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TRAVEL



> ISLAND ESCAPE

Finding family in pristine Fiji



"You want to fish all day? Fish! You want to kayak or snorkel? Whatever you like, it's your choice."

MANASA RAGIGIA
 YASAWA ISLAND RESORT'S RESIDENT ELDER

> **IF YOU GO**

Do whatever you like!
 The laid-back attitude of the islands and their inhabitants favours it.

STEVE HAGGERTY/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

The Yasawa Island Resort is a deluxe hideaway that can only be reached by helicopter, small plane or boat. Pictured is Yawini Island, an uninhabited beach near the resort.

Laissez-faire, relaxed resorts run by friendly locals make for a charming escape from urban cares

ANNE COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

SAVUSAVU, FIJI—As the departing guests gather under the coconut palms to wait for the airport shuttle, Jane begins to sniffle. Tears run down her cheeks. The rest of us, startled, exchange looks. It surprised us that Jane, a one-time debutante with manners to match, was not put off by Koro Sun Resort, the most family-

friendly, and the noisiest, of the three beach resorts we visited in Fiji, southwest of Samoa in the tropical South Pacific.

"I hate to leave," she said, mopping her eyes as the Fijian staff assembled to say goodbye.

Turning from one smiling face to the next, she hugged the housekeeper, high-fived the kayaking guide and gave a

thumbs-up to the guitar player who'd invited her to share in a late-night bowl of "kava," the pungent grog the locals brew. "I'll never see them again," she lamented.

"It feels like losing the family I didn't know I had."

We visited dreamy Yasawa Island Resort, on a pristine sand beach in the remote northwest Yasawa Archipelago; Nanuku Resort, a group of villas in Pacific Harbour, on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island; and Koro Sun on the island of Vanua Levu.

It's true; Koro Sun did feel a bit like summer camp.

Each day started with a bang and didn't slow down until the Southern Cross appeared in the sky. We were welcomed with a fruit drink served in a coconut and steered to a chair for a 10-minute foot massage. Shouting kids ran through the lobby on their way to the pool and water slide, past a group of cyclists geared up for a ride. A family of three generations partied at the adjacent dinner table.

FIJI continued on T7

> DOWNTOWN COWTOWN

Fort Worth, a historic city brimming with Texas-sized pride

PAULINE FROMMER
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The Texas most tourists see isn't the rootin'-tootin' West. Dallas and Houston are sedate cities of gleaming, Shanghai-like skyscrapers; Austin's beat is more alt-music than country and San Antonio puts the emphasis on the "Mex" in Tex-Mex. Fort Worth, however, is the big-city exception, a burg that wears its cowboy boots, 10-gallon hats and nickname "Cowtown" with Texas-sized pride.

And it has a right to do so. For decades, the stockyards here, today the Fort Worth Stockyards Historic District, were among the top 10 most important markets on the continent, known as the "Wall Street of the West" for the thousands of head of cattle, sheep and horses that were traded here.

As the starting point for the Chisholm Trail, this was the last glimpse of civilization for many of the settlers who ventured further west. It's not a past you have to guess at when you come to Fort Worth. The historic core, with its rowdy saloons, steak houses, Stetson stores, classic Western architecture and cobbled streets, looks like a set John Wayne should be loping down. Every day, at 11:30 a.m. and 4 p.m., the main drag, Exchange Avenue, echoes with the clip-clop of hooves as slow-eyed, majestic longhorn cattle are herded to and from their pens.

TEXAS continued on T2



Longhorn cattle parade through town twice a day.

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A relaxed getaway to island paradise on 'Fiji time'

FUJI from T1

All 108 of the resort's guests packed into the clubhouse to watch pounding drums and a floor-thumping "meke" (traditional Fijian dance). We donned snorkelling gear and went out with the dive boat, floating over the coral reefs while the divers deep below, shadowy but visible, snaked their way through the underwater canyon below.

Jane made her own plans, quietly slipping away to kayak through the cave at Bat Island with Manu, the guide, indulging in a meditative massage in the secluded Rainforest Spa, exploring the town of Savusavu alone and identifying indigenous flowers with Leba, the florist.

We'd been anticipating that last morning, too, but for a different reason. As seasoned Fiji fans, we knew the staff would assemble to sing "Isa Lei," the national "love song," the lyrics in Fijian. "Must you leave me?" sing the female sopranos, their voices rising over the altos, each lingering phrase echoed an octave lower by the men's deep notes.

"Every moment my heart for you is yearning; those happy hours are fleeting," they sing, the last refrain fading away. It's enough to put a lump in any cynic's throat.

The truth is that most Fijians, wherever they live in this paradise of hundreds of islands, would sing it voluntarily. Raised in traditional villages where choir-singing is the soul of the church and children learn harmony at their mother's knee, music is part of the culture.

Each resort has its own personality, shaped by location, climate, the topography and the owner's vision of what Fiji is all about. This endless variety is why so many travellers come back, sometimes staying at two or three resorts in one trip.

Yasawa Island Resort, a deluxe hideaway on a blue lagoon, can be reached by helicopter, small plane or boat. It consists of 18 traditionally thatched and furnished bures (pronounced burays), or bungalows, and offers up a regimen of candlelit dinners, chef's menus and no-pressure days. It's a dream come true for self-motivated explorers, A-list luminaries and honeymooners who want their privacy.

"We're on Fiji time here," said Manasa Ragigia, Yasawa's resident elder and the "spokesman" at Bukama, the neighbouring Fijian village. "You want to fish all day? Fish!" he told us, mixing drinks at the sunset cocktail party. "You want to kayak or snorkel? Whatever you like, it's your choice."

Guests knew just what they wanted. Mornings were filled with boat dives on nearby reefs and coral mounts, snorkelling off the beach, windsurfing, fishing for marlin or sailing the catamaran. Laid-back afternoons offered meet-the-people tours in Bukama, lolling in the infinity pool, reading, joining the cultural and basket-weaving demonstrations and beach combing. On Tuesday, Ragigia and Chef Talala Tupou prepared a "lovo" (underground oven) feast, a

> JUST THE FACTS

Lodging: Tipping is not required or expected in Fiji. Most resorts include meals and use of the pool, beach, lounge chairs, hot tubs, tennis courts, snorkel gear, Internet access, in-room safes and television. To avoid hidden charges before you book, request details on anything that could cost extra, from taxes, fees, guides and babysitters to wines, beverages, boat rides, diving gear and local phone calls.

Resorts: At Yasawa Island Resort, all-inclusive rates for two in a beachfront bure start at \$850 per night. Bar drinks, select wines and spa treatments are extra. For more, go to yasawa.com, or email erin@yasawa.com.

At Nanuku Resort, in Pacific Harbour, a typical low-season, five-night lodging package for two starts at \$755 per night and includes meals, on-site facilities, a 30-minute massage and some beverages. Non-package bookings may not include meals. Go to nanukufiji.com, or email info@nanukufiji.com.

At Koro Sun Resort, lodging for two starts at \$430 a night for a garden bure. In the off-season, the Edgewater bures, normally \$750 per night, are priced at \$525. In 2015, Koro Sun is introducing Fiji's "first, true over-water bungalows," to be installed on rafts moored to the shore. Meals, facilities and most activities are included. Massage treatments and boat dives, both provided by concessionaires, cost extra.



STEVE HAGGERTY/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Nanuku resort is a gated group of villas on the lagoon in Fiji's Pacific Harbour.

chance to taste most of Fiji's favourite ingredients and dishes.

Our bure, tucked among ferns, hibiscus and palms, had a private deck, plantation shutters, a hammock, a cookie jar that was never empty, indoor and outdoor showers, piles of towels and air conditioning.

When the honeymooners emerged from their bure, it was for an idyllic picnic alone. Set up with an umbrella, beach chairs and champagne, they

were escorted to a distant beach and left for the afternoon. Asked about the experience, they said that it took only a long look west across the passage now called Bligh Water to understand why HMS Bounty Commander William Bligh and a dozen loyal tars, put adrift in a launch and chased by cannibals, felt they were at world's end.

A signature outing was the boat ride south to the Blue Lagoon, flooded

limestone caverns where the movie of the same name, which featured a nubile 14-year-old Brooke Shields, was filmed. Depositing us on a narrow beach, Yasawa's guides waited while the cave guide, Aku Nacoba, escorted us up the cliff and down a tunnel into the eerie, water-sculpted caves. So eerie, it turned out, that besides the two of us, Jane was the only other traveller brave enough to swim through the half-lit chamber.

Back on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, we headed for Nanuku Resort, a gated group of new and remodelled villas on the lagoon in Pacific Harbour. The villas, privately owned but for rent, are grouped around the pool and pool deck, where a torch-lighting ceremony is held at sunset. Nanuku has lodging for up to 80 guests, from couples and families to larger groups coming for reunions and small meetings.

Karen Taylor, the manager, says Nanuku's location at the east end of the Coral Coast is why it succeeds as a Fijian-style safari lodge. "With the ocean in front of us and the mountains behind, there's everything from hiking and river rafting to sailing," she said. Since child care (nannies) are also included in the lodging cost, parents can get away for a few hours, or, as the couple staying below us did, bring the nanny along every day to help with the children.

We saw fire-walkers, toured a hillside village and explored the vegetable market in the town of Navua.

A family with teenagers signed up for surfing at Yanuca Island; the next day they headed south across the channel to Beqa Island Lagoon, to dive with sharks. The dive sounded so fascinating that we added it to our wish list for next time.

In Fiji, said Taylor, "even the sharks think you're family." *Tribune News Service*



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