

Welcome to paradise

Enjoy lazy days poolside or take a scenic tour to see why Fiji's locals are full of life, laughter and song

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It sounds like a weird kind of insect but it turns out a velocipede is a rather fun mode of transport for the fitness challenged. I am perched on said velocipede – essentially a modified rail-mounted pushbike – and rattling along railway tracks abandoned by Fiji's lapsed sugar cane industry.

These Ecotrax velocipedes, mounted in pairs, are electric-assisted, which makes it easy to glide merrily through fields, ancient rainforest and cuttings that open to deserted beaches edged by azure waters.

This is a rarely seen slice of Fiji's famous Coral Coast, an 80km stretch along the southwest coast of Viti Levu, where palm-fringed beaches and the surrounding reef offer Insta-worthy images at every turn.

Ecotrax launched in January this year, the brainchild of New Zealand couple Howie and Mandy de Vries, and even featured on a "fantasy date" on Channel 10's *Bachelor in Paradise*. Bookings have been brisk as a result.

The station where tours depart and conclude is in a 100-year-old locomotive shed in Cuvu, a town about an hour's drive from the bustling hub of Nadi and 30 minutes from our accommodation at the five-star Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort.

It's a relaxing three-hour round trip, this Ecotrax tour, with lots of stops along the way to give butts a bit of a rest and to allow our hilarious guide, Britney, to point out places of interest. The tour is geared to all fitness levels – mums, dads, the disabled, the super-fits and the unfits. Little ones, too small to pedal, can sit on the timber base while the parents pedal.

The odd horse, cow or goat hampers our progress, but add to the feeling that we are truly off the beaten track – that we are privy to the real Fiji.

We slow down through villages dotted along the way to our destination – the private Vunabua Beach for a swim and refreshments – and bellow a hearty "Bula!" to the tiny tots who race towards the tracks. With faces wreathed in smiles, they raise their hands for a "high five" from the tourists who are now a familiar sight.

STAR TREATMENT

Back at my bure at Outrigger Fiji, I have timed it just right. My "talai" butler Merri greets me with a cheery "Bula!", a glass of champagne and canapes. Today it's sushi;

yesterday was chicken tikka on semolina cakes. I could get used to this. Talai butlers are assigned to deluxe ocean-view rooms, suites or bures and, as well as serving an evening cocktail, they unpack and iron clothing, recommend tours or activities, and make restaurant reservations. How I wish I could bring Merri home with me.

The Outrigger's 207 rooms and suites and 37 thatch-roofed bures are set amidst 16ha of manicured gardens, which stretch along the shores of a reef-fringed lagoon.

Resort facilities include five restaurants

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and bars, a tropical swimming lagoon, kids' clubs, fitness centre, tennis courts, private beach and, at its highest point, the Bebe Spa Sanctuary.

A trip to the spa via golf buggy is an event in itself as the vehicle, driven by a host, winds ever higher to reach the elegant timber structure with its 180-degree views of the resort and ocean.

My Myoxy caviar facial, using Pevonia Botanica products, is an hour of heaven that magically lifts and hydrates skin. My therapist follows up with a warm seashell massage, relieving tired muscles.

I fall asleep, but wake to feel like a new person. What could be better?

COCKTAIL HOUR

Sunset drinks at the resort's Sundowner Bar & Grill, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, are not to be missed. The sky is a postcard-perfect pink and the mojitos are textbook. Local seafood stars on the menu alongside woodfired pizzas and flame-grilled Aussie beef, but if it's authentic South Pacific you want, reserve a table at the adults-only Ivi Restaurant.

Housed in a traditional Fijian bure, Ivi was awarded Best Visitor Dining Experience at the 2017 Fiji Excellence in Tourism Awards and offers fresh local and international fare, such as ika kokoda – Fiji's beloved national dish of lime-marinated island fish with coconut milk and a hint of chilli. Our waiter prepares the



BLUE LAGOON ... (clockwise from main) The palm-fringed outlook from a beachside bure at the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort; an Ecotrax velocipedes tour takes you through rainforest to pristine beaches; local dish kokoda stars on the resort's menu; a Sigatoka River Safari.

dish at the table for added pizzazz and serves it in a half-coconut shell. It's delicious, just like the tati pati clay pot prawn curry with hand-rolled roti and mustard rice I order for mains.

Halfway through dinner the waiters gather to serenade a couple with the traditional Anniversary Song, their voices blending in perfect harmony. Music comes naturally to the Fijians and they often burst into song. I find myself hoping it will be someone's anniversary every night of

my stay, just to hear their dulcet tones.

But back to the food. For guests wanting to recreate Fijian flavours at home, the resort offers kokoda-making classes or, for the more enterprising cook, a lesson with its award-winning chefs.

I was lucky enough to spend a few hours with executive chef Shailesh Naidu – first on a guided tour of the Sigatoka Produce Markets, the biggest day market in Fiji selling fruits and vegetables grown in the Sigatoka Valley, and then at a



cooking demonstration in the Ivi kitchens.

Chef Shailesh shared recipes for his Indo-Fijian chicken curry; prawns baked in infused coconut milk; and the delicious poor man's rice – all the while making it look so easy.

If cocktails are more your thing, enrol in the resort's Fiji Coconut Vodka Cocktail Academy, where mixologists coach guests through a tasting and the creation of signature cocktails using locally made Fiji Coconut Vodka.

VILLAGE LIFE

Kayaks, paddleboards and snorkelling gear are all free for resort guests, plus daily aqua aerobics classes. But lazing by the pool wins out. The water is warm, the sun is shining and there are coconuts with straws. One staff member is the "denutter", and it's his job to harvest coconuts to prevent them falling on the unsuspecting.

The upside is they sell about 40 fresh coconuts poolside daily and scoop out the flesh for you once you've drunk the juice.

A 10-minute stroll from the Outrigger is the Kula Wild Adventure Park, with huge walk-through enclosures housing birds and reptiles. Kids can hit the Splash Mountain Jungle water slide, hold a Fijian iguana and help handfeed baby turtles.

Also well worth doing is the Sigatoka River Safari, a half-day jet boat tour that includes a Fijian village visit. The safari visits 14 villages on rotation, and it's a good idea to bring school supplies or sporting items as gifts for the children.

The 120km-long river supports 52 villages whose residents depend on it for washing, fishing and irrigating crops.

You will take part in a kava ceremony, Fijian dancing and a lunch prepared by the women of the village – and you will fall in love with these people who are so full of life, laughter and song.

The writer was a guest of Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort. Visit outrigger.com for seasonal deals and best rate guarantee.