

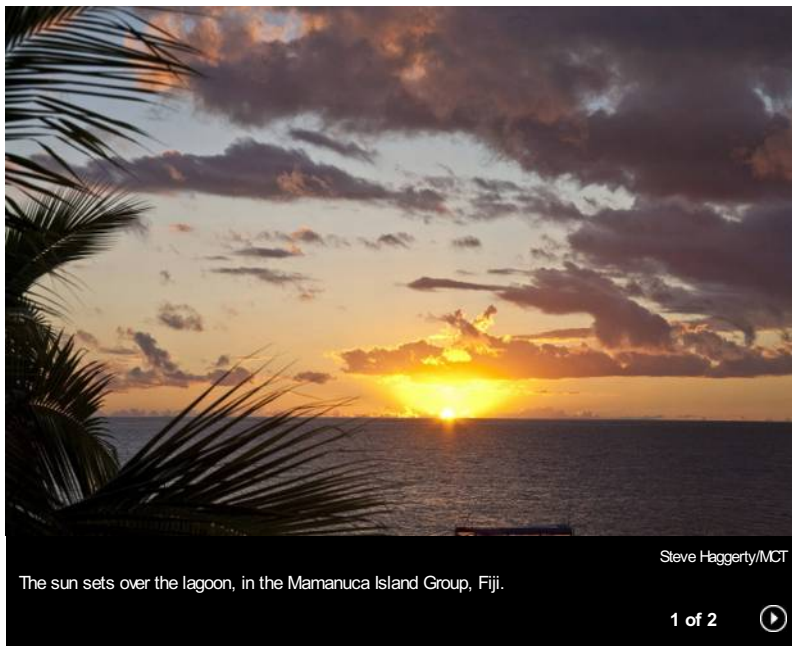


Home > Travel > International

Like 16k

# Castaways on Fiji: Notes from the Coral Kingdom

Share 1 Tweet 0 Text Size 0 0



Steve Haggerty/MCT

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

1 of 2

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY

McClatchy Tribune

Published: 17 February 2012 06:10 PM

QUALITO ISLAND, Fiji — We were dozing on the sand at the edge of the bluest lagoon I had ever seen when suddenly I remembered the snorkel trip. We grabbed our masks and rushed to the dive shack, and caught 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, 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 Vatunitu, 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 had not delayed our flight back to Los Angeles, we 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, on Viti Levu, the main island. Or found a room at one of the Coral Coast's tourist hotels. Instead, we emailed 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, stary 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."

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. I 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.

Turning over, I looked down, and said (into my snorkel), "Wow!" The Malolo Barrier Reef, 75 feet high over the ocean floor, was more fantastic than any animated film. Below me, thousands of hard and soft corals of

## TODAYS TRAVEL DEALS >

## INTERNATIONAL STORIES >

Europe's cafe theater: Have a drink and soak it all in

Find adventure, natural beauty in Germany's Lake District

Family travel five: Ireland

Mexico's city of Guanajuato gears up for the pope's visit

What's new in Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia in 2012

Chasing the Northern Lights in Norway

What's new for 2012 in France and Spain

Castaways on Fiji: Notes from the Coral Kingdom

## HOT TOPICS >

- 1 Caribbean
- 2 San Antonio
- 3 Day trips from Dallas
- 4 Texas Hill Country
- 5 Romantic trips
- 6 Austin
- 7 Colorado River
- 8 Family vacations

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 to and fro, enchanted, until Tagitagivalu touched my shoulder and broke the spell. With the tide turning and the waves breaking, we hurriedly swam back to the boat.

Castaway is hard to forget, but truth to tell, it's just one of many resorts in the Mamanuca Group, each with its own style. If you visit here, 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 rocky islet where actor Tom Hanks filmed *Castaway* — are uninhabited.

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 from the lounge. As the sun dips toward the western horizon, guests enjoy the spectacle from deck chairs beside the pool. For us, it was paradise.

Even better were the resort's half-dozen resident elders, experts in Fijian lore and traditions. If you want to know the back story and why, 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 also the real deal. As the guests gathered to watch, the kitchen staff shoved hot rocks into an earthen pit. These were layered with banana and palm leaves, topped with bundles of securely wrapped chicken, pork, taro and yams, and smothered in dirt. By twilight, dinner was ready.

"The lovo is more than a meal," said Penkioni Sale, on hand to supervise. "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 Lewu, is the cultural and commercial heart of Fiji. Here we checked into the Outrigger on the Lagoon Hotel, on the Coral Coast, our base for exploring. Told that Fijian choirs excel and eager 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.

The jet-boat ride on the Sigatoka River was a canned affair for tourists, but we signed up anyway. Scenic and fun, it turned memorable when the boat stopped for a tour of Tubairata, a traditional hill village. Welcomed by Kini, the village's official greeter, we strolled through the community followed by a parade of chattering kids, then headed for the Community Center. Here the entire population of the village — 45 people — sat cross-legged on the floor awaiting our arrival. The ensuing kava ceremony, with coconut shell cups and ritual clapping, ended and was followed by a lunch served on palm fronds.

As 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 to dance. Soon everyone was up, arms clutching waists, doing the Fijian two-step. Yes, these tours are planned and the villages earn money for hosting guests. But when Fijians welcome you, believe me, it's genuine.

Typically Fijian, the Outrigger is set among lush gardens, with ferns, flowers and shade trees. Geared toward families, the layout includes a huge swimming pool, large dining room and a staff of soft-spoken and ever-smiling nannies, waiters, busboys and maids. The Outrigger is on the shore, as advertised, but this particular lagoon is so large and flat that even at high tide, the water is too shallow even for dipping. The lovely view from the bungalows compensates.

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. The Outrigger's lovo feast, enough to serve a small army, included traditional dishes prepared in the kitchen and served buffet style in the dining room. Even the troupe of Fijian fire walkers, who put on a ceremonial performance in the outdoor amphitheater, was impressive. I sneaked up front afterward to see if the rocks really were hot and earned a blister for my trouble.

Most of Fiji went unseen, including visits to some of the country's other islands, come-hither shapes on the near horizon. They're on our list for next time. Like the Pied Piper, they, too, beckon castaways to their shores.

## When you go

**Baby-sitting and nannies:** Fijians like children. As a result, most resorts have experienced nannies on staff and offer free or affordable rates (\$2 to \$5) per hour for baby and toddler care. For children 5 and older, kids' clubs and guided camp activities are generally free.

**Tours and trips:** Outfitters and guided tours are a big business. Ask at the hotel concierge for suggestions and recommendations. Most include hotel pickup and delivery. Car rentals are also available; driving is easy (if you can manage left-side drive). Taxis are numerous and drivers are helpful; settle on the destination and price in advance.

### Resorts & contacts:

- Castaway Resort, on Qalito Island west of Nadi; [castawayfiji.com](http://castawayfiji.com)
- Tokoriki Island Resort, north Mamanuca Group; [tokoriki.com](http://tokoriki.com)
- Outrigger on the Lagoon, Coral Coast, on Viti Lewu; [outriggerfiji.com](http://outriggerfiji.com)
- Fiji Tourist Office: [tourismfiji.com](http://tourismfiji.com)

**Getting there:** Air Pacific flies 10 hours nonstop from Los Angeles to Nadi. The plane crosses the international date line, so the calendar date on arrival is one day later. The return flight gains a day, arriving the day it left. Qantas and American also fly from Honolulu, with one stop.

### Guidebooks:

## PHOTOS >



Everything has a story at Papillote Wilderness Retreat



Treasure chest of sites found in Oklahoma

## THINGS TO DO >

### Upcoming Events

Sponsored

- 3/23 7 PM Anne of Green Gables BUY
- 3/22 7 PM Shatners World Dallas BUY
- 3/24 2 PM In the Heights BUY
- 3/24 7 PM The 8th Annual Dallas Blues... BUY
- 3/25 11 AM Festival of Balloons BUY

Search Add A Listing

Events Restaurants Movies Venues

What  When

Where  Dallas, TX Within  50 Miles

From GuideLive.com

[FIND US on Facebook](#)

[FOLLOW US on Twitter](#)



## MOBILE >

Get [dallasnews.com](http://dallasnews.com) on your mobile device  
 Sign up for alerts or coupons sent to your phone

## NEWSLETTERS >

Subscribe to Recipe, Travel, and Health Newsletters  
 Subscribe to a variety of newsletters

## MOST POPULAR

### Most Read

- Photos: SportsDayHS' 2011-12 All-Area Boys' Basketball Team
- Dallas woman accused of kidnapping daughter from Chicago in 2009, locking her in closet for weeks
- More: Why trading down in the NFL draft might be the best option for Cowboys
- I and art recorded on mall security video lands

### Most Commented

### Most Recommended

## FIND IT

### Shop

Keyword:

Newspaper Ads | Special Sections | Classifieds

Place an Ad | Sign Up for Special Offers

---

Autos

Jobs

Classifieds/Place an Ad



- *Frommer's South Pacific* by Bill Goodwin is abbreviated but informative.

- *Moon Fiji Guide* by David Stanley (Avalon Press) is a keeper to take with you. Packed with background reading, maps, tips, lodging reviews and cultural history.

- *Lonely Planet Fiji Guide* has color photos and more emphasis on budget travel. Compare with the *Moon Guide* for your preferred style and content.



#### MORE FROM *DALLASNEWS.COM*

- [Five fun family trips in Arizona](#)
- [Take a bite into po-boys that the locals love in New Orleans](#)
- [New names surfacing in SMU coaching search?](#)
- [Moore: Even with Brandon Carr in place, Cowboys still need a pair of playmakers on defense](#)
- [Troy Aikman: Cowboys' Tony Romo is 'a better quarterback than I was'](#)

#### FROM THE WEB

- [Patch - Laguna Beach, CA](#)
- [Opinion: Why Laguna Beach Traffic Gets Worse and Worse](#)
- [The Daily Meal](#)
- [Steakhouse Waiters Arrested for Credit Card Scam](#)
- [Inquirer.net](#)
- [2 confessed child rapists killed in Manila police cell](#)
- [Newsmax.com](#)
- [Pelosi's Daughter Enrages Left with Welfare Video](#)
- [MadameNoire](#)
- [Going On A Trip With Your New Man? Don't Do This](#)

What's this?

#### VIDEOS >

#### Leave Comment

##### Having problems seeing comments?

**Guidelines:** We welcome your thoughts, but for the sake of all readers, please refrain from the use of obscenities, personal attacks or racial slurs. All comments are subject to our [terms of service](#) and may be removed. Repeat offenders may lose commenting privileges.

[Register](#) | [Sign In](#)  [Subscriber Services](#)

Sponsored links

[Follow @dallasnews](#)