

Fresh ideas for winter trips

By LYNN O'ROURKE HAYES
The Dallas Morning News

A winter wonderland of opportunity awaits families eager to learn something new this season. Here are five suggestions:

Start small, Idaho Springs, Colo.

This small family-owned ski and board resort is committed to providing an accessible, reasonably priced mountain experience. Covering 75 acres in the Arapaho National Forest and located just 35 miles from downtown Denver, Echo Mountain Park offers free parking, Wi-Fi and affordable ski and lesson packages.

Contact: 303-325-7347; echomtnpark.com.

Olympic thrills, Park City, Utah

In 2002, Utah hosted the largest crowds ever to gather for the Winter Olympics. That year, 2,500 Olympic athletes representing 77 nations came together for competition and camaraderie. Today, Utah Olympic Legacy works to keep the spirit of the games alive; they also make it possible for the public to take a turn in a bobsled speeding up to 80 mph and experiencing 5 Gs of force. Or consider flying headfirst aboard the skeleton sled through the final four turns of the Olympic track.

Contact: 436-658-4206; utaholympiclegacy.com.

Discover skijoring, Red Lodge, Mont.

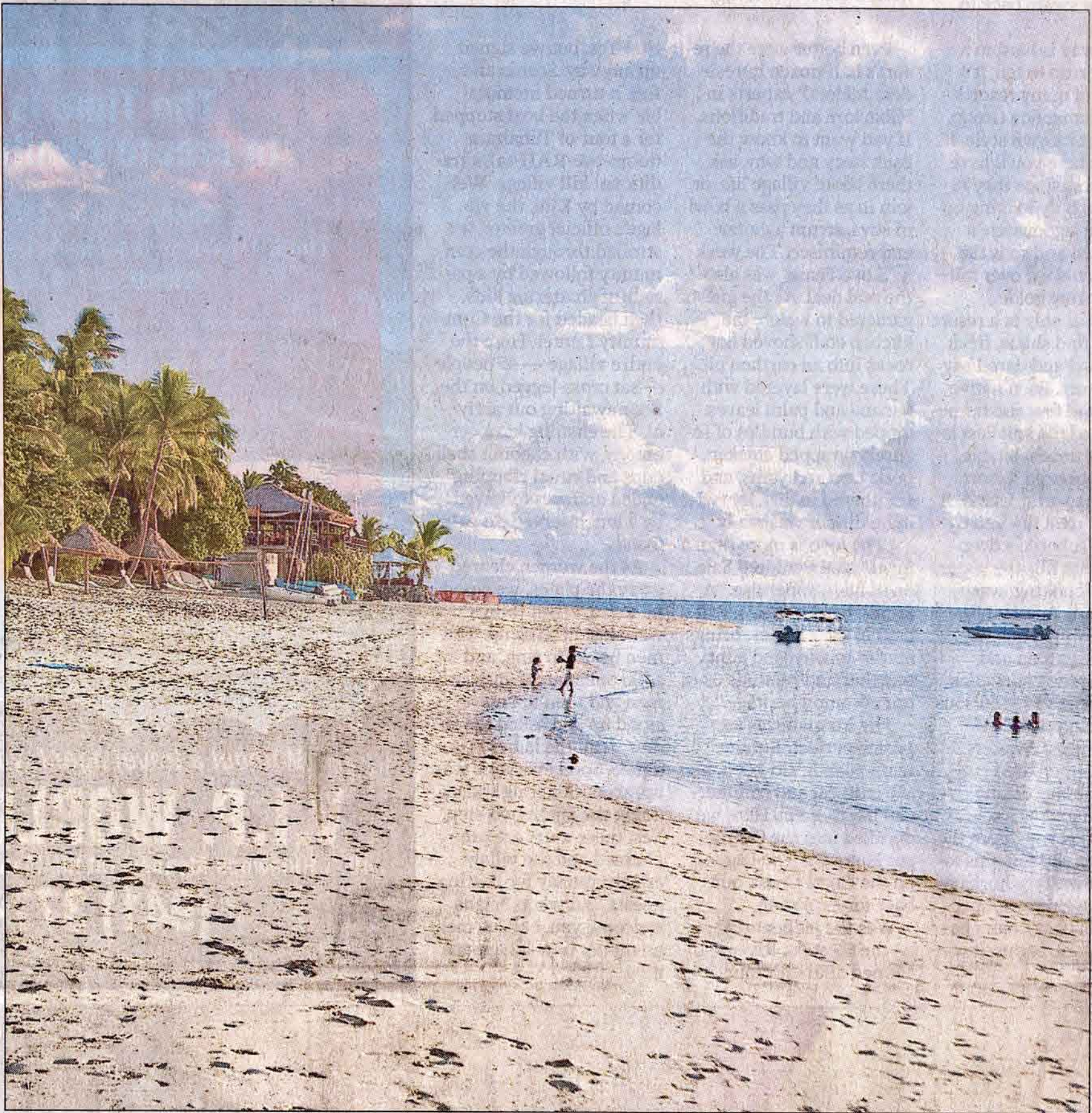
Watch as teams of horses, riders and skiers maneuver snowy tracks, slalom gates and jumps while moving as fast as 25 mph. Catch the long jump competition where a skier is pulled over a jump by a rider on a horse. The sport, said to have Scandinavian roots, holds its national finals in this small Montana town. March 9, 10, 11.

Contact: 406-446-1718; redlodge.com; redlodge-mountain.com.

Ganondagan's Winter Games and Sports, Victor, N.Y.

This upstate festival offers families a chance to learn about how the region's Native Americans lived and celebrated

D Washed ashore in PARADISE



The iconic South Seas beach and lagoon is seen at Castaway Resort, Qalito Island, Fiji.

STEVE HAGGERTY/MCT

A surprise stop in Fiji turns into the perfect respite

By ANNE Z. COOKE
and STEVE HAGGERTY
McClatchy-Tribune
News Service

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 care-free 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 cor-

TRAVEL FROM 8D

al 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 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 Tagitagivala 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 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.



McCLATCHY TRIBUNE

The staff sings a welcome song as visitors arrive at Castaway Resort, Qalito Island, Fiji.

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.

Was the jet-boat ride on the Sigatoka River a canned affair, for tour-

ists? 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 villagers earn money for hosting guests. But when Fijians welcome you, believe me, no matter how it happens it's genuine.