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Fiji pride: Where paradise is more than sand and sea

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TAVENUI, 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 pretty 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 Fiji Retreat, 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 clippers appeared, followed by a head.

Then the head looked up, saw my feet and without 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. Carol and I planted everything you see."

"How did you ever find this spot?" I asked. "Coming across the bay, you can't see it."

"That's easy," he said. "Fiji is home. I've been to most of these islands, dived every reef. Anything you want to know, people, politics, gardens, just ask. Do you drink wine? Maybe later."

I'd already met Carol, who emerged from her garden to show me Sau Bay's four ocean-view bures (BOOR-ays, 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 Carol 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; 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 "bulas" 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 four years old, Tides Reach is still growing, adding two bures and a dive shop later this year. The bures 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.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said guest relations manager Paul Gonebeci, motioning me to a plump white sofa. "Let's sit for a minute, then I'll show you around," he said, handing me a list of possible activities.

"Some people don't want to do anything but relax," he added, nodding toward a guest on the beach, reading a book under an umbrella. "But you might want to see the waterfalls or the hiking trails, so we should pick a time you like."

With a free afternoon ahead, Gonebeci suggested snorkeling around Honeymoon 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. "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 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 Fijian but offer the latest in luxury; miles of clean white sand, sloping gently out into deep water, with ocean views to the horizon.

Less obvious but more important is that Yasawa Resort is, in its own way, both western resort and Fijian village. Blending two cultures, it enchants and enlightens travelers and reminds the staff maids, waiters, guides, gardeners and handymen that they aren't just employees, but hosts.

Why does this matter? Because Yasawa Island Resort, like most Fijian beach resorts, occupies leased land, owned and controlled by the local chief and the clan. A warm partnership and shared traditions benefit both resort and village.

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 rehashing another day in paradise.

THE NITTY GRITTY

Sau Bay hosts small weddings, honeymooners, families and scuba divers. A la carte rates keep prices lower than its competitors. Cottages for two or more start at \$225 per night; add \$60 per day per person for meals; kids are welcome. Bottled drinks and guided outings cost extra. At www.saubay.com.

Tides Reach has been discovered by multi-family travelers. Villas for two start at \$875 per night; the deluxe villa (for four) is \$1,275. Prices available for the entire resort. Rates include airport transfers, all meals, child care, kayaks, paddle boards, snorkel gear and on-site events. Guided tours and bottled drinks are extra. www.tidesreachresort.com.

Yasawa Island Resort's rates per night are all-inclusive, except for alcoholic beverages. Listed rates start at \$1,053 for two in a bure; frequent discounts list \$800. Included are kayaks, paddle boards, other sports gear, tennis courts, Wi-Fi in public areas, non-alcoholic beverages, and most guided outings: snorkeling, catamarans, sailing, half-day Blue Lagoon Cave trips, village tours and private beach picnics. www.yasawa.com.

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101 OF THE BEST FOODS AND DRINKS TO TRY IN CHICAGO NOW

Chicago Tribune staff pick 101 of the best foods in Chicago, from fried chicken nachos with the Honey Butter touch to a spicy, coconuty and cheekily named tequila cocktail to silky thin crepes with goat cheese, honey and black figs, a treasure you'll find at Chicago's first Kurdish restaurant.
