



THE FIJI TIME FORGOT

Some of the South Pacific's most pristine islands are just half an hour from bustling Nadi

CRAIG TANSLEY

The tiny Cessna taking me to Yasawa Islands lands with a bounce onto a grassy runway that angles downhill to the sea. It's not even close to flat – though when I leave here, I'll notice how pilots use the slope for extra speed to get up over the ocean metres beyond the landing strip.

I'm bundled into a 4WD and driven along a muddy track that winds its way past a village and through a tract of coastal forest by the owner of the Yasawa Island Resort and Spa himself, then escorted to a villa built metres from its own white-sand bay.

Before I've had time to look around, I'm taken by speedboat past dozens of deserted beaches flanked by black rock cliffs, rolling grass hills and coconut trees; for lunch to a beach which disappears with the tide.

Since I flew out from Nadi, I've

barely seen another person, except a local bloke free-diving for lobsters for lunch. That's typical in the Yasawas.

Though Yasawa Islands start just a few kilometres further north from the Mamanuca Islands (which are closest to Fiji's main island, Viti Levu) being here is like travelling back in time.

Only opened to land-based tourism since 1987, even cruise passengers permitted to travel through these islands weren't always allowed to set foot on land. And so the Yasawas remain some of the most unaffected of all the Fijian islands. They may be just half an hour away from Nadi by plane, and two hours by ferry from Denarau (depending on where you're staying – the northern islands of the Yasawas take longer to get to), but

locals still live in traditional villages and there are no shops, banks or cafes (outside of the resorts).

I'm staying at Yasawa Island Resort and Spa, and while it's five-star and I eat seafood cooked for me at a table on the beach, and am beautified at a day spa where the treatment rooms are barely 5m from the sea – all but a handful of the workers here are from the village five minutes' drive away.

On Sunday, I join them at a church service there, where they're dressed in neatly pressed trousers, button-up shirts and ties, their hair Bryl-creamed sideways and their voices as rich as opera singers.

WHO SHOULD VISIT THE YASAWAS?

Yasawa Islands have accommodation to suit every type of traveller. In recent times, no-frills flashpacker and backpacker resorts have been built for more intrepid (and younger) travellers. But there are middle-of-the-road three- and four-star options for couples and families.

Then there are five-star offerings. Despite their relative isolation, the Yasawas have been home to some of Fiji's finest luxury resorts for decades. The most famous of them is Turtle Island, the first of Fiji's luxury private island resorts; the vision of American businessman Richard Evanson more than 40 years ago. Today it's still one of Fiji's most exclusive resorts, with space for just 14 couples.

There are numerous excursions and adventures for travellers throughout the 20 islands of the group; but the Yasawas are best for travellers who prefer to leave the

normal attractions behind. You won't find the bustling bars of Fiji's Coral Coast here, or the restaurant scene of Denarau. Most activities centre around swimming, diving and snorkelling. Surfing is rarely attempted; though I find chest-high waves out in front of the resort, surfed by only a handful of surfers.

Blue Lagoon, the 1980 film starring a teenage Brooke Shields, was filmed at the Sawa-I-Lau Caves in the northern Yasawas. Travelling by boat here to the entrance of a deep chamber, I swim beneath the cavern into tiny chambers of blue water lit up by sunlight shining through holes in the limestone ceiling.

A hilly landscape is perfect for hiking, and there's kayaking – from quick paddles to multiple-day-and-night tours lauded across the world. The water teems with sea creatures and visitors can swim with sharks and manta rays. Backpacker resorts have also given rise to night-time options at resort bars – from crab racing to fire dancing and sunset tube cruises.

THE MAMANUCAS: HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

After four days in the Yasawas, I take a flight back to Nadi and travel by ferry to a private island resort in the Mamanucas, where the welcome is as personal as it was in the Yasawas.



Castaway Island is one of the smallest of the 20 islands (seven of which sink with the tide) which make up the island group. Landing on the wide, sandy beach, I am greeted by Castaway Island Resort staff who've come out to sing to me.

While the Mamanucas are home to islands with modern marinas boasting fancy yacht clubs, bars, restaurants, cafes and grocery stores – and there's even a floating day bar – these islands are some of the most pristine in the entire South Pacific. We may well be close to Nadi here (some islands are barely 20 minutes by ferry from Denarau), but this is where Hollywood comes to depict South Seas desolation. *Castaway* was filmed here on Monuriki, and *Survivor* has come to these islands more times than any other destination in its 18-year history.

Castaway Island's resort is on a tiny islet circled by tropical rainforest. My villa is built on its own beach, and each day at dawn I walk across the sand to a speedboat which takes me to some of the best surfing waves on Earth. Big southerly swells push up to the reefs along the southern edge of the Mamanucas, then break perfectly across narrow, shallow reef passes.

Only discovered in the '70s and '80s, breaks like Cloudbreak rate among the world's top 10 surf spots. You'll find famous surfers like Kelly Slater spend time here. There are surf resorts right beside the breaks, but I prefer Castaway Island and the 45-minute boat ride across the clear water.

Some days I take a short speed boat ride to the floating bar and wood-fired pizzeria hangout, Cloud Nine, built out over the reef. Between rounds of beer and pizza, I jump from my place at the bar into the clear water.

There's plenty of action in the Mamanucas if you want it – from jet ski safaris to fishing and sail boats that come right to your island. I prefer to loll in Mamanuca lagoon's shallow waters, taking the odd trip to the outer edges of the reef where the water drops as much as 1000m straight down. There's no better place for snorkelling or diving anywhere in the Pacific.

THE WRITER TRAVELLED COURTESY OF TOURISM FIJI AND YASAWA ISLAND RESORT & SPA

ESCAPE ROUTE

MAMANUCAS AND YASAWAS

GETTING THERE

Get to the Mamanucas via ferry service from Denarau Marina or water taxi. ssc.com.fj, mamanucaexpress.com
The Yasawas can be accessed by a daily ferry service. ssc.com.fj/day-cruises/yasawa-islands-explorer/
Both islands can be accessed by plane. turtleairways.com, pacificislandair.com

STAYING THERE

Yasawa Island Resort and Spa is on the northern tip of the Yasawas and the only way in is by air. yasawa.com
Castaway Island is an hour away from Denarau Marina by ferry, outrigger.com/hotels-resorts/fiji/castaway-island/castaway-island-fiji

MORE

fiji.travel

LOCALS STILL LIVE IN TRADITIONAL VILLAGES AND THERE ARE NO SHOPS, BANKS OR CAFES



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BRIEF OUTRIGGER

INDEX 1

PAGE 3 of 4



