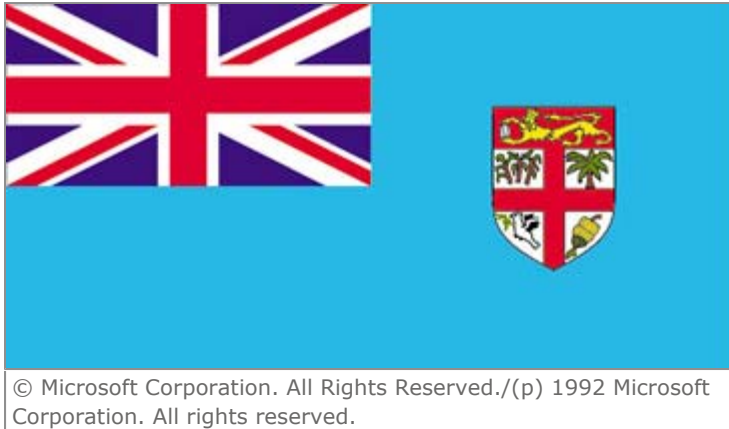


Fiji Islands

I INTRODUCTION

Fiji Islands, officially the Republic of the Fiji Islands (often referred to simply as Fiji), independent island nation in the southern Pacific Ocean, located approximately 3,100 km (approximately 1,900 mi) northeast of Sydney, Australia, and approximately 5,000 km (approximately 3,100 mi) southwest of Honolulu, Hawaii. Fiji was a British colony from 1874 to 1970, when it achieved independence. Suva is the country's capital, largest city, and commercial center.



Fijian Flag and Anthem

II LAND AND RESOURCES

Fiji consists of more than 800 islands and islets. About 100 of the islands are inhabited. The islands cover a total land area of 18,376 sq km (7,095 sq mi). The two largest islands, Viti Levu (10,429 sq km/4,027 sq mi) and Vanua Levu (5,556 sq km/2,145 sq mi), comprise more than 85 percent of the total area. Other major islands are Taveuni, Kadavu, and Koro. The Yasawa Group lies to the west of these major islands, and the Lau Group is to the east. Fiji's large islands are of volcanic origin, with mountains rising to a maximum elevation of 1,324 m (4,344 ft) at Mount Tomaniivi on Viti Levu. Some of the smaller islands are coral formations, rising only a few meters above sea level.

Rivers on the mountainous islands cut valleys into the rugged terrain and form deltas with rich alluvial soils. The largest river is the Rewa, located on Viti Levu, which is navigable for more than 160 km (more than 100 mi). Other major rivers on Viti Levu are the Sigatoka, Nadi, and Ba. The Dreketi is the largest river on Vanua Levu.

The climate in Fiji is tropical. The average annual temperature is 25°C (77°F). December to April are the hottest months, with daily highs of 32°C (90°F). The rainy season coincides with the warmest months. The southeastern windward sides of the islands receive as much as 3,300 mm (130 in) of rain a year, while the leeward northern sides receive about 2,500 mm (100 in). Cyclones occasionally strike Fiji. In January 1993 Cyclone Kina caused great destruction on Viti Levu.

Fiji's native plants include hardwood trees, mangroves, bamboo, and coconut palms. The only native mammals are rats and bats, but settlers brought cattle, dogs, goats, horses, and sheep. There are 109 species of birds, which include owls and parrots. Snakes and lizards are also present. Almost all of the islands are surrounded by coral reefs, giving the Fiji Islands one of the greatest total areas of coral reef in the world.

Forests cover 45 percent of the islands. Rain forests exist on the windward sides of the mountainous islands, while the leeward sides have grassy plains. The islands suffer from a 0.21 percent (1990-2000) annual rate of deforestation. The loss of trees has resulted in soil erosion, and silt washed into the ocean can smother coral. The siltation, combined with oil exploration, sewage dumping, and overfishing, threaten Fiji's coral reefs as well as the coastal ecosystems. With its rich plant and animal life and low population growth, however, the Fiji Islands' environmental problems are not as severe as other places in the world.

Protected land makes up 1 percent (1997) of the country's total land area. The government has ratified international environmental agreements pertaining to climate change, desertification, endangered species, law of the sea, marine life conservation, ozone layer protection, and tropical timber.

Fiji's principal resources are its hardwood trees and abundant marine life. There are also small deposits of gold, copper, and silver.

III THE PEOPLE OF FIJI



Jan Butchofsky-Houser/CORBIS-BETTMANN

Hindu Temple, Nadi, Fiji Islands

The city of Nadi, which has a large Indian population, is a center for Muslim and Hindu worship in the Fiji Islands. Religious sites in Nadi include this Hindu temple and two mosques.

The population of Fiji (2001 estimate) is 844,330, giving the country an overall population density of 46 persons per sq km (119 per sq mi). About 20 percent of the people live in Suva (population, 2000, 77,366). The second and third largest urban areas are Lautoka (36,083) and Nadi (9,170), also located on Viti Levu. Some 58 percent of Fiji's population is rural, with most people living in fishing or farming villages of less than 600 people.

Fiji's population is ethnically and culturally mixed. The Fijians, who comprise about 50 percent of the population, belong to the Melanesian ethnic group. Fiji lies in a transitional zone between Melanesia and Polynesia, however, and the Fijian culture is more closely related to that of the Polynesians. Indians, whose ancestors were brought between 1879 and 1916 to work on British plantations in Fiji, comprise about 45 percent of the population. The remainder consists of Europeans, Chinese, other Pacific Islanders, and people of mixed ethnicity. About 52 percent of the people are Christians, with Methodists and Roman Catholics forming the largest groups. Hindus comprise 39 percent of the population, and Muslims, 8 percent. Fijians are mostly Christians, while most Indians are either Hindus or Muslims. English is the official language and nearly everyone can speak it. With one another, however, the ethnic Fijians usually speak Fijian, while most Indians speak Hindi.

Although education is not compulsory in Fiji, virtually all children attend primary school. The government provides free education for eight years. Tuition is charged for levels 9 through 12, but some financial assistance is available. In 1996, 70 percent of secondary school aged children were enrolled. An estimated 99 percent of the population age 15 and older can read and write. The University of the South Pacific (founded in 1968), the Fiji School of Medicine (1885), and numerous vocational schools are located in Suva.

The lifestyle in Fiji varies between ethnic Fijians and Indians. Rural Fijians practice subsistence agriculture. Some live in traditional *bures*, one-room houses with woven mat walls and thatched roofs. However, many *bures* have been replaced by concrete houses that withstand cyclones better. Furniture is sparse, as floor mats are preferred to sofas and chairs. Village life is communal, with everyone expected to share in ceremonial preparations and village upkeep. People are respectful of traditional patriarchal authority; the village chief, usually a man, leads the villagers and presides over important rituals. *Kava*, a non-alcoholic drink made from the crushed root of a pepper plant, is the ceremonial drink. It is served from a *bilo* (coconut cup) and drunk to ritual clapping, once before drinking and three times after swallowing. Rice, yams, and fish are typical foods. Western-style clothing is common, but *sulus*, wraparound skirts for men and women, are also worn.

Rural Indians also live in small villages. Many lease land from Fijian landowners and grow subsistence crops and sugarcane as a cash crop. Their homes are made of concrete or wood. Foods are cooked with curry and often served with *roti*, a flatbread. Long pants and shirts are common for Indian men, while many women wear *saris* (wraparound dresses).

Although more than half of Fiji's population is rural, there is a shift to urban areas, and urban growth is associated with increased poverty and crime. Dwellings range from modern Western-style homes to makeshift housing in poor areas. There is no formalized segregation, but neighborhoods, villages, schools, and voluntary associations tend to divide along ethnic lines. Relations between Fijians and Indians are strained, and there is little intermarriage.

IV ECONOMY

Fiji's economy is dependent on the sugar industry and tourism. Two political coups in 1987 adversely affected tourism and caused a loss of skilled and educated workers when many Indians left the country. There was a general recovery by the early 1990s, but in 1993 Cyclone Kina caused an estimated \$84 million in damage to agriculture and infrastructure.

In 1999 Fiji's labor force stood at 319,599; most people were employed in salaried or wage positions. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing employ 2 percent of Fiji's workers and in 1999 contributed 18 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Sugarcane is the principal cash crop, while paddy rice is the chief subsistence crop. Vegetables, fruit, beef, pork, poultry, and dairy products are produced for the local market. Forestry is a growing industry and timber production nearly doubled during the early 1990s. Fishing is done mainly at a subsistence level, but commercial fishing is increasing. The country also receives income from the sale of licenses to foreign vessels to fish in Fiji's exclusive economic zone.

Industry, including mining, manufacturing, and construction employs 38 percent of Fiji's wage earners and, in 1999, contributed 29 percent of GDP. The government instituted tax-free incentives in 1988 that created a flourishing garment industry. Ready-made garments are now the chief manufactured items. Gold and silver are the principal minerals mined.

A hydroelectric plant on Viti Levu in 1998 met 80 percent of Fiji's energy needs, with imported mineral fuels providing the remainder. About 96 percent of Fiji's electricity is consumed by the urban areas and tourist facilities on Viti Levu.

In 1999, 410,000 tourists visited Fiji, attracted to the scenery and fishing, snorkeling, and diving opportunities. They spent \$53 million, making tourism a major source of foreign exchange.

The government of Fiji consistently runs a budget deficit. In 1997, revenues were \$520 million with expenditures of \$628 million. The balance of trade was also negative; exports were \$590 million while imports were \$800 million. Fiji's principal trading partners are Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Sugar accounts for about one-third of Fiji's exports. Clothing, fish, gold, and lumber are also important. The primary imports are machinery and transportation equipment, petroleum products, and food.

The national currency is the *Fiji dollar*, which is equal to 100 cents (1.97 Fijian dollars equal U.S.\$1; 1999 average). Many Fijian villagers participate little in the cash economy, living a subsistence lifestyle that requires few purchased goods. Most Indian villagers, however, live on leased land and must have some income to pay rent.

Fiji's road system is fairly well developed, particularly the highway on Viti Levu that links Suva with Nausori and Nadi. Nadi International Airport is an important hub for air travel over the Pacific Ocean, with many flights between North America and Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific Island countries stopping first in Fiji. An airport at Nausori, located near Suva, is the principal hub for domestic air travel. Suva is the largest port, but Lautoka and Levuka are also important. More than a

dozen international shipping lines serve Fiji. Private companies operate automobile ferries between the major islands.

Most of the inhabited islands are linked by telephone or radio telephones. The government operates a radio and a television station, and one radio station is privately owned. In 1996 there was 1 daily newspaper.

V GOVERNMENT

From 1970 until 1987 Fiji was a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, a voluntary association of political entities that pledge actual or symbolic allegiance to the British crown. A governor-general represented the British monarch as the head of state, while actual executive power was exercised by a prime minister. Following a military coup in 1987, Fiji was expelled from the Commonwealth. Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, the coup leader, declared Fiji a republic, and the former governor-general was named president. A new constitution, promulgated in 1990, gave ethnic Fijians greater representation in the government, required that the prime minister and the president be ethnic Fijians, and incorporated Fiji's hereditary clan chiefs into the government structure. In 1997 the government approved a new constitution that largely removed preferential treatment for ethnic Fijians in the government. The constitution became effective in July 1998. In October 1997 Fiji was reinstated as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

The head of state is the president. The president is elected to a five-year term by the Great Council of Chiefs (Bose Levu Vakaturaga), which is composed of the highest-ranking members of the traditional chiefly system. A prime minister serves as head of government. The president appoints the prime minister from among the members of parliament, based on the recommendations of those members. Under the 1997 constitution, the prime minister may be of any ethnic origin.

Fiji has a bicameral (two-chamber) legislature consisting of a Senate (upper house) and a House of Representatives (lower house). Under the 1997 constitution, the House of Representatives is a 71-member body, with 25 of its seats open to all races and 46 seats reserved on an ethnic basis (23 for ethnic Fijians, 19 for Indians, 3 for mixed races, and 1 for Rotuma Islanders). Representatives are directly elected and serve a maximum of five years. The 32 members of the Senate are appointed by the president on the basis of nominations by the Great Council of Chiefs (14 members), the prime minister (9), the leader of the opposition (8), and the Council of Rotuma (1). The Senate dissolves on the expiration or dissolution of the House of Representatives. All citizens of Fiji who are at least 21 years old may vote.

The highest court is the Supreme Court, presided over by a chief justice who is appointed by the president. Fiji is divided into four districts, which are divided into 14 provinces. The provinces are governed by elected provincial councils. The villages in each province also have council governments. The national government provides medical and dental services at a relatively low cost. The Fiji Police Force has about 1,400 officers. The Fiji Military Forces, composed predominantly of Fijians, numbered 3,500 in 1999.

VI HISTORY

Pottery pieces found in Fiji suggest the islands were settled in the west from Melanesia at least 3,500 years ago. These settlers farmed and fished and brought pigs and poultry to the islands. There was extensive contact with Polynesia, particularly Tonga, and culturally, Fijians became more Polynesian than Melanesian. Fijian society was highly stratified. Allegiances to clans and chiefs were complicated, and warfare, including cannibalism, was common as leaders competed for control of the islands.

In 1643 Dutch explorer Abel Tasman was the first European to sight the islands. Regular European contact did not begin until the early 19th century, however. Groves of the valuable sandalwood tree were found by a shipwrecked American on Vanua Levu. His finding led to a vigorous trade that nearly stripped the island of its sandalwood trees. A European settlement developed at Levuka on the island of Ovalau in the 1820s and the London Missionary Society began converting the islanders in the Lau Group to Christianity in the 1830s. In the 1840s the first reliable maps of Fiji were made by the American explorer Charles Wilkes.

Meanwhile, warfare continued on the islands and was aided, in part, by European guns. Cakobau, a Fijian chief from the small island of Bau off Viti Levu, gained control of most of western Fiji. In 1849 the home of John Brown Williams, the American consul at Levuka, was burned and looted during a celebration. Williams held Cakobau responsible and ordered payment for damages. Other incidents followed and to pay the debts, Cakobau sold Suva to an Australian company in 1868. More Europeans arrived and many purchased land from the Fijians to begin plantations. Local disorder prompted the Europeans at Levuka to organize a national government in 1871. They named Cakobau king of Fiji. The disorder continued, however, and in 1874 Cakobau and other chiefs requested British annexation. The colony's first capital was Levuka. It was moved to Suva in the 1870s. Suva became a main port of call between the west coast of the United States and Australia and New Zealand. It also became the headquarters of the British empire in the Pacific Islands.

Sir Arthur Gordon, the first governor of Fiji, declared that native Fijian lands could only be leased and prohibited Fijians from being used as laborers. Instead, he encouraged plantation owners to import laborers. Between 1879 and 1916 more than 60,000 indentured laborers were brought from India. After working on the sugar plantations for five years, the Indians were to remain in Fiji another five years and then had the option of returning home. Many stayed, leased land from the Fijians, and became small-scale farmers or raised cattle. Others became entrepreneurs, setting up shops in Fiji's urban areas. Many Fijians and Europeans, however, continued to view the Indians as second-class citizens, creating an animosity between the ethnic groups that exists today.

The British colonial government in India halted the recruitment of indentured laborers in 1916 and all indenture arrangements in Fiji ended in 1920. Fiji became an independent state and a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1970. The first prime minister was Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, hereditary chief of Lau, and founder of the Alliance Party. Mara and the Alliance Party held power until the elections of April 1987 when they were defeated by a coalition of urban and trade unionist Fijians and Indians. The new government was widely perceived as being dominated by Indians, and there were outbreaks of racial violence. Claiming that political power must be returned to Fijians, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka of the Fiji Military Forces led a bloodless military coup on May 14, 1987.

Dissatisfied with the immediate results, Rabuka staged a second coup in September. He declared Fiji a republic, appointed the governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, as president of a new government, and Ganilau appointed Mara as Fiji's prime minister for a second time.

The UN denounced the Rabuka coup and demanded that the former government be returned to power; the Commonwealth of Nations ejected Fiji from membership; and Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States suspended aid. Tourism came to a halt, and Indian farmers refused to harvest their sugarcane crops. Thousands of skilled and educated Indians fled the country. The loss of international support and skilled labor devastated the Fijian economy, which did not improve until the early 1990s.

In 1992 Rabuka became prime minister; he was reelected in 1994. Ganilau died in December 1993, and in January 1994 Mara was chosen by the Great Council of Chiefs as the new president. In the elections of May 1999 the Indian-led Fiji Labour Party defeated Rabuka's Fijian Political Party, and Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister. On May 19, 2000, ethnic Fijian nationalist gunmen stormed parliament, taking Chaudhry, his cabinet ministers, and many legislators hostage. The gunmen, who declared they were acting on behalf of all ethnic Fijians, demanded the resignation of Chaudhry and the suspension of Fiji's 1997 constitution, which had increased the political rights of ethnic Indians. On May 29 the military took control of the country and imposed martial law. The military then installed as interim prime minister Laisenia Qarase, an ethnic Fijian merchant banker. Satisfied their demands would be met, the gunmen finally released the last of their hostages, including Chaudhry, on July 13. Hours later, Fijian hereditary chief Ratu Josefa Iloilo was appointed the new president. On March 15, 2001, Iloilo formally appointed Qarase prime minister and dissolved parliament, which had not convened since the coup. Later that month, Qarase announced new elections would be held beginning in late August to restore democracy to the ethnically divided nation. Meanwhile, Chaudhry and his supporters challenged the legality of the caretaker government with Fiji's Supreme Court.

Contributed By:

[Robert C. Kiste](#)

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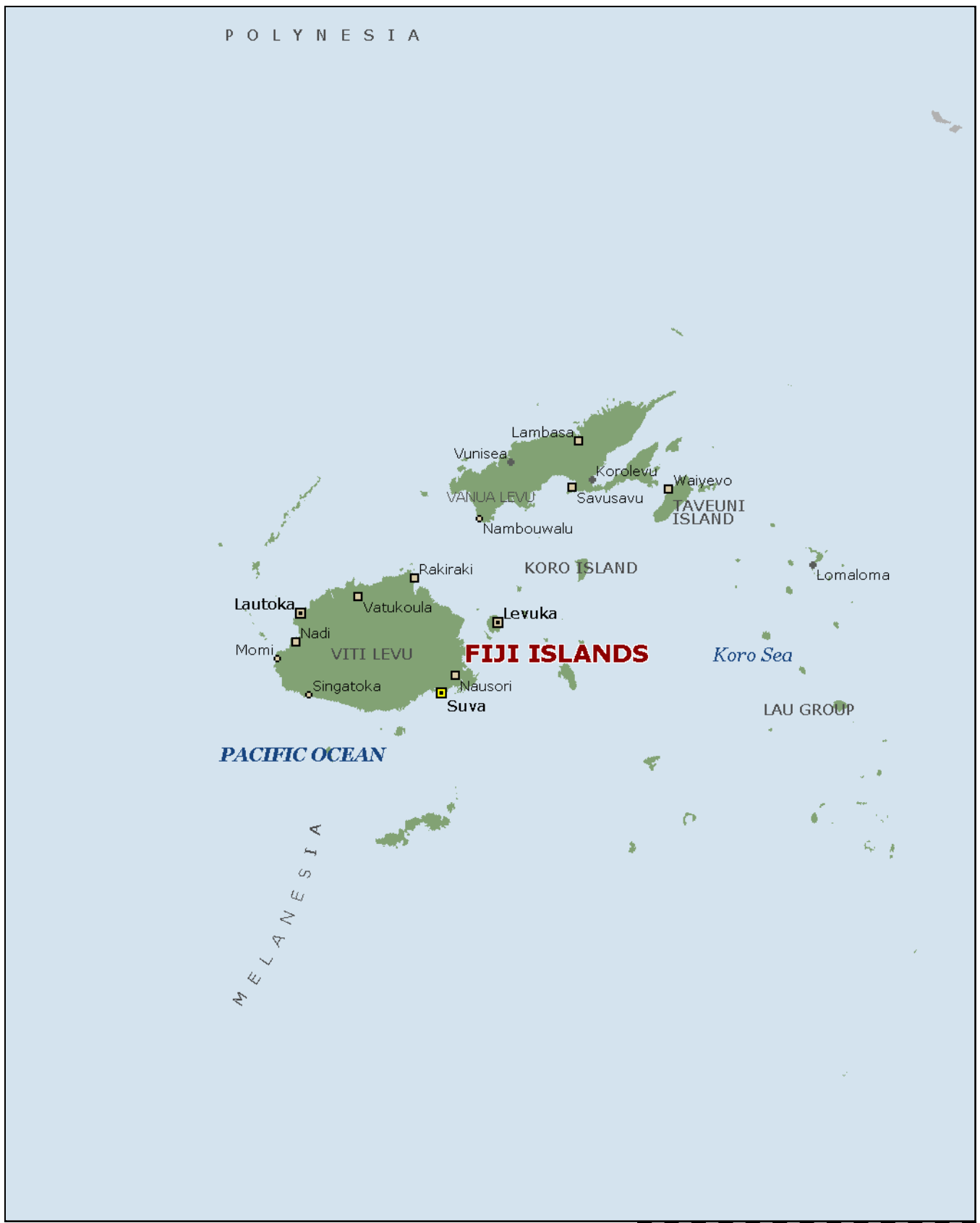
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PACIFIC OCEAN

M E L A N E S I A

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Vanisea
VANUA LEVU
Nambouwalu
Korolevu
Savusavu
TAVEUNI ISLAND
Waiyewo

Rakiraki
KORO ISLAND
Lomaloma
Lautoka
Vatukoula
Levuka
Nadi
Momi
VITI LEVU
Singatoka
Nausori
Suva
Koro Sea
LAU GROUP

FIJI ISLANDS

0 km 50 100 150 200 250

Fiji Islands
Pacific Ocean

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James L. Stanfield/National Geographic Image Collection

Yasawa Group, Fiji Islands

The Yasawa Group in western Fiji is a chain of 16 small islands and numerous islets. Fiji is composed of about 800 islands and islets, although the two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, comprise more than 85 percent of the country's total land area.

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Fiji

Average temperature, rainfall and snowfall information is available for the following climate stations in Fiji

• LAUTOKA

Official name: Republic of the Fiji Islands

Capital: Suva

Area: total: 18,270 sq km
water: 0 sq km
land: 18,270 sq km

Climate: tropical marine; only slight seasonal temperature variation

Location: Oceania, island group in the South Pacific Ocean, about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand

Geographic coordinates: 18 00 S, 175 00 E

Comparative Area: slightly smaller than New Jersey

Land boundaries: 0 km

Coastline: 1,129 km

Terrain: mostly mountains of volcanic origin

Elevation extremes: lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m
highest point: Tomanivi 1,324 m

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Map of Fiji



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General info

Entity:
Fiji
Capital:
Suva
Population (2008-07-01):
931,741 (CIA)
Area:
18,270 sq.km.
Country code:
FJ
Region:
Melanesia

Fiji

Administrative units

administrative units	capital	area (sq.km.)	population 1996-08-25 census	population 2007-09-16 census
Central <i>Division</i>	Suva	4,293	297,607	342,386
Naitasiri			126,641	160,760
Namosi			5,742	6,898
Rewa			101,547	100,787
Serua			15,461	18,249
Tailevu			48,216	55,692
Eastern <i>Division</i>	Levuka	1,422	40,770	39,313
Kadavu			9,535	10,167
Lau			12,211	10,683
Lomaiviti			16,214	16,461
Rotuma			2,810	2,002
Northern <i>Division</i>	Labasa	6,199	139,516	135,961
Bua			14,988	14,176
Cakaudrove			44,321	49,344
Macuata			80,207	72,441
Western <i>Division</i>	Lautoka	6,360	297,184	319,611
Ba			212,197	231,760
Nadroga			54,083	58,387
Ra			30,904	29,464
total		18,272	775,077	837,271

source: [Fiji Island Statistics Bureau](#).

Main cities

name	population 1996-08-25 census	population 2007-09-16 census
Nasinu	0	87,446
Suva	167,975	85,691
Lautoka	43,274	52,220
Nausori	21,617	47,604
Nadi	30,884	42,284
Labasa	24,095	27,949
Lami	18,928	20,529

source: [Fiji Island Statistics Bureau](#).