



WILLING CASTAWAY

There's no shortage of people ready to be stranded on one of Fiji's most enchanting islands



(Clockwise from above) Most visitors' first glimpse of Castaway Island; an aerial view; and typical bure accommodation, traditional on the outside and luxurious within. Pictures: Matt C. Bauer

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There are about a dozen of us on the barge that motors its way from our ferry to the tiny island, which is so beautiful it almost looks fake. All the Fijian islands look like that: fluorescent blue water; sand so white you have to shield your eyes; coconut palms swaying in the breeze, nestled between thatched huts and colourful sea kayaks.

Below us, tiny fish dart about. As we approach, the sounds of a welcoming party drift our way. A chorus of guitars and Fijian voices sing a traditional welcome song. We grin at each other from our seats. It's so perfect, it's ridiculous. As we approach the shore, several of our passengers jump up and rush the bow. As the boat hits sand, they leap over the edge and run toward our welcoming party, shrieking and yelling the names of staff members. "Welcome home! Welcome back, family!" yell the staff, as guests leap into their arms.

We later learn that 30 to 40 per cent of visitors to Castaway Island love it so much that they make the trip back. One Australian visitor has returned 44 times. "Some like to think they are part-owners," general manager Steven Andrews tells us.

We are lucky enough to spend one night on Outrigger's Castaway Island during a trip to Fiji - it's a 70ha spot in the ocean, covered in tropical rainforest and ringed by white, sandy beaches. At low tide, you can walk its entire perimeter in two hours.

We're shown to our oceanfront bures, luxurious and modern yet with traditional thatched roofs and intricately patterned ceilings. There are 64 of them dotted across the island, along with two freshwater



swimming pools and four restaurants and bars. There are no clocks or televisions. On Castaway, guests are encouraged to switch off. Shoes are optional.

There is indeed something magical about the staff on Castaway. They're happy and friendly, calling out "Bula! Bula!" as you wind your way along the island's paths.

We have lunch at the Sundowner Bar, which is, fittingly, the best place to watch the sun go down. At the end of the elevated deck is a live webcam facing North Beach. There is a beautiful rock formation here, often used as a setting for weddings. The webcam is so popular that when it goes down, staff are emailed by past guests wanting to know why they can't remotely check in on their favourite tropical island escape.

It's also handy for weddings. Can't make your friend's destination nuptials? Never mind. You can spy on the celebrations from afar. All you need is champagne and an internet connection.

We spend hours in the water, snorkelling along the front of the resort where tiny fish dart about, at nearby Mondriki Island

(just a short boat ride away) where the movie *Castaway* was filmed (what exactly was your problem with this tropical paradise, Tom Hanks?) and at a secret spot where our snorkelling guide, a free diver named Aku, promises we'll see reef sharks (we do, and it's amazing).

Dinner is served with our feet in the sand at Restaurant 1808. It's high-end Asian fusion, eaten under the stars with water lapping at the shore just metres away.

In the morning, we head out with a guide to see the resort's coral rejuvenation project. Castaway Island is what it is because of its natural environment, and preserving it is a must. We swim above a series of metal grates where coral fragments are at various stages of growth, until it's getting dangerously close to the time when our ferry is due to arrive. I look over at Mondriki Island and consider swimming there, building a fire and finding my own volleyball to keep me company. But instead I reluctantly come to shore, throw myself in the shower, stuff my clothes into my bag and mope my way to the front of the resort.

We share hugs with the staff we met only yesterday and board our boat. As we pull away, they serenade us with guitars and a traditional song of farewell. In my head, like so many others, I am already making fervent plans to come back.

The writer was a guest of Outrigger Resorts

TRAVEL MATE

GETTING THERE

Fiji is a three-and-a-half-hour flight from Brisbane, with daily flights available. Qantas and Virgin Australia fly to Nadi. Castaway Island is a two-hour ferry ride from Denarau Marina. South Sea Cruises, the most popular and affordable mode of transport to the island, travels there three times a day.

STAYING THERE

The private island resort has 64 beach bures with traditional thatched roofs nestled among tropical gardens. Visit castawayfiji.com.