

In Leisure:



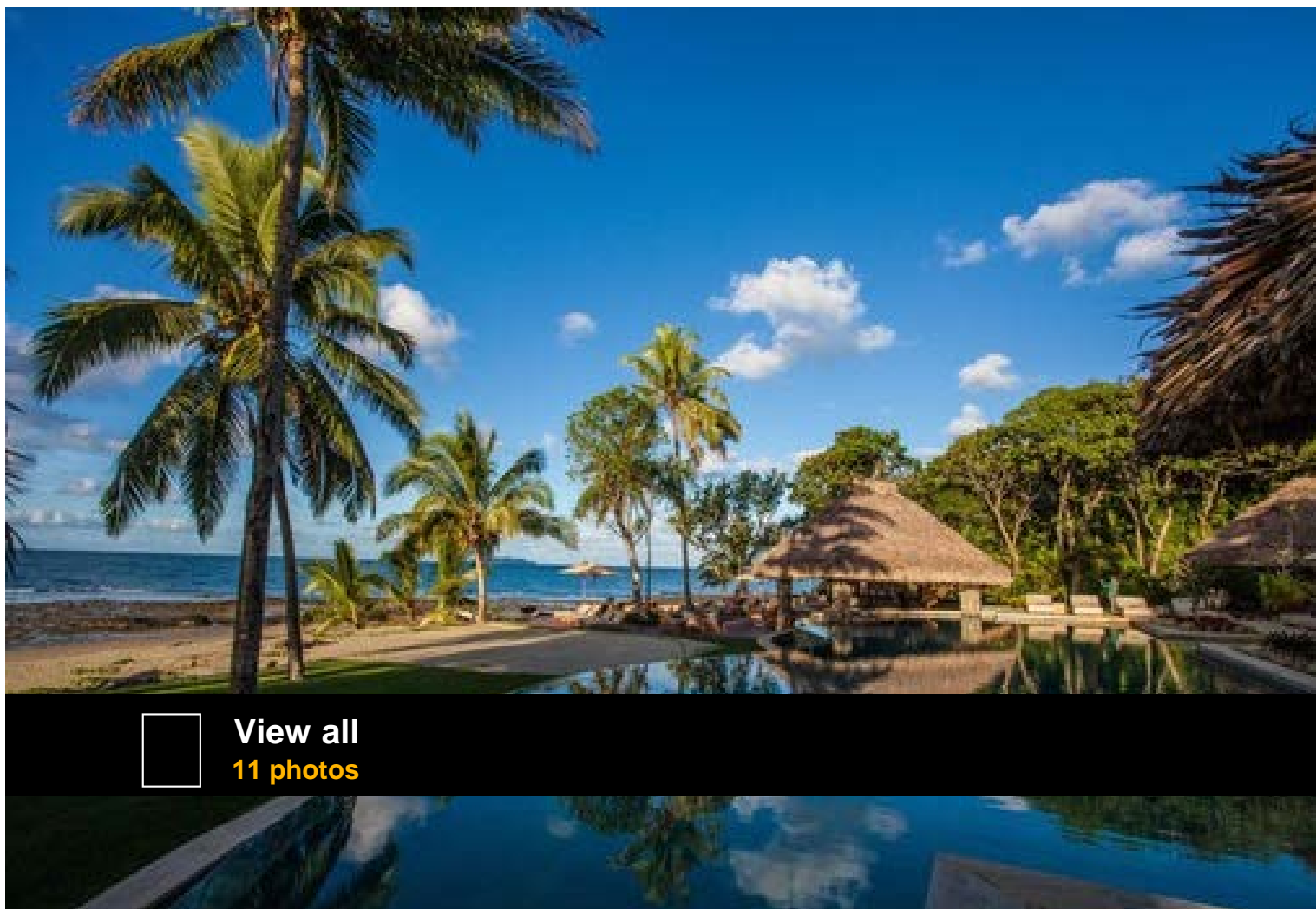
LEISURE / TRAVEL / INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

# BACK TO FIJI: The Sequel



**Next:** Composer Sibelius' 150th anniversary is celebrated throughout U.S. and Finland

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The pool and beach on Rovodrau Bay, at Nanuku Resort, Pacific Harbour, Fiji.  
*Courtesy of @Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

SAVUSAVU, Fiji- As the departing guests gathered under the coconut palms to wait for the airport shuttle, Jane began to snifle and tears ran down her cheeks.



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The rest of us, startled, exchanged looks. Knowing her, a sophisticated world traveler, we expected her to rate Fiji's beach resorts on the usual one-to-ten scale, measuring them against similar South Pacific retreats in Tahiti, Hawaii, Samoa, and elsewhere.

"I hate to leave," she explained, mopping her eyes as the Fijian staff assembled to say good bye. Turning from one smiling face to the next, she hugged the housekeeper, high-fived the kayaking guide and gave a thumbs-up to the guitar player who'd invited her to share in a late-night bowl of "kava," the pungent drink the locals call "grog."

"I'll afraid never see them again," she told the rest of us, sniffing as she climbed onto the airport shuttle. "It's like losing your family."

We'd been anticipating that last morning, too, but for a different reason. As seasoned Fiji visitors we knew the staff would assemble to sing "Isa Lei," the national "love" song, sung in Fijian. "Must you leave me," say the words, the sopranos' voices soaring over the altos, each lingering phrase echoed by the men's deep notes.

"Every moment my heart for you is yearning; those happy hours are fleeting," they sing, the last refrain fading

away. It's enough to put a lump in any cynic's throat, even skeptics who suspect that "Isa Lei" is a tourist office promotion.

But the truth is that most Fijians, wherever they live on this 322-island paradise sing it voluntarily. Raised in traditional villages where choir-singing is the soul of the church and children learn harmony at their mother's knee, music is part of the culture. Think humming when you're happy; whistling while you work.

But a single song doesn't mean that Fiji's beach resorts are alike. Far from it, in fact. Each offers a unique culture, and an experience shaped by location, climate, the topography and the owner's vision of what Fiji is all about. This endless variety is why so many travelers come back over and over, staying at two or three resorts on any one trip.

Our vacation, with three days each in three resorts, began with a classic Fijian dream at lush Yasawa Island Resort, on a pristine sand beach in the remote northwest Yasawa Archipelago. From there we moved to Nanuku Resort, a group of villas in Pacific Harbour, on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, where a central location provides a variety of outdoor adventures. And we spent our last few days at Koro Sun, a casual family retreat on Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu.

Yasawa Island Resort, a deluxe hideaway on a blue lagoon, is accessible only by helicopter, small plane or boat. For independent adventurers, the resort offers seclusion, 18 thatched and smartly furnished bures (BUR-ay, a bungalow) tucked among tropical gardens, candle-lit dinners, chef's menus and no-pressure days.

"We're on Fiji time here," said Manasa Ragigia, Yasawa's resident elder and the official "Spokesman" at the neighboring Fijian village, Bukama. "You want to fish all day? Fish," he told us, mixing drinks at the sunset cocktail party. "You want to kayak or snorkel? Whatever you like, it's your choice."

Mornings were filled with boat dives on nearby reefs and coral mounts, snorkeling off the beach, windsurfing, fishing for marlin or sailing the catamaran. Laid-back afternoons offered meet-the-people tours in Bukama, lazy hours in the infinity pool, cultural and craft classes and beach combing. On Tuesday, Ragigia and Chef Talala Tupou prepared a "lovo" (underground oven) dinner, a feast serving most of Fiji's favorite dishes and ingredients.

For the honeymooners in our midst, Ragigia organized a romantic beach picnic on uninhabited beach along the coast. Dropped off with an umbrella, beach chairs, towels, a picnic basket and champagne, they spent most of a perfectly romantic day alone.

It took only a long look west across the sea passage now called Bligh Water, they told us later, to understand why HMS Bounty Commander William Bligh and a dozen loyal tars, put adrift in a launch and chased by cannibals, felt "they were at world's end."

Our most memorable boat ride was to the famous Blue Lagoon, flooded limestone caverns where the eponymous movie, with 14-year-old Brooke Shields, was filmed. While our boat driver waited, cave guide, Aku Nacoba (na-THUM-ba), led us up a paved path along the cliff and through a tunnel down into the half-lit

cave. It was so eerie, in fact, that Jane was the only other traveler brave enough to swim through the water-sculpted chamber.

At Koro Sun Resort, our days buzzed with activity and didn't slow down until the Southern Cross appeared in the night sky. Greeted with a fruit drink served in a coconut, we were ushered to a chair for a 10-minute foot massage. Exploring the grounds, passing families heading to the pool and water slide, we passed a group of cyclists geared up for a ride.

A three-generation family partied at an adjacent dinner table and all 108 of the resort's guests gathered in the Clubhouse for an evening cultural program, with pounding drums accompanying an energetic "meke" (traditional Fijian dance). Checking out snorkeling gear, we joined the morning dive boat for a trip to a group of nearby reefs, exploring the coral gardens while the divers deep below – shadowy but visible because of the trails of rising air bubbles – made their way through the "Dungeons and Dragons" canyon.

Meanwhile, Jane made her own plans, quietly slipping away to kayak through the cave at Bat Island with Manu, the guide, indulging in a meditative massage in the secluded Rainforest Spa, exploring Savusavu town alone and identifying indigenous flowers with Leba, the florist.

Back on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, we checked into Nanuku Resort, a gated group of privately owned villas, most in a rental pool. Arriving in time to watch the daily torch-lighting event, a re-enactment of a traditional ceremony, we gathered around the pool as the sun set over the ocean. With 28 guests – couples and friends -- on hand, the staff hurried to arrange the chairs and to fill drink orders. But despite the intimate feel, Nanuku can provide lodging for up to 80 guests, and can host family reunions and small corporate meetings.

But it's Nanuku's Pacific Harbour location, in the middle of the Coral Coast, on Viti Levu's southern shore, is why it succeeds as a Fijian-style safari lodge, says Karen Taylor, the general manager. "With the ocean in front of us and the mountains behind, people can do everything from hiking in the mountains, to river rafting, sailing and snorkeling," she said. Since child care (nannies) is included in the lodging cost, parents can get away for a few hours, or – as the couple staying below us did – "bring the nanny along every day to help with the children."

One couple said they'd played 18 holes of golf at the Country Club; another took a day-long trek across the Namosi Highlands. We saw the legendary fire walkers, toured a hillside village and explored the vegetable market in Navua town.

A family with teenagers signed up for surfing at "world famous" Yanuca Island beach; the next day they headed south across the channel to Beqa (pronounced BENG-ah) Island Lagoon, to dive with the sharks. The dive sounded so fascinating that we added it to our wish-list for next time. In Fiji, said Taylor, "even the sharks think you're family."

**GOING THERE:** If Fiji is your final destination, try Fiji Airways' nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Nadi International Airport. Wonderfully convenient for residents of Los Angeles, the ten-hour flight departs at 11:30 p.m. and arrives in Nadi at 5:30 a.m., in time for breakfast. (With time zone changes and the International Dateline, you lose a day but gain it back on your return.) Because the airport is a South Pacific hub, travelers