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Fiji vacationers leave with tales of adventure, tears of goodbye



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A visitor takes an end-of-the-day nap at the Edgewater Beach Club on the lagoon at Koro Sun Resort in Savusavu, Fiji.

IF YOU GO

Fiji

If Fiji is your final destination, try Fiji

By Anne Z. Cooke & Steve Haggerty

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For information on travel to Fiji, visit www.fiji.travel.

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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.

"I hate to leave," Jane said as the Fijian staff of Koro Sun Resort 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.

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

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. Shouting kids ran through the lobby 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 had been anticipating that last morning, too, but for a different reason.

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.

Koro Sun was more high energy than the other Fiji resorts we visited — dreamy Yasawa Island Resort, on a pristine sand beach in the remote northwest Yasawa Archipelago; and Nanuku Resort, a group of villas in Pacific Harbour, on Viti Levu, Fiji's main island.

Each has a unique personality, shaped by location, climate, topography and the owner's vision of Fiji. This endless variety is why so many travelers come back again and again, staying at two or three resorts on any one trip.

Yasawa Island Resort, where we had 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 (bungalows), candlelit 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. "You want to fish all day? Fish. You want to kayak or snorkel? Whatever you like, it's your choice."

Indeed, our fellow travelers knew exactly what they wanted. Mornings were filled with going on boat dives, snorkeling off the beach, windsurfing, fishing for marlin or sailing the catamaran.

Laid-back afternoons offered meet-the-people tours in the neighboring village of Bukama, lolling in the infinity pool, reading, joining the cultural and basket-weaving demonstrations, and



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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.

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, escorted us up the cliff and down a tunnel into the eerie, water-sculpted caves. So eerie 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 are privately owned but in the rental pool.

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.

Because child care is 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 had 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 to Beqa 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, Taylor said, "Even the sharks think you're family."

Airways' nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Nadi International

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