

Currency conversion

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 sceptics 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 travellers 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, snorkelling 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 favourite ingredients and dishes.

Our bure, tucked among fems, 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."

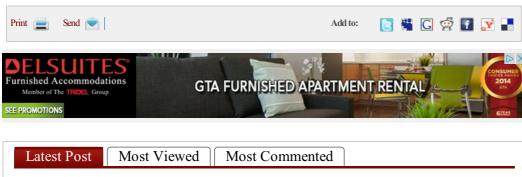
A signature outing was the boat ride south to the Blue Lagoon, flooded limestone caverns where the eponymous movie featuring 14year-old Brooke Shields was filmed. Depositing us on a narrow beach, Yasawa's guides waited while the cave guide, Aku Nacoba (na-THUM-ba), escorted us up the cliff and down a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