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Family jewels

Fiji's coral islands are not just for the honeymooners — they are child-friendly too, writes **Sadie Beckman**

It's all very well seeing those classic advertisements for holidays in Pacific Island paradises, featuring loved-up honeymooners frolicking on impossibly beautiful beaches or sipping cocktails at sunset.

But what about the rest of us, for whom the honeymoon is long over, there are kids in tow, and while we still might like to reminisce about our frolicking days over a cocktail, we need a bit more to keep the littlies occupied and our sanity intact?

Fiji's Coral Coast provides a particularly good solution. Classic tropical trappings, such as sparkling coral-filled lagoons fringed with white sand and coconut palms blend seamlessly with a region rich in traditional culture where the Sigatoka River valley offers plenty of opportunity for activity to keep families busy. It's about an hour's drive from Nadi International Airport too.

There are plenty of good accommodation options and the area's resorts are catering for the needs of families as well as couples. Many

offer such comprehensive facilities and entertainment on-site, that you could get away with never leaving their grounds, although with such a lot to see and do around you, that would admittedly be a bit of a shame. We were lucky enough to sample two; the Shangri-La Fiji and Fiji Outrigger Resort, which are within half an hour of each other and also the main Sigatoka township, a bustling place that melds everyday local life, such as schools, markets and shops, with tourist operators and activities to cater for the many visitors the nearby resorts bring into the area annually.

Arrival at the Shangri-La, accessed via a causeway to the private Yanuca Island, brought my first taste of a Fijian welcome. As our car pulled up, the sound of tribal drums rang out and I heard "Bula!" — that infamous Fijian greeting that never fails to elicit a smile from its recipient.

I had brought my 10-year-old daughter along on this trip, and her eyes were as wide as saucers as the resort's porters, in traditional dress, draped shell necklaces around our necks,



whisked our luggage away and handed us coconuts with straws in them, all to the soundtrack of loud traditional drumming.

Arriving at sunset, we made our way to the beachside restaurant to watch blazes of red, orange and pink streak the sky, while silhouetted coconut palms bowed over a calm lagoon. We spent a little time acclimatising and sampling traditional Fijian foods, like cassava and kokoda, a delicious dish of raw fish marinated in coconut milk and chilli, before getting our bearings in the sprawling grounds of the resort.

Next to the restaurant was a huge pool area, dotted with loungers and flanked by now-closed cocktail bars and kiosks, while anchored in the lagoon beyond, a giant inflatable waterpark sat quietly in the dusk, waiting for the morning's invasion of watery thrill-seekers.

Rooms at the Shangri-La, of which there are over 400, are arranged in identical, efficiently planned blocks, but outwardly, they lack visual touches of the traditional. Inside though, we found colourful nods to Fijian decor, vibrant artwork and an attention to detail that would become evident throughout our trip. Once, when we returned to our ground-floor room, we found the housekeepers had made an elaborate and humorous tableau involving animals made from clever towel origami, scattered flower petals and my daughter's teddy bear, sporting flowers and shell necklaces propped in a pose reading a book. Moments like this really speak to children and make them feel welcome — something Fiji does particularly well.

The next morning we explored the resort, checking out its dining options, the shopping precinct and comprehensive facilities. A purpose-built wedding chapel and private garden overlooking the lagoon, as well as a luxurious spa centre, showed why couples would choose to stay here, but my daughter's attention was drawn to other parts of the resort, such as the quirky marine education centre, where we met up with a friendly guy who took us to build a "fish house".

Curious as to what this would entail, we followed him to one part of the lagoon's shore, where we collected shells, rocks and bits of coral while he mixed up cement in a bucket. My daughter was then shown how to construct a small igloo from the pieces she had collected, all held together with the cement. Little window and door holes were created in parts of the house, and a small metal plaque with a GPS code was cemented on too. Once we had custom decorated it with shells, we were told the fish house would

be left to dry on the shore for a few days, before being carefully placed into the lagoon according to the GPS co-ordinate on it, where it would then become a base for coral to grow and fish to move into, as part of a wider programme to help regeneration. If we return to the area in the future, we would then be able to use GPS to find the little house underwater, snorkel to it and check out its new inhabitants.

For an animal-loving 10-year-old, the idea of making something like this was magical. Thinking about it still being there long after leaving the place is the perfect way to engage children, and the learning that went alongside it about conservation and regeneration was invaluable.

Slightly more self-indulgent pursuits filled the rest of that day. Kayaking, playing on the waterpark and a traditional Fijian buffet dinner compete with live fire-dancing show were all highlights and considering we hadn't set foot outside the resort, we went to bed tired and slept like a couple of logs.

Moving on to the Outrigger Fiji, southeast of Sigatoka, we were again welcomed with such theatrical warmth and decadence that we couldn't help grinning around at everyone like slightly bemused Cheshire cats. This time we were shown to an upper storey room overlooking the sprawling resort, the whole of which is themed to look like a traditional, albeit luxurious, Fijian village.

Along with over 200 rooms in two large, beach-facing blocks at the rear of the resort, there are around 40 freestanding thatch-roofed bures, or chalets, set in the resort's 16 hectares of lush, tropical gardens, and accessed by winding paved paths and covered walkways. The grounds lead down to a white sand beach and calm lagoon where fish swim right into the shallows and bright blue starfish stand out in the clear water, while waves break on the distant reef.

Here too, was a well-planned blend of facilities for couples or child-free adults, as well as for families. A separate pool for adults had the positive effect of removing any sense your child might be infringing on someone else's quiet relaxation time at the main pool, and there was a dedicated kids' club in its own building. Luxurious additions to a stay at the Outrigger included a butler service with a Fijian flavour (I particularly enjoyed the glass of complimentary champagne served with canapes delivered to our room each evening, and got quite skilled at psychically predicting when it was nearly 5pm) as well as



the hilltop Bebe Spa for serene pampering treatments, and the option of a *meimei*, or traditional Fijian nanny service.

Dining options were also varied, and you could choose between the casual poolside Baravi cafe, traditional buffet and entertainment in the form of a lively cultural show at Vale Ni Kana, or salubrious, upmarket, child-free dining at the award-winning Ivi restaurant. I tried the latter one evening (while my daughter had a great time with a lovely meimei who took her eeling at the lagoon) and was blown away by the quality of the experience, attention to detail and amazing food. Fijian hospitality is not a myth, and here it seemed to be infused in everything.

The Outrigger was our comfort zone, but we ventured out to explore the wider area, too. The resort can organise all manner of trips and outings from its dedicated tour desk, and an absolute highlight was a jet-boat river safari up the Sigatoka River to Tuvu, a remote village where we were welcomed into the central meeting hall, allowed to take part in a traditional Kava ceremony, and invited to share food, music and dancing with the villagers, who must have been some of the nicest, most welcoming humans I've had the pleasure to meet. Sure, the cynical observer may presume it was for show and to solicit the tourist dollar, but the warmth we felt there was genuine and the inaccessibility of the place must mean visitors aren't an everyday occurrence. Besides, it felt fine that the money paid for the tour would benefit such a place.

While we sat on rush matting, eating and talking, a warm rain fell outside, little children ran around playing and chickens pecked by the doorway, while old men sat laughing together, and other people broke into spontaneous, harmonised singing or strummed weather-beaten guitars. A contented, warm fug filled the room and I could imagine staying there with these people on a remote Fijian riverbank and forgetting all about the outside world.

Later, I felt a real sense of contrast between the village-themed resort and the genuine article, but it didn't feel bad. Rather, the fact I could experience and appreciate something like that, along with my child, meant we could carry new learning with us in our own lives.

Taking resort or package holidays, especially with kids, does mean there's a chance these opportunities for rich experiences and gaining of perspective could be missed, but that wasn't the case here. Though the resorts we visited were their own private paradises on the inside,

offering everything you could need and plenty you want, they also recognised the importance of encouraging their guests, including and especially those with children, to head outside the enclave and meet Fiji properly.

And for a first-timer in this neck of the woods, it was an introduction I was happy to have made.

Checklist

FIJI

GETTING THERE

Fiji Airways flies from Auckland to Nadi daily, with return Economy Class fares starting from \$535. fijiairways.com

ACCOMMODATION

For information on the Outrigger resort, go to outrigger.com.

Details on the Shangri-La Fijian Resort and Spa can be found at shangri-la.com.

ONLINE

fiji.travel





The writer's daughter (top) builds a fish house as part of Shangri-La's education programme: a view over Outrigger resort (below). Facing page: Shangri-La resort. Photos / Sadie Beckman; Supplied

