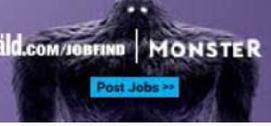


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## Finding Fiji – and each other



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West-facing deck chairs, near the pool, are designed for sunset viewing. At Sheraton Tokoriki Island Resort, Fiji. (Steve Haggerty/TNS)

By **ANNE Z. COOKE** and **STEVE HAGGERTY** |

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MATAMANOVA, Fiji — “You’re up early,” said Dillon, joining us at the breakfast table at Matamanoa Island Resort in Fiji, piling his wet suit and swim 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. Occam’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 resorts’ other guests were on hand, not to mention our family, three generations of us on vacation together.



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 encyclopedia of nature, from birds and fish, to an explosion of bright flowers and craggy shade trees.

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. Lucia, we built sand castles together while their parents slipped away for a sunset cruise. In Toronto, we played Marco Polo in the pool, while the moms and dads enjoyed a candlelit dinner.

Six years later we climbed the pyramids 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 “fourteeners.”

While he studied the menu, we stepped outside, bending an ear for the chirps and twitters overhead, and catching our breath as the sun peeked over the horizon. Sending gold and amber rays across the water, the sun 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 treetops. Circling overhead, their five-foot wingspans catching the updrafts, they plopped down on the top-most branches, squawking and arguing.



The bats, migratory visitors, were new for Dillon. But we'd spotted them before, in the Mamanucas and elsewhere on Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, Fiji's two largest islands. On our first Fiji trip, we did the tourist route: botanical gardens, visits to native villages, a day-cruise on the Sigatoka River and snorkeling off the hotel beach.

By the third visit we were ready for bigger stuff: rafting on the Upper Navua River, kayaking on the Luva River in the Namosi Highlands, hiking to waterfalls and climbing Mount Tomanivi, in the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park, at 4,344 feet, Fiji's highest peak.

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 5 a.m. the next morning, but two days later on the calendar: You've crossed the International Dateline.

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



1 of 5

MAY 13, 2019: There's no charge for sit-on-top kayaks, sailboats and paddle boards at Castaway Island Resort, Fiji. (Steve Haggerty/TNS)



Two hours later the ferry reached Castaway. Climbing out on the sand we were thrilled (for the 30th time, at least) to see that the staff was waiting, gathered to sing Isa Lei, the Fijian welcome song. We melted with joy. If they'd tried to sell us the island we would have written a check. Our son, meanwhile, made a beeline for the dive shop, 20 feet away on the beach.

That evening, we gathered for our first candlelit dinner in Castaway's inviting, newly designed restaurant, overlooking the blue-green sea,

We weren't sure what we'd find at Matamanoa, next on our itinerary, but it proved as marvelous as Castaway, just different. Catering to guests age 16 and older, people who come every year, Matamanoa reminded us of a private club where everyone knows everyone else and we'd been invited to join. The ocean-view "villas" were inviting, and the elegant new hilltop suites were the latest in comfort, privacy



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 bures, 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 bobbed up and down, talking, remembering each day what we'd seen and laughing over the funny things we'd done.

When we close our eyes right now, we can feel it all over again.

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**Anne Z. Cooke**

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