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Hiding out in the South Pacific

Story by Anne Z. Cook Photos by Steve Haggerty

TOKORIKI ISLAND RESORT, Fiji – They come to Tokoriki -- Germans and Australians, Texans and Virginians -- like migrating sea birds. But how do so many travelers hear about this luxury hideaway in Fiji’s sun-kissed Mamanuca Archipelago? What brings people from around the globe to this out-of-the-way isle in the South Pacific, an adults-only retreat for honeymooners, celebrities and captains of industry?

A stellar reputation, of course. Now in its 22nd year, Tokoriki has perfected the recipe for success, earning top rankings in travel magazines and credibility the old fashioned way: by word of mouth.

Stop for a moment, close your eyes and conjure the image: A thatched, peaked-roof open-air lodge overlooking the lagoon. Thirty-four individual palm-shaded bures (BOOR-rays), facing the setting sun. A narrow sand beach and boat dock, where Tokoriki’s skiff meets the daily ferry from the mainland, the one you’ll board for the two-hour ride to the island.



Inside the lodge, wicker and bamboo armchairs invite you to sit and chat, sip a glass of fruit juice, order a gin and tonic or retire with a book. At dinner, ferns and flowers bloom around a burbling brook flowing in a channel behind your table. At sunset, you’ll find a lounge chair on the infinity pool deck and watch the western sky shift from blue and gold to fiery pink and orange, fading away to a violet dusk.

California-based travelers, we thought we’d come a long way. But our fellow guests came farther by halves. The minimum stay is a week; many of them were there for two. We, sadly, had a last minute three-night reservation, not time enough to absorb the resort’s daily rhythms: cooked breakfast overlooking the lagoon, expedition to a nearby island or traditional village, a snorkel and scuba trip, an afternoon swim, kayaking, a sunset cruise, spa treatments and delicious cuisine.

But it’s the staff at Tokoriki whom you’ll remember longest. Hailing from many Fijian islands, they’ve been with the resort for years. “We’ve got a remarkable group of people,” said General Manager Robert Ring. “And we’re very lucky to have on site a half-dozen Fijians who grew up in a different generation with the old traditions and customs. Because of them, our guests experience the real Fiji.”

A top-to-bottom remodel two years ago enlarged the main lodge, brought in more light and air, upgraded the bures and built four new villas with posh amenities and private plunge



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pools. The gleaming new infinity pool frees up the original pool for scuba school lessons. If you want personal coaching in quiet surroundings, this is the place. Deep water dive sites are fabulous.

Save the beach not for swimming but for long soulful walks. Tokoriki's least appealing feature (in my opinion), it's narrow, edged by rocks and a magnet for washed-up seaweed, which the staff diligently rakes away. But snorkeling in the lagoon is remarkable. Probably the most lasting experience was the morning tour to Yanuya, a Fijian village on the next island.

The visit was proof of the old saw that "Fijians are the world's friendliest people." You'll never encounter so many smiles or say "bula" so often as you will in a Fijian village, though poverty, by western standards, is no stranger. Residents sleep and cook in dark, one-room cinderblock huts, roofed with thatch or corrugated tin, lit by a light bulb and without glass or screens on their window openings. Dirt paths do for sidewalks, and flush toilets (one is available to visitors) are few. The school – full of exuberant, chattering kids anxious to show you their pads and pencils – has few books and fewer pads and pencils.

As a village guest – you're on private property – it's customary to bring a few dollars, not as an entry fee (as you might suspect), but as a gift to your hosts. Little gifts for the children make a big difference: Pencils, paper, crayons, watercolors and copy books bring joy. After your visit, stroll past the souvenir stands manned by the local ladies. Sadly, these are the self-same beads and bracelets sold in every hotel throughout Fiji.

Tokoriki's tennis court is in the rear garden, adjacent to woods and lawns. A path leads to a pretty stone chapel which stays busy with weddings and renewals of vows. Tokoriki lays out receptions and banquets; you reserve room for your guests in the bures. Each is air conditioned, has a coffee maker, ironing board and iron, king bed with a filmy mosquito net, inside and outdoor shower, and an outdoor patio overlooking the lagoon.

A few bits of modern life remain absent, like TVs and telephones. "Some guests, when they arrive, say they wish we supplied TV," said former GM Andrew Travers. "But after a week, they change their minds. They'd rather chill out."

Getting there: Air Pacific and Continental Airlines operate 10-hour-long overnight flights from points on the U.S. west coast to Nadi, leaving after dinner and arriving early the next morning. If you're flying to Los Angeles or San Francisco first, arrive in time for dinner before continuing on.

More info: Visit the Tokoriki Island Resort at www.tokoriki.com. Email requests for current prices and special rates to marketing@tokoriki.com. At the time of this writing, rack rates start at U.S. \$624 per person, per night, for a minimum seven nights. Variations in the exchange rate may change that. All-inclusive meal plans, with wine, add about U.S.



\$113 per person per day (there is nowhere else on the island to eat).

Special packages may include a roundtrip ticket for an 80-minute catamaran ride with South Seas Cruises from the Denarau Marina (near Nadi) to Tokoriki. You can also arrange a sightseeing helicopter transfer.

Fiji Tourism publishes first-class brochures, pamphlets and maps. Email infodesk@tourismfiji.com.

A personal note: Writer-photographers Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty, who rarely buy souvenirs, couldn't say no to a matched pair of Fijian war clubs.