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RESEARCH LETTER



# Is Fiji's tourism sector on the right path to successfully recovering from the COVID-19 crisis? A rapid assessment\*

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic has brought far-reaching and complex repercussions. Small Island Nations (SINs) are particularly devastated by the pandemic because of their peculiar characteristics. One of the worst-affected Pacific countries is Fiji. The nation has suffered because of the shattering of its booming tourism sector for almost two years. However, on 1 December 2021, the country reopened its border thanks to the effort exerted to fast-track one of the highest immunization rates globally. This paper offers a rapid assessment of the reopening process and the potential for Fiji's tourism recovery and contributes to the current body of knowledge regarding tourism recovery in SINs.

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Care Fiji Commitment (CFC); COVID-19 pandemic; crisis management; small island nations; tourism recovery; post-pandemic tourism; Fiji islands

## Introduction

Our planet has experienced several fatal pandemics, ranging from the Black Death to the Spanish Flu, from smallpox to SARS and MERS, and now the Coronavirus. Such global outbreaks do not only trigger tragic human catastrophes but also bring numerous other negative domino effects, such as the suspension of production, trade, and travel, which eventually spark a global recession.

Particularly, Small Island Nations (SINs) are vulnerable to the severe socio-economic effects of unforeseeable events as they inherently lack both the structure and resources to effectively deal with national disasters (Gu et al., 2022; Leal Filho et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020). The fact that many small island nations are heavily dependent on tourism and the inability of their small and less diversified economies to quickly adapt to such a shock, they are particularly ravaged by the current pandemic (Coke-Hamilton, 2020; Connell, 2021; Gounder & Cox, 2022; Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022; OECD, 2021). As Edwards (2020, p. 1) pointed out, 'globally, over 180 countries have social protection systems in place. Of those that do not, almost all are in the Pacific', demonstrating the severity of the problem in the region. Furthermore, before the crisis, one-third of households in Pacific SINs were below the poverty line and the crisis might have further pushed them into extreme poverty (Connell, 2021). In 2020, tourist arrivals in the South Pacific dramatically dropped by 82% (Tuilaepa-Taylor, 2022) and the unprecedented collapse of tourism triggered the closure of resorts, hotels, and tourism-oriented businesses that employed hundreds of thousands of people with multiplier effects throughout the island economies (Connell, 2021). Therefore, in SINs, the pandemic's effects on health are overshadowed by its economic impacts.

Fiji is one of the hardest-hit economies in the Pacific subregion and its tourism sector experienced a nearly 85% decline in 2020 – the highest in the whole Pacific (Asian Development Bank, 2021b).

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In the middle of the pandemic, 115,000 Fijians lost their job or were on reduced hours and 279 hotels and resorts suspended their operation indefinitely (Howes & Surandiran, 2021). The economic impact of the pandemic was particularly severe within the micro, small, and medium tourism enterprises (MSMTes) as they have lost seven times more income than MSMEs in non-tourism sectors (International Finance Corporation, 2020). MSMEs are the most widespread type of enterprise in the world with profound economic and non-economic impacts, especially at the grassroots level of society (Ferrari, 2022). Particularly within the tourism sector, around 80% of enterprises are MSMEs, which employ a substantial percentage of women and young people (UNWTO, 2020). According to Howes and Surandiran (2021), Fiji's total revenue in 2021 was about half of what it had in 2019. This is because the tourism sector, the main driver of its economy, which contributes 40% of the country's GDP was completely shattered for two years due to pandemic restrictions. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a two-year cumulative 20% contraction of the Fijian economy (Asian Development Bank, 2021a) and the country has increased its borrowing by 55% to fund most of its subsistence expenditures (Howes & Surandiran, 2021).

Consequently, the government of Fiji launched the Fijian COVID-19 Safe Economic Recovery Framework in June 2020 to safely reopen its economy (International Finance Corporation, 2020). As tourism is the backbone of the Fijian economy, the government has been implementing a series of strategies to rescue the economy by restoring the tourism sector (International Finance Corporation, 2020). Bula Bubble, a travel arrangement between Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia (Pratap, 2020), and the Blue Lanes, an initiative that provided yachters all over the world with the opportunity to cruise to Fiji (The Fijian Government, 2021) were introduced in the initial stage. As part of the broader framework, the Care Fiji Commitment (CFC) program was also developed in collaboration with pertinent stakeholders such as the tourism recovery team, COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce, Fiji Hotels and Tourism Association, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, and UNWTO, and other tourism Industry Partners (Tourism Fiji, 2022). The CFC is a program that guarantees the readiness of Fiji to welcome tourists back to its shores despite the pandemic is still prevailing. It was developed to restore and increase travellers' confidence and requires every business to appoint a Senior Wellness Ambassador. The Wellness Ambassador who is responsible for the successful execution of duties including vaccination policies, testing capabilities, hygiene, guests' and employees' wellness, and handling of suspected cases. The introduction of the CFC accreditation program was indeed a key milestone since for 74% of tourists this program grants a great deal of confidence to travel to Fiji. Particularly for Americans (80%) and

**Table 1.** Demographics of participants.

No.	Participant code	Gender	Nationality	Category
1	T <sub>1</sub>	M	Australian	Tourist
2	T <sub>2</sub>	M	Australian	Tourist
3	T <sub>3</sub>	F	Australian	Tourist
4	T <sub>4</sub>	F	American	Tourist
5	T <sub>5</sub>	M	Australian	Tourist
6	T <sub>6</sub>	M	New Zealander	Tourist
7	T <sub>7</sub>	M	American	Tourist
8	T <sub>8</sub>	F	Finnish	Tourist
9	IR <sub>1</sub>	M	Fijian	Industry representative
10	IR <sub>2</sub>	M	Fijian	Industry representative
11	IR <sub>3</sub>	F	Fijian	Industry representative
12	IR <sub>4</sub>	F	Fijian	Industry representative
13	G <sub>1</sub>	M	Fijian	Government representative
14	G <sub>2</sub>	M	Fijian	Government representative
15	G <sub>3</sub>	M	Fijian	Government representative
16	A <sub>1</sub>	F	Fijian	Academician
17	A <sub>2</sub>	M	Fijian	Academician
18	A <sub>3</sub>	F	Fijian	Academician

younger age travellers (81%), the introduction of the CFC was tremendously important (Tourism Fiji, 2022).

## Methodology

To understand the steps taken by the government to reopen its border and comprehend the entire recovery process, 18 key informants were recruited purposively (Table 1) – eight tourists, four industry personnel, three government representatives, and three academicians. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews and an online survey. Then, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participants were requested to review transcripts to ensure data accuracy (Dimache et al., 2017). Once participants approve the contents of the record, transcripts along with online survey responses were reorganized, filtered, and arranged for subsequent analysis (Wondirad et al., 2020). The paper employs thematic analysis and information has been coded and analysed at a basic level to explore conceptual associations that could lead to the formation of higher-order themes, known as major themes (Filep et al., 2021). Eventually, higher-order emergent themes are discussed in consultation with relevant literature (Kebete & Wondirad, 2019) and policy measures taken by the government to reopen its international border and thereby rescue its tourism sector and the economy.

## Findings and discussion

At the time of writing this paper, out of the 20, Pacific Island member countries, to date, only three (Fiji, French Polynesia, and the Cook Islands) have re-opened their borders for tourists (Tuilaepa-Taylor, 2022). Based on data obtained from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (2022), on its official reopening day (1 December 2021), Fiji had a total of 52,532 COVID-19 cases (with 153 active cases), 697 total deaths related to COVID-19, and fully vaccinated 90.7% of its eligible population. During the crisis, the Fijian government has been considering designing a 'roadmap to recovery' that would include sector-specific recovery actions and guidelines (International Finance Corporation, 2020). Preparation of the re-opening process took Fiji eight months and required active and multiple stakeholder participation and attaining a high rate of vaccination. The high vaccination rate, the implementation of CFC, strict adherence to WHO COVID-19 protocols, the decline in COVID-19 daily cases, entry relaxations, and the effort made by the government to contain, suppress, and manage the outbreak and the subsequent positive media coverage are the major factors that boost tourists' confidence to travel to Fiji while COVID-19 is still present. In this regard, a government representative elaborates his opinions as follows that echoes the sentiments of the majority:

The high immunization rate and the CareFiji Commitment (CFC) program created a sense of safety. Fiji's COVID-19 protocols were designed to ensure safety, but at the same time to allow movement so that visitors can enjoy their holiday. It was designed to be practical and to reinstate business while keeping people safe as much as possible. The approach was efficient, and we received very few complaints. Fiji now has what the world wants to experience in a post-pandemic era.

(G2, August 2022, Fijian)

An Australian tourist also outlined a couple of factors that helped rebuild vacationers' trust and motivate them to travel to Fiji following the reopening of the country as follows:

A strong desire to travel again and see the world after being cooped up for more than two years, especially to a place with a very different natural environment, climate, and culture from home (Australia), a relatively lower COVID-19 risk since Fiji successfully controls the pandemic and achieves one of the highest vaccination rates, and further relaxation measures taken by the government, as they have a few to no entry barriers at the moment, are some of the factors that encourage tourists to visit Fiji while COVID-19 still exists in the country.

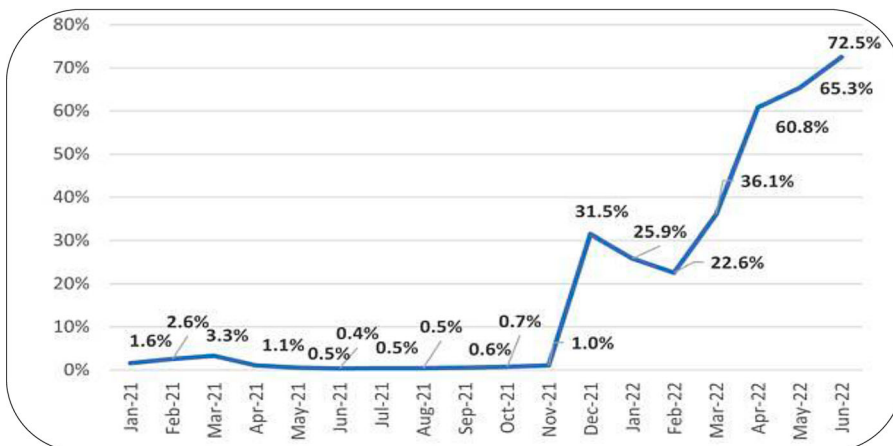
(T3, September 2022, Australian)

Based on Travel + Leisure readers' assessments, Fiji won the best islands status in Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific because of its natural beauty, great hospitality, and friendly people (Sachdev, 2022). The high vaccination rate is also considered a milestone from the government standpoint as the permanent secretary, Dr. Fong underlines that with a high vaccination and herd immunity created, Fijians become no longer a COVID-naive nation as they were in the initial stages of the pandemic (Turaga, 2021). According to industry officials, the operating standards of the tourism sector have also been changed since the arrival of COVID-19 in line with the CFC requirements.

The reopening process had phases where initially preference was given to some countries that were considered 'travel partners' with only three quarantine days. Travel partner countries are countries that have achieved a high rate of immunization comparable to Fiji with significant implications for tourism, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, among others (Nanuqa, 2021). To attract tourists, Fiji Airways in collaboration with luxury resorts and hotels found in the country provided consumers with alluring offers that have never been seen before. Subsequently, the country has successfully re-marketed itself as a safe, clean, and spectacular, and affordable tropical paradise ready to welcome back tourists.

Following its reopening on 1 December 2021, tourist arrivals steadily increase, and tourism brought 109.4 million FJD between January and March 2022. Since the reopening, 380,050 international tourists (excluding October, 2022 arrivals) have visited Fiji (Tourism Fiji, 2022). Australia is the number one tourist-generating country, followed by New Zealand, the USA, and Canada (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In the month of July 2022 alone, 78,638 tourists visited the country, and compared to pre-pandemic figures for the same month, this represents an 82% recovery. As the first Pacific market to reopen its international borders, Fiji has experienced tourist arrivals above 70% of pre-COVID-19 (Figure 1). The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) also ranked Fiji number one among 28 Asia Pacific countries for its tourism recovery potential (The Fiji Times, 2022). Moreover, Fiji was selected as Oceania's 2022 top adventure tourism destination by the World Travel Awards (2022).

Because of this promising recovery of tourism, thousands of Fijians have reclaimed their lost jobs and gained new employment opportunities. For instance, the Outrigger Beach Resort Fiji had 530 employees before the pandemic but only 154 during the crisis, while 480 staff are at work as of August 2022. A similar trend has been noticed in other properties as well. In May 2022, the government announced quarantine-free travel for fully vaccinated tourists while as of 5 September 2022,



**Figure 1.** Fiji tourism arrivals (Jan 2021 to June 2022) (CAPA – Center for Aviation 2022).

the government scrapped COVID-19 entry and departure testing requirements, and the isolation period for suspected cases is reduced just to five days (The Fijian Government, 2022). Through the COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce (CRMT) the government took a more audacious move to welcome cruise ships that several countries are cautiously scrutinizing (South Pacific Tourism Organization, 2022). Subsequently, Fiji welcomed its first cruise ship to its shoreline in August 2022 (Carnival Cruise's Pacific Explorer, with 1,147 guests and 830 crew) after 2.5 years (Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, 2022) followed by Coral Princess and Carnival Splendor in September 2022 while six cruise ships arrived in October 2022 (Lui, 2022). The policy measures taken by the government and the subsequent profound positive impacts on the tourism recovery process demonstrate the invaluable efforts of the Fijian government in collaboration with domestic and international partners to revive its tourism sector. Further, the above facts simply reveal the crucial implications of the international border reopening despite COVID-19 was still considered to be an eminent danger 10 months ago. The government escalated its preparedness and took a calculated risk since addressing the deeply worrying economic situation was equally critical. Indeed, rather than closing borders indefinitely, a much better approach would be to carefully monitor situations and apply necessary preventive measures while creating an environment of coexisting with the virus and operating businesses. Fiji is a prime example in this regard, and other island states can learn valuable lessons from it. To properly steer and sustain the promising tourism recovery in Fiji, participants forward several crucial suggestions. The following excerpt shows what a European tourist highlights in this regard:

In my opinion, Fiji's post-pandemic tourism needs to capitalize on its competitive edge and should discourage the phenomenon of mass tourism. As nature is Fiji's tourism unique selling proposition, integrated, well-managed, and regulated, tourism is paramount to keeping the environment clean and attractive. Moreover, constant improvements in service quality and tourist satisfaction as well as staffing resorts and hotels with properly trained employees who carefully and correctly execute COVID-19 protocols must be a priority.

(T8, September 2022, Finnish)

Figure 2 depicts the daily positive cases since the 2nd wave, which began in April 2021. Hitherto, Fiji recorded 68,257 COVID-19 cases and 878 COVID-related deaths and fully vaccinated over 95% of its eligible population (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2022).

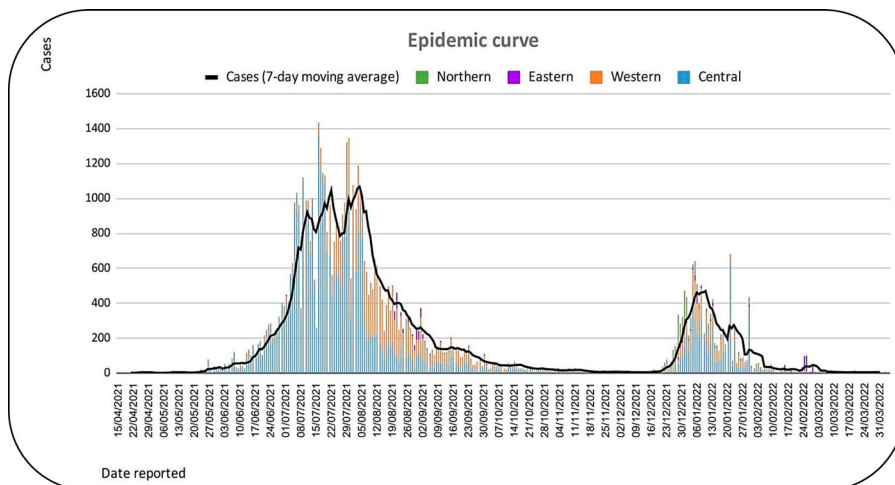


Figure 2. Fiji's COVID-19 pandemic curve – April 2021 to 2022 (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2022).

## Conclusion, implications, and further research suggestions

Since the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are inherently multifaceted involving a range of socio-economic and health problems such as rising domestic violence and other crimes, enormous mental health issues, unemployment, and disruption of the production and the supply of goods and services, the journey to recovery must also be multidimensional supported by strong regional and national policy measures and international collaboration. In the short term, healing from the economic wounds caused by the pandemic is extremely important. However, addressing health and other social issues is equally vital and might require more time. Nevertheless, from an economic viewpoint, the crucial lesson we got from this challenging pandemic is the vitality of developing a diversified and resilient economy that resists external shocks and turbulences. The Fijian tourism sector should encourage regional ties and sustainable, locally oriented tourism (in terms of both supply and demand) that has positive local spillover effects. In the long-term, the economy shall gradually move away from being highly reliant on a fragile sector such as tourism and rather consider tourism as a complementary sector to its economy. Additionally, post-pandemic tourism in Fiji should focus on net yield and sustainability instead of the number of tourist arrivals. Therefore, marketing efforts need to be well crafted to target tourists who can stay longer and benefit the economy while discouraging mass tourism. Furthermore, the pandemic has taught us the significance of steadfast collaboration at local, regional, and international levels to successfully manage unforeseeable events such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. A comprehensive, in-depth, and participatory sector-specific research is timely and vital to successfully guide the tourism recovery of Fiji as a safe and attractive post-pandemic destination. From a practical standpoint, rigorous monitoring and evaluations are also extremely important to sustaining the recovery by correcting discrepancies and avoiding complacencies. Despite more time is needed to better understand the entire process, at least for the time being, it appears that Fiji is on the right track and is experiencing a strong tourism recovery. Findings suggest substantial implications to other small island nations in the South Pacific and elsewhere regarding tourism recovery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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