

TRAVEL

ANOTHER THREE DAYS IN PARADISE

FIJI | Serendipity leads to unexpected Castaway pleasures

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

QALITO ISLAND, Fiji — If the fates and new flight schedules hadn't swept away our original travel dates, we might never have washed up on Qalito Island.

But as often happens here in Fiji, where smiles are the coin of the realm, a rising tide often brings good fortune — in this case, three more days in the tropical South Pacific.

Finding a place to stay wouldn't have been a problem. The airport hotels in Nadi (NAN-dee) had plenty of room. But a friend at home, a frequent visitor to this 220-island nation, had a better idea: Hide out at Castaway Resort, in the Mamanuca islands, off Fiji's west coast.

"Castaway's on the ferry route, about 14 miles offshore," she said in her e-mail. "Lots of sun, a beautiful beach and it's secluded. An ideal place to relax and catch up before heading home. If you leave in the afternoon, you'll get to the Nadi airport with hours to spare."



The beach and lagoon at Castaway Resort (top) and the green peaks, lush fields and shade trees at Viti Levu (above) are head-turners in Fiji. | STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS-FOR THE SUN-TIMES

We had read about Castaway in the guidebook and ranked it so-so. Busy, popular with Australians, a family favorite and stuck with a sound bite for a name, it didn't represent the Fiji we'd hoped to find. But with a couple of exceptional resorts and 10 days of sightseeing behind us, a brass-plated finale was surely better than an airport hotel.

What a surprise then, when the ferry reached Castaway, to find it perched on a stretch of powdery-soft sand next to a blue lagoon, as beckoning as the Pied Piper's flute. With 66 thatched bures (BOO-rays) and a lodge tucked away under a canopy of rain trees, frangipani, mahogany and coconut palms, Castaway was quiet, homey and service-oriented. The

staff hummed as they swept the cobbled pathways and cleared the dinner tables. And the food — as much as you could eat — tasted delicious.

Our last tranquil morning at Castaway, our plans changed again.

We were watching the tide go out when dive guide Kima Tagitagivalu rushed up to say that the snorkel trip to the Malolo Barrier Reef was boarding and our names were on his list.

"Hurry," he said. "You can't go home until you've been to the reef. It's a marine preserve. Lots of fish. Ratu [Chief] Seva Vatunitu has made it tabu for fishing and collecting, and the people who live here respect that."

Minutes later, we were bouncing seaward toward the encircling surf, hanging onto the gunwales with one hand and adjusting our snorkel masks with the other.

Reaching the reef, Kima dropped the anchor on a sandy spot, checked his watch and counted heads. "We've got an hour before the tide starts to turn," he said, leading the way toward the stern ladder.

Splashing in, I looked down to discover another world. We've snorkeled along a half-dozen coasts, but this reef was a wonderland more fantastic than any animated film. Weightless, like avatars for other bodies (the movie came to mind), our group glided over a vast coral wall 150 feet



For Fijian growers, the produce market in Nadi also serves as a social event. | STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

high, topped by a crowded forest of corals colored pink and violet, electric green and neon yellow, dark brown and speckled yellow. For an hour, we floated free, drifting in over the reef, then out over the ocean, where white tipped sharks patrolled below. And to think I almost missed it.

If it's true that last impressions linger longest, that could be why Castaway seems most vivid. But every day on Fiji's two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, brought something new.

At Tokoriki, a lagoon-side resort in the Mamanucas, a staff of in-resident "elders" with a wealth of Fijian lore introduced us to the "lovo feast," an ancient village tradition.

"The lovo is more than a meal," said Penkioni Sale, as the chef's helpers wrapped bundles of chicken, pork, taro and yams in aluminum foil, layered them between palm and banana leaves atop hot rocks, then buried the lot under heaps of dirt. "A family feast like this brings all the cousins and aunts together and reminds us of our common heritage."

At Fiji's largest and only five-star property, the Intercontinental Golf Resort and Spa at Natadola Beach, we arrived on Sunday in time to visit the nearby Methodist church. The choir's vocal powers and gift for harmony "raised the roof" of the wood-frame cottage, a concert so loud it could be



The staff sings the Fijian farewell song, "Iso Lei," to guests departing from Castaway Resort on Qalito Island.

heard through ear plugs, outside the open windows and down the lane.

Checking into the Outrigger Hotel on the Lagoon, a family-style resort on the Coral Coast, it became the base for another set of "firsts," including a jet boat trip into the highlands on the winding Sigatoka River, another "lovo" dinner — this one with music — and a traditional fire-walking ceremony, a bit stagey but popular with the guests.

A real highlight was our day at Tubairata (toom-bye-RA-ta), a traditional Fijian village in the hills, where we were treated to a tour, a lengthy

kava ceremony and a traditional feast. The entire village crowded into the community building for the event, where every woman came up to tell us her name and shyly wait to hear ours.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, we sampled each dish and smacked our lips in appreciation. Eventually, it was time for the men to sing the "men's dance" and invite every woman to join him in a lively two-step.

Our last destination — before Castaway unexpectedly joined the itinerary — was to the Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort on Savusavu Bay on the island of Vanua Levu.

Sited near Fiji's most unspoiled marine reefs, this elegant resort offers diving trips and snorkeling as part of a larger educational mission: to protect and promote ocean health.

Cosseted in our luxurious thatched-roof accommodations, we dipped into the outdoor plunge pool to watch the stars come out.

With so much to see, most of Fiji slipped by unseen. On my wish list for next time? A personal peek at the some of the mysterious islands that lie, sunset framed, on the Fijian horizon. Like the Pied Piper, they also beckon castaways to their shores.

Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored in part by the Fiji Tourist Board.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Air Pacific flies non-stop from Los Angeles to Nadi, a 10-hour flight leaving just before midnight and arriving early the next morning. Qantas and Air New Zealand also fly from the United States.

STAYING THERE: Most resorts are not all-inclusive, but those in very remote areas often provide a choice of meal plans. Non-motorized water sports equipment, resort facilities and chil-

dren's activities are usually free. Dive shops are independent contractors that charge separately for gear, air, snorkel sets and lessons.

◆ Castaway Resort, on Qalito Island west of Nadi: castawayfiji.com

◆ Tokoriki Island Resort, north Mamanuca group: tokoriki.com

◆ Outrigger on the Lagoon, Coral Coast: outriggerfiji.com

◆ Intercontinental Golf Resort and Spa, Coral Coast: intercontinental.com

◆ Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort, Savusavu: fjijoresort.com

TOURS: Tour guides and outfitters — big business in Fiji — are available everywhere; ask at your hotel's front desk. Tours include hotel pick-up and delivery, eliminating the need for a rental car. Taxis for short and longer jaunts are easy to arrange.