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Fiji residents seem to revel in showing visitors how sweet life can be

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune News Service Published 3:21 pm CST, Thursday, February 15, 2018



Photo: Steve Haggerty



IMAGE 1 OF 7

Sun pushes away wispy clouds above Beach Bungalow No. 1, at Tides Reach Resort, on Taveuni, Fiji's Garden Isle. (Steve Haggerty/Colorworld/TNS)

Taveuni, Fiji —

If Fiji was nothing more than sand and sea, palm fronds and flowers, it wouldn't matter which South Pacific beach resort you visited. Every vacation would be just another ho-hum adventure.

But after 15 years and as many visits to this 333-island nation, I've got a pretty good idea why each destination promises a unique experience. What's the secret? It's the Fijians themselves, proud to be Fijian and proud to show you their country.

Sau Bay Resort, on Vanua Levu, the second largest island, was the first stop on my most recent trip to Fiji. Still jet-lagged, I was sitting on the deck of the lodge, gazing over the bay, when the bushes below me suddenly stirred and two hands and a pair of clippers appeared, followed by a head.



Then the head looked up, saw my feet and without missing a beat asked me what I thought of the umbrella-like trees towering over the lodge. Thus was my introduction to the owner, Nigel Douglas, a Scotsman by ancestry and a fifth-generation Fijian.

"These are rain trees," he said, affectionately patting a gnarled trunk. "I took one look and I knew this was the place for me. You don't often see them so close to the shore — saltwater, you know — but they're thriving. And look at these tiny white flowers. These bushes are rare, but native." He paused, scanning the hillside. "This was bare when we bought it. Carroll and I planted everything you see."

"How did you ever find this spot?" I asked. "Coming across the bay, you can't see it."

"That's easy," he said. "Fiji is home. I've been to most of these islands, dived every reef. Anything you want to know, people, politics, gardens, just ask. Do you drink wine? Maybe later."

I'd already met Carroll, who emerged from her garden to show me Sau Bay's four ocean-view cottages, called "bures" (BOOR-ays), each equipped with big beds, mosquito netting, private baths, coffee makers, a cookie jar and air conditioning.

Casual but courteous, the Douglasses know how to make travelers feel at home. On most mornings Carroll worked at her desk while Divemaster Nigel suited up to guide the resort's six other guests to Rainbow Reef and the Great White Wall, 10 minutes away by dive boat.

That left precious private time, to kayak across the bay, hike uphill and (with assistant manager Sarah as guide) visit nearby Kioa Island, the adopted home of Polynesian immigrants from Tuvalu; rising oceans are washing away their villages.

Four days later it was time to leave Sau Bay, this time to go to Tides Reach Resort, on Taveuni, Fiji's Garden Isle.

More Information

If you go

Sau Bay hosts small weddings, honeymooners, families and scuba divers. A la carte rates keep prices lower than its competitors. Cottages for two or more start at \$225 per night; add \$60 per day per person for meals; kids are welcome. Bottled drinks and guided outings cost extra. At www.saubay.com.

Tides Reach has been discovered by multi-family travelers. Villas for two start at \$875 per night; the deluxe villa (for four) is \$1,275. Prices available for the entire resort. Rates include airport transfers, all meals, child care, kayaks, paddle boards, snorkel gear and on-site events. Guided tours and bottled drinks are extra. www.tidesreachresort.com.

Yasawa Island Resort's rates per night are all-inclusive, except for alcoholic beverages. Listed rates start at \$1,053 for two in a bure; frequent discounts list \$800. Included are kayaks, paddle boards, other sports gear, tennis

Expecting a clerk and a check-in desk, I was welcomed like royalty as the staff — 10 handsome Fijians — lined up with hearty "bulas" and firm handshakes. "You must be thirsty," said bartender William Celua, eyes twinkling, big smile, handing me Fiji's traditional welcome drink, fresh coconut water topped with a flower.

Just 4 years old, Tides Reach is still growing, adding two bures and a dive shop later this year. The bures are sleek and simple, uncluttered white with minimalist furnishings and bold Asian and Fijian art. The main lodge, airy and spacious with two open-air sides, looks out over a sandy beach and the bluest of blue water.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said guest relations manager Paul Gonebeci, handing me a list of possible activities.

"Some people don't want to do anything but relax," he added, nodding toward a guest on the beach, reading a book under an umbrella. "But you might want to see the waterfalls or the hiking trails, so we should pick a time you like."

courts, Wi-Fi in public areas, non-alcoholic beverages, and most guided outings: snorkeling, catamarans, sailing, half-day Blue Lagoon Cave trips, village tours and private beach picnics. www.yasawa.com.



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