



Yasawa Islands

Exploring this land is like travelling back in time, explains **CRAIG TRANSLEY**

The tiny Cessna taking me to the 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 & 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; to a beach for lunch which disappears with the tide. Since I flew out from Nadi, I've barely seen another person, except the local bloke free-diving for lobsters for lunch. That's just the way it is in the Yasawas.

Though the 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's 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's no shops, banks or cafes (outside of the resorts).

I'm staying at the 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 whose treatment rooms are barely 5m from the sea — all but a handful of the workers here come 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 COME TO THE YASAWAS?

The 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 the five-star offerings. Despite their relative isolation, the Yasawas have for decades been home to some of Fiji's finest luxury resorts.

The most famous of them all is Turtle Island, the first of Fiji's luxury private island resorts; the vision of American businessman Richard Evanson over 40 years ago. Today it's still one of Fiji's most exclusive resorts, with space for just 14 couples.

There's numerous excursions and adventures for travellers throughout these islands; 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.

There's plenty to do across the 20 islands of the group; though most activities are based around swimming, diving and snorkelling. Surfing is rarely attempted; though I find empty chest-high waves out in front of the Yasawa Island Resort and Spa which have only been surfed by 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.

I take a boat here to an entrance of a deep chamber at the top of a limestone formation. I hold my breath and swim beneath the cavern into tiny chambers of blue water lit up by sunlight shining through holes in the limestone ceiling.

Because of its hilly landscape, there are plenty of hikes all over the Yasawas. And there's kayaking — from quick paddles to multiple-day-and-night tours lauded across the world. The water here teems with sea creatures — visitors can swim with sharks and manta rays.

With the rise of backpacker resorts, there's now night-time options at resort bars — from crab racing to fire dancing and sunset tube cruises; though anyone coming to the Yasawas to party will be disappointed.

THE MAMANUCAS: HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?



After four days in the Yasawas, I take a flight back to Nadi and arrive on a private island resort in the Mamanucas by ferry. My entrance is every bit as personal as it was on Yasawa Island. Castaway Island is one of the smallest of the 20 islands (seven of which sink with the tide) which make up the island group. As I'm transported from the ferry by tender to a wide, sandy beach the staff of the Castaway Island Resort 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 set just inside the barrier reef — 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 situated on a tiny

islet surrounded by tropical rainforest. My villa's built on its own beach, 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 barrier 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 the world's most famous surfers, like Kelly Slater, spending down time here. There's surf resorts right beside the breaks, though I prefer Castaway Island and the 45-minute-long boat ride I have across the clear blue water (when I've surfed all day, I don't need to spend my nights discussing each wave).

Some day I take a short speedboat ride to the two-tier floating bar and wood-fired pizzeria hangout, Cloud Nine, that's 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 loads of activities in the Mamanucas for those who want action on vacation — everything from jet ski safaris to fishing boats and sailing boats come right to your island.



The Mamanucas are home to some of the world's best waves

Picture: TOURISM FIJI



The Yasawa Islands are some of Fiji's most pristine and deserted

Picture: YASAWA ISLAND RESORT AND SPA

