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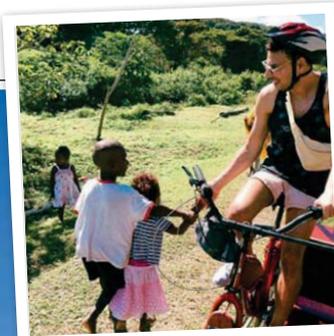




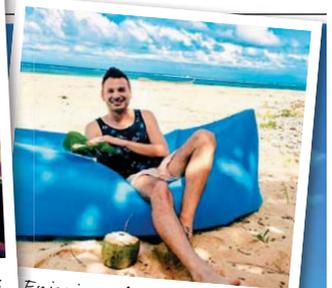
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MATT MACKAY
WHO PHOTO DESK



Children offer high-fives as we pass through the villages on the bike tour.



Enjoying a fresh coconut after a long day of bike riding on the Ecotrax tour.



Arriving into Fiji's Nadi International Airport after a four-hour flight from Sydney, I feel instantly relaxed and charmed by the warmth of the Fijian people greeting us with a warm 'Bula' and big smiles.

Outrigger Hotels and Resorts kindly provide a driver to take me the 90 minutes to my home for the next few days, the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort, on the Coral Coast, on the south-western side of the main island, Viti Levu.

Designed around the architectural style of a traditional Fijian village, the resort has 207 guest rooms and suites, and 47 bures set amid the manicured gardens stretching along the shores of a reef-fringed lagoon.

My private bure has all the necessities without losing any of the charm of the original Fijian living quarters. There is even a hammock waiting for me on my porch so I can relax and enjoy the afternoon's remaining hours of sun before cocktails and dinner. Bliss.

The Sundowner deck is a magical way to get to know my new surroundings. Situated on the resort's private beach, with views across the water of an ever-changing sky, Sundowner is an idyllic location for my first evening in Fiji. The menu is filled with classics, like lamb shanks, pastas and children's meals.

In the morning, after too many wines the night before, I start the day right with a workout in the small but practical fitness centre. Having refuelled with breakfast at Vale Ni Kana Restaurant, it's time to depart for Fiji's newest

tourist attraction, the Ecotrax tour.

The non-athlete in me is a little apprehensive about a 26-kilometre bike ride, however I needn't worry. Ecotrax involves pedalling an electric-assisted pushbike – you can pedal or use your accelerator – along a historic railway line that passes through tropical sugar-cane plantations, lush rainforest and native villages. To top it off, we enjoy a swim at a remote, private beach. After all of the riding and swimming, I feel rejuvenated yet a little worn out.

Luckily, it's time to return to the resort for a luxurious two-hour spa treatment at Bebe Spa Sanctuary. While in Fiji, I feel it is appropriate to have the best of what the nation has to offer, and start with an hour Bobo massage, followed by a Fijian blissful facial.

The following day, after another fulfilling buffet breakfast, it's off to meet with Kini Sarai to chat about the resort's OZONE and cultural programs, a cornerstone of the Outrigger brand. After the damaging Cyclone Winston in 2016, large parts of the resort's coral reef were destroyed. Outrigger Fiji has begun replanting coral in the hopes that the once vast coral reef will prosper once more.

Leaving Outrigger Fiji is a bittersweet moment. As many as 10 staff members serenade us with a beautiful traditional Fijian song, yet another example of the genuine love Fijian people have for their visitors.

The sadness quickly dissipates as I journey to our second destination, Castaway Island

Resort, with South Sea Cruises.

Arriving at this pristine private island paradise, located in the heart of Fiji's Mamanuca island group, is something I never believed possible in my lifetime. Thankfully, Fiji keeps making my dreams come true.

Beautiful Fijian voices serenade us as we step onto the beach and marvel at the azure water, coral reef and talcum white sand.

Checking into my Beach Bure, I am impressed by the fine soft furnishings scattered over day lounges. The king-sized bed is layered with a 'Bula Family' welcome sign and there's a bathroom large enough to satisfy most couples and small families.

With just enough time to take in the bure and the ever-changing sunset beach views, it's time to enjoy a private Kava ceremony at Mokimokiti, followed by a beautiful dinner at Castaway's 1808.

The next morning, I discover breakfast at Castaway is an experience not to be missed. The aptly named Water's Edge restaurant hugs the shoreline and it feels as though you are eating your poached eggs and sourdough on a seaside cliff.

More sun and relaxation ensue and without even realising it, it's midday and time to leave Castaway for an even more private island paradise.

Modriki Island was made famous in the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*, hence the name of our resort. We travel in true James Bond style, via speedboat, which takes 30 minutes to reach



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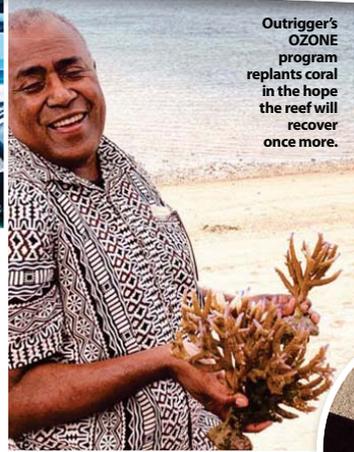
travel



Castaway Island resort is a private island in Fiji's Mamanuca group.



The Beach Bure at Castaway Island resort offers views of the beach.



Outrigger's OZONE program replants coral in the hope the reef will recover once more.



The award-winning 1808 restaurant is inspired by traditional Fijian cooking techniques.

the island. Along the way we are lucky to see a pod of more than 30 dolphins, which we are told is a rare sight.

Arriving at Modriki Island, I am taken aback by the sheer size of the cliff face made famous in the movie. The water seems bluer, if possible, than Castaway, which can be seen in the very far distance from the shoreline of Modriki.

There are a few people around, brought in by other tours and resorts, but you do still feel as if you're the only one inhabiting the island, waiting for 'Wilson' to wash up on the shore.

Castaway Island Resort provides a picnic lunch on the tour, however; their idea of picnic is much fancier than my old blanket and a sandwich in the park.

An intricate Japanese box opens to a smorgasbord of delights such as fried chicken, prawns, fresh salad and fruit. A champagne cork pops, and I have to pinch myself that places like this even exist.

Even though you could spend a lifetime on Modriki, it's time to leave once the late afternoon sun goes down.

Sun-kissed and a few champagnes down, the boat ride is a little choppier on the return journey but nothing can wipe the smile off my face.

It is lovely to visit a place as beautiful and majestic as this and share it with the Fijian locals. I leave knowing I will return to Fiji and my new 'family' very soon.

castawayfiji.com, outrigger.com/hotels-resorts/fiji/viti-levu/outrigger-fiji-beach-resort



Sunset at the Water's Edge restaurant.



'Wilson' washes ashore on Modriki Island.



A warm welcome from the staff at Castaway Island.