

ANIMALS FIJI

Animal Doctor Sails into Sunset



Opinion



Mary-Anne Fiebig

Mary-Anne is a volunteer on assignment with Animals Fiji as part of the Australian Volunteers Program, an Australian Government Initiative.

Described as an 'absolute legend of the North' by former Animals Fiji North Manager, Brenda Fenton, Dr Jeff Allen and his wife, José Bol have been mainstays for Animals Fiji in the Fiji Northern Division.

Thanks to the assistance of Dr. Jeff and José in November 2013, Animals Fiji successfully established the first veterinary clinic in the Northern Division in decades. Dr. Jeff served as the primary veterinarian until his retirement in 2016. Despite retiring from his role, he continued to contribute as a consultant for the Animals Fiji until their departure from Fiji this month.

We now farewell Dr Jeff and José as they sail off for more adventures across the world. In a recent interview, I asked Dr Jeff and José about their time with Animals Fiji in Savusavu.

Interview with Dr. Jeff and José

1. When did you first visit Fiji?

Dr Jeff: I first sailed into Suva in Lami Bay in the 1970's. It was there that I met Dr Robin Irwin, a fellow graduate from the Edinburgh Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, and yes, that is the name as it was named after William Dick, who founded the school. It is one of the oldest veterinary schools in the world and a one-of-a-kind centre of veterinary excellence. Dr Robin and I agreed that we should "one day" set up a clinic together in Fiji – that is where the idea started for me.

2. When and why did you come to Savusavu?

José: Jeff wanted to show me Fiji, and Robin had offered us a job and a mooring for our boat in Savusavu. We arrived in December 2012 – just before Cyclone Evan.

Luckily, one of Robin's clients introduced us to Casey Quimby, Animals Fiji Co-founder and Managing Trustee who was looking for someone to set up a clinic in the Northern Division. After our initial meeting, she expressed enthusiastic support for our endeavour to set up a clinic in Savusavu. With Animals Fiji facilitating our work permits, providing medications, equipment, and financial resources, along with valuable assistance from the community,



Dr Jeff and José on their yacht waving goodbye as they leave Savusavu for Mexico.



Brenda, Animals Fiji North Manager, Dr Jeff (Consultant) and Luisa, Veterinary Assistant, in the new clinic by Savusavu Medical Centre.



Dr Jeff operating on a dog with José assisting in the first Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic at Savusavu Marina in 2014.

we joined forces to establish the first veterinary clinic staffed by a permanent veterinarian in decades.

3. What was involved in setting up the clinic in Savusavu?

Dr Jeff: Well, we first had to find a place to work in. We tried several places, but eventually Robin Irwin offered a couple of rooms in the Savusavu marina, which would work well. José and I set about cleaning up, refurbishing the building to suit our needs and obtaining all the permissions needed as part of Animals Fiji who were in charge of stocking the clinic with veterinary medical supplies and equipment. One room was for the clinic itself and the other room housed cages for the animals that we saw and also as a store-room. It was a lot of work.

Big thanks here to Ryan and Peter

Fong for their help!

4. José, Dr Jeff was the veterinarian – what was your role?

José: I managed everything else. I was the veterinary assistant, manager, cleaner, and bookkeeper for Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic. I liaised with the head office in Nadi, clients and, most importantly, trained our veterinary assistants. I remember working with a local assistant, Luisa, and she and I used to have contests on who could put surgical kits or clean up instruments the fastest – it was a lot of fun.

I had worked with Jeff previously when he and I set up a large clinic from scratch in Portugal. It is a rewarding thing to do and gave me a lot of knowledge on the best ways to set up veterinary clinics – with Jeff's advice as well of course!

Dr Jeff: José is too modest – she built it all!

5. Animals Fiji Savusavu clinic is now part of the Naqere Foundation, which includes Dr Ischaque's surgery. Why did you have to move?

Dr Jeff: In 2018, Robin, who was overseas, decided he wanted to move back to Savusavu and back to the two rooms he had lent us at the Savusavu Marina. Kindly, the Naqqa Giving Foundation donated the space and Dr Ishaque made our Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic rooms available, so with a lot of help from the Savusavu community, we relocated there.

6. I understand there have been many vets, vet assistants and volunteers during your time in Savusavu. How helpful has that been to the Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic?

José: Invaluable during our time there, and we would like to thank everyone for the help and time they spent with us in the clinic until we retired in 2016. The Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic would not have survived the early years without Ben and Barbara Temo, who spent their time looking after stray dogs and animals that needed care, fostering up to 13 dogs at a time. In the early days, when Jeff and I were the only Animals Fiji staff, it was always somewhere that we could leave an animal that needed help.

Animals Fiji has had terrific help

must read

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As a non-profit charity, Animals Fiji depends on the kindness of donations to continue in their work to support animals across Fiji.

To find out more about Animals Fiji's services and how you can help please contact their Savusavu Clinic at (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic at (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

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from different vets and assistants during the years Jeff was a consultant. It is difficult to remember them all, but vets Dr Alex, Dr Megan and Dr Rita come to mind and then Brenda and Luisa for their fantastic assistance and support. I am sure there are others, and I am sorry if I have left you out. I am getting older!

Dr Jeff: I cannot stress enough the importance of having local staff at the clinic. They have helped us understand the local problems. They are very needed to help translate the language and explain to the clients what is needed – so important.

7. After ten years you are leaving Savusavu and can you tell us what you loved about living here – on a boat!

Dr Jeff: It is time to move back to friends and family. We loved the Savusavu and surrounding communities – it was a safe place to stay, and the people were so friendly and accepting – we soon felt we were a part of it all. We enjoy the Fijian way of life and will miss everyone we have made friends with here, but we won't miss the cyclone season.

I think José would agree – living on a boat is sometimes hard – but it gives us the freedom to travel wherever and whenever we want and see as many places around the world as we can.

8. What do you see are the issues in the Northern Division concerning veterinary services?

Dr Jeff: Veterinary services in a small community is a 24-hour job – you are always on call – it can cause burn-out or exhaustion in staff. Also, lack of equipment, supplies and available staff is a problem.

There is a big need for sterilisation (desexing) of dogs to control the populations of stray and roaming dogs and farmers need advice on how to look after their animals.

Outreach clinics to our smaller villages and communities as well as in our bigger towns, like the ones we do in Labasa and nearby islands like Taveuni would be another item on my wish list.

9. Lastly, Dr Jeff, I hear you have quite an interesting history as a vet – including a practice in Beverly Hills. Can you tell me a bit about what you have done in the past?

Dr Jeff: Well, after graduating, I spent a short time in Chicago, Arkansas and a couple of years in California in Beverly Hills. I had some quite famous clients that some of you probably won't even remember as you are too young, but I looked after Steve McQueen's white standard poodle, Sammy Davis Jnr's two small dogs, and Mickey Rooney and Dean Martin's dogs. I have a lot of stories, but I am afraid I can't repeat them due to professional reasons!

I also worked in Vanuatu setting up a 2,000-hectare cattle breeding program with over 2,000 head of cattle, breeding cattle to suit the Vanuatu climate as part of a British government initiative.

As was said before, José and I set up a large clinic in Portugal, and we have had many adventures sailing around the world in between times.

Animals Fiji would like to warmly and sincerely thank Dr Jeff and José for their mammoth contribution to Animals Fiji and the veterinary industry in Fiji as a whole – particularly the animals in Fiji's Northern Division and wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

Source: Animals Fiji