

MY TRIP AND EXPERIENCE IN THE FIJI ISLANDS

by Dave Feser

In late summer of 1973 I accepted a position of Golf Course Superintendent at a club in the City of Suva in the Fiji Islands. My family and I left Minneapolis in October and the flight from Minneapolis lasted 20 hours with stops in Los Angeles and Honolulu for refueling.

Fiji lies about 17° south of the equator and just across the International Date Line. This latter fact resulted in our anniversary being a very short day as you miss a day when going west across the date line. My bride, Joanie, swears she will some day get even with me for that trick. Due to my wife becoming ill we returned to Minneapolis late in May this year.

The course was designed by Robert Trent Jones, Inc. and was in various stages of construction when we arrived. There were a couple of firsts that I was proud of: (1) the fact that when we mowed the greens in Fiji they were the first greens mowed in the world every day, and also (2) our golfers were the first golfers in the world to tee off each day, on our course in Fiji. The course is part of a large planned resort community with an expected population of about 20,000 in 10 to 15 years. At present there is one hotel with three more planned, and about 150 homes near completion.

Pacific Harbour (name of the development) is about 35 miles west of Suva, the capital city of Fiji; it has a population of 60,000. Fiji's total population is about 400,000.

The 35 miles from the course to the city of Suva is a tortuous route of switchbacks with all large stones graded to the center. When we were there only a week, on our way back from Suva, we got a stone through our windshield that totally shattered the glass. We learned later that this was an extremely common occurrence. One of the men on my crew had three windshields broken in as many months. Thank goodness, only one for us.

Well, let's get back to the golf course. The land the course was built on was all tidal swamps going back into areas of high jungle cover hills. A dredge had been working for 24 hours a day for the last three years building lakes and canals and it is on this dredged material that the golf course is built. Only a couple of holes are on high ground of latsolic red clays. From a soil standpoint we had either red clay, dredged sand or dredged peat. Because of the area being a salt water marsh we had some extremely salty soil conditions. In some places this was coupled with a pH as low as 3.5 making growth of anything nearly impossible. Fortunately the rainfall in the area is about 140 inches a year and this helped in reducing the salt level. The entire course (greens, tees, fairways, and rough) was planted in Tiftgreen (Tifton 328).

There are about 10 courses in Fiji and the best was in much worse condition than the worst course in Minnesota. Our course was in the best condition of any course within a 1000 mile radius.

Supplies and equipment presented many headaches over which I had practically no control. When I arrived the first nine holes had been grassed and they were mowing everything with walk-behind 24-inch mowers. Gang mowers had been ordered from California but did not arrive for nearly two months after we got there. This was four or five months after they had been ordered. I never would have believed that I would have been so happy to see a set of 5-gang mowers. It was like a Christmas morning. After this equipment arrived and was put to work the fairways improved rapidly and by the time we left compared favorably with fairways anywhere.

Fertilizer was a real problem and will continue to be so. We ordered over 200 tons for one year and most of this was high analysis type of material such as urea and muriate of potash.



Dave Feser

With high rainfall, sandy soils, 12 month growing season, and hybrid bermuda, high fertilization was a must. Back to logistics, when everything comes by ship and takes maybe five to six months for delivery, good inventories must be kept. For example, I had to order a sod cutter blade by air freight and the shipping cost was much more than the cost of the blade.

As to the culture and job related problems, they were minimal. Fiji's population is about 60% Indian (brought from India in the late 1800s to cut sugar cane) and about 40% Fijian who are a negroid race. Our crew was about 90% Fijian. The man whom I was training to become a superintendent was about 50 years old and of European ancestry although his family had been in Fiji several generations. It was almost like being in Minnesota for his name is Ted Peterson. The second man, Brian Eastgate, was about 22 years old and also European. Both men spoke Fijian fluently and were, therefore, able to carry out most of the actual work direction. At one time we had nearly 200 men working on the construction of the golf course although only about half were under my supervision and direction.

The men were paid about 50 cents an hour but they were very happy to have a job and worked extremely hard providing they knew what was expected of them.

OSHA would have had fits in Fiji, for example, I would say that about 95% of my crew worked barefoot. Most of them had probably never had a pair of any kind of shoes in their lives. It was amazing to watch the type of terrain that they could walk over or watch a man digging a trench with a shovel and barefoot. When I left we had 50 men working on golf course maintenance and were planning to cut this to about 30, who would form the year around staff. It may be of interest that despite the high rainfall we had the capability of irrigating the entire course with a double row fairway system and all of the trenching for the system dug by hand.

We were there in their summer, December-March, and it was hot and humid, although the body seems to adapt quite well. The average temperature is around 87° with the relative humidity about the same. Winter might find it cooling off only five or six degrees with slightly less rainfall. Despite this, disease was a problem for only about three or four weeks which I guessed to be mostly a pythium species. Various species of cutworms were the worst problem. They could quickly defoliate an entire fairway although recovery would be quick.

All in all it was an experience that we thoroughly enjoyed and would like and hope to do again. Fiji is about everything that you have heard of a South Sea Island and the Fijians are undoubtedly the most likeable people anywhere.

Of course, on my return it was necessary for me to find employment and I have taken the position of Golf Course Superintendent at the Chattanooga Golf and Country Club, Chattanooga, Tennessee and we will be leaving for there in July. The Chattanooga Golf & Country Club is a very old club, having been built in the 1890s. It has bent grass and bermuda fairways and golf is played the year around. Chattanooga is on the Georgia-Tennessee border and is on most routes to Florida, so we hope that those of you who head for Florida for a winter vacation will give us a call when you come through.

VANDALISM AT THE WHITE BEAR YACHT CLUB, AUGUST 3, 1974

A cart was stolen and driven over greens 8-10-17, spinning the wheels and tearing up the greens, driving over the pins and poking holes in the greens with the poles. They then totaled out the golf cart by rolling it down the #8 golf path. Superintendent Tom Frost and his staff used nursery sod and repaired the greens and fortunately, by Sunday, the 4th, you could hardly tell there was any damage. we are certainly glad to learn of the quick repair. However, it is too bad these vandals cannot be apprehended and punished.