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Castaways on Fiji: Notes from the Coral Kingdom

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QUALITO ISLAND, Fiji - We were dozing on the sand at the edge of the bluest lagoon I'd ever seen when suddenly I remembered. The snorkel trip. Grabbing our masks we rushed to the dive shack, catching the skiff as it was pulling out for the ride to the far side of the lagoon.

"You can't go home until you've seen the Malolo Barrier Reef," said Kima Tagitagivalu, dive guide at Castaway, a family-friendly resort on Fiji's northwest coast. He checked off our names and handed us our swim fins. "A few years ago the district chief, Ratu (Chief) Seva Vatunitu, made it tabu for fishing and collecting. The people - even the fishermen - respect that decision and the fish have come back."

Being there, in the Mamanuca Archipelago, was kismet. If a last-minute schedule change hadn't delayed our flight back to Los Angeles, we would never have washed up on Castaway at all. But as often happens here in the carefree South Pacific, changes can be lucky. We could have booked an airport hotel in Nadi (NAN-dee), on Viti Levu, the main island. Or found a room at one of the Coral Coast's tourist hotels. Instead, we emailed a friend at home, an indefatigable Fiji booster, for advice.

"Go to Castaway on the ferry route, about 14 miles offshore," she answered. "Lots of sun, a gorgeous beach, starry nights. Great food and secluded. An ideal place to relax and catch up before heading home. Leave by mid-afternoon and you'll be back at the airport with time to spare."

With mask and fins in hand we grabbed a seat and the skiff headed for deep water, speeding up until the prow bounced over the waves. I had just gotten a good grip on the gunwales when the boat slowed over the reef. Peering down through the glass-clear water, Tagitagivalu found a sandy patch and dropped the anchor. He checked his watch. "We've got an hour before the tide turns," he said, counting heads as we splashed off the stern ladder.

Turning over, I looked down, and said (silently, into my snorkel), "Wow!" We've seen some pretty special coral over the years. But the Malolo Reef, 75 feet high over the ocean floor, was more fantastic than any animated film. Below me, thousands of hard and soft corals of every shape and color crowded together, swaying gently with the tide. Here was a ribbon of pinks, blood red and



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soft purple; there a swirl of electric green, custard yellow branches and chocolate brown leaves. For an hour we floated to and fro, enchanted, until Tagitagivalu touched my shoulder and broke the spell. With the tide turning and the waves breaking, we hurriedly swam back to the boat.

Castaway is hard to forget. But truth to tell, it's just one of many resorts in the Mamanuca Group, each with its own style. If you visit here you'll have to pick one, since they're really the only lodging option. The lagoons are a perfect ten and so is the sand, burnished over millennia to tiny golden specks. But only at a resort will you find shade, fresh water, food and dare I say it, souvenirs. Even native villages are few and far between, and the smallest islands - like the rocky islet where actor Tom Hanks filmed "Castaway" - are uninhabitable.

Take Tokoriki Resort, on hilly Tokoriki Island. A storied retreat favored by couples, Tokoriki's deep well is what fills the water tanks for cooking, washing, topping up the infinity swimming pool, watering the garden and supplying the bathrooms in the resort's 34 luxurious thatched bures (BOOR-rays, cottages). Waiters serve chef-prepared cuisine in the airy dining room and guides organize snorkel trips from the lounge. As the sun dips toward the western horizon, the guests enjoy the spectacle from deck chairs beside the pool. For us, it was paradise.

Even better were the resort's half-dozen in-resident "elders," experts in Fijian lore and traditions. If you want to know the back story and why, ask them about village life, or join in as they pass a bowl of kava, strum a guitar and reminisce. The weekly "Lovo Feast" was also the real deal. As the guests gathered to watch, the kitchen staff shoved hot rocks into an earthen pit. These were layered with banana and palm leaves, topped with bundles of securely wrapped chicken, pork, taro and yams, and smothered in dirt. By twilight, dinner was ready.

"The lovo is more than a meal," said Penkioni Sale, on hand to supervise. "A family feast like this, still held in the villages, brings all the cousins and aunts together and reminds us of our common heritage."

The Mamanucas are poster-perfect. But the main island, Viti Levu, is the cultural and commercial heart of Fiji. Here we checked into the Outrigger Hotel On The Lagoon, on the Coral Coast, our base for exploring. Told that Fijian choirs excel and anxious to hear them, we decided to attend a Sunday service at a tiny Methodist church. The 12-person choir, mostly elderly, looked tired and wan. And when they sang the hymns, each from memory, a cappella, in harmony, and with perfect pitch, they raised the rafters. As the melody soared over the congregation and out the open windows, people in the lane stopped to listen.

Was the jet-boat ride on the Sigatoka River a canned affair, for tourists? Yes, but we signed up anyway. Scenic and fun, it turned memorable when the boat stopped for a tour of Tubairata (toom-bye-RAH-ta), a traditional hill village. Welcomed by Kini, the village's official greeter, we strolled through the community followed by a parade of chattering kids, then headed for the Community Center. Here the entire village - 45 people - sat cross-legged on the floor awaiting our arrival. The ensuing kava ceremony, with coconut shell cups and ritual clapping ended and was followed by a lunch served on palm fronds.

As the women cleared away the plates, we stood up to leave. But things were just heating up. The men began to sing, and soon one man, then two men and then ten more stood up and asked the ladies - all the ladies - to dance. Soon everyone was up, arms clutching waists, doing the Fijian two-step. Yes, these tours are pre-planned and the villages earn money for hosting guests. But when Fijians welcome you, believe me, no matter how it happens it's genuine.

Typically Fijian, the Outrigger is set among lush gardens, with ferns, flowers and shade trees. Geared toward families, the layout includes a huge swimming pool, large dining room and a staff of soft-spoken ever-smiling nannies, waiters, bus boys and maids. The Outrigger is on the shore, as advertised. But this particular lagoon is so large and flat that even at high tide the water is too shallow even for dipping. The lovely view from the bungalows compensates.

We shopped in town, tasted odd fruits in the open-air market, signed up for a massage in the

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Outrigger's hilltop spa and dozed by the pool. The Outrigger's lovo feast - enough to serve a small army, included traditional dishes prepared in the kitchen and served buffet style, in the dining room. Even the troupe of Fijian fire walkers, who put on a ceremonial performance in the outdoor amphitheater, were impressive. A Doubting Thomas, I sneaked up front afterwards to see if the rocks really were hot, and earned a blister for my trouble.

Most of Fiji went unseen, including visits to some of the country's other islands, come-hither shapes on the near horizon. They're on our list for next time. Like the Pied Piper, they, too, beckon castaways to their shores.

IF YOU GO:

BABYSITTING AND NANNIES: Fijians like children. As a result, most resorts have experienced nannies on staff and offer free and/or affordable rates (\$2-\$5) per hour for baby and toddler care. For children 5 and older, kids' clubs and guided camp activities are generally free.

TOURS AND TRIPS: Outfitters and guided tours are a big business. Ask at the hotel concierge for suggestions and recommendations. Most include hotel pickup and delivery. Car rentals are also available - driving is easy (if you can manage left side drive). Taxis are numerous and drivers are helpful; settle on the destination and price in advance.

RESORTS & CONTACTS:

- Castaway Resort, on Qalito Island west of Nadi: www.castawayfiji.com
- Tokoriki Island Resort, north Mamanuca Group: www.tokoriki.com
- Outrigger On The Lagoon, Coral Coast, on Viti Levu: www.outriggerfiji.com
- Fiji Tourist Office: www.tourismfiji.com

GETTING THERE: Air Pacific flies 10 hours nonstop from Los Angeles to Nadi. The plane crosses the International Date Line, so the calendar date on arrival is one day later. The return flight gains a day, arriving the day it left. Quantas and American also fly from Honolulu, with one stop.

GUIDEBOOKS:

- "Frommer's South Pacific," by Bill Goodwin, is abbreviated but informative; check it out at the library and read it before going.
- "Moon Fiji Guide, Avalon Press," by David Stanley. A keeper to take with you. Packed with personal information, background reading, maps, tips, lodging reviews, a brief history and the cultural back story.
- "Lonely Planet Fiji Guide," co-written. Has color photos and more emphasis on budget travel. Compare with the Moon Guide for your preferred style and content.

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