

**Commodore J. V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc**

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter and Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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SPEECH AT THE AON FIJI EXCELLENCE IN TOURISM AWARDS NIGHT

Sofitel Fiji Resort and Spa  **Fri. 22nd Feb., 2013**

**DENARAU 1900 Hours**

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**The Minister for Tourism;**

**The Trustees of the Fiji Excellence and Tourism Awards;**

**The Chair of the Organizing Committee of the Awards;**

**Tourism Industry Stakeholders;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and good evening.

I arrived back in the country this morning from my visit to France, full of optimism about our industry and its potential to improve the lives of every Fijian.

As you know, I had the pleasure of visiting the Airbus factory in France, where I inspected the first of our A330-200 aircraft that

will launch the Fiji Airways brand.

These three planes – the first wide-bodied aircraft owned by Fiji – will deliver millions of visitors to our shores in the coming years.  And they will carry Brand Fiji to an expanding network of Fiji Airways destinations.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dave Pflieger once again for all he has done to revitalise Air Pacific and shepherd its transformation into Fiji Airways. Thank you Dave. I wish you and your family all the best in your future endeavours.

In an industry where there is so much competition for the tourist dollar, we need to constantly monitor trends and re-invent ourselves in the marketplace.  This is why we have decided to revitalise the Fiji brand– not just for Fiji Airways – but for our Tourism Industry as a whole. This year, we launched a new look for Tourism Fiji. But the change wasn’t just skin deep. Tourism Fiji has – for the first time – adopted a holistic and integrated approach to marketing, branding and advertising that is sure to bring more visitors to our shores.

I’m sure that all of you share my excitement about the potential these developments have to grow our industry – to take the number of visitor arrivals to one million a year and beyond.

 Since I last addressed you a year ago, we have all lived through the devastation caused by two natural disasters - the floods in early 2012 and Hurricane Evan in December.

We feared that our economy would be hit hard, and especially Tourism. But I’m pleased and relieved to report that visitor numbers stayed remarkably buoyant.  In fact, we hit a new record. Under adverse circumstances, this is a remarkable vote of confidence in Fiji.

I have no doubt that this owes something to hearty *“Bula”* and warm smile our visitors are greeted with – the concept behind our new Fijian Hosts program at Nadi Airport – and the remarkable hospitality they experience throughout the rest of their trip.

Total arrivals up to November were up 4.9 per cent over the previous year. Some 606-thousand in 2012 – compared to 578-thousand in 2011 – an increase of 28-thousand. And that’s not even counting December’s figures.

My fellow Fijians, I am certain that you share my pride, my gratitude and relief at the way our nation faced these natural disasters.

The Fijian spirit is alive and well. And I want to again pay tribute to the various Government agencies, our partners in the business community, the ordinary men and women of our country, and of course, the members of the Tourism Industry. From the owners and management who provided leadership in the times of crisis – many of whom are gathered here tonight – to all the thousands of the Industry’s staff.

The commitment of individual Fijians to a speedy return to work when many were dealing with destruction or damage to their own homes and communities was an inspiration to us all.

We know that you all have been working around the clock to restore the damage to your properties. I am happy that Government was able to provide assistance to many of you, including cleanup troops from the RFMF. It was a team effort to get this vital sector of our economy back on its feet and we can all be proud of the result.

Tourism is benefiting from a host of Government initiatives – and not just our huge investment in Fiji Airways or the $150-million Momi Resort development.

In the 2013 Budget, we have made a massive investment in infrastructure, especially our roads. Our visitors – as well as every Fijian – will benefit from this because the state of our roads has been one of the biggest impediments to economic growth.

We’re also investing heavily in agriculture, training a new generation of farmers with a view to eventually making Fiji self-sufficient in food production. Our resorts and hotels should be proudly serving food that is Fijian-made and Fijian-grown.

With those few words, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you all success in your various ventures and congratulate tonight’s winners. I also thank the sponsors and organisers of the AON Fiji Excellence in Tourism Awards.

 Vinaka vakalevu everyone. Enjoy the rest of the evening.

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