

**taking off G2**

Renting a car in Mexico?  
Don't get in an accident.

**tip sheet G3**

Americans suffer from rela-  
tive vacation deprivation.

**viewfinders G2**

Captured on safari:  
a dazzle of zebras.

**destinations G4**

Off Fiji's Qalito Island,  
the lagoons are a perfect 10.

# travel

STARTRIBUNE.COM/TRAVEL • SECTION G • SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2012



The sun set over the lagoon in the Mamanuca Island Group, Fiji.

**The Coral Kingdom offers 'an ideal place to relax and catch up' for weary U.S. travelers looking for a tropical-paradise retreat.**

## CASTAWAYS ON

# Fiji



By ANNE Z. COOKE and  
STEVE HAGGERTY  
McClatchy News Service

**QALITO ISLAND, FIJI-**  
**W**e were dozing on the sand at the edge of the bluest lagoon we'd ever seen, when suddenly we remembered. The snorkel trip. Grabbing our masks we rushed to the dive shack, catching the skiff as it was pulling out for the ride to the far side of the lagoon.

"You can't go home until you've seen the Malolo Barrier Reef," said Kima Tagitagivalu, the dive guide at Castaway, a family-friendly resort on Fiji's northwest coast. He checked off our names and handed us our swim fins. "A few years ago the district chief, Ratu Seva Vautenu, made it taboo for fishing and collecting. The people — even the fishermen — respect that decision and the fish have come back."

Being there, in the Mamanuca Archipelago, was kismet. If a last-minute schedule change hadn't delayed our flight back to the States, we



Staff members sang as visitors arrived at Castaway Resort. Even pre-planned welcomes convey a genuine warmth.



Source: ESRI

would never have washed up on Castaway at all. But as often happens here in the carefree South Pacific, changes can be lucky. We could have booked an airport hotel in Nadi (NAN-dee), on Viti Levu, the main island, or found a room at one of the Coral Coast's tourist hotels. Instead, we e-mailed a friend at home, an indefatigable Fiji booster, for advice.

"Go to Castaway on the ferry route, about 14 miles offshore," she answered. "Lots of sun, a gorgeous beach, starry nights. Great food and secluded. An ideal place to relax and catch up before heading home. Leave by midafternoon, and

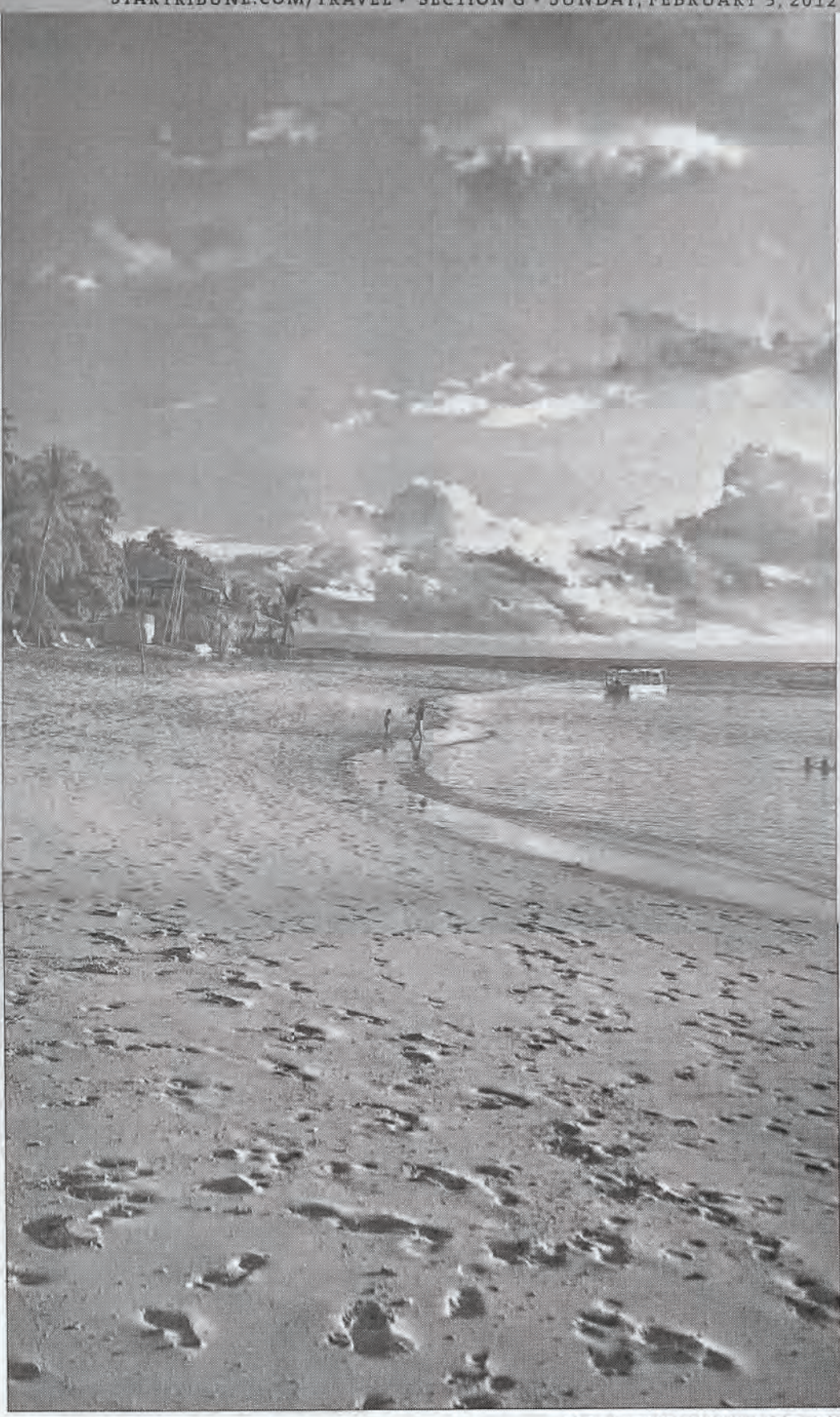
you'll be back at the airport with time to spare."

### Resort as civilization

With mask and fins in hand, we grabbed a seat and the skiff headed for deep water, speeding up until the prow bounced over the waves. We had just gotten a good grip on the gunwales when the boat slowed over the reef. Peering down through the glass-clear water, Tagitagivalu found a sandy patch and dropped the anchor. He checked his watch. "We've got an hour before the tide turns," he said, counting heads as we splashed off the stern ladder.

We've seen some special coral over the years, but the Malolo Reef, 75 feet high over the ocean floor, was more fantastic than any animated film. Below us, thousands of hard and soft corals of every shape and color crowded together, swaying gently with the tide. Here was a ribbon of pinks, blood red and soft purple; there a swirl of electric green, custard yellow branches and chocolate brown leaves. For an hour, we floated, enchanted, until Tagitagivalu touched our shoulders and broke the spell. With the tide turning and the waves breaking, we swam back to the boat.

Castaway is hard to forget. But it's just one of many resorts in the Mamanuca Group, each with its own style. If you visit here you'll have to pick one, since they're really the only lodging option. The lagoons are a perfect 10 and so is the sand, burnished over millennia to tiny golden specks. But only at a resort will you find shade, fresh water, food and, dare I say it, souvenirs. Even native villages are few and far between, and the smallest islands — like the



Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY • ColorWorld

The iconic South Seas beach and lagoon, above, are the highlight of Castaway Resort on Qalito Island. Native Fijian pineapple, left, looks as good as it tastes.



Traditional Fijian thatched bures dot the landscape in Nalesutale Village, east of Nadi, in upcountry Viti Levu.

rocky islet where actor Tom Hanks filmed "Castaway" — are uninhabitable.

Take Tokoriki Resort, on hilly Tokoriki Island. A storied retreat favored by couples, Tokoriki's deep well is what fills the water tanks for cooking, washing, topping up the infinity swimming pool, watering the garden and supplying the bathrooms in the resort's 34 luxurious thatched bures (cottages). Waiters serve chef-prepared cuisine in the airy dining room and guides organize snorkel trips. As the sun dips toward the western horizon, the guests enjoy the spectacle from deck chairs beside the pool. For us, it was paradise.

### The real deal

Even better were the resort's half-dozen in-resident "elders," experts in Fijian lore and traditions. You can ask them about village life, or join in as they pass a bowl of kava, strum a guitar and reminisce. The weekly "lovo feast" was the real deal. As the guests gathered to watch, the kitchen staff shoved hot rocks into an earthen pit, layered them with banana and palm leaves and topped them with bundles of securely wrapped chicken, pork, taro and yams, and smothered it all in dirt. By twilight, dinner was ready.

"The lovo is more than a meal," said Penkioni Sale. "A family feast like this, still held in the villages, brings all the cousins and aunts together and reminds us of our common heritage."

The Mamanucas are poster-perfect. But the main island, Viti Levu, is the cultural and commercial heart of Fiji. Here we checked into the Outrigger Hotel on the Lagoon, on the Coral Coast, our base for exploring. Told that Fijian choirs excel and anxious to hear them, we decided to attend a Sunday service at a tiny Methodist church. The 12-person choir, mostly elderly, looked tired and wan. When they sang the hymns, each from memory, a cappella, in harmony, and with perfect pitch, they raised the rafters. As the melody soared over the congregation and out the open windows, people in the lane stopped to listen.

Was the jet-boat ride on the Sigatoka River a canned affair, for tourists? Yes, but we signed up anyway. Scenic and fun, it turned memorable when the boat stopped for a tour of Tubairata (toom-bye-RAH-ta), a traditional hill village.

Welcomed by Kini, the village's official greeter, we strolled through the village followed by a parade of chattering kids, then headed for

### IF YOU GO

**Baby-sitting:** Most resorts offer free or affordable rates (\$2-\$5 per hour) for baby and toddler care. For kids 5 and older, clubs and guided activities are generally free.

**Tours and trips:** Ask at the hotel concierge for recommendations. Most include hotel pickup and delivery. Car rentals are also available (left-side driving). Taxis are numerous.

**Info:** Castaway Resort ([www.castawayfiji.com](http://www.castawayfiji.com)), Tokoriki Island Resort ([www.tokoriki.com](http://www.tokoriki.com)), Outrigger on the Lagoon ([www.outriggerfiji.com](http://www.outriggerfiji.com)), Fiji Tourist Office ([www.tourismfiji.com](http://www.tourismfiji.com)).

the community center, where the entire village — 45 people — sat cross-legged on the floor awaiting our arrival. The ensuing kava ceremony, with coconut shell cups and ritual clapping, was followed by a lunch served on palm fronds.

When the women cleared away the plates, we stood up to leave. But things were just heating up. The men began to sing, and soon one man, then two men and then 10 more stood up and asked the ladies — all the ladies — to dance. Soon everyone was up, arms clutching waists, doing the Fijian two-step. Yes, these tours are pre-planned and the villages earn money for hosting guests. But when Fijians welcome you, believe us, no matter how it happens, it's genuine.

We shopped in town, tasted odd fruits in the open-air market, signed up for a massage in the Outrigger's hilltop spa and dozed by the pool. Most of Fiji went unseen, including the country's other islands, come-hither shapes on the near horizon. They're on our list for next time.

**« THE LOVO IS MORE THAN A MEAL. A FAMILY FEAST LIKE THIS, STILL HELD IN THE VILLAGES, BRINGS ALL THE COUSINS AND AUNTS TOGETHER AND REMINDS US OF OUR COMMON HERITAGE. »**

Penkioni Sale, a Fiji islander