

# ISLAND SCENE

BY RON GLUCKMAN

## Paradise in the Making

How a cyber experiment became reality on a small Fijian island

**SOMEWHERE AROUND THE FIFTH CUP OF KAVA, POLYNESIA'S** mildly narcotic brew, it hit me: "Is this it?" I had anticipated a much bigger buzz, and not just from the grog. After all, I'd journeyed halfway around the world to a remote South Pacific landfall, keen to visit Tribewanted, a radically experimental resort community that promised a castaway-island experience somewhere between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Survivor*. Brochures had touted: "Paradise or Bust." Yet, from the second I set foot on the Fijian isle of VoroVoro, everything seemed subdued, smaller than life.

There were a handful of rustic huts clustered by a beach, and bold, cartoonish signs that declared a raft of ecologically sound features: composting toilets, water-saving showers, solar panels, a wind turbine. Not that the notices were necessary; in under an hour, one couldn't help but stumble upon every green-minded amenity

MEET THE TRIBE Island chief Tui Mali and Ben Keene posing with other members of the Tribewanted village on VoroVoro.

this small yet ambitious enclave had to offer. And, if you did happen to miss the organic garden or pig-poo biomass station, someone was sure to point them out, with a proud smile.

Indeed, nobody could slight this unlikely colony on VoroVoro for ambition or hospitality. A euphoric joy radiated among all. Western managers, Fijian staff, maybe a dozen guests—all bound together in a "tribe" conceived online in a novel social network, then planted on this island as perhaps the first utopian scheme of the 21st century.

But while the smiles were as wide and sincere as the

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Tribe's lofty aims, much of it was anticlimactic. The beach was nice, but hardly a thing of brochures. The entire island amounted to 81 hectares. The surroundings were spectacular enough, with rugged views of adjoining isles and a nearby reef that ranks among the world's largest. Yet none of my fellow islanders seemed anxious to explore that, or anything else beyond their tiny outpost. Despite talk of noble ecotourism projects, I saw little during my visit except for the painting of more signs. Most of the Tribe seemed content to loll around the huts until called for ceremonies involving group singing. And lots more kava. Still, the bond of brotherhood and purpose reminded me of my youthful experimentation on California communes decades ago—right down to the bland organic food and shower-conservation policies.

Tribewanted's physical domain, however, is only part of the picture. For Vorovoro, otherwise inhabited by a just a few members of the Fijian clan that owns the island, exists in two worlds, one real, one virtual. Hence, when not singing or expounding on the merits of the "tribe vibe," many visitors were documenting their experiences on laptops, for later posting on Tribewanted's prolific blog. Some of them devoted several hours a day to the Hammock Society, an ongoing bull session centered on a trio of seaside hammocks. Discussions revolved around the same "big" questions pondered along any backpacker trail: where to next, how long will the money last, what to do when university started.

Indeed, the transition from backpacker bungalows on a beach to the genuine Next Big Thing has proven the toughest challenge to what was once the most blogged-about resort in cyberspace. That was back in 2006, when twentysomething British founders Ben Keene and Mark James announced plans for a daring, utterly original concept that blended social networking, ecotourism, and time-sharing elements into one potent package.

The idea, as Keene described it to me, came out of nowhere, "like magic," in an e-mail from James, whom he had never met. The enticing subject line simply read: "A Tribe Wanted." James's idea was to create an online community that, unlike other Web-based forums, would lay the foundations for a real one, to be seeded on a desert island as a model of sustainable tourism.

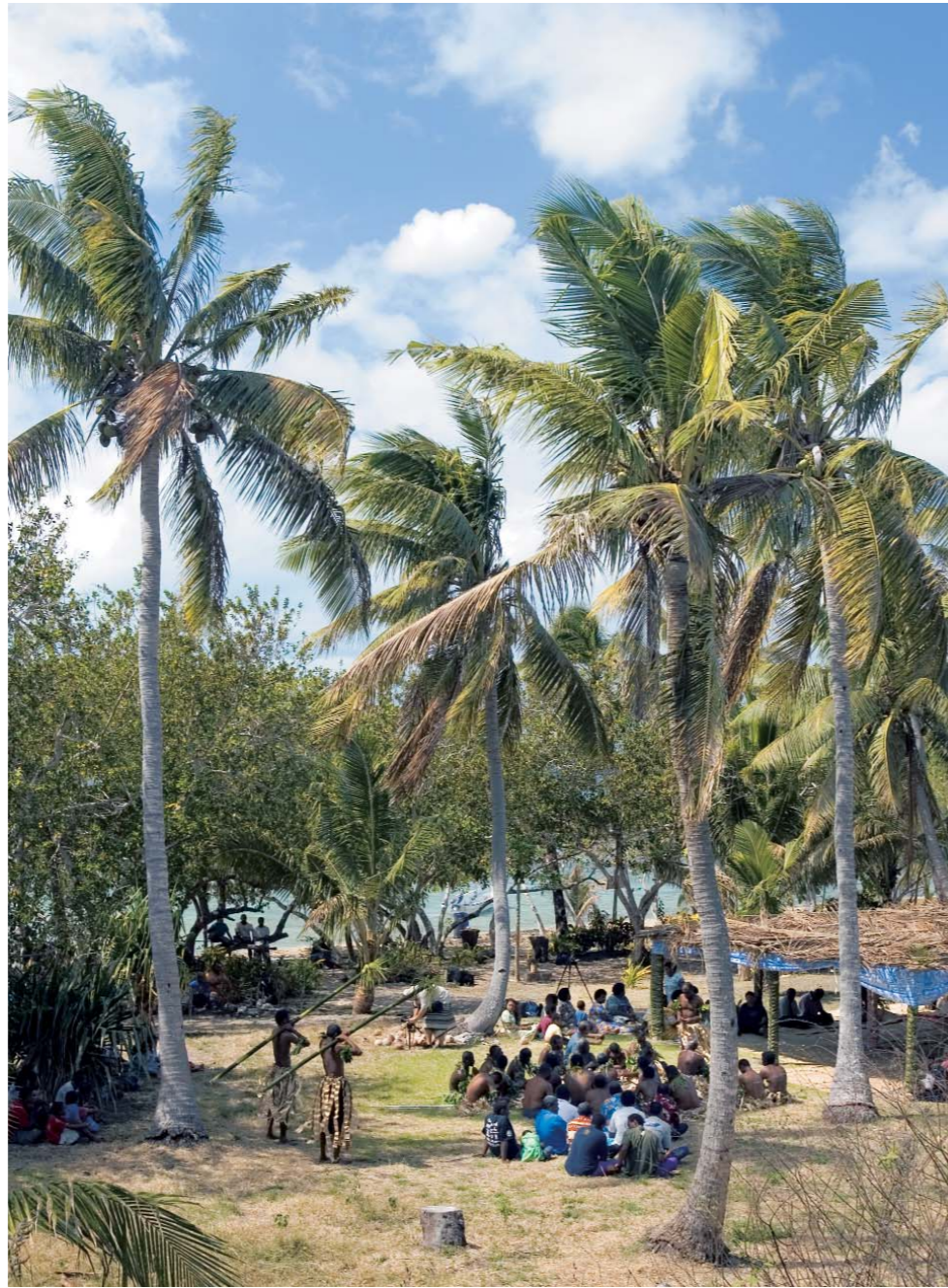
The buzz was immediate; netizens flocked to Tribewanted.com in droves. The target was to create a "tribe" of at least 5,000 stakeholders, whose modest £250 annual membership fee would

entitle them to take part in discussions and votes about the island community's development—issues like rules, facilities, infrastructure—and

then, once the settlement on Vorovoro was established, become an authentic colonist, for a week at a time. Fueled by frantic media coverage, 700 like-minded dreamers signed up in a matter of months. Even before the first pioneers, led by Keene, washed ashore in September 2006, the BBC had signed on for a five-part series, "Paradise or Bust," and Keene had inked a book contract. Success seemed written in the sand.

Then, as quickly as the Web showered Tribewanted with global hype, it tooketh away. A report entitled "Is Tribewanted.com A Scam?" inflamed online chat rooms. The story questioned the credibility of the venture, and drew attention to Mark James's previous involvement with defunct Internet schemes. James, also known as Mark Bowness, retreated to a backseat role amid the controversy, leaving Keene, with his background in adventure travel, to lead Tribewanted to reality.

"This project has been full of excitement and interesting



**SOUTH SEAS IDYLL** Clockwise from above: Overlooking the site of Tribewanted's village; the Grand Bure, a gathering spot for social events and ceremonies; a Tribe member in a Fijian wrap. Opposite: A welcoming ceremony hosted by the local clan.

story lines," Keene recalled. "The first lesson we learned was how quickly the Internet could make or break you. We were drawn into a false sense of security. Everyone loved it. We thought we'd have the budget in the bag in months."

Instead, signings plummeted. A thousand people joined in the first six months; four years on, memberships still haven't hit 2,000. Plans had to be scaled back, conceded Keene, whose tanned, boyish face makes him look more like a surfer than an entrepreneur. His "office" on Vorovoro is, in fact, a beachside surfboard mounted on two coconut stumps. He can tap away on his laptop and soak up the serenity, but not connect to the Internet—the vital missing link between islanders and onliners. Tribewanted cannot afford the costly satellite hookup.

Keene has been stymied by other problems, too. Fiji has been battered by cyclones over the years, and a fire nearly burned down the initial settlement. Nor did the island-nation's 2006 coup—the fourth in 20 years—help matters.

Keene admitted online enthusiasm has wavered over time. Tribewanted.com, where members elect island chiefs, debate policy, and blog about visits, gets 100 visitors per day—down from 7,000 when the BBC series aired in 2008. But on Vorovoro itself, much progress has been made establishing a multicultural, sustainable resort community. Last fall, at the end of the resort's original three-year lease, Keene had no difficulty negotiating a five-year extension with Tribewanted's Fijian partner. "We need people, and we need money here," Poasa Tutaqa, deputy chief of

the Fijian clan on Vorovoro, told me. "We want them to stay."

If anything, new vitality and more professional management has been added with the arrival of

Jimmy and Jenny Cahill, an Indiana couple with three blond children and an almost missionary zeal. Jimmy headed a Lexus auto-parts division for a decade and knows how to muster resources. Jenny runs the camp like a giant household, frugally adding nutrition and spice to menus.

The Cahills first came to Vorovoro on a holiday break. "We had been looking to do something different," Jenny explained. "We weren't satisfied back home with the rat race." Jimmy added, "Right away, we knew this would be perfect for us, and at about the same time, Tribewanted was looking for a new management team."

The lack of facilities for a family doesn't bother them. Jenny has always home-schooled her children. "We brought lots of education programs on DVDs," she said. "Anyway, this is only for a year, and it's an education in itself." Oliver, her adventurous five-year-old, already features in an online guide to the island.

Vorovoro tends to attract younger visitors, like Oliver Roberts, 20, and Jonathan Pitchford, 21, British students who visited the island while on an exchange program in Australia. They had already spent a week

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on Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, with some other students, "mostly our age, mostly drinking beer every night," said Roberts. "But we wanted to do something different, cultural. Here, you really get to know the locals."

And what, you may ask, do the locals think of all this? Does the project have actual traction with Fijians, or do they just see the Tribe as gap-year travelers out to paint their faces, drink kava, and play *Lord of the Flies*. For 19-year-old resort worker Nemani Lala, at least, it's the former. "I think it's good that a different kind of people come to really experience Fijian culture," he said. "This isn't a resort, like a hotel, where you come and pay and don't learn anything. This is really like a tribe. They live in a village and all of us Fijians and our friends here eat from one plate, use one spoon," he adds. "This may not be the real Fiji, like at home. But for us, it is also good to be able to learn from them."

Longtime expats have also been won over. "I thought it was wacky at first," said Chuck McCay, who came from Zimbabwe to Fiji to do charity work in 1992, and stayed on to build a guesthouse in Labasa, on nearby Vanua Levu. "When I first heard about this, it sounded like a good project, but there was no way to predict if the Fijians would stay with it." McCay stopped by for a look and has been a supporter ever since, helping Tribewanted design its ecological programs. "I've never seen so much interaction with a local community. This is really special."

The project has drawn praise from the top levels of the Fijian government as well. "As far as we're concerned, TribeWanted has



SHORE ENOUGH Getting to Vorovoro involves a short boat transfer from Labasa on the nearby island of Vanua Levu, itself a short plane ride from Viti Levu's international airport.

host a Tribe and the income it generates: according to Keene, more than US\$1 million has been injected into Vorovoro and neighboring islands in salaries, supplies, services, and lease payments.

In the works for over a year, Keene's next project—let's just call it Tribewanted 2.0—is now unfolding in one of the poorest parts of Africa, Sierra Leone. While many aspects will likely mimic Vorovoro, especially the multicultural interaction and Internet fellowship, there will be considerable differences. Instead of making a huge online splash, Keene has been keeping details quiet. Rather than chase Internet cash, he linked up with corporate partners to provide investment and design expertise.

"Before, we definitely aimed high online," he said. "We used up a lot of resources developing a social network. This time around, we've spent less online and more on infrastructure."

Ironically, having in many ways invented a new style of resort community, Keene now seems ready to retreat to a more traditional business model. Building Tribewanted 2.0 not on a remote island but close to a city of about a million people—his site is on John Obey Beach, 32 kilometers south of Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital—will not only allow him to keep costs down for transportation and supplies and to improve on services like Internet access, but also to make better use of the tried-and-true booking methods, including travel agents.

Keene now prefers to sum up Tribewanted with the term "geotourism." Loosely put, this applies to travelers wandering the globe, interacting with locals in low-impact ways that benefit all parties. Among a modest group of native huts on a small island in northern Fiji, this sounds like a grand and wondrous idea. Then, the signal is sounded, and such thoughts are shelved, at least on Vorovoro. The Brave New World of tourism can be reconsidered later. Now, it's kava time. ☺

For more information, visit [tribewanted.com](http://tribewanted.com).

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been great publicity for the islands," Tourism Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum told me back in Suva, the Fijian capital. "We're happy to have them here, and are glad they are staying." It has also been the subject of academic discussion halfway around the world. "This is a new model, with various elements of utopian literature and thought," Dr. Carrie Hintz, a professor at the City University of New York, told me over the phone. Hintz, who also heads the Society for Utopian Studies, said she admired the element of online participation. "That's really new. I cannot help but think a lot of people engage with this because of the online factor. It's a classic sort of utopia updated for the 21st century that clearly speaks to youth."

Keene counters that Tribewanted isn't a utopian experiment at all. "It's not fiction. We're doing this for real." And more Tribes are on the way, he said. "We always planned to take this model beyond Fiji."

The publicity surrounding Vorovoro has brought offers from dozens of communities around the globe, all eager to

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