

TRAVEL TRENDS



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SOFT SAND, slow swells and a gradual slope to deep water make a perfect children's beach at Castaway Island Resort, Fiji. (Courtesy)

Finding Fiji (and each other)

BY ANNEZ COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY

MATAMANOA, Fiji (TNS) — "You're up early," said Dillon, joining us at the breakfast table at Matamanoa Island Resort in Fiji, piling his wet suit and swim fins on the chair where we'd be sure to see them. "Did Dad tell you? Blue sky, no wind, a perfect day for a shark dive?" He paused, waiting for an answer. "I know, you guessed it. Ocam's razor, huh?" he said, grinning. "You don't mind being alone, do you?" We were glad he cared. But no, we could never be lonely on Matamanoa Island, in the Mamanuca Archipelago, in the central South Pacific. If we needed company, the resort's other guests were on hand, not to mention our family, three generations of us on vacation together.

holes, fish in the shallows, and a horde of wave-tumbled sea shells and coral washed up from deeper water. Did we feel left behind now that the kids were growing up? For a nanosecond, maybe. But in truth, it was nice to be alone, no longer in charge of organizing these annual family trips, or planning the days. We could swim, climb to the summit, or read under an umbrella, as the moment dictated.

Our first family trip, more than a decade ago, was a last-minute idea, patched together on a whim. But adventuring together proved such a rewarding way to stay connected that it gradually became a tradition. When the kids were toddlers, in St. Lucia, we built sand castles together while their parents slipped away for a sunset cruise. In Toronto, we played Marco Polo in the pool, while the moms and dads enjoyed a candlelit dinner.

Six years later we climbed the pyramids together, at Teotihuacan, Mexico. But Dillon, now 20, was long past making sand castles. Like his cousins, he wanted to ski the mountains in Alaska and climb Col-

orado's "fourteens." While he studied the menu, we stepped outside, bending an ear for the chips and twitters overhead, and catching our breath as the sun peeked over the horizon. Sending gold and amber rays across the water, it illuminated each nearby island, one after another.

With the night fading, a colony of fruit bats suddenly appeared above — like Halloween witches on their broomsticks — coming home to rest in the treetops. Circling overhead, their five-foot wingspans catching the updrafts, they plopped down on the top-most branches, squawking and arguing.

"Look, they're shoving each other," said Dillon, joining us to peer up through the leaves. "Do you think they have a pecking order?" he asked, as they folded their wings and gradually fell asleep. "Another 10 minutes and you wouldn't know they were there."

The bats, migratory visitors, were new for Dillon. But we'd spotted them before in the Mamanucas and elsewhere on Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, Fiji's two largest islands. On our first Fiji trip, we did the tourist route: botanical gar-

dens, visits to native villages, a day-cruise on the Sigatoka River and snorkeling off the hotel beach.

And by the third visit we were ready for the best stuff: rafting on the Upper Navua River, kayaking on the Lava River in the Nanosoi Highlands, hiking to waterfalls and climbing Mount Tomaniwi in the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park, at 4,344 feet, Fiji's highest peak.

But a family trip to Fiji always seemed too far away, and too expensive. Until recently, that is, when a Fiji Airways promotion popped up in our email, advertising round-trip, non-stop tickets from Los Angeles to Nadi for about \$750 each, half off the regular price, an offer too generous to ignore.

THEN, WITH everyone on board, the dates sorted and the tickets bought, we hit a snag. Most of the resorts we'd bagged about were overbooked. Castaway Island Resort, our all-time family favorite, had space for three nights. But we'd never been to Matamanoa or to the Sheraton Ikoriki, which did have space. We decided to take a chance. The Fiji Airways overnight

flight, 11 hours from LAX to Nadi, is painless. You have time to read, eat, watch a movie, and then get a good night's sleep. Departing shortly before midnight, it lands at 5 a.m. the next day, but two days later on the calendar: you've crossed the International Dateline.

Hailing a couple of cabs, we headed for Denarau and the South Seas Ferry dock, where we bought tickets and ate breakfast while waiting to board the ferry. Once on board, we hustled up to the top and found seats, the best place for views of the Mamanucas's green islands and the world's most beautiful peacock-blue water.

After an hour and hundreds of selfies, son Paul, carrying his out-of-date PADI diving certificate, spoke up. "You won't mind, will you, if we go diving?" he said. "I'll have to take a refresher course. And if Dillon wants to finish the course, we'll be diving every day. But you couldn't find a better place to do it. Look at this water, the visibility, it's like glass! And it's so calm!"

Two hours later the ferry reached Castaway. Climbing out on the sand we were

thrilled (for the 30th time, at least) to see that the staff was waiting, gathered to sing Isa Lei, the Fijian welcome song. We melted with joy. If they'd tried to sell us the island we would have written a check. Our son, meanwhile, made a beeline for the dive shop, 20 feet away on the beach.

That evening, when we gathered for our first candlelit dinner in Castaway's inviting, newly designed restaurant overlooking the blue-green sea, Dillon, beaming with anticipation, announced that they'd all signed up for the dive course. If they were happy, we were happy.

We weren't sure what we'd find at Matamanoa, next on our itinerary, but it proved as marvelous as Castaway, just different. Catering to guests ages 16 and older, people who come every year, Matamanoa reminded us of a private club, where everyone knows everyone else and we'd been invited to join.

The cocktail hour began on time and was followed by a single dinner seating, with everyone served at once. The ocean-view "villas" were inviting, and the elegant new hilltop suites were the latest in comfort, privacy and spec-

tacular views. Meanwhile, Dillon and the cousins headed straight for the dive shop, for the next round of lessons.

Our last island resort, the Sheraton Ikoriki, surprised us. We'd expected a hotel, but relieved to find a long, low, modern building, with an office, gift shop, several dining rooms and a beautiful pool, all overlooking a long beach. The bures, or huts, some with plunge pools, formed a small village. The property, swept clean in 2016 by Cyclone Winston, looked bare, and recently planted bushes and trees were still small. But the dining areas were open all day and the pool deck, looking over the ocean, was our meeting place after the dive boat — and the divers — returned.

On our last day, sad to be leaving, we went for one last ocean swim, walking out to a sandy spot where everyone hung out, splashing and bobbing about, wallowing in that delicious warm water, like a giant bathtub. For an hour we bobbed up and down, talking, remembering each day that we'd seen and laughing over the funny things we'd done.

When we close our eyes right now, we can feel it all over again.

Wooing visitors to Star Wars land is easy. But shoeing them?

BY HUGO MARTIN

Star Wars fans have spent years waiting for Disneyland to let them enter a galaxy far, far away. How then does the Magic Kingdom get them to leave?

Disneyland's May 31 launch of Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge will test the park's efforts to open a highly anticipated expansion without the crushing crowds, frustration and chaos that can accompany a new attraction.

The much-hyped land is expected to attract such a throng that Disneyland engineers and landscapers have been working for months to accommodate more visitors by widening walkways and improving queuing systems.

To maintain some order during the first three weeks after the 14-acre attraction opens, Disneyland will require reservations for each visitor to enter the land, with colored wristbands used to distinguish which four-hour time window corresponds with each visitor.

Once a time window expires, park employees dressed as Star Wars characters will politely tell park-goers that they need to leave the land to make way for new visitors.

Disneyland representatives say they expect that most guests will abide by the courteous directions to move on. But they remain mum about what will happen if guests ignore the requests.

"Four hours is a long time in the land," said Kris Thelier, vice president of the Disneyland Park. "Most guests are going to find that they're ready to roll after four hours."

The new \$1 billion land is being built in the northwest corner of the park, replacing several attractions in Frontierland, including a petting zoo. It will have three entrances, where employees can control the crowd flow.

The expansion is designed to resemble a remote outpost on the planet Batuu filled with space outlaws, smugglers and rebels battling the evil empire. The land features two rides, four eateries, one space-themed cantina and five retail shops.



STAR WARS: Galaxy's Edge opens May 31 at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and August 29, at Disney's Hollywood Studios in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. (Disney Parks/TNS)

Workers last week putting finishing touches on electrical and mechanical features, such as a robot that turns a spit at a barbecue eatery, as media members were allowed a glimpse of the new area.

The buildings look aged and war-ravaged, and the rocky hoodoos that dot the landscape are meant to resemble the remnants of giant petrified trees. The roar of spaceships landing and taking off blasts from hidden speakers.

Several shops and eateries operate out of what resembles a Middle Eastern bazaar.

ALL THE signs on the concrete buildings are in an alien language, but visitors with the Play Disney Parks app will be able to use it to translate the signs into English, park representatives said. Everyone else will have to ask staff for help in identifying the stores and restaurants.

"If it doesn't work out, we can tweak it later," Thelier said about the signs.

Only one ride, the interactive Millennium Falcon: Smugglers Run, will be operational on opening day. The second Galaxy's Edge attraction — Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance — is promised for later in the year.

Park representatives have not disclosed whether they will limit how many times park visitors can ride the Millennium Falcon attraction during each four-hour window.

If the ride breaks down during the three-week reservation period, Disneyland will make amends to the guests, park representatives said, but no details have been provided yet.

The reservation system is Disneyland's effort to avoid the gridlock and social media backlash that have come with the opening of other blockbuster attractions, such as the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios Hollywood in 2016 and Cars Land at Disney's California Adventure Park in 2012.

When the popular Tower of Terror drop ride at Disney's California Adventure Park was overhauled in 2017 to become Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout, the lines during opening weekend were as long as five hours.

Park visitors who book rooms at any of the three Disneyland Resort hotels automatically get a four-hour reservation to visit the land.

Park-goers who didn't go the hotel-room route were allowed to make reservations online May 2. Those reservations for the initial May 31-June 23 opening period were filled within two hours.

And there were a few hitches: Some people with hotel reservations complained that Disney sent them Star Wars land reservations for the wrong dates, and others groused that the online reservation system didn't give them the chance to add friends and family to their party — problems Disney representatives say have been addressed.

After June 23, the theme park will launch a virtual queuing system, similar to the FastPass system used to schedule appointments to ride the most popular attractions.

By visiting the Disneyland app or a kiosk in the park, visitors can sign up to be part of a boarding group to enter the Star Wars land. Each boarding group will have a four-hour window in which to enter the land but no time limit once visitors enter. Disneyland workers will gauge how crowded the land is before deciding when to accept more boarding groups.

Disneyland officials have not decided how long into the future they will require the virtual queuing system for the land, hinting that it may be deployed as long as the Star Wars land is in high demand. (Los Angeles Times/TNS)

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