

Fund for Fiji: Helping Disadvantaged Youth Through Education and Sport and  
My Experience on Kadavu Island



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### Who? What? Where? When and Why?

This September I embarked on a 2 month project to Fiji with the charity called Think Pacific. Along with 21 other volunteers and three team leaders, our group made our way to the seaside village of Namalata, on Fiji's fourth largest island, Kadavu.

As part of a volunteer program it was important that we understood the aims and objectives of the project and particularly the values of the Think Pacific Charity in order to get the most out of our time in Fiji, in addition to helping the children at Namalata Central School (NCS), where we would be based for the 7 weeks. With over 75% of Fijian children living below the poverty line, the volunteer work through Think Pacific is vital in supporting and changing the lives of Fijians in some of the most remote islands. By replenishing school resources, providing teacher training, and helping to rebuild essential facilities, our work on project was extremely significant to the Fijian youth on Kadavu island. Focusing mainly on early years education and coaching a variety of sports to those at NCS, we sought to make the most of our time in Fiji and help those in need in any way possible.

So with a with our sulu's on and rucksacks in hand project began and our expedition group joined the wider team of volunteers across the Think Pacific Charity in the hopes to achieve the charity's main initiative:

*“To empower disadvantaged youth to overcome poverty issues and achieve holistic health by improving education, sports development, infrastructure assistance and health promotion.”*





## Interaction with the Locals and the Homestay:

### “The Homestay”:

It is a strange experience to turn up to a stranger's home with a giant rucksack and move in for two months. However, in Fiji, this is made to feel almost normal. The kindness and hospitality of my host family made my move in day feel extremely relaxed and so I felt at home almost straight away. Of course there will always be a few nerves and you question if you will get on or if they will like you, however these questions were answered immediately through the radiant smile of my Fijian mother. Welcoming us with open arms, myself and my roommate Jemma, were made to feel as though we had been a part of the family for years. The whole notion of living amongst strangers upon the beginning of a homestay therefore felt comical to us, as our Fijian family were so accommodating and loving from the word go. Famous for their hospitality and friendliness, our Fijian host family did not disappoint and by the end of day one Jemma and I were already referring to our family members as ‘nana and tata’ or ‘mother and father’. Our family had 3 children, a one and a half year old called Valu, and 6 year old twins called Naomi and Tiana. This meant our house was full of noise and life, and not a moment went by which wasn't entertaining, often with Valu at the center of all of our laughs.

Luckily for us, our host families' English was great and so we could converse easily and so covered a wide range of topics throughout our stay. Showing them photos of our family and the UK through the photo albums we created, we bonded very quickly and living amongst them felt very easy and natural. In fact, words cannot quite do justice just how caring and generous Fijians are and our family went above and beyond to make Jemma and I feel comfortable during our stay. I have so many great memories with each one of my family members, however some of the ones I cherish most include staying up in the kitchen with Jemma and our Nana chatting and preparing food (Fijian food is absolutely delicious) especially when we taught our nana to make a crumble (funnily enough food seemed to be the only thing we missed from the UK) and poached eggs on toast.

The two months that I spent living with my host family were two of the greatest months I have ever spent and I hope they know just how grateful I am for all their love, kindness and hospitality. I really do recommend doing a homestay project if the chance arises, for it is the best way to create unforgettable

memories and friendships.



*(Left to Right):  
My Fijian father,  
Davita, Valu, my  
Fijian mother,  
Margarita, and  
the twins Naomi  
and Tiana.*



#### “Back to Basics”:

One concept of the project that I realized may prove a challenge was the housing and living conditions. Given that Fiji is poverty stricken, I was aware that remote villages means back-to-basics conditions, including cold bucket showers, poor sanitation facilities and sleeping on a mat in a simple wooden or tin house. Surprisingly, however, this was all taken in stride and did not bother me at all, in fact I was already used to it by week two! Although at first it may take some time to adjust, it soon becomes the norm... so much so that having to shoo out a chicken to get into the shower becomes an everyday routine!

Although the houses were fairly small, given the sizes of Fijian families, they were very colorful and inviting (*see above: my house in Namalata*). I also found that they were very open and very much family oriented spaces, as there were little to no walls inside the homes, as rooms were created with curtains that were often pulled back to allow for the feeling of ‘shared spaces’. This ties in with the importance of family in Fijian culture, in addition to the ‘kere-kere’ concept. Kerekere in Fiji has multiple meanings, from ‘please’ to ‘share’ and ‘borrow forever’. As they are a very generous and giving culture this is reflected in the layout of the home as all spaces are open to create an inviting feeling and so the rooms are very much a ‘shared space’. This was lovely as it meant myself and my roommate, Jemma, were very much at home in the house as nothing felt off limit or restricted to us. However, this did mean we struggled with privacy and often woke up to our Fijian twin sisters (and sometimes neighbors) in our rooms in the very early hours of the morning and considering that days start very early in Fiji, we often found ourselves awake around 4/5am to the beaming smiles of Fijian children... and occasionally the odd chicken or two! The happy and friendly atmosphere that surrounded the Fijian home meant that all luxuries, such as hot, running water for example, became forgotten. The back to basics lifestyle therefore became an eye opener to what we really need in life, in regards to materialistic needs as it highlighted how we often take for granted many things in our day to day life. I have therefore gained a greater appreciation for all that I have and am truly grateful for it too, thus this project was extremely illuminating for me.



### Village Life and Interaction with the Locals:

As I was going to be living in Fiji for two months and partaking in a homestay, it was vital that all of us volunteers took our time to get involved with village life and get to know the locals. As Fiji is an extremely social country, there was always someone around to play volleyball with or head to the beach with when on our downtime or walks home from teaching at school. This meant that we created many friendships within the village in addition to all the those we created whilst teaching at the school.

As there is a massive focus on the concept of family and community within Fijian culture, everyone's doors are always open and there is very much a sense of unity amongst the village. This friendly atmosphere and kindness was felt everywhere particularly on walks around and about the village. It is common for every Fijian, be them old or young, to greet you with either a 'Bula' or 'Yandra' (hello/good morning) in the day or a polite 'Moce' (goodbye/evening) at night. However, their friendliness was demonstrated most obviously through their endless invitations of 'somiti', which literally translates as 'some tea?'. No matter the time of day. Or how much of a hurry you were in, Fijians would always extend their kindness and hospitality and invite you round for food or tea because of their love for socializing (and their love for food of course). This therefore provided a great excuse to get to know the locals in Namalata and chat to them over some lemon-leaf tea and Bamako. It was times such as these which I cherished most on project, as it just felt like hanging with friends. Fijians' warmth and generosity means you are never treated like a stranger and so, despite a few language barriers, conversation would flow easily and interactions were always very relaxed and fun.

Another one of the best parts about village life was the happiness of the children. Everyday, no matter what time of day, children would be playing games outside and running around with sticks and half-deflated volleyballs... not to mention the occasional machete... which would always bring a smile to all the volunteer's faces. The children here are some of the happiest and cheeky people I have ever met, even though they grow up in poverty. Their beaming smiles would greet you everyday and they would run up and hug you whenever they saw you walk across the green or pass by their house. The admiration



towards us volunteers really made the trip worthwhile, as we could see just how much our presence in the village meant to them.

It was therefore great to spend time playing outside with the children, climbing coconut trees or playing volleyball or tag, to show them just how much they also meant to us. (Above: Jalesi posing outside his door. Left: Wolly and Fernando pulling faces)

### Learning about Fijian Culture:

One of the best parts of the project was the fact that Think Pacific allowed for such an intense and immersive experience with Fijian culture. This occurred through the numerous amounts of activities we did in the evenings, in which we were taught a variety of skills or traditions that are practiced within Fijian culture. These activities included 'bilo' making, language learning, weaving and meke and haka practice. Tirani our main guide for the project and the spokesman of Namalata Village would often join us in the evenings and we would sit down and pay attention to the ways of the locals. These evenings were both interesting and fun, but also a great way of bonding with the locals, as many of the children and parents would come to the village hall and join us, or also help teach. One of my favorite amongst these activities was the evening we spent weaving with palm tree leaves. Not only was it amazing to watch the detail and intricacy of the weaving itself, but it was also an important lesson which taught us how the Fijians have a great respect for their surroundings and their environment. They are not materialistic peoples at all and thus they make the most out of everything around them- and nothing goes to waste, which was really shown through their weaving. Using the leaves from the palm trees and the men and women in Namalata create all sorts of wonderful creations which can be used in a variety of ways. Often the women make large baskets to carry food in, however they also make small bags which are used for fishing. These leaves are also used for cooking, particularly when doing a 'lovo', which is a traditional form of cooking. A large hole is dug in the ground, and large heated rocks are placed at the bottom. The food, such as chicken for example, is then wrapped in the palm tree leaves and placed in the hole, which is then covered. It takes around an hour and a bit to cook the food, but it is worth the wait (see Figures 5 & 6 for photos).

However, one of the most important and interesting elements of learning about Fijian tradition and culture, were the hop-hop nights and grog sessions. Celebrating the infamous 'kava' drink, we spent plenty of time with the locals drinking kava and enjoying the company of our new Fijian friends. It is a very significant part of Fijian culture and is used in many different occasions, both formal and social, all the way from birthdays and weddings to funerals. At first, I did not like the taste of it... but after a while you get used to its bitterness and the strange numbeness it leaves in your mouth and it actually becomes rather enjoyable! Kava or 'grog' is the highlight of any social affair in Fiji and there are many customs when it comes to drinking it. Everyone should have their legs crossed (*See Right: Adam at the head of the Kava bowl*) and should have their feet pointed away from the bowl. Traditionally, men are served first and then the women, but as we were guests, they served to all the volunteers before they served the Namalata locals (again a demonstration of their hospitality). When receiving your bilo (bowl) of kava you should clap out of respect- the louder the better! These nights mingling with the Fijians were some of the best, as grog makes you very relaxed, which in combination with the friendliness of Fijians, made for some really pleasant evenings and socials. The hop-hop evenings, which we did every Friday evening in the village hall, was sort of the equivalent of a primary school disco for the village children, as we would play Fijian pop music and sing and dance in between the rounds of grog- it was a great laugh and the children loved it.





## Carrying Out Think Pacific's Initiatives and the Impact of the Project on the Local Community:

### Early Years Education and Teaching:

Throughout the years Think Pacific have helped to provide early years education for over 1,000 children, thus it is a great responsibility and privilege to have had the chance to add to these numbers and teach the children at Namalata Central School (NCS). As our main object was to focus on teaching English and Math to the students who struggled most, it was important that on our observation days we all highlighted the students who needed the most amount of help. Ranging from Kindi to Class 7, all of us volunteers were split amongst the classes in order to have the greatest impact throughout the school. I chose to work alongside two other volunteers, Abby and Jemma, in Class One to aid the teaching of early years education, as I believe that if we can help them with the very basics then they will surely conquer to complicated matters when they grow up!

Every day at school provided new obstacles and challenges when teaching as the ability amongst the slow students in Year 1 ranged massively, with some students unable to spell their name or recite numbers 1-10. With each one-to-one session I had to think of new ways to captivate, motivate and teach the children English and Maths, all whilst making it fun. However, as hard and taxing as some of the days may have been (it took one of my one-to-ones an entire hour to grasp the first four letters of the alphabet) it was perhaps one of the most rewarding experiences too. Particularly after examination results were released and I found out that everyone in Class 1 passed their tests and that one of my one-to-ones, Laisa, only dropped 2 marks in her English exam! I was extremely proud of all my students that day and it was great for them to see how all their hard work had paid off. In fact, exam results throughout the whole school increased following the work of our project!

### Sports Coaching

As one of the aims of Think Pacific is to “increase sports participation, promote inclusion and instill aspiration for children living in hardship as well as using sport as a tool to promote health”, it was important that we coached the children at NCS a variety of different sports and activities. As sport is not on the school curriculum in Fiji, it was vital that our project led structured and organized P.E. lessons that the teachers could replicate when we left, in order to maintain long term progression for the children at NCS.

Everyday from 2:30-3:30pm we delivered P.E. lessons to the children, in a similar style to that of P.E lessons here in the UK. We divided these lessons based upon age (e.g. Years 1&2 together, 3&4, 5&6 etc.) and would focus on 4 different sports a week (with year 1's and 2's as our only exception, who would partake in 'multi-sports' which focused on skills and coordination). For classes 3-7, each day would offer a new sport, with new skills to learn and games to play. Over the course of the 2 months, we taught a massive range of sports; Hockey, Rugby, Netball, Volleyball, Dance, Zumba, Cricket, Baseball, Football and lots more. It was vital to give these children the opportunity to learn and play as many sports as possible, in order to encourage them to keep up a healthy and active lifestyle.



Luckily Fijian children are bursting with energy and seem to have above-average ability in coordination and sports skills- particularly rugby- so sports became one of the most enjoyable parts of the project. It is very fun and easy to coach children who are so willing to learn new sports, and so, being able to coach hockey- my favorite sport- was one of the highlights of my time in Fiji.

### “Out-Reach Days”:

As part of their sustainability aim, every project run by Think Pacific holds either one or two outreach days, in which the volunteer team visits another school to that of their host village, to a location that was previously attended to by another TP project. This allows TP to assess the impact of the previous project, whilst also allowing the new project to maintain and sustain the early years education and sports coaching.

Two of my favorite days on project were the two outreach days we did during the examination week. As the children at NCS were undergoing tests, we decided to put our free time to good use and visit two villages that had previously hosted Think Pacific projects. One was the capital village of Kadavu, called Tavuki and the other was a small, remote island village called Galoa, which was nestled next to the mangrove river (*pictured below*).



These days were extremely fun and rewarding as we got to meet and teach different children in a different school. This allowed for better understanding of life for Fijian children as we could draw comparisons between the three schools we taught at. Although only for a day each, the two outreaches were as equally rewarding as our time spent at NCS, for we were able to continue the work of Think Pacific. As both schools had previously hosted volunteers, it was lovely to see the impact of their work, which was reflected in the games they remembered and the songs we sung during sports warm ups. It was very touching to know that despite the passing of a whole year, the weeks the previous Think Pacific team had spent working with these children still influenced the youths and teaching in the schools today, which gave me hope that, in a year's time, the children at Namalata would still remember the songs and games we played. This really highlighted the impact that Think Pacific has on the youth in Fiji and how important volunteer projects like this are. However, the greatest lesson learnt from these days were how fondly the children and adults within the village and schools spoke of the past volunteers, signifying how much the Fijians cherished the bonds and friendships they made with the Think Pacific project team, which I can only hope will be the same for when another project goes to NCS for their outreach days.

Although we specialized in helping the youth at NCS, it is also fair to say that the whole local community benefitted from our project. This was shown through the village fun day-our Fete style day with informative stalls on first aid and health care, animal welfare and recycling aims.

Through this we aimed to teach the locals a few tips and tricks to lead a healthy lifestyle, which in turn, will inspire and teach the youth of Namalata to do the same. Hopefully through our project on Kadavu, we will aid to the wider achievements of Think Pacific and help Fijians in need.



Overall, I found this project extremely fun and challenging in some parts, but most of all educational and eye opening. Although I have been lucky enough to travel the world, nothing can quite prepare you for the experience of living in a foreign country with a family that is not your own for two months. My life in Fiji whilst volunteering is a time that I will never forget and I can only hope that as many young people get the opportunity to experience something similar. It is experiences like this in which the kindness and generosity of strangers really speaks true and this is something I will take away with me from this project. Not only are the islands of Fiji beautiful, but so is the nature of its inhabitants- Fijians really are the friendliest and kindest of people you will ever come across in this world, which is why the friendships that myself and my fellow volunteers made on this project were so special. Gift Trust states: "Friendship and understanding between people and across different cultures is one of life's most important objectives" and I personally could not agree more. Despite being worlds apart, with very different lifestyles, it is so important to recognize that no matter where you are in the world or which culture you belong to that we all belong to something wider: humanity. This is feeling that really comes across when doing volunteer work abroad and is the concept that really brings people together.

So the ultimate question now project is over is 'would I do it again?' My answer: yes! I had such an incredible time on my project in Fiji and I have learned so much. In fact, the project has inspired me to carry on the work of Think Pacific across the Fiji Islands by leading my own project in the future. As I have already completed a volunteering project, Think Pacific allow for the chance to return to Fiji as a project leader in order to sustain the hard work of the charity. I am hoping that I will have a successful application and lead a project in another remote area of Fiji to spread the aims of Think Pacific and help other areas in need. If I am successful, then this will be a fun, but rewarding challenge which will allow me to further my leadership skills whilst simultaneously allowing me to experience and create new memories with the Fijian natives.

If possible, I would also try and visit Namalata to see my host family again. Haven spoken to my project leaders, (*Photographed here: Left to Right: Will, Pate, Marco*), this seems to be a common desire amongst volunteers and leaders returning to Fiji, as many people make unforgettable friendships with their host families and many return to Fiji to see them again. This just goes to show how deep the bonds are when doing a homestay trip and so I highly encourage as many young people to do a homestay project abroad and stay with the locals of your host country in order to truly experience their culture. You will also make life long friends and make a whole new family- what more could you want!



To conclude then, I would like to show my appreciation to everyone who helped me along this journey, particularly to those involved in the months leading up to the project. Thank you to all those involved in my fundraising and sponsorship and thank you to GIFT trust for their kind and generous donation. Without this sponsorship, I would not have had the opportunity to visit Fiji and make a difference to

the lives of the children in Namalata. Without GIFT Trust I would not have the incredible memories of life in Fiji, the deep understanding of their culture and traditions, but most of all, I would not have had the chance to create the unbreakable bonds of friendship with my Fijian family and all the friends I made whilst on project.

To those reading this report please know how much this Trust is vital to young explorers and volunteers across the world and how their generosity is more than just financial aid for your project abroad- but rather that it is the chance to create some of the most exciting and rewarding memories and the opportunity to have life changing experiences that you will carry with you for the rest of your life.



#### Postscript of Problems:

Although my trip to Fiji was extremely well planned and run (particularly when in Kadavu through the hard work of my team leaders and the efforts of Think Pacific) it did not go without a few hiccups here and there. Surprisingly the main struggle for my adventure was actually UK side, specifically at the airport in regard to my luggage and VISAs. As I was packing for a 2 month trip, I needed to make sure I had everything I needed for a variety of situations (formal clothes for school and church, traditional Fijian wear for Kava ceremonies, clothes that could get ruined for painting days and beach clean up days, to sports clothing and excursion wear) this posed as quite a struggle to pack everything into one rucksack. Although Think Pacific provided a kit list it is definitely worth writing one of your own and thinking outside the box (particularly in regard to first aid kits) on items you need to bring. I struggled mostly with small gifts for my host family as I did not know the ages or the amount of children I would be living with. Therefore, for anyone doing a homestay, perhaps research into the culture of your host nation and think of appropriate gifts based upon this.

Additionally, I was also bringing over a sports bag of donated hockey sticks and balls for the children in Namalata Central School. This was not a requirement of the trip, I just chose to do this as I had accessibility to spare hockey sticks from my club and thought it would be a great way to leave my own personal mark in Fiji. This was somewhat of a challenge to bring over as different airlines have different regulations about travelling with sports equipment and given that I was flying with two different



airlines, they had their own requirements and conditions. This meant that on my flights with Southern China Airlines I got the luggage for free, but for my flight from Sydney to Nadi I had to pay for the extra bag. I had researched into this and was expecting to have to pay in Sydney, however I was very lucky in the fact I did not pay half as much as I had expected. Excess baggage is paid based on weight and I was lucky that my large backpack and sports gear were weighed together, thus I only paid for the weight that exceeded the maximum combined weight, rather than the independent weight of the sports bag- which approximately came to £40.

My other issue was with a transit VISA for Australia. As Fiji is in a very remote area of the world, my journey to get to the islands involved flying from London to GuangZhou, GuangZhou to Sydney and finally Sydney to Nadi. Booking through STA, I was told I did not need a VISA for Australia as my layover was only 6 hours (which is correct). However, when turning up at Heathrow they almost didn't let me fly because I did not have a VISA and they believed I terminated my journey in Sydney, for they could not see my flight to Fiji as it was with a different airline. Therefore, my advice for any fellow travelers is to pay close attention to VISA's and print off a copy of your flight itinerary, as I had to explain that I *was* going to be leaving Australia to go to Fiji.... Let's just say that they were very reluctant to let me travel without a VISA and I had to get an override code to let me fly- it was a very chaotic start to my trip! However, the Australian VISA is very easy to obtain online, so whilst waiting for my flight in GuangZhou I quickly purchased one to be safe and it was sent electronically within a matter of minutes, so everything ran smoothly upon arrival in Australia and the rest of the trip.

#### Useful Contacts and Information Sources:

Thinking of applying for a project in Fiji or if you are interested in learning more about volunteer work in Fiji then please check out the link below:

<https://thinkpacific.com/about-think-pacific/why-think-pacific/>

Need help booking flights for your trip? Check out STA Travel:

<https://www.statravel.co.nz/>

VISA information for Australia:

<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/entering-and-leaving-australia/entering-australia>



START THE ADVENTURE



Australian Government  
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### Gallery and Maps:

Map 1: The island I volunteered on: Kadavu. It is 55 Miles south of Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji. Namalata is located in the bay near Vunisea.



Figure 1 (Below): My host family in Namalata Village: (From left to right): My 'tata', Davita, Jemma, Myself, Naomi, Valu, My 'nana' Margarita and Tiana.







Figure 2: *This photo was taken outside church on a Sunday. (From Top Left to Right): Jemma, Vinnie, Myself. (From Bottom Left to Right): Tiana, Valu, Naomi*

Figure 3 (Below): *My little brother Valu sat smiling in a Kava Bowl.*





Figure 4: (Below) *Our project team on a Saturday Excursion about to eat the freshly cooked food from the Lovo.*



Figures 5 and 6: (Below) *Preparing the food to be cooked in the 'Lovo' using leaf weaving.*





Figure 7: *Before constructing our rafts on one of our excursion days on Saturdays.*

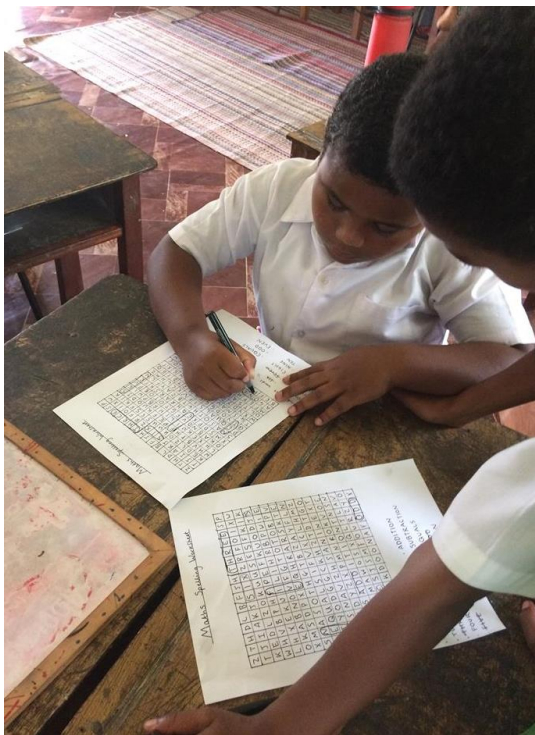


Figure 8 (Below): *Jalesi eating the food from the Lovo on the raft the girls team constructed.*





Figure 9 (Below): *My group of one-to-ones in 'red group' from Class One.*



Figures 10 and 11 (Above): *Students at NCS doing a word-search I made them and Manasa, one of my on-to ones showing his beaming smile for the camera.*



Figure 12 (Below): *Coaching multi-sports to the Year 1's and 2's during the outreach day at Galoa.*



Figure 13 (Below): *Nancy at our village Fun Day with face paint on.*





Figures 14, 15 and 16 (Below): A sign created by a previous Think Pacific project at Tavuki School. And Kris and Will with signs we created following environment day for our beach clean-up.

