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# Cities of Fiji

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## Introduction

Fiji, a sprawling archipelago of over 300 islands scattered across the South Pacific, has long captivated the imaginations of travelers, traders, and settlers. Renowned for its lush landscapes, azure waters, and warm hospitality, Fiji's islands are also home to a thriving network of cities and towns, each with its own story, rhythm, and vital place in the nation's identity. Far from being just picturesque backdrops for visitors, Fiji's urban centres serve as vibrant engines for cultural exchange, economic progress, and civic life.

The urbanization of Fiji is a relatively recent chapter in its long history. Once characterized by scattered villages and rural settlements, Fiji has witnessed a profound shift toward city living over the past century. Today, nearly sixty percent of Fijians reside in urban areas—a transformation powered by migration, economic diversification, and an enduring quest for opportunity. The nation's cities are as varied as its people: from the bustling capital of Suva to the storied sugar port of Lautoka; from multicultural Nadi, gateway to the world, to the tranquil harbors of Savusavu and Levuka's colonial relics.

Fiji's urban landscape is shaped not only by opportunity but by resilience. Overcrowding, limited housing, transportation bottlenecks, and informal settlements are pressing challenges. Cities balance growth with a need for sustainability, as climate change and environmental threats loom—especially for low-lying coastal communities. At the same time, Fijian towns pulsate with life, culture, and entrepreneurial possibility, hosting vibrant marketplaces, religious festivals, football matches, and traditions both ancient and new.

As Fiji strides into a future shaped by global currents, urban development has taken center stage in the nation's aspirations. Government initiatives and forward-thinking programs aim to foster new urban hubs, invigorate old ones, and ensure that growth is equitable, resilient, and harmonious with both cultural heritage and the natural environment. Fiji's experience is both unique and instructive; it is a story of adaptation and innovation in the face of global challenges.

This book, "Cities of Fiji," is designed as both a historical account and a guide for visitors and curious readers. Through twenty-five detailed chapters, it explores the evolution of Fiji's cities from their earliest days to their present forms, guiding you through their bustling streets, storied landmarks, diverse communities, and the challenges and triumphs they face. Each chapter offers a window into the life of a city—its origins, people, economy, and the rhythms that make Fijian urban life so distinctive.

Whether you are planning a visit, studying urban development, or simply seeking a deeper appreciation of Fiji's place in the Pacific, this book aims to provide context, insight, and inspiration. The cities of Fiji are more than places on a map—they are living, evolving stories, and in the pages ahead, you are invited to discover them.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Islands and Geography of Fiji

Fiji, an archipelago nation, graces the vast expanse of the South Pacific Ocean, specifically within the region of Melanesia. This island nation is a captivating mosaic of more than 330 islands and over 500 smaller islets. Among this multitude, approximately 110 islands are permanently inhabited, forming the vibrant communities that define Fiji's unique character. The sheer number of islands, scattered across roughly 1.3 million square kilometers of the South Pacific, means that only about three percent of Fiji's territory is land; the rest is shimmering ocean.

Geographically, Fiji is situated about 1,770 kilometers north of New Zealand and approximately 4,450 kilometers southwest of Honolulu. Its closest neighbors are Tonga to the east and Vanuatu to the west. The islands themselves are primarily of volcanic origin, a testament to their fiery birth along the Pacific Ring of Fire's tectonic plate boundaries. Though now dormant, the remnants of this volcanic past are still visible in the form of cones, calderas, and ancient lava flows, all shaping a diverse landscape of mountains, valleys, and plains. While most are volcanic, a few rare limestone islands and atolls can also be found in more remote corners of the archipelago.

The two titans of the Fijian archipelago are Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, which together host the vast majority of the nation's population. Viti Levu, the largest island, spans an impressive 10,388 square kilometers, accounting for more than half of Fiji's total land area. It is home to over 70% of Fiji's population, making it the undeniable hub of the entire archipelago. This island is not only the most populous but also the most economically developed. The capital city, Suva, and many other significant urban centers like Lautoka and Nadi, are nestled along its coasts. A rugged mountain range slices through the center of Viti Levu from north to south, creating a striking topographical division. Mount Tomanivi, formerly known as Mount Victoria, proudly stands as Fiji's highest peak at 1,324 meters, located within this mountainous spine.

This central mountain range on Viti Levu also plays a crucial role in the island's climate, creating distinct wet and dry zones. The eastern side, exposed to the prevailing winds, experiences heavy rainfall, nurturing dense tropical forests. Conversely, the western side of the island, often referred to as the "burning west," lies in the rain shadow of the mountains and is noticeably drier. This drier climate in the west makes it ideal for sugarcane cultivation, a vital industry for Fiji, while the wetter east is seeing the development of a dairy industry. Viti Levu is also the exclusive home to the magnificent Giant Fijian long-horned beetle, one of the world's largest insects.

To the north of Viti Levu, separated by 64 kilometers of ocean, lies Vanua Levu, Fiji's

second-largest island. Covering an area of 5,587.1 square kilometers, it accounts for just over 30% of Fiji's land area and is home to about 15% of the population. The island is roughly shaped like a tall, thin triangle, with its northernmost point, Udu Point, extending into the vast Pacific. A long peninsula stretches out from its southeastern side into the Koro Sea. Like Viti Levu, Vanua Levu is characterized by rough, hilly terrain and is encircled by extensive coral reefs. The main part of the island is horizontally divided by a rugged mountain range, featuring peaks like Mount Batini (also known as Nasorolevu) at 1,111 meters. This mountainous spine ensures that the southern coasts, being windward, are significantly wetter, while northern Vanua Levu enjoys a drier eight-month period, perfect for its significant sugarcane industry. Vanua Levu also boasts several rivers, including the Labasa, Wailevu, and Qawa, which form a delta where the town of Labasa is situated.

Nestled amidst these islands, the Koro Sea is a significant body of water in the Pacific Ocean, bordered by Viti Levu to the south, Vanua Levu and Taveuni to the north, Kadavu to the west, and the Lau Islands to the east. It derives its name from Koro Island, a volcanic island within the Fijian archipelago. Covering approximately 58,000 square kilometers, the Koro Sea is relatively shallow, with a maximum depth of 2,930 meters. Its seabed is composed of heavy basaltic rocks, typical of ocean basins. However, navigation can be tricky due to numerous coral reefs and sandbars between the islands, allowing passage only through a few narrow channels. The Koro Sea is celebrated for its remarkable marine biodiversity, boasting over 300 species of hard corals, 1,500 types of fish, and 7,000 species of sea snails. It's a diver's paradise, with crystal-clear waters and vibrant coral gardens, supporting a rich ecosystem that includes majestic manta rays and colorful clownfish.

Fiji's climate is predominantly tropical marine, characterized by mild temperatures and only slight seasonal variations throughout the year. However, this idyllic setting is not without its challenges. The nation lies within a tropical cyclone belt, making it highly susceptible to these powerful storms, which typically occur between November and April. These cyclones, varying in strength from tropical depressions to destructive Category 5 storms, bring strong winds and heavy rainfall, often leading to floods, landslides, and storm surges. Fiji has experienced devastating cyclones in recent years, such as Cyclone Winston in 2016, which was the strongest tropical cyclone ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere, causing immense damage and loss of life.

Beyond cyclones, Fiji is also vulnerable to other natural disasters, including earthquakes and tsunamis, given its location on the Pacific Ring of Fire. The islands can experience higher-than-normal coastal flooding, and there's a risk of tsunamis triggered by underwater disturbances. Climate change has amplified these existing vulnerabilities, leading to more intense tropical cyclones, rising sea levels, and increased coastal erosion. Since 1993, Fiji has recorded an annual sea level increase of 6 millimeters, exceeding the global average. This rising tide has already forced some communities, like Vunidogoloa village on Vanua Levu, to relocate to higher ground,

highlighting the urgent need for adaptation strategies.

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