Bula Coffee

Bula Coffee has partnered directly with villages in the upper Sigatoka valley area to harvest abandoned-plantation and wild-grown coffee beans since 2011. The processed beans are sold locally and exported. The company has a focus on social responsibility supporting harvesters, mostly women, to earn a fair price and establish bank accounts for their savings. Their coffee qualifies for both the ‘Fijian made’ and ‘Fijian grown’ labels. They acquired a property on the main highway near Sigatoka in 2021 with the intention of opening a cafe and creating a coffee experience.

# Agritourism proposition

Bula coffee wanted to use their new property to develop a cafe and allow for half-day coffee tours. The owner envisaged that the tours would involve visitors participating in tree planting, tasting different sorts of coffee, a roasting demonstration, and finish off with a ploughman’s lunch using locally made artisan produce: Yeastie boys bread, cheese from Navua, locally made chutneys, fruits and veggies from Sigatoka, and possibly Mokusiga beer. They planned to target the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market initially, then business travellers (Government, NGOs, corporates, regional and international organisations), group travellers (sports teams, schools) and the MICE (meeting, incentive, conference, events) market.

# Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

Bula Coffee continued to operate through the pandemic to the extent possible. In establishing a tourism experience they hoped to take advantage of the opening of Fiji’s borders in December to launch their coffee tour. The reality of the border opening was that key industry partners were focussed on restarting the mainstream tourism industry, not start-ups, and compliance with the stringent Covid-safe protocols put in place for reopening was consequently difficult to get approved.

# Agritourism Support Programme

## Support requested

Through the Agritourism Support Programme, Bula Coffee requested support to train tour guides, to improve the landscaping at the new property, to develop an online marketing and social media presence, and to develop an online booking and payment system. With the support of the programme they aimed to be market-ready and launch their first tour within 3 months.

## Successes

* The new facility was opened, including a small cafe and shop stocking produce from local artisans.
* Guides were trained.
* The cherry-to-cup coffee tour was launched, and has received good reviews.
* The tours are still running, although roasting is the core business.
* Tours are bookable through the Bula Coffee website.
* Coffee packaging was refreshed to better reflect the company’s ethos and brand.
* The business additionally invested F$35,000 to upgrade toilet facilities and purchase furniture for the cafe.

## Lessons learned - the owner’s perspective

Having embarked on the development of the new property with the intention of opening it to farm tours, it became clear that significant additional investment was needed to ensure the inside space and facilities matched the desired quality of the tour and Bula Coffee’s brand.

Unforeseen delays, particularly relating to obtaining Care Fiji Commitment approval (required as part of tourism Covid-19 protocols) and resulting from Tourism Fiji’s decision to prioritise hotel approvals over new tour operators, pushed opening from November 2021 to April 2022. This resulted in needing to both retrain guides and train new guides. In retrospect, seeking to join the wave of reopening was ambitious for a new business, and improved sequencing of activities could have saved money.

With borders open, one guide also left to join the seasonal worker scheme in Australia. This reinforced Bula Coffee’s sense that nothing goes to plan, and there will always be delays. For the owner, resilience is therefore an important characteristic for any business owner in Fiji to have, to plan for the unexpected and to overcome frustrations.

Bula Coffee noted that they needed to undertake a “mind shift”, to believe that visitors would actually enjoy the coffee experience and find it interesting. The owner believed that this was only possible with external encouragement and support.

A final lesson was that the tour needed time to become established. Although all the focus was on launching, the process of achieving visibility, building a reputation and attracting visitors is a much longer process that can only really get underway after launch. As a new tourism activity, Bula Coffee believes that the odds are stacked against you to breakthrough and get engagement from larger players. For example, Bula Coffee had believed that inbound and tour operators would be interested in packaging the coffee tour with transport. Whereas the larger operators would prefer Bula Coffee to also provide the transport from hotels to the tour site.

## Community impacts

### Economic impacts

Bula Coffee continues to provide employment directly and provides a consistent income to coffee harvesters. The tours are not yet providing a significant additional income stream, but are expected to in the future. The small shop in the new cafe provides an outlet for locally made produce, as well as providing an additional reason for passing trade to stop.

### Social impacts

Bula Coffee now employs more staff. They have recruited one male and one female tour guide on a part time basis; and one full time front-of-house barista/server, who is female. An unforeseen benefit has been that Bula Coffee’s harvesters have been able to fully understand the process from harvesting cherries to brewing a cup. This has helped them appreciate the importance of picking good beans. There has also been a mutual sharing of culture on the tours between staff and guest, which is part of the tour experience for guests, but has been beneficial for the team too.

### Environmental impacts

Significant landscaping has taken place on the property, including the planting of coffee trees, banana trees, and some companion flowers to encourage bees to help with pollination. Seventy coconuts, tavola and dilo trees have also been planted, including along the river side to help reduce erosion.

# Future steps

Bula Coffee is very confident that the coffee experience will thrive, but that it may need to evolve and their operations adapt to market needs. This may include needing to include transport as part of the tour package, and lengthening tours to include wild farm visits. Getting listed with the inbound operator, Rosie Holidays is seen as an important step, and 5000 brochures have been printed to be distributed to hotel tour desks and other locations. They are also in the process of making the cafe and tour wheelchair accessible.

Five years from now, Bula Coffee envisages the new space to be a hub for things to do on the Coral Coast, with regular tours enjoying the cafe and a new bakery, and making purchases from the shop stocked by artisans who have amazing things to sell, but nowhere to sell them.

| Bula Coffee was supported through the PARDI2 Fiji Agritourism Support Programme. The programme provided existing agritourism experience operators and agribusinesses with technical support and mentoring to be market ready for the domestic market initially, as COVID restrictions ease, and for the international market eventually. Five enterprises were selected by an expert panel. Each enterprise received a small grant to further support market readiness. |
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