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Fiji: Where you find the family you didn't know you had

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Story

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SAVUSAVU, FIJI — As the departing guests gathered under the coconut palms to wait for the airport shuttle, Jane began to sniffle and tears ran down her cheeks.

The rest of us, startled, exchanged looks. Knowing her, a once-upon-a-time debutante with manners to match, we thought she'd been put off by Koro Sun Resort, the most family-friendly - and the noisiest - of the three beach resorts we'd visited in Fiji, southwest of Samoa in the tropical South Pacific.

"I hate to leave," she said, mopping her eyes as the Fijian staff assembled to say goodbye. Turning from one smiling face to the next, she hugged the housekeeper, high-fived the kayaking guide and gave a thumbs-up to the guitar player who'd invited her to share in a late-night bowl of "kava," the pungent drink the locals call "grog."

"I'll never see them again," she lamented, blowing her nose as she climbed into the bus. "It feels like losing the family I didn't know I had."

Compared with dreamy Yasawa Island Resort, on a pristine sand beach in the remote northwest Yasawa Archipelago, or with Nanuku Resort, a group of villas in Pacific Harbour, on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, Koro Sun on the island of Vanua Levu did feel a bit like summer camp in Minnesota.

Each day started with a bang and didn't slow down until the Southern Cross appeared in the sky. We were welcomed with a fruit drink served in a coconut and steered to a chair for a 10-minute foot massage. Shouting kids ran through the lobby on their way to the pool and water slide, passing a group of cyclists geared up for a ride.

A three-generation family partied at the adjacent dinner table and all 108 of the resort's guests packed into the Clubhouse to watch pounding drums and a floor-thumping "meke" (traditional Fijian dance). We donned snorkeling gear and went out with the dive boat, floating over the coral reefs while the divers deep below - shadowy but visible - snaked their way through the "Dungeons and Dragons" canyon.

Meanwhile, Jane made her own plans, quietly slipping away to kayak through the cave at Bat Island with Manu, the guide, indulging in a meditative massage in the secluded Rainforest Spa, exploring the town of Savusavu alone and identifying indigenous flowers with Leba, the florist.

We'd been anticipating that last morning, too, but for a different reason. As seasoned Fiji fans we knew the staff would assemble to sing "Isa Lei," the national "love song," the lyrics in Fijian. "Must you leave

me," sing the sopranos, their voices rising over the altos, each lingering phrase echoed an octave lower by the men's deep notes.

"Every moment my heart for you is yearning; those happy hours are fleeting," they sing, the last refrain fading away. It's enough to put a lump in any cynic's throat, even skeptics convinced that "Isa Lei" is the boss' way of ensuring guest satisfaction.

But the truth is that most Fijians, wherever they live on this 322-island paradise, would sing it voluntarily. Raised in traditional villages where choir-singing is the soul of the church and children learn harmony at their mother's knee, music is part of the culture. Think humming when you're happy; whistling while you work.

But a single song doesn't mean that Fiji's beach resorts are alike. Far from it, in fact. Each has a unique personality, shaped by location, climate, the topography and the owner's vision of what Fiji is all about. This endless variety is why so many travelers come back over and over, staying at two or three resorts on any one trip.

Yasawa Island Resort, where we'd been before, is a deluxe hideaway on a blue lagoon, accessible only by helicopter, small plane or boat. The experience, with 18 traditionally thatched and furnished bures (BUR-ay, a bungalow), candle-lit dinners, chef's menus and no-pressure days, is a dream come true for self-motivated explorers, A-list luminaries and honeymooners needing space.

"We're on Fiji time here," said Manasa Ragigia, Yasawa's resident elder and the "Spokesman" at Bukama, the neighboring Fijian village. "You want to fish all day? Fish," he told us, mixing drinks at the sunset cocktail party. "You want to kayak or snorkel? Whatever you like, it's your choice."

Indeed, our fellow guests - including a honeymooning couple - knew exactly what they wanted. Mornings were filled with boat dives on nearby reefs and coral mounts, snorkeling off the beach, windsurfing, fishing for marlin or sailing the catamaran. Laid-back afternoons offered meet-the-people tours in Bukama, lolling in the infinity pool, reading, joining the cultural and basket-weaving demonstrations and beach combing. On Tuesday, Ragigia and Chef Talala Tupou prepared a "lovo" (underground oven) feast, a chance to taste most of Fiji's favorite ingredients and dishes.

Our bure, tucked among ferns, hibiscus and palms, had a private deck, plantation shutters, hammock, a cookie jar that was never empty, indoor and outdoor showers, piles of towels and air conditioning.

When the honeymooners emerged from their bure, it was for an idyllic picnic alone. Set up with an umbrella, beach chairs and champagne, they were escorted to a distant beach and left for the afternoon. Asked about the experience, they said that it took only a long look west across the passage now called Bligh Water to understand why HMS Bounty Commander William Bligh and a dozen loyal tars, put adrift in a launch and chased by cannibals, felt "they were at world's end."

A signature outing was the boat ride south to the Blue Lagoon, flooded limestone caverns where the eponymous movie featuring 14-year-old Brooke Shields was filmed. Depositing us on a narrow beach, Yasawa's guides waited while the cave guide, Aku Nacoba (na-THUM-ba), escorted us up the cliff and down a tunnel into the eerie, water-sculpted caves. So eerie, it turned out, that besides the two of us, Jane was the only other traveler brave enough to swim through the half-lit chamber.

Back on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, we headed for Nanuku Resort, a gated group of new and remodeled villas on the lagoon in Pacific Harbour. The villas, privately owned but in the rental pool, are grouped around the pool and pool deck, where the torch-lighting ceremony is held at sunset. Depending on how the space is shared, Nanuku has lodging for up to 80 guests, from couples and families to reunions and small meetings.

According to Karen Taylor, the manager, Nanuku's location at the east end of the Coral Coast is why it succeeds as a Fijian-style safari lodge. "With the ocean in front of us and the mountains behind, there's everything from hiking and river rafting to sailing," she said. Since child care (nannies) are also included in the lodging cost, parents can get away for a few hours, or - as the couple staying below us did - "bring the nanny along every day to help with the children."

One couple said they'd played 18 holes of golf at the Country Club; another took a daylong trek across the Namosi Highlands. We saw the fire walkers, toured a hillside village and explored the vegetable market in the town of Navua.

A family with teenagers signed up for surfing at "world famous" Yanuca Island; the next day they headed south across the channel to Beqa (pronounced BENG-ah) Island Lagoon, to dive with the sharks. The dive sounded so fascinating that we added it to our wish-list for next time. In Fiji, said Taylor, "even the sharks think you're family."

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GOING THERE: If Fiji is your final destination, try Fiji Airways' nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Nadi International Airport. Wonderfully convenient for residents of Los Angeles, the 10-hour flight departs at 11:30 p.m. and arrives in Nadi at 5:30 a.m., in time for breakfast. (With time zone changes and the International Dateline, you lose a day but gain it back on your return.)

Be aware that some travelers continuing on have reported that delayed departures and late arrivals have forced them to miss a connecting flight, and that ticket agents have been less than helpful in booking alternate flights or arranging refunds. At www.fijiairways.com

LODGING: Tipping is not required or expected in Fiji. Most resorts include meals and use of the pool, beach, lounge chairs, hot tubs, tennis courts, snorkel gear, Internet access, in-room safes and television. To avoid hidden charges before you book, request details on anything that could cost extra, from taxes, fees, guides and babysitters to wines, beverages, boat rides, diving gear and local phone calls.

RESORTS: At Yasawa Island Resort, all-inclusive rates for two in a beach-front bure start at US \$850 per night. Bar drinks, select wines and spa treatments are extra. For more go to www.yasawa.com, or email erin@yasawa.com.

At Nanuku Resort, in Pacific Harbour, a typical low-season, five-night lodging package for two starts at \$755 per night and includes meals, on-site facilities, a 30-minute massage and some beverages. Non-package bookings may not include meals. Go to www.nanukufiji.com, or email info@nanukufiji.com.

At Koro Sun Resort, lodging for two starts at \$430 a night for a garden bure. In the off-season the Edgewater bures, normally \$750 per night, are priced at \$525. In 2015, Koro Sun is introducing Fiji's "first, true over-water bungalows," to be installed on rafts moored to the shore. Meals, facilities and most activities are included. Massage treatments and boat dives, both provided by concessionaires, cost extra. PHOTOS (from MCT Photo Service, 312-222-4194): WLT-FIJI

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