Fiji Update

Media coverage of the current situation in Fiji has been mixed. While there have been almost daily press, radio, and TV reports about it in Australia and New Zealand, there has been next to nothing in the U.S. media about the military takeover in that island nation. I hope the following will help inform the members of our ‘ohana about a situation that is severely affecting one of our flagship properties in the Pacific.

On December 5, 2006, the Fiji military leader, Commodore Voreque “Frank” Bainimarama, led a group that claims to have ousted the lawfully elected government and its leader, Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The overthrow was relatively peaceful. No shots were fired, and I have not been able to find any reports of injuries to either local residents or visitors.

The issues leading to the coup are complex and were outlined in the November 25, 2006, issue of Saturday Briefing. Since the coup, there have been a number of changes in Fiji:

- The military regime declared a state of emergency.
- Military checkpoints have been set up in and around major population centers such as Suva (the capital) and Nadi (where the international airport is located).
- Parliament was dismissed.
- The new regime has replaced many top officials of government agencies, such as Airports Fiji Limited, Post Fiji Limited, Fiji Electricity Authority, etc.
- Financial controls have been imposed, limiting the amount of money that citizens may take out of the country to F$5,000 (about $3,000 in American currency), down from F$20,000 (USD$12,000).

Refunds of overseas deposits on cancelled hotel and tour bookings are limited to F$500 (USD$300)

Travel advisories have been issued by the governments of the countries that supply most of the tourists to Fiji, including Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. They advise travelers to consider carefully the risks of travel to Fiji and suggest that all non-essential travel to Suva be deferred.

In addition, the nation has been suspended from the British Commonwealth; the United States has suspended aid, and New Zealand, Australia, and Britain have imposed sanctions.

The result has been a dramatic fall-off in tourism to all parts of Fiji; including the Coral Coast, about two hours’ drive west of Suva, where Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji is located. Even though everything has been running smoothly, and there is no military action in the area, occupancies have been running in the low to mid-30-percent range. As a result, most staff members are now working on a reduced schedule.

At our companion property, Castaway Island Fiji, offshore from Nadi and far from Suva, occupancy is down only slightly from normal levels. Apparently Castaway’s remote location is working to its benefit in the current situation.

In response to declining visitor numbers, the Fiji Visitors Bureau has brought tourism leaders together to form a Tourism Action Group to focus on getting the word out that Fiji’s hotels and attractions are operating smoothly during this time of political unrest. According to Travel Mole, the group feels it is critical to get the Fiji recovery program into the market immediately to capture some of the business that normally comes over the next few months. At this point, bookings for the Christmas and New Year period remain strong for most hotels.

With the situation still in a state of flux, it is hard to predict what the future holds. I hope that for the sake of all, particularly the members of our ‘ohana at Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji, the political issues are quickly resolved, and Fiji will soon be hosting large numbers of visitors again from all over the world.