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GENERAL • 3

**Serving up a treat**



TRAVEL • 13

**A tropical paradise escape**



SPORT • 15

**Columba takes title**



# TRAVEL

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**Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty** head to Fiji for a family holiday.

## Escape to a tropical paradise

**Y**OU'RE up early," said Dillon, joining us at the breakfast table at Matamanoa Island Resort, in Fiji, piling his wet suit and dive 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. Ocean'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 an holiday together.



Sunny skies, warm days and coral reefs tomorrow; such is a diver's dream.

### Checklist

- Where to stay  
For more about the resorts, find them at:  
— Castaway Island Resort: [www.castawayfi.com](http://www.castawayfi.com)  
— Matamanoa Island Resort: [www.matamanoa.com](http://www.matamanoa.com)  
— Sheraton Tokoriki Resort and Spa: [www.sheraton.com/holiday/travel/south-sheraton-resort-and-spa-tokoriki-island-fi/](http://www.sheraton.com/holiday/travel/south-sheraton-resort-and-spa-tokoriki-island-fi/)
- Ferry trips  
Ferry trips to the Mamanuca Islands: South Sea Cruises at [www.ssc.com.fj](http://www.ssc.com.fj)
- On the net  
[www.fiji.com](http://www.fiji.com)

And there was the island to explore, a poster-perfect South Pacific hideaway. A limestone cone sticking up out of the sea, it was an encyclopaedia of nature, from birds and fish, to an explosion of bright flowers and crazy shade trees.

Walking barefoot along the shore on the powdery soft sand, you'd see crabs digging holes. Fish in the shallows and a hoard of wave-tumbled sea shells and coral, washed up from deeper water.

Did we feel left behind, now the kids were growing up? For a nano-second, maybe. But in truth, it was nice to be alone, no longer in charge of organising 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 Louis, we built sandcastles together while their parents slipped away for a sunset cruise. In Toronto, we played Marco Polo in the pool, while the mums and dads enjoyed a candlelit dinner.

Six years later we climbed the pyramid together, at Teotihuacan, in Mexico. But Dillon, now 20, was long past making sand castles. Like his cousins, he wanted to ski the moguls, fish in Alaska and climb Colorado's "fourteens".

While he studied the menu, we stepped outside, bending an ear for the chirps and whistles 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 tree-tops. Clinking



Lazy days and island views are a sure cure for high blood pressure.



There's no charge for sit-on-top kayaks, sailboats and paddle boards at Castaway Island Resort.



Like glass... The South Sea ferry Tiger V docks offshore to drop passengers at Sheraton Tokoriki Island Resort. PHOTO: TNS



West-facing deckchairs at Sheraton Tokoriki Island Resort are designed for sunset viewing.

generously to ignore.

Then, with everyone on board, the dates sorted and the tickets bought, we hit a snag. Most of the resorts we'd brugged about were over-booked. Castaway Island Resort, our all-time family favourite, had space for three nights. But we'd never been to Matamanoa or to the Sheraton Tokoriki, 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 Suva, but two days later, you've crossed the International Dateline.

Hailing a couple of cabs, we headed for Denarau and the

South Sea 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 Mamanuca's green islands and the world's most beautiful peacock-blue water.

After an hour out 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 to see the staff were waiting, gathered to sing *Lea, Le*, the Fijian welcome song. We greeted with joy. If they'd tried to sell us the island we would have written a cheque. Our son, meanwhile, made a beeline for the dive shop.

That evening, when we gathered for our first candlelit dinner in Castaway's restaurant overlooking the blue-green sea, Dillon, beaming with anticipation, announced they had 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 smart a choice as Castaway, just different. Catering to guests ages 16 and older, Matamanoa reminded us of a private club where everyone knew 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 spectacular views. Meanwhile, Dillon and the cousins headed straight for the dive shop for the next round of lessons.

Our last island resort, the Sheraton Tokoriki, surprised us. We'd expected a hotel, but were 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 buses, 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 hobbled 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 now, we can feel it all over again.—TCA

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\*Conditions apply. Prices and offers are based on per person, rates where in NZD, are exclusive of taxes, and combine with other offers and subject to availability and end on 31/08/2019. For new bookings only until 31 August 2019, unless and our price. Flights are not included. Cruise is subject to change. Offer ends on 31 August 2019. Offer ends on 31 August 2019. Price and offer based on F&O 11/2019 in a category E with the following: 2 adults (16+), 1 child (12-15), 1 baby (2-11), 1 infant (0-2), 1 pet (max 10kg), 1 wheelchair (max 10kg), 1 cot (max 10kg), 1 baby (max 10kg), 1 infant (max 10kg), 1 pet (max 10kg), 1 wheelchair (max 10kg), 1 cot (max 10kg).