

ADVENTURE >> STEP INSIDE A POSTCARD

Find your way to Fiji, forget cares

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McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

QUALITO ISLAND, Fiji—We were dozing on the sand at the edge of the bluest lagoon I'd ever seen when suddenly I remembered. The snorkel trip.

Grabbing our masks, we rushed to the dive shack, catching the skiff as it was pulling out for the ride to the far side of the lagoon.

"You can't go home until you've seen the Malolo Barrier Reef," said Kima Tagitagivalu, dive guide at Castaway, a family-friendly resort on Fiji's northwest coast. He checked off our names and handed us our swim fins.

"A few years ago the district chief, Ratu [Chief] Seva Vatunutu, made it tabu for fishing and collecting. The people—even the fishermen—respect that decision and the fish have come back."

Being there, in the Mamanuca Archipelago, was kismet. If a last-minute schedule change hadn't delayed our flight back to Los Angeles, we would never have washed up on Castaway at all. But as often happens here in the carefree South Pacific, changes can be lucky.

TWO HAPPY CASTAWAYS

We could have booked an airport hotel in Nadi, on Viti Levu, the main island. Or found a room at one of the Coral Coast's tourist hotels. Instead, we emailed a friend at home, an indefatigable Fiji booster, for advice.

"Go to Castaway on the ferry route, about 14 miles offshore," she answered. "Lots of sun, a gorgeous beach, starry nights. Great food and secluded. An ideal place to relax and catch up

before heading home. Leave by mid-afternoon and you'll be back at the airport with time to spare."

With mask and fins in hand we grabbed a seat and the skiff headed for deep water, speeding up until the prow bounced over the waves. I had just gotten a good grip on the gunwales when the boat slowed over the reef. Peering through the glass-clear water, Tagitagivalu found a sandy patch and dropped the anchor. He checked his watch. "We've got an hour before the tide turns," he said, counting heads as we splashed off the stern ladder.

Turning over, I looked down, and said (silently, into my snorkel), "Wow!"

We've seen some pretty special coral over the years. But the Malolo Reef, 75 feet high over the ocean floor, was more fantastic than any animated film. Below me, thousands of hard and soft corals of every shape and color crowded together, swaying gently with the tide. Here was a ribbon of pinks, blood red and soft purple; there a swirl of electric green, custard yellow branches and chocolate brown leaves.

For an hour we floated to and fro, enchanted, until Tagitagivalu touched my shoulder and broke the spell. With the tide turning and the waves breaking, we hurriedly swam back to the boat.

Castaway is hard to forget. But truth to tell, it's just one of many resorts in the Mamanuca Group, each with its own style. If you visit here you'll have to pick one, since they're really the only lodging option. The lagoons are a perfect 10 and so is the sand, burnished over millennia to tiny golden specks. But only at a resort will you find shade, fresh water,



Get away from it all, literally, and relax and play at Castaway Resort on Qalito Island, about 14 miles offshore along a ferry route.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD

food and dare I say it, souvenirs.

Even native villages are few and far between, and the smallest islands—like the rocky islet where actor Tom Hanks filmed "Castaway"—are uninhabitable.

TERRIFIC TOKORIKI RESORT

Take Tokoriki Resort, on hilly Tokoriki Island. A storied retreat favored by couples, Tokoriki's deep well fills the water tanks for cooking, washing, tops up the infinity swimming pool, waters the garden and supplies the bathrooms in the resort's 34 luxurious thatched bures (cottages).

Waiters serve chef-prepared cuisine in the airy dining room and guides organize snorkel trips from the lounge. As the sun dips toward the western horizon, the guests enjoy the spectacle from deck chairs beside the pool. For us, it was paradise.

Even better were the resort's half-dozen in-resident "elders," experts in Fijian lore and traditions. If you want to know the back story and why, ask them about village life, or join in as they pass a bowl of kava, strum a guitar and reminisce.

The weekly "Lovo Feast" was also the real deal. As the guests gathered to watch, the kitchen staff shoved hot rocks into an earthen pit. These were layered with banana and palm leaves, topped with bundles of securely wrapped chicken, pork, taro and yams, and smothered in dirt. By twilight, dinner was ready.

"The lovo is more than a meal," said Penkioni Sale, on hand to supervise. "A family feast like

this, still held in the villages, brings all the cousins and aunts together and reminds us of our common heritage."

OGLING THE OUTRIGGER

The Mamanucas are poster-perfect. But the main island, Viti Levu, is the cultural and commercial heart of Fiji. Here we checked into the Outrigger Hotel On The Lagoon, on the Coral Coast, our base for exploring.

Typically Fijian, the Outrigger is set among lush gardens, with ferns, flowers and shade trees. Geared toward families, the layout includes a huge swimming pool, large dining room and a staff of soft-spoken ever-smiling nannies, waiters, busboys and maids.

The Outrigger is on the shore, as advertised. But this lagoon is so large and flat that even at high tide the water is too shallow even for dipping. The lovely view from the bungalows compensates.

We shopped in town, tasted odd fruits in the open-air market, signed up for a massage in the Outrigger's hilltop spa and dozed by the pool.

The Outrigger's lovo feast—enough to serve a small army, included traditional dishes prepared in the kitchen and served buffet style, in the dining room.

Even the troupe of Fijian fire walkers, who put on a ceremonial performance in the outdoor amphitheater, were impressive.

A Doubting Thomas, I sneaked up front afterwards to see if the rocks really were hot, and earned a blister.

Most of Fiji went unseen, includ-

WANT TO GO?

BABYSITTING AND NANNIES: Fijians like children. As a result, most resorts have experienced nannies on staff and offer free and/or affordable rates (\$2-\$5) per hour for baby and toddler care. For children 5 and older, kids' clubs and guided camp activities are generally free.

TOURS AND TRIPS: Outfitters and guided tours are a big business. Ask at the hotel concierge for suggestions and recommendations. Most include hotel pickup and delivery. Car rentals are also available—driving is easy (if you can manage left side drive). Taxis are numerous and drivers are helpful; settle on the destination and price in advance.

RESORTS & CONTACTS:

- Castaway Resort, on Qalito Island: castawayfiji.com
- Tokoriki Island Resort, north Mamanuca Group: tokoriki.com
- Outrigger On The Lagoon, Coral Coast, on Viti Levu: outriggerfiji.com
- Tourist Office: tourismfiji.com

GETTING THERE: Air Pacific flies 10 hours nonstop from Los Angeles to Nadi. The plane crosses the International Date Line, so the calendar date on arrival is one day later. The return flight gains a day, arriving the day it left. Quantas and American also fly from Honolulu, with one stop.

GUIDEBOOKS:

■ "Frommer's South Pacific," by Bill Goodwin, is abbreviated but informative; check it out at the library and read it before going.

■ "Moon Fiji Guide, Avalon Press," by David Stanley. A keeper to take with you. Packed with personal information, background reading, maps, tips, lodging reviews, a brief history and the cultural back story.

■ "Lonely Planet Fiji Guide," co-written. Has color photos and more emphasis on budget travel. Compare with the Moon Guide for your preferred style and content.



Indulge in fresh tropical food like the lovely and delicious native Fijian pineapple.

ing visits to some of the country's other islands, come-hither shapes on the near horizon. They're on our list for next time. Like the Pied Piper, they, too, beckon castaways to their shores.



This is a traditional Fijian thatched bure, or cottage. This one is in Nalesutale Village. Resorts offer accommodations in this style.

CRUISE: Disaster has cast a shadow on growing industry

FROM PAGE E10

Carolina, agreed. "I don't think it will have a long-term impact," he said. "The industry has been very resilient considering all the other problems with the world's economy."

Still, the Italian disaster forced Carnival Cruise Lines to address safety issues on its Twitter and Facebook pages, assuring passengers that "cruising continues to be one of the safest means of travel."

Although most online comments indicated fans of

the cruise line plan to continue to take cruises, some were more critical.

"But your captain deserted the ship like a rat," one person responded on Facebook. "Explain that!"

The cruise industry had a very good safety record until the Italian accident, said Michael Crye, executive vice president of the Cruise Lines International Association. Until the accident, cruise ships carried more than 100 million passengers since 2005, with 16 maritime deaths.

The industry suffered a blemish to its reputation in November 2010, when Carnival Splendor lost power because of an engine fire off Mexico and had to be towed four days later. No one was injured, but passengers went without air conditioning, hot food, laundry services and flush toilets for a time.

Industry officials said the cruise industry has enjoyed healthy growth in the past

few years partly because cruise trips are relatively inexpensive vacations.

The cruise companies have also kept longtime cruise vacationers returning by introducing new and larger ships.

Royal Caribbean International's Allure of the Seas, the world's largest cruise ship, with a capacity of 6,360 people, was introduced in 2010.

Disney Cruise Lines last year launched its first new ship in over a decade, the Disney Dream, which has a maximum capacity of 4,000 passengers. In March, Disney plans to launch the Dream's sister ship, the Disney Fantasy.

"The industry is increasing the number of beds to sell, and that keeps the price relatively flat," said Johnson of Coastline Travel Advisors. "Once someone gets on a cruise, they almost always go again."

SULLIVAN: Fewer places are offering shelves of books

FROM PAGE E10

close. And my local libraries here and in Prescott are quite good. The Prescott library has one feature I would love to see at its downtown Fredericksburg counterpart: a small coffee shop, staffed by volunteers, with tables and comfy chairs for reading. Proceeds go to the library, and the offering is quite popular and works very well.

There wouldn't be space for that in the old Lafayette School that houses the downtown library here. Back in 1990, the issue was whether to build a new facility or renovate. Renovation won. The facility has served well, but the crowding is painfully apparent. Nevertheless, things happen with glacial slowness in Fredericksburg, and it may be years before it becomes an issue again.

THERE SIMPLY IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ROAMING THE AISLES AND SHELVES OF A LARGE BOOK EMPORIUM. THAT'S EVEN MORE TRUE IF IT HAS ITS OWN COFFEE SHOP. OF COURSE A GOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY COMES PRETTY CLOSE.

When that time does arrive, I'd vote for keeping the existing library and building a new, larger one somewhere out along the Cowan Boulevard corridor. But I digress.

Books, yes, good old-fashioned paper books, are not going to disappear. As a

New York Times tech columnist wrote about changing technologies, what often happens is that the new does not replace the old, but supplements it. In other words, traditional books are going to be with us for a long time, but so will electronic books.

And that brings me full-circle to my own situation. I can easily see the utility and convenience of an e-reader in some situations—especially traveling.

On the other hand, at home, in my favorite reading chair, I love being surrounded by my own library, passing a cold winter's eve with a drink, my dog and a great book.

Good living is simple living.

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