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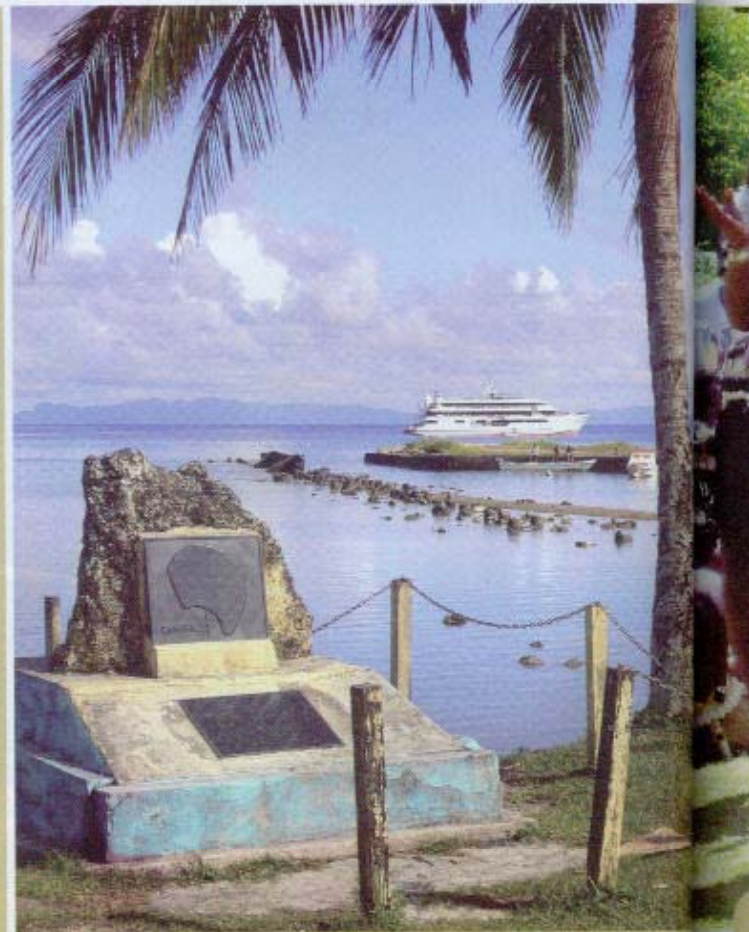
# AIR PACIFIC

Islands

VOLUME 2, 2009







If you wanted to start an argument with amateur anthropologists, start by saying, "I've just visited the Micronesians in Fiji". RODERICK EIME did just that.



# A LONG WAY FROM HOME





Of course, anyone who knows the basics will triumphantly point out your error, announcing "You are mistaken; Fiji is part of Melanesia".

True, but the tiny island of Rabi (pronounced RAM-bee) is a curious and fascinating anomaly within the boundaries of Melanesia.

The story begins many miles to the north among the former Gilbert and Ellis Islands, now Kiribati, and the tiny Ocean Island.

The Micronesians had lived there for thousands of years, peacefully existing on a stoney outcrop that met all their basic needs of shelter and food. The inhabitants even called it 'stoney' in their local language - Banaba.

At the very end of the 19th century, it was decided by the colonial rulers, then Great Britain, through their evangelical and missionary proxies, to begin phosphate mining on the island. Albert Ellis, a bit of a religious



zealot with a scientist's curiosity and the canny eye of a businessman, made a deal with some locals and laid claim to the island's resources.

Phosphate mining began straight away and thousands of tonnes of guano were progressively stripped from the island, effectively scraping it back to the bedrock.

During WWII (World War Two),

the Japanese bombed Ocean Island within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbour and occupied it from August 1942.

They treated the Banabans pretty much as they treated everyone they came across during their sweep of Asia and the Pacific.

The Japanese weren't evicted until after the final surrender in 1945.





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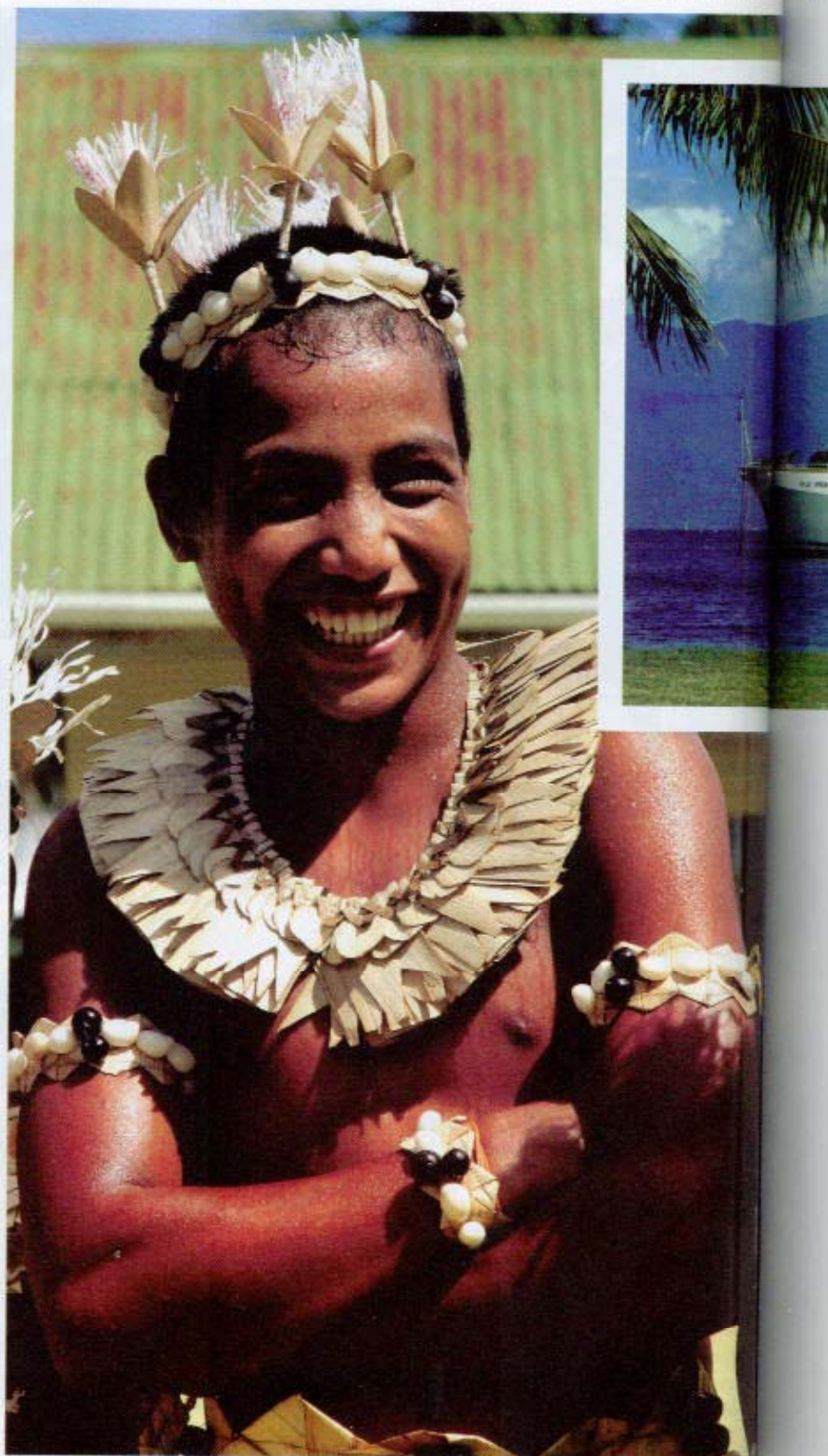
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*Even nowadays people ask me where is Banaba? I say, Banaba's all over Australia, New Zealand and everywhere else in the world. Been used as phosphate."*





Blue Lagoon Cruises' Fiji Princess...at Rabi.

Dispersed and distressed by the Japanese, the Allied administrators decided to relocate the surviving Banabans to Fiji and purchased the island of Rabi of the eastern coast of Vanua Levu for that purpose using the Banabans' own mining royalties.

The population was resettled in waves between 1945 and 1981, when the last of the phosphate was exhausted.

The plight of the Banabans was the subject of a BBC documentary and an ABC Radio National episode as part of the Encounter series.

Presenter, Stephen Watkins, examined the progress of the Banabans half a century after the first wave was resettled on Rabi.

"It was larger, was fertile and had possibilities for agriculture. But at the time it had virtually no facilities or satisfactory shelter from the colder weather. It was bought for the Banabans with their royalties. They were to be there until Banaba was rehabilitated. Fifty four years later, they're still there. They are part of the diaspora (forced ethnic migrations) of the Pacific."

Even though some 300 people have returned to Banaba, the majority have accepted their resettlement and forged

lives for themselves on Rabi, further away in Fiji or further away still in Australia and beyond.

Ken Sigrah is one of the younger generation of Fiji-born Banabans now living in Australia. Ken is the great-great-grandson of one of the signatories to the 1900 mining contract that spelled doom for the island and is the author of the book *Te Rii Ni Banaba (The Backbone of Banaba)*, published in 2001.

"Even nowadays people ask me and say, Ken, where is Banaba? And I say, Banaba's all over Australia, New Zealand and everywhere else in the world. Been used as phosphate."

Ken hopes to rehabilitate Banaba one day and preserve it for future generations, to retain an important link with the past.

Back on Rabi, passengers from the Blue Lagoon Cruises' History and Cultural Cruise regularly visit the island, bringing a small economic boost for the little community.

These visits are important, not just for the extra cash that comes ashore, but as an opportunity for the islanders to tell their story and remind visitors and themselves of where they come from.

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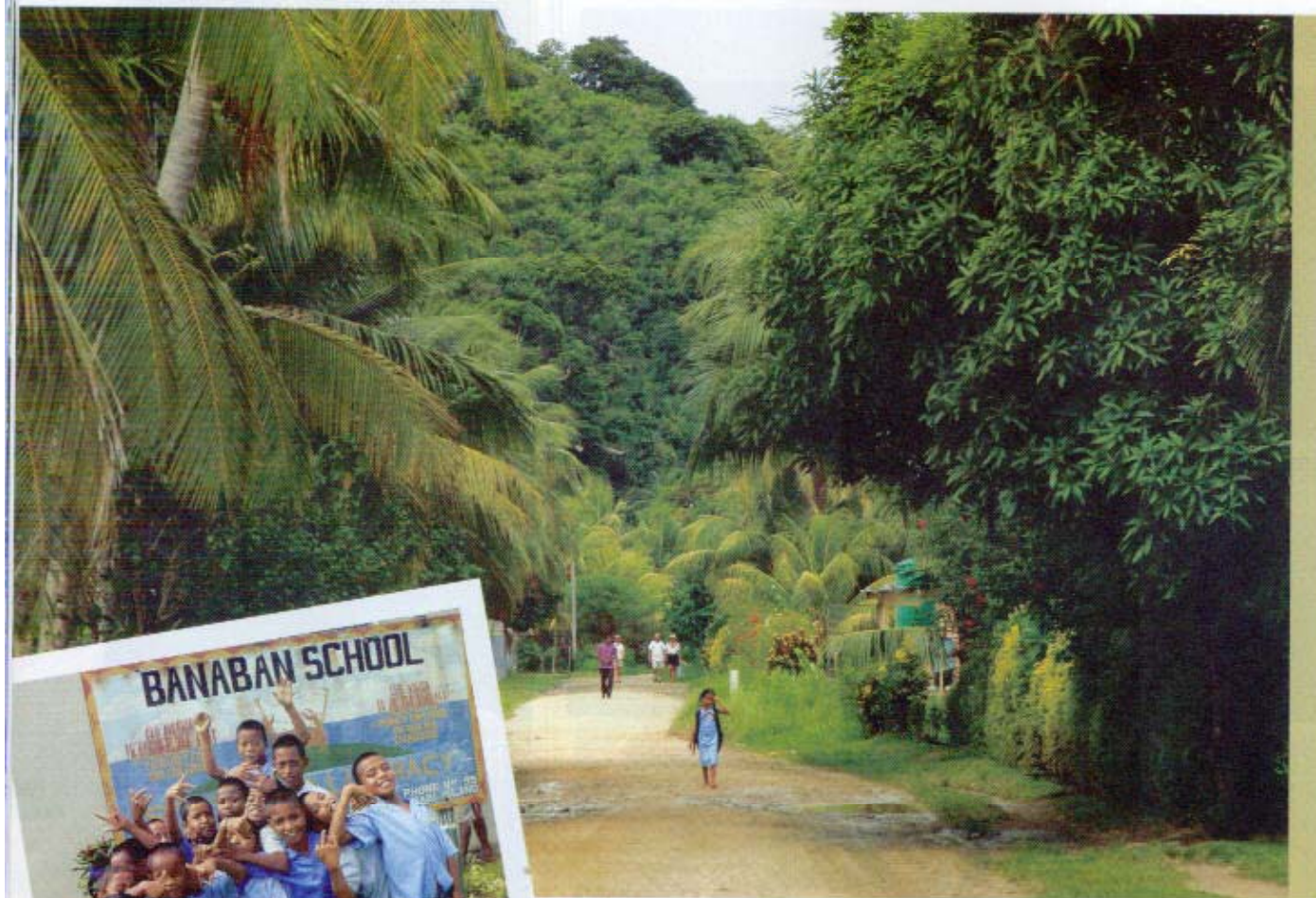


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The rich cultural traditions, dances and songs are revived and performed for their guests.

Children from the school at Tabwewa, the administrative centre of the island, delight in these performances and deliver them with such gusto and emotion it brings the crowd to their feet.

The politics of the tiny island has been described as a modern anomaly.

Although many are citizens of Fiji, the Rabi Islanders still hold Kiribati passports and retain legal ownership of Banaba.

They have a representative on the Kiribati parliament and the Rabi Council of Leaders and Elders administers their original homeland.

Rabi has four villages and all are named after the ones on Banaba that were destroyed by the Japanese in WWII.

Tabwewa village is the "capital" and has the administrative buildings, wharf, post office, court house, hospital and guest house.

It is the only accommodation for visitors on the island. Tabiang has the only airstrip, while other settlements are Uma and Buakonikai.

The islanders still maintain their native Gilbertese as the main

language of communication.

While there is still plenty of discussion about whether they should return to Banaba or continue to pursue greater share of the phosphate royalties, the majority have settled down to a peaceful existence and been recognised for their contribution to Fiji.

In 2005, 60 years after the first Banabans arrived, then Home Affairs Minister, Josefa Vosanibola, waived application fees as part of the Fiji Government's acknowledgement of their right to full Fiji citizenship.

Even though not all Rabi's 5000 inhabitants accepted the offer, they are a welcome and cherished part of the wider Fijian multicultural family that includes Polynesians, Chinese and, of course, Indians.



• Roderick Eime is a freelance journalist based in Sydney. He travelled to Rabi aboard Blue Lagoon Cruises' MV Fiji Princess. Photos by Roderick Eime unless credited otherwise.