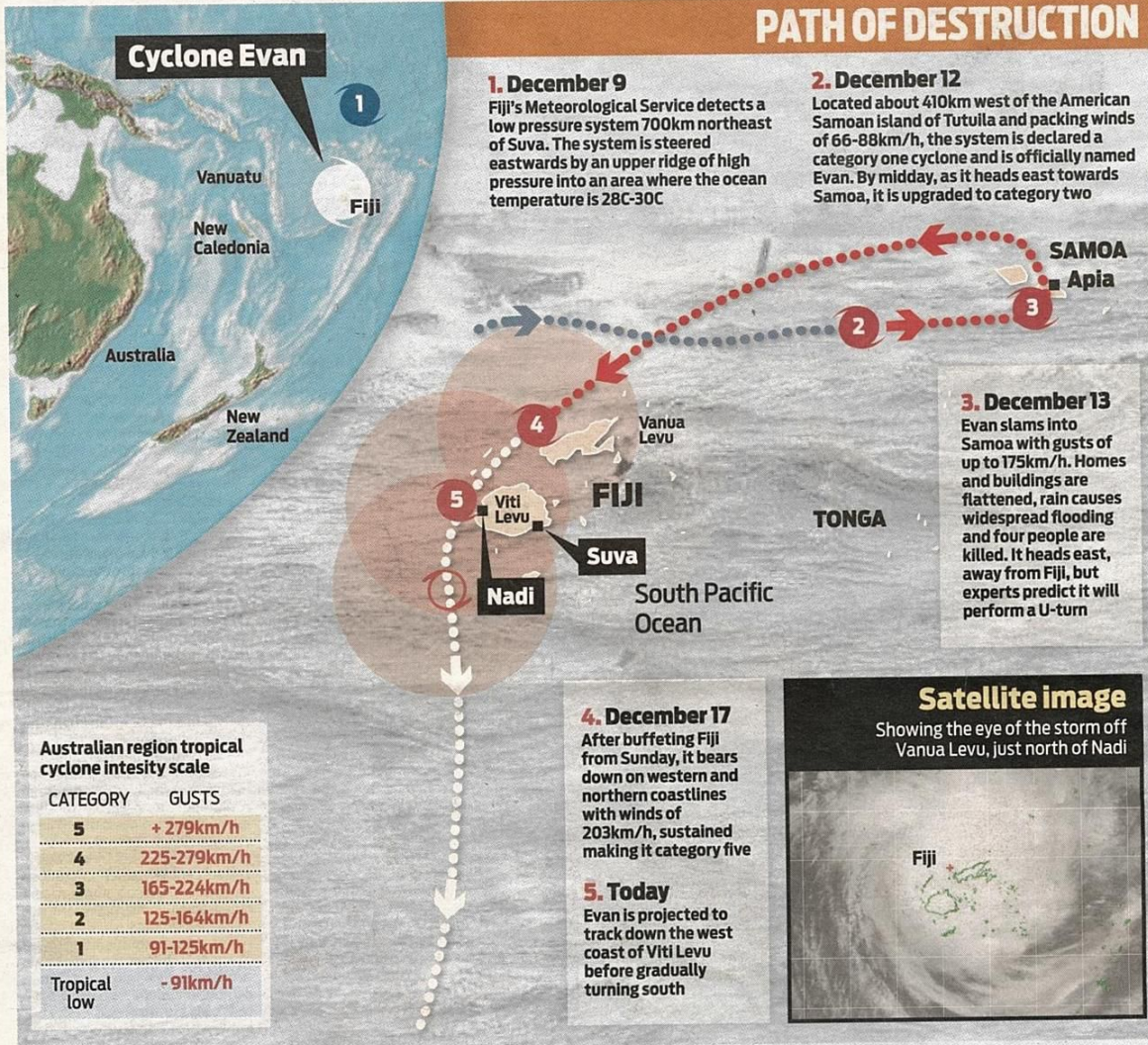


EYE OF THE STORM

Forced to take shelter

PATH OF DESTRUCTION



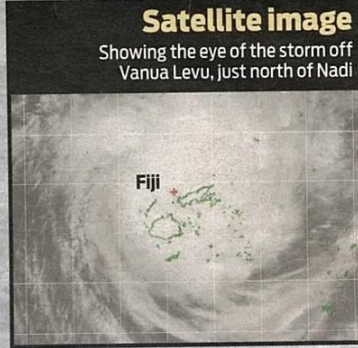
1. December 9
Fiji's Meteorological Service detects a low pressure system 700km northeast of Suva. The system is steered eastwards by an upper ridge of high pressure into an area where the ocean temperature is 28C-30C

2. December 12
Located about 410km west of the American Samoan island of Tutuila and packing winds of 66-88km/h, the system is declared a category one cyclone and is officially named Evan. By midday, as it heads east towards Samoa, it is upgraded to category two

3. December 13
Evan slams into Samoa with gusts of up to 175km/h. Homes and buildings are flattened, rain causes widespread flooding and four people are killed. It heads east, away from Fiji, but experts predict it will perform a U-turn

4. December 17
After buffeting Fiji from Sunday, it bears down on western and northern coastlines with winds of 203km/h, sustained making it category five

5. Today
Evan is projected to track down the west coast of Viti Levu before gradually turning south



Australian region tropical cyclone intensity scale

CATEGORY	GUSTS
5	+ 279km/h
4	225-279km/h
3	165-224km/h
2	125-164km/h
1	91-125km/h
Tropical low	- 91km/h

GEOFF CHAMBERS, NATHAN KLEIN & CARLEEN FROST

THOUSANDS of Australian tourists are stranded in Fiji after tropical cyclone Evan lashed the islands yesterday, destroying villages and leaving behind a trail of destruction that is estimated to cost the Pacific Island nation billions of dollars.

More than 2100 Australians will wake up in Nadi, Lautoka and Suva this morning after a wild night bunkered down in their hotel rooms as wind gusts reached 270km/h, bringing down trees on to homes and ripping roofs off.

Fijian tourism officials last night reported that 2700 holidaymakers had fled their resorts and moved to hotels closer to Nadi airport.

The Fiji government ordered 400 troops to the worst hit areas and officials warned villagers to brace themselves for a 3m tidal surge overnight.

Cyclone Evan tore through Fiji about 2.30pm (AEST) yesterday with the northern town of Lautoka, Fiji's second biggest city, hammered by winds of up to 155km/h, with houses and shops being blown away and buildings flooded. Locals described the scene as resembling a "war zone".

Foreign Minister Bob Carr last night said there were 2100 Australians — including 680 schoolies — registered with the government as currently being in Fiji, with many more believed to be unregistered.

Thousands more Australian families and couples who have booked holidays in Fiji over Christmas have been warned to check the fine print in their travel insurance policies if they need to cancel.

Insurance Council of Australia CEO Rob Whelan said most policies would cover cancellations caused by the cyclone, "depending on the circumstances".

"Anyone heading to the South Pacific soon, and anyone stranded due to the cyclone, should check their travel insurance policies to determine if their provider will compensate them for flight and accommodation cancellations," Mr Whelan said.

Australian Jarrod Harman, who is holidaying at the Sheraton on Denarau Island with his partner, told *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday all the surrounding islands had been evacuated in the morning. They were told to assemble in the ballroom as the cyclone hit.

"It's pretty bad outside."

Mapping the monster as it grew in deadly strength

MALCOLM HOLLAND
SCIENCE REPORTER

IT was just a weak low pressure system when it was first spotted on December 9. Despite being 700km northeast of Suva, it was sitting above the warm waters of the South Pacific Convergence Zone, the southern hemisphere's most expansive and persistent rain band. It is a place where cyclones are born.

Early on December 12, Fiji's storm watchers declared the system had become a category one tropical cyclone with gusts of up to 125km/h on the Australian tropical cyclone intensity scale and named it Evan. By December 12, as it headed towards Samoa, it became category two.

By 6pm, as it was just 40km southeast of the Samoan capital of Apia, Evan was producing winds of 120km/h with far stronger gusts.

Its real destruction was done the next day, as wind gusts of up to 175km/h flattened homes and buildings, and streets and villages were deluged by floodwater. Four people were killed.

And Evan wasn't finished yet. As it moved east, away from Fiji, cyclone experts found their computer atmospheric and ocean modelling was strongly predicting it would do a U-turn.

And they were right. Computer models forecast Evan heading straight

for Fiji, that it would intensify to a category four — with 160-200km/h sustained winds — and would start being felt in Fiji on December 16.

Evan did as the computer's predicted. By yesterday as it bore down on Fiji, its winds were gusting at more than 250km/h — category five strength.

Evan is thought to be the strongest to threaten Fiji since Cyclone Kina, which killed 23 people and left thousands homeless in 1993.



Katrina Venticinque (left) and Brittany Prudgett (third from right) yesterday.

Schoolies forced to flee their adventure in paradise

PHIL JACOB

THEY had travelled to Fiji to relax after a long year of studying.

But any thoughts of lying by the pool were soon forgotten when student Brittany Prudgett and her friends were forced to cut their holiday short and flee on the last flight out of the island nation as Cyclone Evan bore down.

"We thought the biggest obstacle we'd face in Fiji would be a few hangovers, let alone a crazy storm," 18-year old Brittany said from her Maitland home yesterday.

"We were lucky to get the last flight back but plenty of students will still be stuck over there."

Brittany and her friends were among 200 Australians who were evacuated from Mana Island, off Fiji's west coast, on Saturday before

being housed in cramped hotel rooms in Nadi.

Brittany's friend Katrina Venticinque was looking forward to the trip for nine months. "We had the trip planned for almost a year so it was a bit of a let down," she said.

The biggest organiser of schoolie trips to Fiji, Unleashed Travel, said they flew all their clients out just before Evan slammed into the resorts and hotels.

The company had 680 schoolies in the country but got them all out over the weekend.

Unleashed Travel managing director Jot Lynas said about 500 had been scheduled to leave Fiji on the weekend, meaning their seven-day holidays had not been curtailed.

"They were good, they were obviously having a great time and didn't want to leave and the weather was fine when they left," he said.