

FIJI

SECRETS OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Take a break from the pool or beach with these inside tips for the tropics

SARAH NICHOLSON

Pictures of the South Pacific tell a tale of perfection – palm trees leaning across empty stretches of sand, colourful fish swimming above vibrant coral, the clear water of a remote lagoon.

And while a traveller needs do nothing more than step from their beachside bure to find such a scene, the hidden gems are revealed when the people who know these places best share a favourite way to see their idyllic corner of the South Pacific.

**WHAT: SWIMMING WITH WHALES
WHERE: TONGA**

Imagine seeing the ocean’s giants in their own environment – underwater. From July to October, travellers can take a day tour or make a multi-night getaway of swimming with humpback whales around Tonga’s Ha’apai islands.

Majestic Whale Encounters director Carmen Ellis says it’s an awe-inspiring experience.

“Nine years ago I was blessed to swim with humpback whales in Tonga’s pristine lagoons and the way these gentle giants – nurturing mothers and inquisitive calves – interacted with me in their underwater world left me in awe.

“Today, there are minimum people and maximum respect when swimming with the whales and everyone sees the true Tonga, the beautiful caring people, the Tongan culture and the tranquil islands that play host to these precious whales for three months each year.”

MAJESTICWHALEENCOUNTERS.COM.AU

**WHAT: SECRET BEACHES
WHERE: SAMOA**

David Stanton, general manager of Sheraton Samoa Aggie Grey’s Resort

on the west coast of Samoa’s most populated island, Upolu, recommends getting off the tourist trail. Simply roaming can be the greatest way to find a perfect beach.

“Just the other day, friends and I planned a visit to the popular To Sua Trench but we were too late, it was closed, and instead of going home we went for a drive,” he says.

“We came across a signpost to Vavau Beach so we decided to check it out and arrived at the most spectacular slice of paradise, a long cove lined with white sand and waves crashing on the shoreline. That’s a hidden gem in the southeast of Upolu everyone should explore.”

SHERATONSAMOAAGGIEGREYSRESORT.COM

**WHAT: SEE LOCAL LIFE
WHERE: FIJI**

There’s a lot to love about cruising around the coral reefs of Fiji’s Yasawa



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Islands. But Captain Cook Cruises Fiji general manager Jackie Carlton says it's the Sunday morning visit to a tiny community's church that people remember most.

"Remote Fijian communities revolve around the church and as you sit waiting for the service to start one lady comes in with a child wrapped around her legs, she sits quietly, head bowed, then starts to softly sing a hymn," she says.

"Others join her and soon there are many in the congregation – some with children, some sitting alone – but all join in the most amazing harmony of song. Fijians are raised with music and they learn to sing in church, so harmony is part of life."

Captain Cook Cruises' trips range from three-day jaunts around the Yasawa Islands to seven-day journeys across Bligh Water to Taveuni.

CAPTAINCOOK.COM.AU

**WHAT: RIDE THE OCEAN
WHERE: VANUATU**

It's not unusual to wade into the waves for a swim in the South Pacific – most resorts position rooms no more than a few steps from the sea – but Vanuatu Tourism Office's Australian representative Anne Lee's favourite activity is taking a dip on horseback.

"Horse riding is a passion of mine and I always wanted to swim with horses with this dream coming true on Vanuatu's largest island Espiritu Santo when Santo Horse Adventures took me out for a ride," she says.

"We ventured through coconut plantations and mangroves to the white sand where my horse waded into the clear water and I'll never forget that moment the water came over my knees and I could feel the horse swimming beneath me."

SANTO.TRAVEL/SANTO-HORSE-ADVENTURES

**WHAT: UNPLUG, UNWIND
WHERE: FIJI**

Castaway Island has always been an indulgent stop-and-flop holiday, but the resort's general manager Steven Andrews says that it's "the feeling of being unplugged" that's proving to be the new luxury for stressed guests.

"There's no television, radio, clock or Wi-Fi in the bures – Wi-Fi is only available in the public areas," he says.

Instead of screen time, kayak around the island at sunrise to see coral and the abundant marine wildlife, slip over to Modriki Island for a picnic lunch of fresh seafood and champagne packed by the resort chef.

"Head to Cloud 9, which is a hip floating bar and restaurant 10 minutes from Castaway, or dine barefoot in the sand at Restaurant 1808."

CASTAWAYFIJI.COM

**WHAT: ADRENALIN RUSH
WHERE: COOK ISLANDS**

Muri Beach Club Hotel's general manager Liana Scott says a Cook Island stay isn't complete without venturing inland on a bush-bashing ride with Raro Buggy & Quad Tours. Outings to explore the Rarotonga rainforest depart the resort 364 days a year, rain or shine, with "the wetter the better" the guide's motto.

"When I first went on the tour I had never seen some of the places we visited on Rarotonga, and I have lived here my whole life, and the inland is so beautiful when you see the mountains all around," she says.

"The buggy tours take passengers as young as four, because it's really important families are able to join the off-the-beaten-track fun, and guides explain the history and origins of Rarotonga as well as showing points of interest along the way that are generally unknown unless you're talking to a local from the village."

**RAROBUGGYTOURS.COM,
MURIBEACHCLUBHOTEL.COM**

**WHAT: CRUISE EXCURSION
WHERE: VANUATU**

Vanuatu's Mystery Island is a jewel in the Pacific Ocean that's been one of P&O's most popular destinations for years, but company destination director Michael Mihajlov encourages passengers to venture a little further to discover the fascinating culture on a neighbouring island.

"Mystery Island is a stunning location, with blue water and white sand beaches which are reason enough to go there, but I urge visitors to take the next step with a visit to the neighbouring island of Aneityum," he says.

"The local midwife Akissi heads a special village tour, which tells the story of Aneityum before Christian

missionaries arrived – a time when cannibalism was common and men were warriors – and our guests are immersed in tales of the past as well as gaining insight into modern life on a remote island where just 1500 people live."

POCRUISES.COM.AU

**WHAT: FAMILY FUN
WHERE: FIJI**

When the new Fiji Marriott Resort Momi Bay opens on April 2, general manager Silvano Dressino will be talking about the beautiful bays and

beaches surrounding the property on Viti Levu's west coast, but during free time he turns his back on the Pacific and heads inland for family time.

"I love taking the family for a picnic at the Momi Bay Battery Historic Park – a secluded spot away from the hustle and bustle of Nadi and Denarau – and while the kids play, I always look around the World War II bunkers that have been transformed into a small museum," he says.

"A favourite weekend activity is a quad-biking trip with Go Dirty Tours, my kids love jumping on the off-road bikes and whizzing through the forests and fields, with a traditional Fijian lunch in the remote village Nawaqanamu the highlight for me."

MARRIOTT.COM.AU, GODIRTYTOURSFII.COM

**WHAT: EXPLORING BY WATER
WHERE: NEW CALEDONIA**

New Caledonia Tourism's Australian

director Caroline Burnel's perfect day happens when she packs a picnic basket filled with French-style goodies, charters a boat from Dal Ocean or La Maison du Lagoon, and spends a few blissful hours surveying the islets around Noumea.

"Laregnere Islet is one of my favourites – uninhabited and untouched, it makes you feel like Robinson Crusoe, except you have a boat and the most amazing French picnic. And the diversity of underwater fauna is exceptional," she says.

"You will depart from Port Moselle so visit the local Noumea markets to buy fresh seafood and salad, Maison Ballande for a bottle of chablis, Chocolats Morand for amazing desserts and macarons, then step aboard to drift around the islets



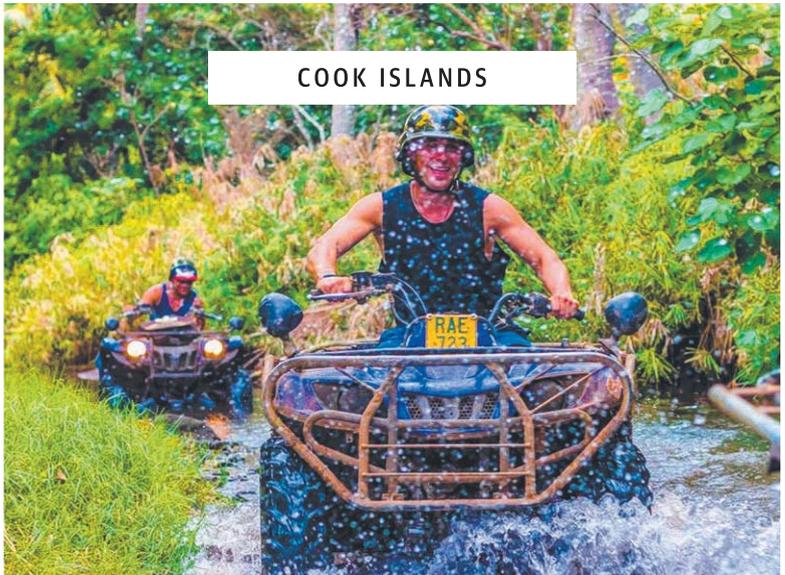
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in New Caledonia's UNESCO-listed lagoons."

NEWCALEDONIA.TRAVEL/AU

MY KIDS LOVE JUMPING ON THE OFF-ROAD BIKES AND WHIZZING THROUGH THE FORESTS AND FIELDS

PICTURES: ISTOCK, SUPPLIED





Tropical Samoa with white sandy beaches and coconut palms (left); swim with the whales off Tonga with Majestic Whale Encounters (above); Fiji Marriott Resort Momi Bay (below left); and explore the Cook Islands with Raro Buggy & Quad Tours (below right).

