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LANDMARK LOST

Paradise islands

Fiji adventure made unforgettable by locals

By ANNE Z. COOKE
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

TRAVEL

TAVEUNI, Fiji — If Fiji was nothing more than sand and sea, palm fronds and flowers, it wouldn't matter which South Pacific beach resort you visited. Every vacation would be just another ho-hum adventure.

But after 15 years and as many visits to this 333-island nation, I've got a good idea why each destination 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 Resort, on Vanua Levu, the second-largest island, was the first stop on my most recent trip to Fiji. 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 clipper appeared, followed by a head.

Then the head looked up, saw my feet and with-

out missing a beat asked me what I thought of the umbrella-like trees towering over the lodge. Thus was my introduction to the owner, Nigel Douglas, a Scotsman by ancestry and a fifth-generation Fijian.

"These are rain trees," he said, affectionately 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. Carroll and I planted everything you see."

I'd already met Carroll, who emerged from her garden to show me Sau Bay's four ocean-view burees (i.e. cottages), each equipped with big beds, mosquito netting, private baths, coffee makers, a cookie jar and air conditioning.

Casual but courteous, the Douglasses know how to make travelers feel at home.

On most mornings, Carroll 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.

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

Four days later it was time to leave Sau Bay, this time to go to Tides Reach Resort, on Taveuni, Fiji's Garden Isle.

Expecting a clerk and a check-in desk, I was welcomed like royalty as the staff — 10 handsome Fijians — lined up with hearty "budas" and firm handshakes. "You must be thirsty," said bartender William Celua, eyes twinkling, big smile, handing me Fiji's traditional welcome drink, fresh coconut water topped with a flower.

Just 4 years old, Tides Reach is still growing, adding two burees and a dive shop later this year. The burees 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.

"Some people don't want to do anything but relax," said guest relations manager Paul Gonebeci, nodding toward a guest on the beach, reading a book un-

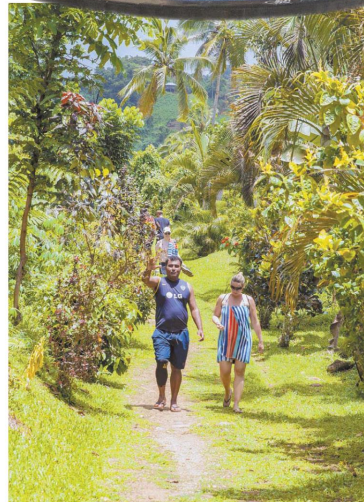


PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD/RTNS

FRIENDLY FACES: On Taveuni Island, Tides Reach guests are greeted with Fiji's signature drink: fresh coconut water, left. The half-mile walk, below, to Tavoro Falls suggests why Taveuni is called the Garden Isle.

der an umbrella. With a free afternoon ahead, Gonebeci suggested snorkeling around Honey-moon 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.



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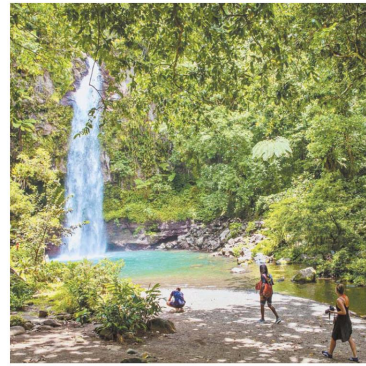
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RELAXATION: Papayas, above, fringe the beach on Taveuni Island. Tavoro Waterfalls, top right, in Bouma National Heritage Park, is one of Taveuni's top attractions. The inside-outside living, bottom right, at Sau Bay's beachside bures offers a variety of amenities. The sun shines on a beach bungalow, below.

"It was a Category 5 storm, the worst one ever," said Lebaivalu. "The Pacific Ocean is warmer than it used to be."

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

"Shorts are OK at 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.

Back at Tides Reach, a farewell dinner waited — grilled lobster with roasted garden vegetables and a green salad — served by the chef, who came to the table to wish me safe travels.

Yasawa Island Resort, 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.



And it was my second visit, so I knew what to expect: Total privacy among tall palms and landscaped gardens; luxurious thatched bures that feel like a wrap-around skirt; miles of clean white sand, sloping gently out into deep water, with ocean views to the horizon.

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.

And each evening, as the sun set over the yardarm, I joined my fellow travelers — kindred spirits all — at my favorite pool-side bar, toasting our adventure amid palm fronds and flowers, and reliving another day in paradise.

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