



FIJI

Falling for Fiji

Its idyllic tropical setting, effortless ease and a diversity of extraordinary experiences has **RENE YOUNG** falling head over heels for Fiji.

Cradled in a hammock between two shady palm trees as the water shimmers in the midday sun, I watch my girl perform barefoot twirls on an empty beach. My son gives me a gentle push as he hums the Pokémon tune, the incongruous song choice a reminder that this isn't a splendid daydream after all.

Island hopping

A chain of 22 remote islands to the west of Fiji's Viti Levu, each surrounded by deserted, palm-dotted beaches and sapphire blue beaches, makes up the Mamanuca Islands.

On intimate **Castaway Island**, our kids flit between the sheltered lagoon beach, fabulous pools and exceptional Kids' Club. Our only concerns are which secluded spot to relax in or where to dine next.

We spy jungle-clad volcanic islands on the horizon, enticing us off our beach loungers and onto Castaway's fastest jet boat, *Teivovo*. With blue skies overhead, smooth seas and Wilson the volleyball by our side, we glide across to **Monuriki Island**, where Tom Hanks filmed the movie *Castaway*. Unlike his forsaken character Chuck, we were happy to be stranded on the island, indulging in a beach picnic and snorkelling in the thriving underwater world of its exquisite blue lagoon.

A sunny day calls for a trip to **Cloud 9**, a floating bar suspended over another

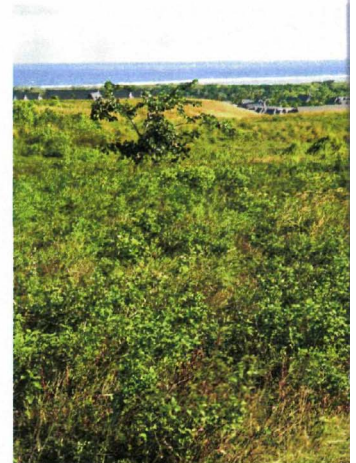
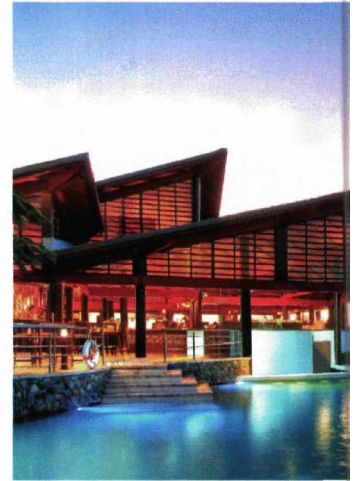
picturesque lagoon. Brave kids can leap off the edge or they can nab a daybed to enjoy wood-fired pizzas while mum and dad sample colourful cocktails.

After lunch, we cruise to **Cloudbreak**, the famous left-hand barrel, where we're lucky to catch champion surfers taking on the waves at the annual Fiji Pro. Although it is tempting to stay on **Cloud 9**, *Teivovo* soon roars to life in readiness to show off the rest of the Mamanuca Islands. We zip past **Mana Island**, where *Survivor* was filmed, spy **Malolo's** pretty overwater bungalows and spot heart-shaped **Tavarua Island**.

When a secret reef is found, the engine cuts out and the kids launch themselves into the open ocean. We spend the afternoon chasing barracudas, floating above giant clams and swimming with schools of parrotfish.

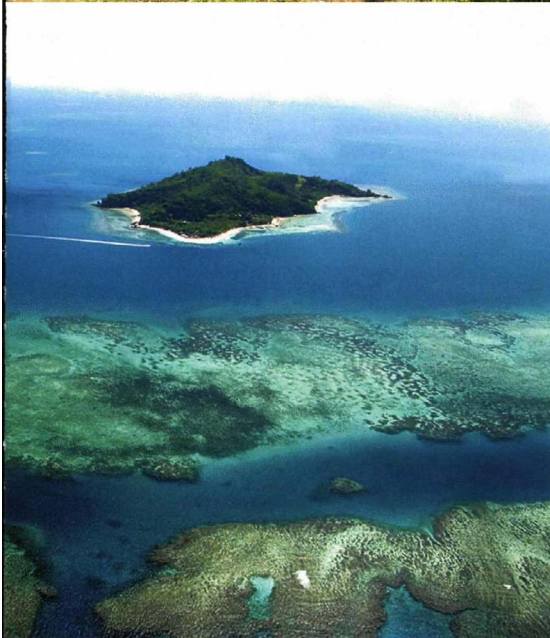
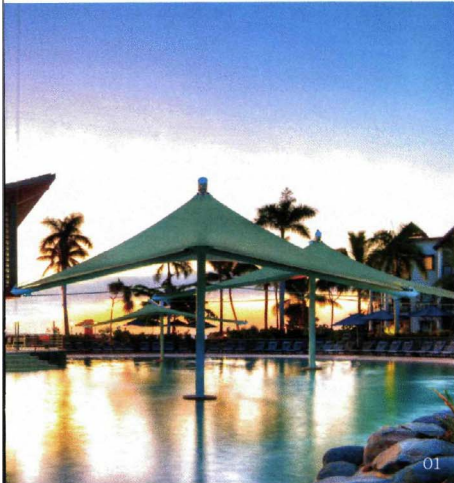
Creature comforts

While going off-grid on a secluded island appeals to some families, connectivity, convenience and comfort appeal to others. No sooner had we arrived in the luxury resort enclave of **Denarau**, located just minutes from the airport and marina, were we unpacked and kicking back in a stylish one-bedroom apartment at **Radisson Blu Resort Fiji**. Surrounded by shops and restaurants,



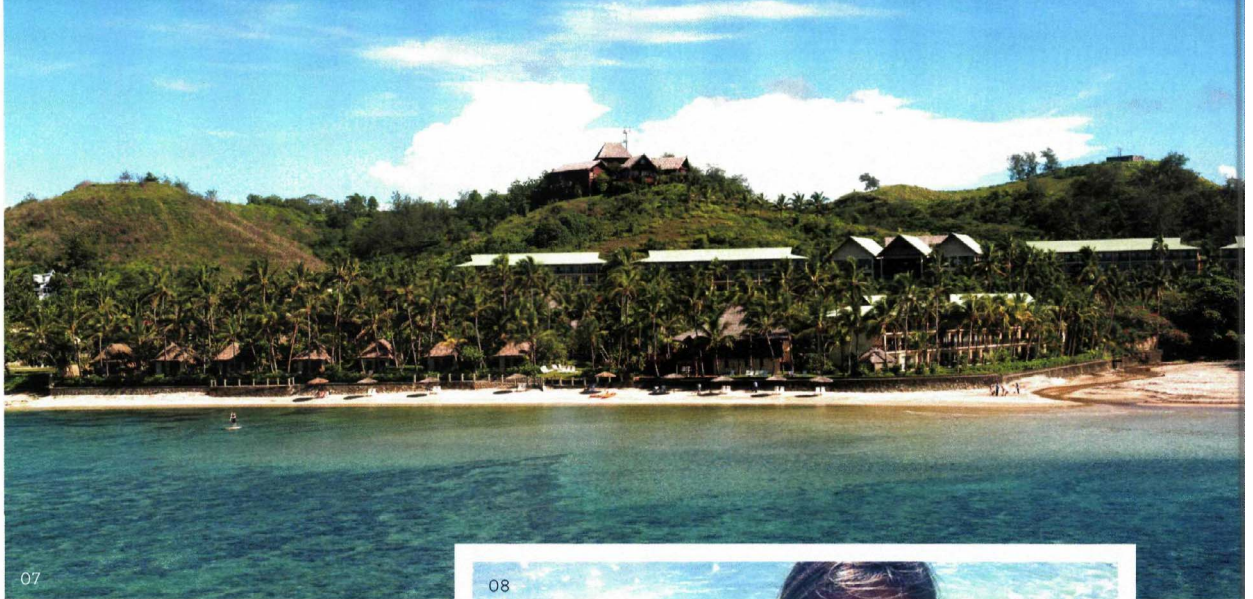


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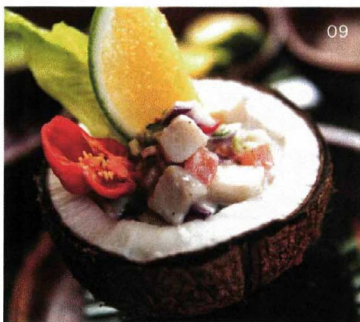
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sprawling pools and the entertaining Blu Bananas Kids' Club, the resort offered us all we could need for an effortless tropical holiday.

"We're lighting fires!" exclaimed my five-year-old arsonist, dressed in a grass skirt and tapa cloth ready for the torch-lighting ceremony. Without a single backwards glance, she trots back to her brother and a crew of other mini warriors.

Taking advantage of our kids in the resort's supervised care, we slink off next door for a five-course degustation at Sheraton's award-winning Flying Fish restaurant. It's sublime and just one of the restaurants on Denarau that are leading the Fijian food scene.

Away from the manicured man-made island, good local food and a real slice



09

01 Stunning people at Radisson Blu 02 Rene and family in the Mamanucas with Wilson 03 Natadola Beach hilltop, Coral Coast 04 Conch shell trumpet @ Tourism Fiji, Derek Henderson 05 Castaway Island 06 Iguana at Kula Wildlife Park 07 Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort, Image @ Eason Creative Photography 08 Taste sensation at Castaway Island 09 The famous Kokoda dish at Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort

of authentic Fiji can be found in bustling Nadi where we tuck into delicious curries influenced by its Fijian-Indian community at cheap and cheerful Tata's.

The colourful **Sri Subramaniya Temple** is nearby and we head off to explore with our bellies happily bursting. The history of Hindu deities goes over our heads, but the kids still find the working shrine's mysterious fortune teller, inner sanctums and intricate paintings absolutely riveting.

At Nadi's local market, we pass rows of fresh produce to find *yaqona* (kava) to gift the host at local village Nawaka. Despite calling in without notice, we were greeted with open arms by Bill the chief spokesman (second in command).

"We're family now," he says with a grin, introducing us to his vibrant children. He is

our escort around Nawaka, home of the Chief, who presides over five villages and 12 clans.

It's a modest way of life, even for a village chief, and we're thankful that the kids have an opportunity to meet this community of warm-hearted locals and to witness their humble way of life.

A slice of the real Fiji

We love the feeling of space on the Coral Coast. The sprawling oceanfront resorts that pepper the emerald hills along this dramatic slice of coastline are so spread out that, besides a few local villages, it feels like we've escaped to a remote jungle paradise.

It's a popular choice for families, made even more appealing by affordable all-inclusive package deals, caring *mei meis* (nannies), spacious family rooms, indulgent



Fiji Report Card



Info fijitravel.com

Getting there Fiji Airways offers regular flights from major Australian cities to Nadi International Airport

Cruise ssc.com.fj

Stay castawayfiji.com
radissonblu.com outrigger.com



hilltop spa, a choice of pools, buffets and restaurants, complimentary kids' club and sublime beach sunsets.

While there is really no need for us to leave **Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort**, we eventually tear ourselves away from the swim-up bar long enough to explore the jungle interior, starting with the **Kula Wildlife Park**. Located alongside the resort, kids can pet iguanas, feed turtles, spot tropical birds, splash at the water park or take a zipline.

Dropping into the pulsating **Sigatoka Markets** is another exhilarating introduction to island life. Subsistence farmers carefully arrange their market stalls, putting Fiji's food bowl on display with fresh produce of every shape and colour.

Strolling the streets, we see locals haggling over freshwater clams plucked straight from the river and enjoy the scent of fresh baked bread wafting through the air.

Kids give back

To avoid sensory overload, we swap the high-energy town for a gentle hike to historic **Tuvuni Hill Fort**, an ancient Tongan village offering views over the Sigatoka Valley.

Embracing the opportunity to teach the kids about giving back, we join Outrigger's **Volunteer Tourism** initiative to help build

10 Pooltime fun at Radisson Blu Resort Fiji. 11 Lighting the torches during sunset at Radisson Blu 12 Meke gr, at Castaway Island. Images 02, 03, 06, 07 & 12 © Rene Young



two new school classrooms for Conua Primary School. The program has helped transform the school with a new library, kindergarten and main hall.

After a rewarding day of work, the elders share a bowl of kava with the adults as a symbol of good will. While not everyone loves the muddy brew, we all adore the songs performed by the spunky local kids. Then we venture out of our resort, the greater the love we feel for the wonderful diversity of Fiji.

We cap off what has been a dreamy island holiday on horseback. We ride gentle Vegemite and Jimmy Carter along the long curve of powder-white sand at **Natadola Beach**, the prettiest on Viti Levu, a bucket list-worthy experience that our kids will be talking about for a lifetime. ▲



FIJI

Hello *Bula* (mboo-la)

Yes *Io* (ee-o)

No *Sega* (se-nga)

Village *Koro* (ko-ro)

Shop *Situa* (see-to-ah)

Eat *Kana* (kah-na)

Drink *Gunu* (goo-noo)

Coconut *Niu* (new)

One *Dua* (ndu-a)

Two *Rua* (ru-a)

Lady *Marama* (mah-rah-mah)

Mister *Turaga* (tu-ra-ngah)

Thank you *Vinaka* (vee-nah-ka)

Goodbye *Ni sa moce* (nee sa mo-thee)

Good morning *Ni sa yadra* (nee sa ya-ndra)

Please *Yalo vinaka* (yalo vee-nah-ka)

Excuse me *Tolou* (too-low)

House *Vale/bure* (va-ley/mbu-rey)

Toilet *Vale lailai* (va-ley lie-lie)

Fiji

Speak

