

PARADISE FOUND

Fijians provide the warmth that makes their islands truly divine

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

If Fiji was nothing more than sand and sea, palm leaves and flowers, it wouldn't matter which beach resort in this South Pacific island country you visited. But each destination in this 333-island nation promises a unique experience. What's the secret? It's the Fijians themselves, proud to be Fijian and proud to show you their country.

Sau Bay Fiji Retreat (saubay.com), on Vanua Levu, the second largest Fiji island, was the first stop on my most recent trip there. Still jet-lagged, I was sitting on the deck of the lodge, gazing over the bay, when the bushes below me suddenly stirred and two hands and a pair of clippers appeared, followed by a head.

Then the head looked up, saw my feet and asked me what I thought of the umbrella-like trees towering over the lodge. This was my introduction to the owner, Nigel Douglas, a Scotsman by ancestry and a fifth-generation Fijian.

"These are rain trees," he said, patting a gnarled trunk. "I took one look and I knew this was the place for me. You don't often see them so close to the shore — saltwater, you know — but they're thriving. And look at these tiny white flowers. These bushes are rare, but native." He paused, scanning the hillside. "This was bare when we bought it."

Since the spot is hidden, I asked Douglas how he found it.

"Fiji is home," he said. "I've been to most of these islands, dived every reef."

Sau Bay's four ocean-view bures (pronounced BOOR-ays, they're cottages) are each equipped with big beds, mosquito netting, private baths, coffee makers, a cookie jar and air conditioning.

The Douglasses, Nigel and his wife Carol, know how to make travelers feel at home. On most mornings Carol worked at her desk while divemaster Nigel suited up to guide the resort's six other guests to Rainbow Reef and the Great White Wall, 10 minutes away by dive boat.

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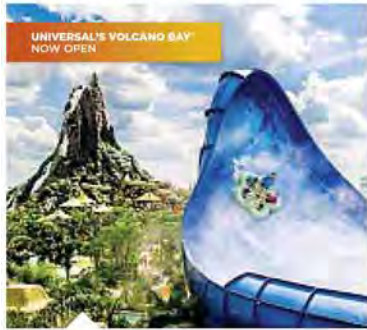
There's plenty of sunshine and tranquility outside a beach bungalow at Tides Reach Resort on Taveuni (main), where top attractions include the Tavoro Waterfalls (top left) in Bouma National Heritage Park. Guests are greeted with fresh coconut water (left), Fiji's signature drink.



STEVE HAGGERTY/TNS

DAILY NEWS
TRAVEL
Sunday, February 18, 2018

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That left precious private time to kayak across the bay, hike uphill and (with assistant manager Sarah as my guide) visit nearby Kiao Island, the adopted home of Polynesian immigrants from Tuvalu. Rising oceans are washing away their villages.

Four days later, it was time to leave Sau Bay and head over to Tides Reach Resort (tides-reachresort.com) on Taveuni, Fiji's Garden Isle.

Checking in, I was handed Fiji's traditional welcome drink, fresh coconut water topped with a flower.

Just four years old, Tides Reach is still growing, with two bures and a dive shop to be added later this year. The bures are sleek and simple, uncluttered white with minimalist furnishings and bold Asian and Fijian art. The main lodge, airy and spacious with two open-air sides, looks out over a sandy beach and the bluest of blue water.

With a free afternoon ahead, I decided to snorkel around Honeymoon Island, at the end of the bay. Following sports guide Niu Lebaivalu into water as clear as glass, I had my first look at the coral damaged when Cyclone Winston roared over Fiji in February 2016.

Clumps of newly grown coral, yellow, beige and red, looked healthy. But you couldn't miss the piles of dead coral ripped out by wind and waves. "It was a Category 5 storm, the worst one ever,"

Lebaivalu said. "The Pacific Ocean is warmer than it used to be."

On my last day at Tides Reach, he invited me to his village, Wivi. A dozen small houses built in a circle, on 800 grassy acres, it's fringed by vegetable gardens and a coconut palm grove. He fetched a wrap-around skirt (called a sulu) from the car and handed it to me, blushing.

"Shorts are OK other places, but the chief is inviting us to his house to share a bowl of kava. It's traditional," he said. Prepared, I'd also brought kava for the chief, a gift bought an hour earlier at the corner market.

Yasawa Island Resort (yasawa.com), in northwest Fiji, seemed a long way from Taveuni Island, in the east. But it was the last stop on

my itinerary, and one of Fiji's top 10 luxury retreats. That made it worth the two short flights it took to get there.

There, you'll find total privacy among tall palms and landscaped gardens; luxurious thatched bures that feel Fijian but offer the latest in luxury; miles of clean, white sand sloping gently out into deep water, with ocean views to the horizon.

Less obvious, but more important, is that Yasawa Island Resort is, in its own way, both Western resort and Fijian village. Blending two cultures, it enchants and enlightens travelers and reminds the staff — maids, waiters, guides, gardeners and handymen — that they aren't just employees, but hosts.

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STEVE HAGER/TNS



The half-mile walk to Tavoro Falls (above) shows why Taveuni is Fiji's Garden Isle. Bures on Vanua Levu (right) afford all the comforts of beachside life.

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Papayas fringe the beach behind the Tides Reach lodge on Fiji's Taveuni Island.

STEVE HANCOCK/TINS

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Why does this matter? Because Yasawa Island Resort, like most Fijian beach resorts, occupies leased land, owned and controlled by the local chief and the clan. A warm partnership and shared traditions benefit both resort and village.

I did what I always do at Yasawa: I swam, organized a beach picnic up the coast, toured Bukama and visited the famous Blue Lagoon Caves, where you take a deep breath, swim under water through a narrow channel (guided by a strong, kindly Fijian man) and pop up in a mysterious, sunlit pool.

IF YOU GO...

- Sau Bay hosts small weddings, honeymoons, families and scuba divers. A la carte rates keep prices lower than its competitors. Cottages for two or more start at \$225 per night; add \$60 per day per person for meals; Kids are welcome. Bottled drinks and guided outings cost extra. (saubay.com)
- Tides Reach has been discovered by multi-family travelers. Villas for two start at \$875 per night; the deluxe villa (for four) is \$1,275. Prices available for the entire resort. Rates include airport transfers, all meals, child care, kayaks, paddle boards, snorkel gear and on-site events. Guided tours and bottled drinks are extra. (tides-reachresort.com)
- Yasawa Island Resort's rates per night are all-inclusive, except for alcoholic beverages. Listed rates start at \$1,053 for two in a bure; frequent discounts list \$800. Included are kayaks, paddle boards, other sports gear, tennis courts, Wi-Fi in public areas, non-alcoholic beverages, and most guided outings; snorkeling, catamarans, sailing, half-day Blue Lagoon Cave trips, village tours and private beach picnics. (yasawa.com)



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