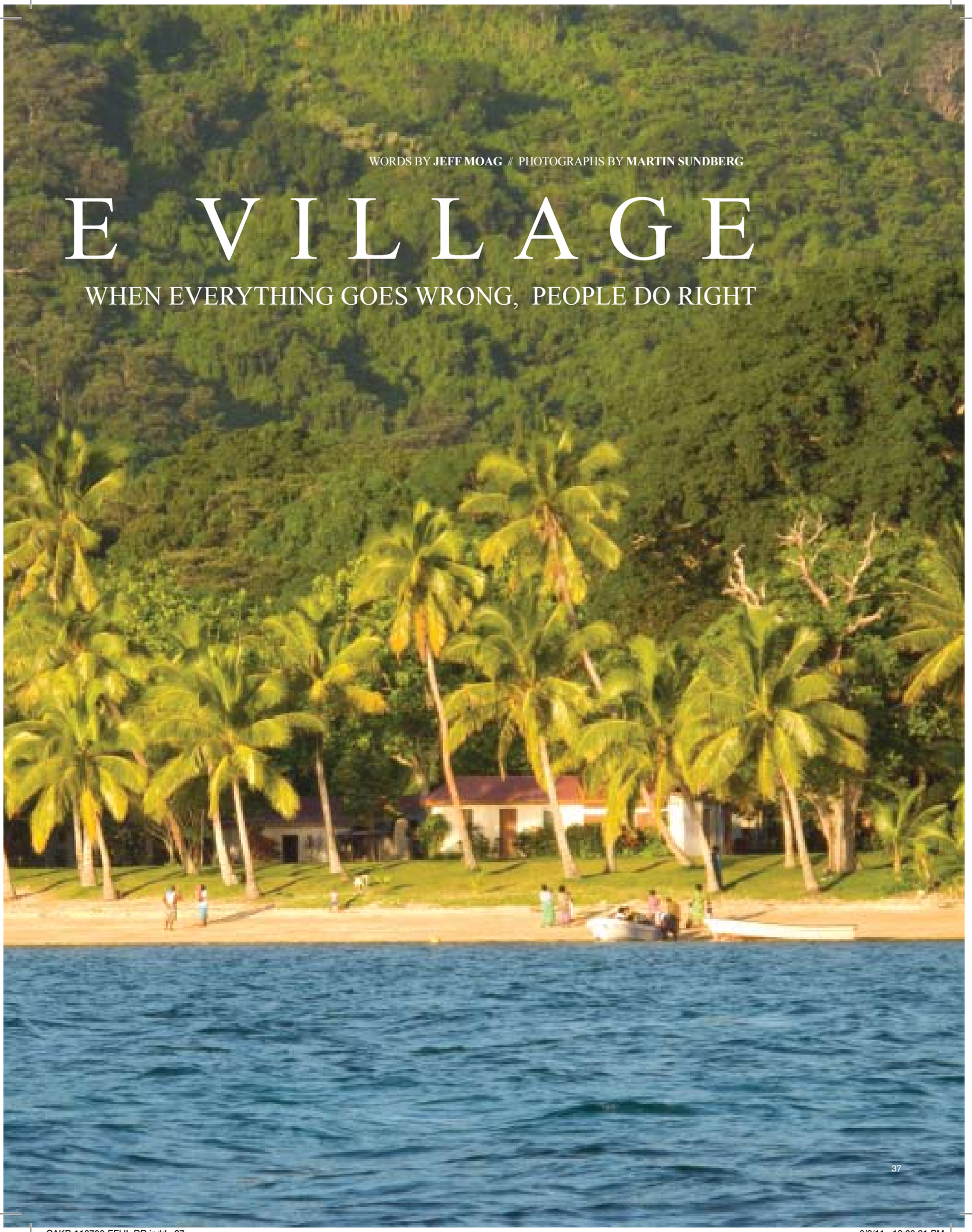




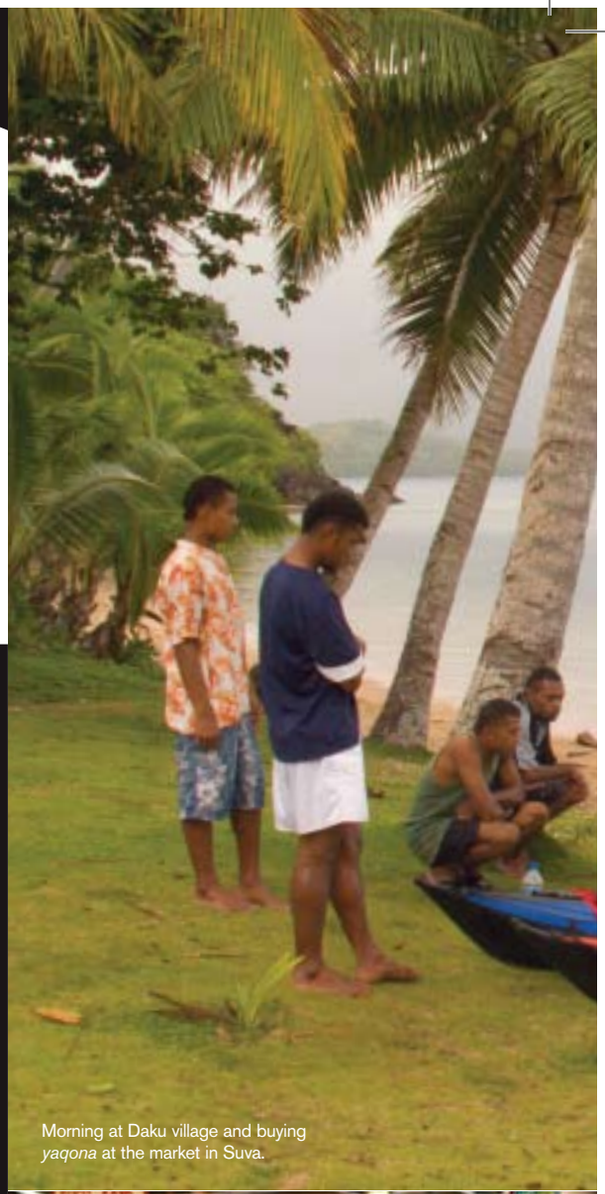
WORDS BY **JEFF MOAG** // PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MARTIN SUNDBERG**

E VILLAGE

WHEN EVERYTHING GOES WRONG, PEOPLE DO RIGHT

We had both been up well before dawn, assembling our folding kayaks and stuffing them with gear. The trip's first 20 miles had banished the frenetic feeling built up over days of hard travel, but the jetlag was still with us, and an unrelenting headwind had ground away our last energy reserves. Now the sun was sinking fast, and the only place to possibly find shelter was the postcard scene we were paddling into: an unknown shore lined with palm trees, small houses and people bathed in impossibly warm evening light.

We were crossing a wide bay toward a group of people whom we had never met, with the expectation that they would care for us and ask for nothing in return. The feeling was truly humbling—more like an adventure than most of the adrenaline-seeking things I have done in my life.



Morning at Daku village and buying *yaqona* at the market in Suva.

If we were at home we'd just roll our sleeping bags out on the sand. But in Fiji, every square foot of land, reef and lagoon belongs to one village or another. Camping without permission is unthinkable, and if you ask you'll invariably be invited to stay in the village. So I paddled on, reminding myself that this is the reason we'd declined to join a guided trip that would certainly have been better organized, with better food, and would have led us to more beautiful beaches and snorkeling spots. We needed to take out the middleman to see Fiji in the purest way a tourist can in a mere two weeks. This was what we had wanted, but actually doing it, I had my doubts.

I thought of Lewis and Clark when they arrived in the Mandan villages with winter setting in. Without help from the local tribes, they surely would have perished. We weren't in mortal danger, of course. We were just tired and hungry. But the feeling of helplessness, of total dependence on strangers, was very real.

I had a long time to think about all this as we paddled across the mouth of a mile-wide bay and distant figures slowly resolved into women and children and men. I ran through the instructions that Anthony Norris, the owner of Tamarillo Tropical Expeditions who's led kayak trips on this island for more than a decade, had e-mailed weeks before: "Land on a beach outside the village, but don't enter. Ask a local to go and get the *turaga ni koro* (the village administrator, this is a different role than the chief). Tell him who you are, and explain that you have a *sevusevu* to present to the village.

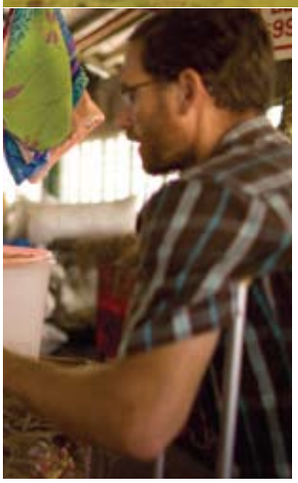
"From there, everything will fall magically into place."

We could only hope that he was right.

THIS WASN'T MY FIRST TRIP TO FIJI. As a boy in the 1970s, I'd spent three summers here. My parents had recently split, and my father took a job with the University of the South Pacific in the capital, Suva. Letters took two weeks each way, and in three years we never once spoke on the phone. I suppose I felt abandoned on some level, but those barefoot summers in Fiji made everything else seem worth it. Then and now, Fiji occupied a strange, rose-colored place in my mind, halfway between reality and a dream. It's a place I love but had never really known.

Here's an example: One of those summers my family spent a day visiting a Fijian village set up as a tourist attraction. I remember two things about it—feeding Cheetos to a caged monkey, and thinking how fake it was. At age 9, I made up my mind that the traditional Fiji was gone forever. When I discovered many years later that I'd been wrong, that Fijian culture was alive and well in the outer islands, I promised myself that one day I'd go see it for myself. Naturally, I'd get there in a kayak.

That promise eventually led me to Kadavu. Though it's the fourth largest of Fiji's 300-some islands, Kadavu had stayed out of the flow of commerce, nearly forgotten by the British colonialists because the steep, rocky interior is use-



less for sugar cultivation. It's a bastion of traditional culture, surrounded by a spectacular coral reef, with an airstrip perfectly suited to a fly-in expedition using folding kayaks. Google Earth told me everything I needed to know: The satellite photo actually showed a DeHavilland Twin Otter parked three wingspans from the beach. I'd just put my Feathercraft kayak together on the sand and paddle away, staying in villages and small resorts as I circled the island.

Fijians have a well-deserved reputation for friendliness and generosity, but there's a strict protocol required of guests and hosts alike. So while I studiously avoided any itinerary more detailed than paddling clockwise around Kadavu—a nine-day route that would cover anywhere from 100 to 150 miles—I also spent time learning how to be a good guest. I devoted hours on the phone with Anthony and Mark Calamia, an ethnographer who had spent two years on Kadavu. Most importantly, I enlisted my good friend Martin Sundberg to come with me. A gifted photographer, strong paddler and a gregarious personality, Martin is the perfect person with whom to arrive unannounced in a remote Fijian village.

I prepared meticulously in every way but one: I'd barely paddled in months. A nagging wrist injury had kept me out of the boat, and as our late June departure crept closer, the warning signs mounted: a week spent flat on my back with a nasty stomach bug, tendonitis that flared without provocation, and what I think of as "the usual"—chronic knee pain that I deal with by strapping a pair of crutches to the rear deck of my kayak. I had never been so physically unprepared for a big paddling trip.

MARTIN WAS ELECTRIFIED to finally be afloat, blurting superlatives as his photographer's eye parsed the scene—the clarity of the water, the angular shape of the hills sweeping down to the sea, the flying fish that skittered across our bows. I admired the view, but the headwind distracted my attention. I tried to keep up with Martin's exuberant pace, but began falling behind. I kept a steady rhythm, and each time he stopped to remark about something spectacular—a sea turtle!—I'd close the gap.

I couldn't escape the feeling that we were also slipping behind schedule, despite our best efforts not to have one. Our only firm commitment was to meet Tamarillo's lead kayak guide, Ratu Joseva Banivalu, in five or six days. Today's goal was modest: to reach Papageno, a garden-like eco-resort somewhere between 10 and 20 miles east of our starting point in Vunisea. The website was pretty vague about Papageno's precise location. They're selling an escape—you get off the plane and a big, smiling Fijian picks you up in a motorboat. What more do you need to know?

So as Martin marveled at the crystal water and spectacular reefs, I scanned the shoreline for signs

of basking tourists. I was tired, hungry, jetlagged and injured. Despite wrapping my ailing left wrist in duct tape and switching my regular paddle for an ultra-light Greenland stick, after six hours of steady paddling I could barely grip my paddle. When a collection of hammocks and beach chairs hove into view, I made a beeline.

"It doesn't look like there's anybody here," Martin said.

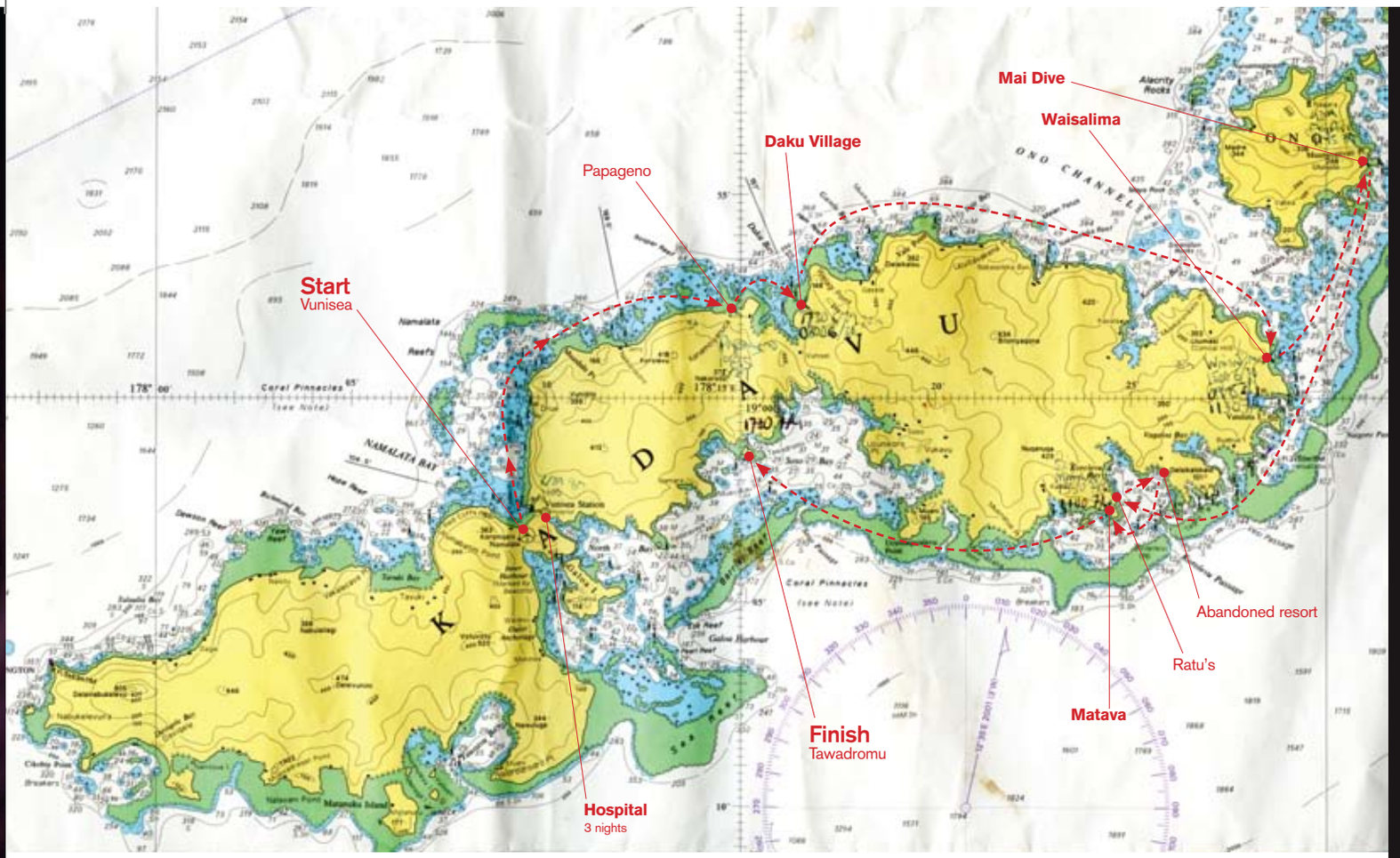
I glanced across the empty beach, then at the low-hanging sun. "It must be happy hour. Everybody's probably at the bar," I said, wandering up a manicured trail. A little snooping brought us to the resident manager, who regarded our salt-crusted sprayskirts warily and confirmed our worst fears. The resort was closed for renovations. "You could try the village," she said. I swallowed four ibuprofen, wrapped my wrist in fresh duct tape, and we paddled on.

AN HOUR LATER, we slid our kayaks onto the coarse sand beach, smiled broadly and, sticking to Anthony's script, asked for the *turaga ni koro*. Someone went to fetch him, and we stood there awkwardly, two oddball Americans in paddling gear surrounded by about 20 people, most less than 10 years old. Kids stared warily from behind their mother's brightly colored skirts. Martin and I smiled back, and waited.

Soon the turaga arrived and introduced himself as Pio. He was a tall man of about 60, slender but strong, with a deeply creased brow and serious demeanor. I told him that we hoped to stay the night, and that we had brought the village a small gift of *yaqona*, or kava root.

He said something gracious to the effect of "we'll get to that, but first go get cleaned up." We followed a young woman to a modest tin-roofed home, walking barefoot across cool grass as chickens scattered before us and a flock of kids followed at our heels. A meal of fish and root vegetables appeared, and we sat on the floor to eat with Pio, his grown daughter and 5-year-old granddaughter Elizabel, as a Hollywood film about rival cheerleaders played on a VCR wired to a deep-cell battery.

Afterward, Pio invited us to drink kava. By accepting our gift of *yaqona* and sharing the kava made from it, the village would be formally extending its hospitality. We followed him in the dark to another tin-roofed shack, where five men sat cross-legged around a large wooden bowl. The youngest, a short, powerfully built fellow of about 25, introduced himself as "Bond. James Bond." Everyone laughed. The mood was relaxed but reverent. We waited as 007 mixed the roots with water from a five-gallon plastic bucket, rinsing and wringing them repeatedly. Using an iron bar



as thick as my wrist, the men had pounded the roots into a mass of fibers resembling the detached head of a mop. James Bond repeatedly pulled it toward him, using it to strain the muddy-looking kava. He then handed the roots to another young man sitting next to the open door, who shook them violently into the night, as if flinging sand from a towel, and then passed them back for more kneading and straining.

Finally it was time to drink. James Bond handed a bowl brimming with brown liquid to the man seated to my right, who spoke for a few minutes in Fijian. This was his house, and as host he drank first. Next, Pio spoke for a long time, again in Fijian. His tone reminded me of a man saying grace. I wasn't sure of the protocol, but when they passed me the bowl I said a few heartfelt words thanking the village for its hospitality. Then I emptied the bowl of earthy liquid in a single draft to murmurs of approval. Martin drained his bowl, and when everyone had drunk, we talked. Pio carried a conversation straddling two cultures and two languages. Fijians learn English in school but the degree of fluency varies widely. When Pio asked about President Obama, I said that I'd voted for him, but had been surprised that he was elected. I hadn't thought that my country would elect a black man. The men nodded thoughtfully, and conversation turned to Fiji's rugby loss against Samoa two days before, which was something of a national travesty.

The next morning I woke before dawn to a duet sung by Pio and his daughter, with young Elizabel joining in the chorus. When Martin and I joined them, Pio was lying on the floor in the glow of a kerosene lamp with Elizabel perched on his belly. I asked about the song. "I don't know the name in English. It's the song they played when the Titanic was sinking," he said. (Later I learned that the hymn is "Nearer my God to Thee," about a traveler who arrives in a strange place after sunset and, with a stone for a pillow, dreams that he's close to heaven.) It occurred to me that Pio had been singing the same hymn in this house since his daughter was a toddler. Now, they sing in perfect harmony to her daughter.

CLAYTON HAD GONE TO THE VILLAGE TO DRINK GROG AND SAY HIS GOODBYES. THE VILLAGE SENT HIM BACK WITH A SUCKLING PIG.

THE LACK OF A PLAN was going perfectly to plan. Each of the last four days had brought another happy accident. We'd rounded more than a third of Kadavu, made the four-mile crossing to neighboring Ono Island, and spent two extraordinary days at Mai Dive, a small family-owned resort there. Though the famed manta rays of Buliya Island blew off our appointment, we found some extraordinary coral swim-throughs and happened into a *lovo*, or traditional feast, in honor of a lanky 24-year-old from Texas named Clayton, who had spent the last year working at Mai Dive. He'd gone to the nearby village to drink grog and say his goodbyes, and the village sent him back with a suckling pig. It had been roasting for most of the afternoon, wrapped in banana leaves and buried in the sand with dalo, cassava, a pair of magnificent Trevally, and plenty of hot rocks. Everyone had gathered around to watch as the men pulled the hot food from the pit barehanded, laughing as Clayton heckled them in Fijian.

The next day, or the day after, we were due in Korolevu Bay to paddle with Ratu and his crew of Fijian kayak guides. We'd left it vague, and despite Anthony's assurance that "Ratu loves to text," we still hadn't made contact. Maybe I hadn't figured out how to send text messages on the little pink Digicel phone I'd bought for $50 in the city, or maybe the island's lone cell tower had run out of mojo. Ei-

Sunshine and Rainbows: crossing Gasele Bay on the protected north side of Kadavu.

ther way, Martin and I decided we should stop in at Ratu's house, which Anthony had described as the only combination coconut plantation, guesthouse and kayak storage facility on Korolevu Bay. Getting there involved a lively 16-mile paddle, starting with the trades almost on our nose and following the curve of the island until we finally rounded the headland and ran dead downwind two miles across the bay, riding 2-foot rollers toward a likely looking roofline on the western shore. This was our first real downwinder in five days of paddling, and the fact that Ratu's place was empty barely dented our enthusiasm.

We continued to Matava, an eco-resort one bay farther west. When we arrived the tide was all the way out, and a man was waiting for us, standing on the wide mud flats in tasseled leather loafers and a single yellow flower behind his ear. He introduced himself as Maggie. "You must be freezing!" he said. "I can't believe you're out paddling in this weather." It was about 70 degrees.

At dinner that evening Maggie made a grand entrance in a flowing silk sari and matching scarf, and proceeded to distribute dinner plates and one-liners with practiced ease. The food was excellent—chicken from the village and greens from the resort garden—but despite the bone-deep hunger from consecutive long days of paddling, I could only nibble at my salad. I told Martin that I hadn't completely shaken the stomach bug that laid me flat two weeks ago in California, and went to sleep at 8 o'clock.

THE NEXT DAY WE SET OUT ON OUR BIGGEST DAY of paddling, about 25 miles culminating in a long open-water crossing to Galoa Island, just across the isthmus from where we had started. The storm, as Maggie had called it, brought a brisk, crossing tailwind, temperatures in the high 60s and a clean feeling, as if a thunderstorm had recently passed. We'd covered about a dozen miles when a distant motorboat abruptly altered course and charged straight toward us. It was full of children, drums of fuel and bundles of produce, and standing at the outboard was a thickset figure in an orange rain slicker with the hood drawn tight. We shouted across the water, "Bula bula!" as Ratu cut the throttle and glided to a stop beside us.

He greeted us warmly and said that he and the boys would be thrilled to paddle with us. We made plans to meet the next morning on Tawadromu, a tiny island about seven miles ahead. He assured us that we could camp there, and pointed out on my chart where to ask permission and where to sleep. We thanked him and began the long open-water run, staying close to the reef and catching sidelong glances at the heavy south swell crashing onto the coral. We reveled in being close to something so powerful, while skidding along with gentle 2-foot wind waves nipping at our sterns. Martin would dash ahead, surfing from swell to swell, then double back and wait, saying, "How ya doin'?" as I chugged by. "Good," I'd answer, and it was only half a lie. I felt awful—dehydrated, weak, my left wrist throbbing—but I was having a ball.

We reached the lee of Tawadromu just at

MARTIN WOULD SURF AHEAD, THEN DOUBLE BACK AND WAIT, SAYING, "HOW YA DOIN'?" AS I CHUGGED BY. "GOOD," I'D ANSWER, AND IT WAS ONLY HALF A LIE. I FELT AWFUL—DEHYDRATED, WEAK, MY LEFT WRIST THROBBING—BUT I WAS HAVING A BALL.

sunset, ghosting quietly through the mangroves as bats flitted through the dusk. A tethered motorboat indicated a narrow path that led us to the island's only permanent residents, a young couple and their infant son. We sat dripping on their Formica floor and they naturally invited us to stay, but it was clear they had no space. We suggested camping on the beach that Ratu had pointed out, and the man gave us his blessing.

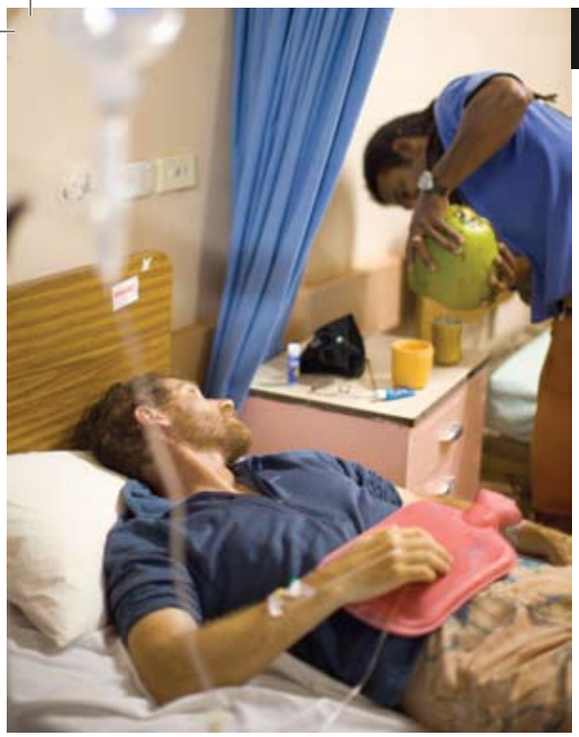
We paddled there in the dark, and I got a fire going on the sand and sat down close to it. Knowing I was dehydrated, I gulped down two cups of water. Immediately, I started to shiver. Martin handed me a hot cup of minute rice. I took three bites and vomited. I crawled into my sleeping bag, zipped the hood over my head, and shivered until I fell asleep. The diarrhea started around midnight. I swallowed all my Imodium. Two hours later, I took all of Martin's. It was no help. I stopped counting after 18 episodes. I was desperately sick.

At first light I called Ratu on the Digicel. He picked up on the second ring and told me not to worry. Soon one of his guides met us on the beach, and I rode the last six miles to Vunisea lying in the bottom of a motorboat like a bundle of cassava. A Toyota Hilux appeared a few minutes later and the driver, a thickly muscled man with tied-back dreadlocks, introduced himself as Ledua and hoisted our loaded kayaks into the bed of the pickup. Within minutes I was sitting in the shaded foyer of the Kadavu Sub-Divisional Hospital with a thermometer under my tongue. The verdict: 40.5 degrees Celsius (105 Fahrenheit). Soon I was lying on a cot with an IV in my arm. I felt the cool saline spreading up my arm, and closed my eyes.

I ENDED THE EXPEDITION IN THAT HOSPITAL, a wood-frame building with eight beds, screened windows and a small veranda with a sliver of a view. I couldn't see much of the town, but I could hear everything: children's laughter from the schoolyard, a band playing gospel country music every evening, the clang of iron bars after dark as men pounded *yaqona* for kava. At about 9 o'clock each night a nurse would come through the ward, lighting kerosene lamps. At 10 o'clock the town generator would shut down.

I shared the ward with a middle-aged man. Fijians, particularly those raised in the villages, are accustomed to greeting everyone they encounter. So each time I gathered my IV bottle and roll of toilet paper, my roommate would say,

Continued on p. 72



FIJIANS ARE ACCUSTOMED TO GREETING EVERYONE THEY ENCOUNTER. SO EACH TIME I GATHERED MY IV BOTTLE AND ROLL OF TOILET PAPER, MY ROOMMATE WOULD SAY, "HEY BRADDAH. YOU GOING TO THE LOO?"

Guest of the Village continued from p. 43

"Hey braddah. You going to the loo?" And I would say, "Yeah brother. How's your leg?" We had this conversation about 20 times in two days.

Each time a nurse would bring a plate of food, I would ask her to "give it to my brother," and the man, or one of his visiting family members, would devour it. I sent them seven meals. The thought of food nauseated me. When Martin and Ledua visited on my second afternoon in the clinic, I told the nurse I couldn't even hold down a sip of water, prompting my roommate to shout across the ward, "*Bu*!"

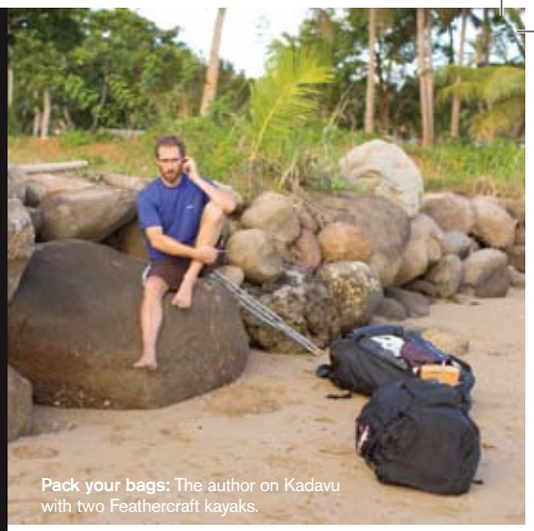
"Oh yes, *bu*," the nurse said. "It's green coconut. Good for a fever."

"I will get it for you," Ledua said, and an hour or two later he returned with a coconut and a machete. I managed to drink half a cup—the first nourishment I'd had in nearly 72 hours. The next morning, my roommate took the ferry to the big hospital in Suva where, I could only guess, his foot would be amputated. Our conversation had been limited, to say the least. But when he was gone I missed him.

The place felt empty, and after two days of near-continuous slumber, I suddenly couldn't sleep. I spent the last 24 hours in the hospital just thinking. By most measures, this trip had been a complete failure. We hadn't finished the circumnavigation. Hadn't paddled with Ratu and his friends. Hadn't swum with the mantas or speared fish for lunch. For the first time in 15 years of paddling, I had felt like a liability on a trip. I wasn't just the least experienced paddler—I've been that guy plenty of times and it's never bothered me. This time I was the instigator, the primary planner of an expedition that turned out to be beyond my abilities, not because it was overly ambitious, which it wasn't, but because I undertook it when I was unfit, with an injury that was more limiting than I had let myself admit. That, and I was carrying a dormant bacterial time bomb in my gut.

But the journey taught me more about Fiji, and myself, than if every piece had fallen perfectly into place. I'd been a guest of the village. I hadn't been the best guest, but the village—the whole country of Fiji and a cast of island-minded expats—had cared for me when I needed it most.

If You Go see p. 74



Pack your bags: The author on Kadavu with two Feathercraft kayaks.

Fiji, continued from p. 72

IF YOU GO:

Fly Air Pacific. Fiji's national airline flies direct from Los Angeles to Nadi on the main island of Viti Levu. Advance fares can be had for less than $1,000, and the 10.5-hour overnight flight is a deceptively easy long haul, even if your ticket stub says you leave Thursday night and arrive Saturday morning. (Fiji is 19 hours ahead of the U.S. west coast, which is another way of saying its just 5 hours behind.) The daily inter-island flight to Kadavu takes 45 minutes and costs about $100 each way.

Paddle with Anthony, Ratu and the rest of the Tamarillo crew. The New Zealand-based adventure travel company has been leading kayaking trips on Kadavu since 1998. Choose from 3-, 5- or 7-day itineraries, or ask Anthony about a custom trip.

Stay at small fishing and diving resorts on eastern Kadavu (Papageno, Waisalima and Matava) and Ono (the excellent Mai Dive), where room and board ranges from about $50 to $150 per person per night. Or stay with Tamarillo guide Ratu and his family at their Kadavu Wilderness Lodge, set on a piece of land called Natubagunu, believed to be the very first place humans set foot on Kadavu about 2,000 years ago.

Dive or Snorkel on the Great Astrolabe Reef, the world's fourth-largest reef system, and one of its best preserved.

Learn a few words. The *Lonely Planet Fijian Phrasebook* is an excellent primer, and well worth nine bucks on amazon.com. Start with *bula* (hello), and *vinaka* (thank you).