

BIRDWATCHING ON VITI LEVU AND KADAVU, FIJI – JANUARY 2009



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Bula! The following notes will provide some up-to-date information for bird tourists visiting Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji, and Kadavu (pronounced Kandavu), another Fijian island, as collected during a one week visit, 17th to 22nd January, 2009. The main emphasis is on endemic bird species, sites and travel arrangements. A few of photographs have been included to illustrate some of the locations and conditions on the islands. F\$ refers to Fiji dollar, the local currency.

My itinerary in Fiji was pretty straightforward. Soon after my arrival from Brisbane, Australia, to Nadi (pronounced Nandi), I took a domestic flight to Vunisea, Kadavu, and spent one afternoon, night and morning there, to see the island's four endemic species (**Whistling Dove**, **Red Shining-Parrot**, **Kadavu Honeyeater**, **Kadavu Fantail**). After a return flight to Nadi International Airport, I rented a car and drove to Suva (driving time 3 hours 15 minutes), together with a new local friend, Buka, and stayed at the Raintree Lodge. The lodge was used as a base for four days of birding in and around the capital region. On the last day, I spent the morning in Suva, did some seabird observations on the way to Nadi and eventually arrived at the airport well after sunset, having had a supper at the close-by Raffle's Gateway hotel. I had an early hours Air Pacific departure to Apia, Samoa, on the 23rd.

All in all, the endemic bird species were relatively easy to locate, also on Viti Levu. Only two of the species of interest for me proved to be too elusive, the introduced **Java Sparrow** (later seen on Kauai, Hawaii) and the timid **Shy Ground-Dove**. In retrospect, I should have visited the island of Taveuni as well, to 'do' the **Orange Dove** and **Silktail** in a day, but I had not made any preparations for that. On a long birdwatching journey, it is a good strategy to not make one's timetable too tight, in case unexpected delays occur. Oftentimes they do, but in this time the strategy backfired, as everything went more or less as planned. Well, those two species are a good reason for another stopover in Fiji some day in the future.

In regard to mammals, the introduced **Small Indian Mongooses** were seen at a depressing frequency, everywhere on the island. **Samoan Flying-Foxes** were identified at the Raintree Lodge, on a daily basis, and **Tongan Flying-Foxes** were abundant on Kadavu but scarce on Viti Levu. Otherwise, no records of mammal species other than human beings and domestic animals, and a **Polynesian Rat** in Vunisea.

SEASON

January is the hurricane season in the Central Pacific and Fiji certainly had suffered from heavy rains and flooding at the time of the visit. Nadi, the location of Fiji's international airport, had been seriously hit, with the center of the town submerged, and thousands of people were without home and in need of help. The main reason for the situation was said to be unsustainable logging and farming on the mountains. Several bridges had collapsed, but the main highway between Nadi and Suva had not been affected by the floods, except around Nadi, where high piles of debris waited to be cleared on the roadsides. Later on, the access to Monasavu Dam area in the mountainous center of the island was closed by submerged bridges. Some flight connections to smaller islands had been canceled for the time being, the landing strips being under water. The tourist information at Nadi airport claimed that also Kadavu was 'closed', even though its airfield was in perfect condition!

Having said all this, birdwatching was great and no serious problems due to weather were encountered during the week, with the exception of the Monasavu access. There were one or two heavy afternoon showers in Suva, but mornings and afternoons were sunny and predominantly calm. Most of tourist accommodations were empty during the visit, as many groups and individuals had cancelled their arrival after hearing the news on floods. I do not really understand why. 95 percent of the island was quite fine, albeit more peaceful and affordable than normally! The ongoing political disputes between the Fiji military regime and the neighboring governments may have had their effect, as well. At the moment, Fiji has no legal, democratic government.



Fig. 1. Heavy afternoon shower at the Raintree Lodge, Suva.

LOCAL FLIGHTS

My flights to Kadavu and back were reserved and paid in advance in the Internet, and confirmed by a fax. Pacific Sun organized things amicably and the domestic terminal had a pleasant waiting area, with secure left luggage office, a small but well-stocked restaurant/bar and a number of leather sofas (!) for the waiting passengers. In regard to currency exchange, Western Union had clearly the best exchange rates at the airport. Do not try the tea at international departures (café), or on board Air Pacific. The Fijians are either coffee drinkers or cook bitter Indian style tea, passable only with copious amounts of milk and sugar.

After my arrival in Nadi, I went straight to the domestic to confirm that the flight was going to depart, removed a selection of things out of my suitcase and into a light canvas bag (no more than 10 kg allowed on board), and left the suitcase at the airport. The reservation proved to be unnecessary, because the nine-seat Norman Britton had only two passengers on board, in addition to two pilots. The plane had some mechanical problems, which delayed our departure by one and half hours, but the rest went well. Landing on the grassy airstrip in Vunisea was quite an experience, in a positive way. A local taxi waited us at the small airport building, and delivered me back for the Nadi flight the next morning (F\$5 one way). On the return flight, the spacious De Havilland Island Hopper had more people on, but there were also vacant seats left.



Fig. 2. Leather sofas at the Nadi domestic departure lounge – cleaner and more comfortable than the international departures area.



Fig. 3. On the way to Kadavu, over Viti Levu, in the small Norman Britton plane.

CAR RENTAL

Please, do not do as I did! I reserved a Suzuki Grand Vitara 4x4 from Budget Fiji, to be sure to be able to negotiate the mountain roads, even in the case of some flooding. At the Nadi airport, I soon discovered that Budget had not honored our agreement. Neither were they able to replace the Vitara by another 4x4. After a rather slow process, I was given a Mazda 6, to drive to Suva. (The car was supposed to have a full tank of petrol, but it was 15 liters short). In Suva, I would be delivered a 4x4 the next day. Originally, they invited me to visit the headquarters in Suva to discuss the issue of car replacement, apparently supposing that I had arrived to Fiji to spend my time sitting in offices, waiting. After I firmly pointed out that I had other interests and was actually quite busy, they finally agreed to deliver the car at Raintree Lodge, at 1 PM sharp.

As you may already have guessed, they did not arrive. At 1 PM I called the headquarters and heard that the vehicle was not delivered because I had failed to confirm them that I was waiting for them at the lodge! Eventually, an old Mazda Twin Cab (100 000+ km under its belt) appeared by the lodge, one hour late. The replacement vehicle, of larger size than Vitara, was said to compensate the trouble Budget admitted to have created. Later it was discovered, that the rental rates for Vitara and Twin Cab were the same.

The next day, one hour after my return from the highlands, an afternoon rest was broken by alarming information: smoke had started to emerge from my parked car's engine. There was fire, because the bottom of its battery had cracks and acid was dripping on the rest of the engine, including petrol pump. I called Budget in an attempt to save their property – “What have you done to our car? Have you had an accident? We are busy now, there is no time to attend your problems. Do not touch it or you will be responsible for the damage.” Well, they arrived, eventually after my second call, on the last moment to save the car. If this had happened at night, four other cars, some trees and quite possible the main lodge building with a restaurant had burned down.

I got another Mazda Twin Cab, one year younger and in a much better shape, and had no problems until the return of the car in Nadi. The Budget computer system was being updated, being more or less out of order, and they could not confirm my final rate. That would be done the next day, according to their final analysis, after the Suva headquarters had opened. The fact that I had not received a full tank for the Mazda 6 was acknowledged and agreed after I presented the petrol station receipt, as I was told to do by the headquarters. Needless to say, no compensation was made as the lady in charge of the business could not be contacted, and the office in Nadi could make such decisions without her consent.

Well, they did not charge me any extras. Actually, the staff in Nadi was quite competent and tried to do their best in a situation dictated by a glaringly non-competent managerial team in Suva. Even in a situation of acute customer shortage, they failed to produce a reserved and confirmed car, were keeping run down vehicles in service, without adequate maintenance! My recommendation is: try some other company, and keep your eyes open and fingers crossed!

Driving in Fiji was not too difficult. There were police checkpoints here and there, but they were not occupied. Most of the roads were in fair to fine condition, including the ones in and around Suva, and most of the coastal highway. Some roads were not. For example around Nadi the highway had large numbers of potholes, some of them serious enough to bust one's tire. In the Colo-i-Suva Forest Park, a few sections of the access road were difficult to deal with a sedan, but probably passable. On the road towards Monasavu Dam, a 4x4 certainly helped in keeping the speed up, even though the gravel road is normally good enough for a sedan. The final dam access road is, however, apparently not suitable for anything less than a 4x4.

ACCOMMODATION

Biana Accommodation, Vunisea, Kadavu

I did try to contact Biana Accommodation for several times by phone, also from the Nadi airport, but failed every time. Pacific Sun rescued me, calling their guy in Vunisea and asking him to inform the guesthouse of my arrival. Later on, I learned that their phone line had been out of order for months. There are new numbers which work: 354 3334, 934 9552 and 362 7176.

At the time of my visit, Vive was in charge of the place, and did her job very well. The room had a large bed and a mosquito net, the toilets and showers being in the back of the dining area. It is a spacious small building with a concrete patio for observations. The charge was F\$70, including a fine dinner and breakfast, and plenty of water and lemonade. There was one another birder staying there, from Canada (thank you for the advice!) and two men from the family slept in the living room area, arriving after we birders had already hit the sack. The lack of power at night, after 10 PM, was a problem for me, a person with sleep apnea. Without a CPAP-device, my sleep was not really restful.

Raffle's Gateway Hotel, Nadi, Viti Levu

I spent one night there, in-between flights from Apia and to Honolulu. The standard rooms are very nice, even though a bit expensive at F\$97 per night. A day room (maximum 6 hours) may be had for F\$60. The restaurant was fine but hotel service variable, with some less than welcoming people and others who were quite friendly. A free shuttle runs between the airport and the hotel and is necessary, even though the distance is short. There is, after all, a busy highway between the terminal and Raffle's.

Raintree Lodge, Colo-i-Suva, Viti Levu

The accommodation was reserved and prepaid in the Internet. The fact that I was upgraded, without charge, from a room with shared facilities to a fully equipped four bed bure admittedly helped in forming a positive opinion of this Suva lodge. On the other hand, the Raintree Lodge is by any standard a model case of a well-run birder-friendly establishment. The lodge had great staff, an excellent restaurant with tasty meals and drinks, wonderful surroundings with lush vegetation, tall trees, several ponds and peace so close to the center of Suva. It must have been quite an effort to put up the place, but at this moment, I would not change a thing. Being a researcher and lecturer in tourism, I could only admire the way the manager and the rest of his team ran the place. As an example, the bure was the best designed and most functional wooden unit of accommodation I have seen during 30 years of travel in 80+ nations around the world. It was perfectly constructed and tastefully decorated, by somebody with an eye for details and color combinations, with television, fridge and all the comforts a globetrotting birder may desire. Do not miss the Raintree Lodge while in Fiji! (www.raintreelodge.com) It is affordable (F\$65 for a double room, and F\$165 for a bure), it is secure and right next to birding sites.



Fig. 4. Part of the bure toilet; simple, clean and stylish.

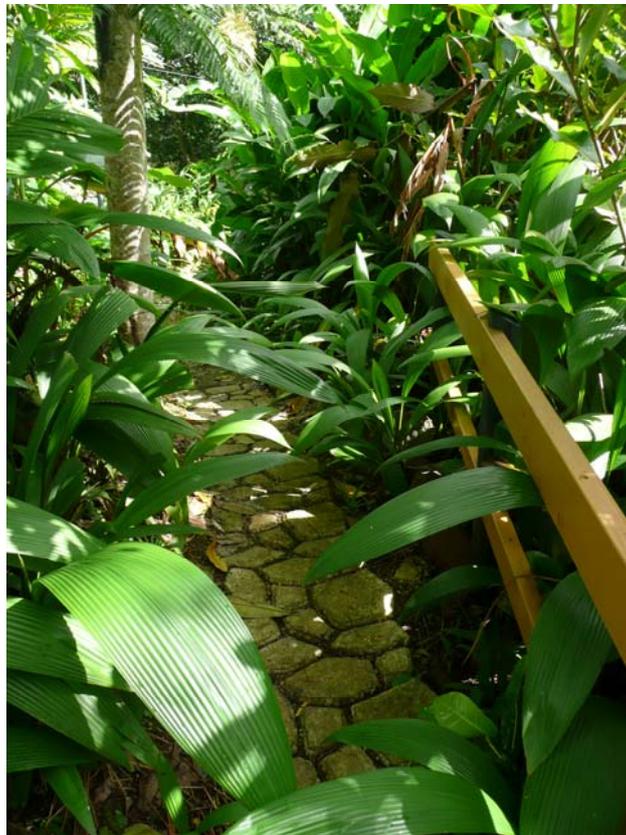


Fig. 5. Bure access path; Raintree Lodge grounds have a rainforest atmosphere.

BIRDING SITES

Vunisea, Kadavu

In Vunisea, Namara Road is the place to go for the Kadavu endemics. All four species are readily seen there. In fact, I saw three of them already on the first afternoon at the Biana Accommodation, scanning the treetops of Vunisea. **Red Shining-Parrots** flew over the forest, a single **Kadavu Honeyeater** sat on top of a close-by tree and a pair of **Whistling Doves** were seen flying by, late in the afternoon. One night on Kadavu clearly is enough to 'do' the main target species. There is no need to hire a taxi and a guide to take one to more remote forest locations, unless you prefer it for the fun of it. A **Pacific Black Duck**, **Lesser Frigatebirds**, **Eastern Reef-Egrets**, **Swift Terns**, a **Wandering Tattler**, **Collared Kingfishers** and **White-rumped Swiftlets** were among the other birds recorded in Vunisea. The village is one of the blessed places on earth with hardly any noise of engines. Relax and enjoy the sounds of waves braking against the tropical shoreline...

The Namara Road is easy to locate as long as you know where to go. From Biana Accommodation, proceed on the bayside road towards the air strip, for a short distance, and turn left at the first major crossing. The climb up a hill, to a distinctive roundabout, had many **Kadavu Honeyeaters**, **Collared Lorys** and a few **Fiji Parrot-Finches**. At the five-way roundabout, take the second road to the left, signposted as Namara Rd (**Fig. 6**). The endemics will start to show at the first trees of secondary forest, and should all appear within the next few hundred meters.

I was greeted by my first **Kadavu Fantails** right by the edge of the secondary forest, and saw many **Red Shining-Parrots** along the road, which could have been walked for several kilometers. The most difficult of the endemics, the **Whistling Dove** is easier in the proper forest, but two birds were seen in the beginning, too. Other nice birds along the Namara Road included **Fiji Goshawks** (breeding), **Barking Pigeons** (very common, great views), **Slaty** and **Vanikoro Flycatchers** (both quite common), a **Fiji Bush-Warbler** (Kadavu subspecies), **Polynesian Trillers** and **Starlings**, **Fiji White-eyes** and **Silvereyes**, and **Golden Whistlers** (Kadavu subspecies).

A very attractive feature of Vunisea were the hundreds of magnificent **Tongan Flying-Foxes (Fruit-Bats)**, active both day and night, and much easier to observe there than on Viti Levu. The local centipedes are not that attractive. During a heavy shower, I sat down in roadside grass, under a spacious rain cloth, and waited. Suddenly, I felt something on my body, on the side of belly. There was a 20 cm long centipede there, also looking for a shelter. I tried to get rid of it but failed on the first occasion, the insect biting me through the cotton shirt. Fortunately, the fabric was thick enough to prevent most of the bite. My second attempt was successful and the centipede was forced to leave.



Fig. 6. The Vunisea five-way-roundabout. Namara Road is on the left, out of frame.



Fig. 7. The start of the Namara Road; all the four endemics can be seen there.

Colo-i-Suva Forest Park, Viti Levu

The Colo-i-Suva Forest Park is a classical site to see several of the Fiji endemics. The park entrance fee is F\$5 and should in theory be paid in the park office, across the road in front of the entrance gate, before you go in. Moreover, the chain at the gate is closed, even though not locked, before the official opening time, 8 AM, and after the closing time, 4 PM. In practice, it is ok to go in whenever you wish, for birdwatching, as long as you pay the daily fee at the office after your return and close the gate behind you. No need to wait for the office or gate to open!

Unfortunately, the place continues to be plagued by thieves breaking into unattended cars and even (rarely) robbing visitors. I met one or two of them, young guys in their twenties who wandered around alone or in small groups with other blokes, having entered the park through a back entrance. They peeked into people's cars, asked for money and needed to be reported (preferably with photos) to the police station in front of the Raintree Lodge. Afternoons are known to be risky, but early mornings should be fine. During the first couple of hours of the day, I did not see any other people in the park.

One should, however, never leave the car unattended. A good strategy is to drive along the one and only access road through the park, windows open, and stop for birds and bird parties. The best sites are around the back entrance junction and at the end of the road (**Figs. 8 & 9**). The good thing is that most, possibly all, of the available target species can be seen right next to the road. There is no reason to wander around in the forest. Also, two women regularly jogged in the park with an unleashed Pitbull and a German Shepherd, another reason to stay close to one's car.



Fig. 8. The simple map of the Colo-i-Suva Forest Park. Access gate on left corner, the road following the park border to the back entrance (down right) and turning up to the picnic sites and swimming ponds, where it ends. The other entrance road can be seen up left, ending at the big 'F'.

The first bird I saw at the end of the road was a splendid male **Golden Dove**, with one of the most amazing plumages I have ever seen! The field guides are not really able to show the 'oversized pullover' effect. There is a small sunny opening by the picnic table at the end, and the bird was sunning itself in the middle of it, for ages, and was later joined by a female. More **Golden Doves** (and **Barking Pigeons**) were easily observed by the road close to the back entrance junction, feeding in bushes and calling in the open.

Hundred meters after the junction, towards the swimming ponds (end of the road), mixed bird parties were regularly countered. My only **Black-faced Shrikebill** was seen there, as well as several **Fiji Shrikebills**, together with the rather bold **Blue-crested Flycatchers** (common along the road, also at the end). **Fiji Parrot-Finches** were quite common, just like **Slaty Flycatchers**, **Streaked Fantails**, **Orange-breasted Myzomelas**, **Polynesian Trillers**, **Vanikoro Flycatchers** and **Fiji White-eyes**. **Yellow-throated Golden Whistlers** were seen on several occasions. **Masked Shining Parrots** were here and there, but exceedingly difficult to see well, because of the closed canopy. **Fiji Bush-Warblers** were easiest to locate about 150 m towards the entrance gate from the above-mentioned junction. In there, a single **Pink-billed Parrot-Finch** flew over and landed in a top of a bush, giving brief but valuable views before I even thought of looking for this supposedly elusive species.

The other entrance road, via the staff residential area, left 50 meters before the main gate when approaching from the Raintree Lodge, and proved not to be very productive. A pair of rather tame **Masked Shining-Parrots** was the best record there.



Fig. 9. Colo-i-Suva Park road, the section with several mixed bird parties.

Raintree Lodge, Viti Levu

I did not do much birding at the Raintree Lodge grounds, but a few birds were recorded on the way to the car and back, at restaurant dinners and during afternoon rests at the bure. A female **Many-colored Fruit-Dove** greeted me by the bure on the first morning and **Fiji Wattled Honeyeaters** were always around, together with **Barking Pigeons**, **Fiji Parrot-Finches** and **Collared Lorys**. The lodge was the best place to see the **Giant Forest Honeyeater**, with a few present and seen for example from the restaurant. I never saw this shy species in the Colo-i-Suva Forest Park. The Raintree Lodge restaurant patio is also one of the best places to get good views of the noisy **Masked Shining-Parrots**, otherwise often obscured by leafy canopies. In there, the parrots fly across the large clay-pond and may stop on top of trees at the edge of the opening.



Fig. 10. One of the simplest choices on the Raintree Lodge restaurant menu; on the patio, with the above-mentioned pool and trees in the background. The meals were delicious and filling, and well-priced, too. No wonder it is a popular place for lunch meetings!

Suva Point, Viti Levu

There are extensive mudflats along the beachside streets of Suva Point, the shoreline of the Suva city, and good numbers of shorebirds. There are also many people walking and jogging there, in general very polite and reluctant to obscure one's views, perhaps because they think the telescope is actually some sort of a camera. The best time to visit is at sunrise (5.30 AM), when the tide is low and observation conditions are ideal. Hundreds of **Pacific Golden Plovers** were present, on lawns at the high tide. **Whimbrels** were also common, together with hundreds of **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Turnstones** and **Wandering** (and **Grey-tailed**) **Tattlers**, and **Swift Terns**. The best birds included two **Sharp-tailed Sandpipers** and a lone **Double-banded Dotterel**, in breeding plumage. No **Bristle-thighed Curlews** there!

Fiji Wood-Swallows were seen at Suva Point, too, just like along the highway between Nadi and Suva, and by several local roads around the capital. This is also the place to see a **White-throated Heron**, otherwise uncommon in Fiji. Other bird records included **Brown** and **Red-footed Boobies**, **Lesser Frigatebirds**, **Swamp Harriers**, a single **Black Noddy** and **Fiji Parrot-Finches**, in addition to the common introduced species.



Fig. 11. The lawns of Suva Point, late in the afternoon.

Nausori airport, Viti Levu

One afternoon was spent in and around the Nausori airport, south of Suva, in search for the supposedly common **Java Sparrow** (cf. earlier trip reports). Not a single one was located, despite extensive search for a few hours.

Monasavu Dam access road, Viti Levu

On my third day on Viti Levu, I woke up early and headed towards Monasavu Dam, well before sunrise. The dam is a well-known stake-out for **Long-legged Warbler** and **Shy Ground-Dove**. The junction to Monasavu is easily spotted a few kilometers beyond Raintree Lodge, on the Princess Road towards Suva, after a downhill stretch of the road, by a petrol station (right) and a police checkpoint. Turn left there and cross a bridge, continuing straight on to Nagali, where tarmac ends. The next junction to the left was pretty straightforward, but the third one wasn't. At the Monasavu-Naisoli Road sign, one should turn left to Naisoli, as I discovered at the next village in the wrong direction (=straight on). Along the Naisoli-Lutu-Monasavu road, the first large bridge was damaged by flood but passable. Afterwards, the gravel road climbed up hills, towards Lutu, Monasavu being already visible in the distance, at the end of a large power-line leading to the dam. Unfortunately, the concrete bridge at Lutu was submerged and damaged at the each end. After hearing that the next bridge was even worse, I gave up and turned around, focusing on the close by hills.

Most of the morning was spent there, prospecting the side tracks and better habitats. With great luck persistence paid off and a singing **Long-legged Warbler** was located in a fern gully on the highest of the hill! Once thought to be extinct, this skulking but loud species occupies thick undergrowth along streams in the central highland of Viti Levu, and apparently is more common than was thought before people knew how to spot its territorial song. My only **Multicolored Robins** were located there, as well. Two **Pink-billed Parrot-Finches** were observed by the main road, one sitting on top of a small bush, quite close – a memorable sight of this species missed by Phoebe Snetsinger, the late queen of the world listers. **White-throated (Metallic Green) Pigeons** were common on the road, also lower down towards Suva. On my way up to Lutu, there was little time to check out the birds, which were numerous. Towards noon, bird activity went down and I returned to Suva, just before an exceptionally heavy downpour. In there, a group of small boys were seen swimming (yes, swimming!) on the highway, in a depression filled by water, laughing as the passing cars splashed the water on them.

Other birds recorded along the Monasavu Road included, among others, a **Fiji Goshawk**, a **Golden Dove**, **Barking Pigeons**, one **Island Thrush** (Viti Levu subspecies), **Polynesian Starlings** (common, contrary some trip reports), **Fiji Wattled Honeyeaters**, many **Fiji Parrot-Finches** and about twenty **Red Avadavats**. According to Buka, birders are welcome to visit the Monasavu Dam, as long as the road condition permits it.



Fig. 12. A roadside **White-throated (Metallic Green) Pigeon**, on its namesake island (*Columba vitiensis*).



Fig. 13. With luck and hard work, one may discover a **Long-legged Warbler** on these hills. The best bet is, however, the Monasavu Dam.



Fig. 14. End of the road; the submerged bridge at Lutu, with a major gap at the other end.

Navutulevu curve

On the road from Suva to Nadi, soon after Crusoe's Resort, there is sharp curve to the right with parking space next to the shoreline, a short distance from the village of Navutulevu. From there good numbers of seabirds could be observed on my last day, in the afternoon. It is difficult to say if this vantage point is regularly productive, but it certainly is worth a try. During my stop, stormy winds forced the coastal seabird traffic against the shoreline at least for an hour, before it died and the birds drifted away, becoming distant and difficult to identify. I checked the close-by (towards Suva) Crusoe's Resort for visibility, but the birds were actually further away from there than from the highway.

With a telescope, the following assortment could be observed, fishing and flying around: 15 **Red-footed Boobies** (both brown and white phases), about 100 **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters**, 3 **Common Noddies**, about 200 **Black Noddies**, 300 unidentified dark noddies, 10 **Swift Terns**, and the best of all, 22 **Spectacled (Grey-backed) Terns**, with close views!



Fig. 15. A Red-footed Booby, white phase.



Fig. 16. The empty Crusoe's Resort; the news of floods had had a major effect on tourism on Fiji.

FEW MORE WORDS...

Do not expect perfect services for international flights at the Nadi airport. My suitcase was left standing out of the building and discovered only after I asked people to look for it. The ANZ bank had 25% commission for currency exchange – go for the Western Union. Escalators were out of order. Immigration was closed for hours between departures and one needed to wait in the main hall, with mosquitoes. Every chair in the departure lounge was dirty, having apparently never been cleaned. Somehow, I lost all interest in visiting the tax free shops.... On the plus side, the Air Pacific check in was open well before departure, the immigration procedures were efficient once open and there was a band playing for the waiting passengers!