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 SUNDAY EDITION SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2024 • \$4.00





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30 TRAVEL

Lush foliage, dazzling beaches &

By Anne Z. Cooke

NADI, Fiji Islands—“That’s Tom Hanks’ island, in ‘Cast Away’ the movie,” said the passenger sitting nearby, on the rear deck.

We’d seen him standing in line, a college kid in a red shirt, packing and re-packing a knapsack while we waited to board the early morning ferry out of Viti Levu, largest of Fiji’s 330 islands. Leaning over the railing, he pointed at the horizon and a faint grey-green shape.

“Its real name is Motriki, and it’s small, just 100 acres,” he said. “But the beach is awesome. Tourists can’t wait to go.”

No surprise there. For most South Pacific travelers, nothing rivals Fiji’s sandy beaches, palm-shaded gardens, starry nights and Melanesian hospitality. We’d island-hopped over the years, tried a dozen different beach resorts, and liked most of them. Until 2019, when we joined a hiking group for a long look at the island’s mountains.

Finally last fall, with COVID in decline and Fiji open for tourists, we hopped a plane and headed back. Finding hotels wasn’t easy, but we crossed our fingers, found five with rooms and struck gold at three places begging for a repeat visit.

The Fiji Orchid, a stately manor house near Viti Levu’s north-west shore and the former home of Hollywood actor Raymond Burr, star of the detective series “Perry Mason,” felt nothing like a hotel and everything like a home away from home.

Hotel Manager Deepika Dimlesh arranged an authentic Fijian dinner, and co-owner Gordon Leewie told tales of Fiji life in the early days. Though Nadi (NAN-dee) International Airport was 20 minutes away, our bure (BOO-ray, room, house), one of six in



STEVE HAGGERTY — TNS

Natadola Bay’s public beach, beside the Intercontinental Hotel & Resort, is one of Viti Levu’s best.

the lush tropical garden, was as quiet as a cemetery.

“We’ve had guests who stayed for weeks,” said Dimlesh at dinner.

Curious about Lautoka, Viti Levu’s second-largest town on the northwest shore, we hired tour guide and driver Kesho Goundar, who (like many Fijians) speaks Fijian, English and Hindi. Stopping at the town’s huge covered market, he bought a couple of kava “sticks,” the gifts we would need — for the chief — if we visited a village.

Then it was on to the Sabeto Mountains and the Garden of the Sleeping Giant. A popular park, it was founded by Burr, a worldwide orchid collector. Hundreds

of orchids, planted along the trail to the summit, a huge head-like rock, are the highlight of a visit. And the adjacent forest — a tower of vines, shadowy branches and strange flowers — was a set waiting for a movie.

The next day we headed upcountry to Navala Village, the country’s last thatched village, driving past barnyards, gardens, sugar cane fields, villages, the occasional manufacturing plant and Methodist, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Catholic-oriented primary schools.

At first glance Navala looked empty, until guide Mark Navaroka came out to collect our \$25 entrance fee and a kava stick for the chief. “This is how we

used to build houses,” he said, leading us inside the chief’s official structure, where a couple of village leaders sat cross-legged, talking. “They built it in 1954 when five dying Catholic villages joined together,” he continued, leading the way to the school and church.

Turning onto the Nausori Highland Road — not another car in sight — we lurched uphill over a rocky, pot-holed track for more than an hour, each hill steeper than the one before, until we rounded the top, a photographer’s delight. Finally, around the corner, we passed two hunters on horseback with rifles and dogs.

Moving to Viti Levu’s southwest corner, we



STEVE HAGGERTY — TNS

The Nausori Highland Road, scaling ancient lava slopes, reveals the origins of Fiji’s birth.

checked into the Intercontinental Fiji Golf Resort & Spa, a 35-acre landscaped property on Natadola Bay. The hotel was as busy as a country club on a holiday weekend. Dads

and kids played volleyball; moms worked out at a fitness center. We spotted kids racing hermit crabs, and others learning Fijian words and Polynesian dances. Menus at the ho-

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SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2024

more put Fiji's islands on the map



STEVE HAGGERTY — TNS

Navala Village, Fiji's last traditionally thatched village, is an hour from the Fiji Orchid Hotel and welcomes visitors.

tel's several restaurants listed continental and some Fijian dishes.

Coaxed into trying the Jet Ski "experience," we flew over the waves, riding tandem behind two water-sports guides. But the skis were trumped by the hotel's Coral Planting project, headed by marine scientists Lawaci Koroyawa

and Luke Romatanababa. Joining them in the water, we learned how to plant healthy corals onto damaged reefs. Most memorable was the river cruise with Singatoka River Safari. Wide and long, the river winds through an endless valley, weaving past rocky hills, farms and meadows. Children

splashed in it and men scrubbed their horses, waving as we passed. Pastoral and peaceful, it was a nod to an older century.

The 35-mile-long trip ended at a village, with a tour, lunch at the community center and a kava ceremony — shared cups — with the chief and town fathers. Kava is calming,

some say. Just more weak tea, say others.

As our last week approached, we took the ferry to Lomani Island Resort — yes, an adults-only beach resort — on Malolo Lailai island, a single hour's ferry ride to the mainland and Nadi International Airport. You can stay overnight and still

make it to the airport on time.

But it wasn't the beach that earned the gold star. It was the charming cottages, each with a private yard and plunge pool.

"It's peaceful here," said Shelley White, the general manager, when we met at the cocktail hour. "And quiet. But with Nadi next

door, we stay busy with weddings and anniversaries, and lately, even business retreats," she said.

"Still, we love to have visitors like you, people who know this place and like it," she added, with a puckish smile. "Let me know the next time you travel. I might decide to come along."

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