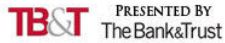




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Finding Fiji (and each other)

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty Tribune News Service (TNS)

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MATAMANOVA, Fiji — “You’re up early,” said Dillon, joining us at the breakfast table at Matamanoa Island Resort, in Fiji, piling his wet suit and swim fins on the chair where we’d be sure to see them.

“Did Dad tell you? Blue sky, no wind, a perfect day for a shark dive?”

He paused, waiting for an answer. “I know, you guessed it. Occam’s razor, huh?” he said, grinning. “You don’t mind being alone, do you?”

We were glad he cared. But no, we could never be lonely on Matamanoa Island, in the Mamanuca Archipelago, in the central South Pacific. If we needed company, the resorts’ other guests were on hand, not to mention our family, three generations of us on vacation together.

And there was the island to explore, a poster-perfect South Pacific hideaway. A limestone cone sticking up out of the sea, it was an encyclopedia of nature, from birds and fish, to an explosion of bright flowers and craggy shade trees.

Walking barefoot along the shore, on the powdery soft sand, you’d see crabs digging holes, fish in the shallows, and a hoard of wave-tumbled sea shells and coral, washed up from deeper water.

Did we feel left behind, now that the kids were growing up? For a nano-second, maybe. But in truth, it was nice to be alone, no longer in charge of organizing these annual family trips, or planning the days. We could swim, climb to the summit, or read under an umbrella, as the moment dictated.

Our first family trip, more than a decade ago, was a last-minute idea, patched together on a whim. But adventuring together proved such a rewarding way to stay connected that it gradually became a tradition.

When the kids were toddlers, in St. Lucia, we built sand castles together while their parents slipped away for a sunset cruise. In Toronto, we played Marco Polo in the pool, while the moms and dads enjoyed a candlelit dinner.

Six years later we climbed the pyramids together, at Teotihuacan, in Mexico. But Dillon, now 20, was long past making sand castles. Like his cousins, he wanted to ski the moguls, fish in Alaska and climb Colorado's "fourteeners."

While he studied the menu, we stepped outside, bending an ear for the chirps and twitters overhead, and catching our breath as the sun peeked over the horizon. Sending gold and amber rays across the water, it illuminated each nearby island, one after another.

With the night fading, a colony of fruit bats suddenly appeared above — like Halloween witches on their broomsticks — coming home to rest in the treetops. Circling overhead, their five-foot wingspans catching the updrafts, they plopped down on the top-most branches, squawking and arguing.

"Look, they're shoving each other," said Dillon, joining us to peer up through the leaves. "Do you think they have a pecking order?" he said, as they folded their wings and gradually fell asleep. "Another 10 minutes and you wouldn't know they were there."

The bats, migratory visitors, were new for Dillon. But we'd spotted them before, in the Mamanucas and elsewhere on Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, Fiji's two largest islands. On our first Fiji trip, we did the tourist route: botanical gardens, visits to native villages, a day-cruise on the Sigatoka River and snorkeling off the hotel beach.

And by the third visit we were ready for bigger stuff: rafting on the Upper Navua River, kayaking on the Luva River in the Namosi Highlands, hiking to waterfalls and climbing Mount Tomanivi, in the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park, at 4,344 feet, Fiji's highest peak.

But a family trip to Fiji always seemed too far away, and too expensive. Until recently, that is, when a Fiji Airways promotion popped up in our email, advertising round-trip, nonstop tickets from Los Angeles to Nadi for about \$750 each, half off the regular price, an offer too generous to ignore.

Then, with everyone on board, the dates sorted and the tickets bought, we hit a snag. Most of the resorts we'd bragged about were overbooked. Castaway Island Resort, our all-time family favorite, had space for three nights. But we'd never been to Matamanoa or to the Sheraton Tokoriki, which did have space. We decided to take a chance.

The Fiji Airways overnight flight, 11 hours from LAX to Nadi, is painless. You have time to read, eat, watch a movie, and then get a good night's sleep. Departing shortly before midnight, it lands at 5 a.m. the next morning, but two days later on the calendar: you've crossed the International Dateline.

Hailing a couple of cabs, we headed for Denarau and the South Seas Ferry dock, where we bought tickets and ate breakfast while waiting to board the ferry. Once on board, we hustled up to the top and found seats, the best place for views of the Mamanucas's green islands and the world's most beautiful peacock-blue water.

After an hour out and hundreds of selfies, son Paul, carrying his out-of-date Padi diving certificate, spoke up.

“You won’t mind, will you, if we go diving?” he said. “I’ll have to take a refresher course. And if Dillon wants to finish the course, we’ll be diving every day. But you couldn’t find a better place to do it. Look at this water, the visibility, it’s like glass! And it’s so calm!”

Two hours later the ferry reached Castaway. Climbing out on the sand we were thrilled (for the 30th time, at least) to see that the staff was waiting, gathered to sing Isa Lei, the Fijian welcome song. We melted with joy. If they’d tried to sell us the island we would have written a check. Our son, meanwhile, made a beeline for the dive shop, 20 feet away on the beach.

That evening, when we gathered for our first candle-lit dinner in Castaway’s inviting, newly designed restaurant, overlooking the blue-green sea, Dillon, beaming with anticipation, announced that they’d all signed up for the dive course. If they were happy, we were happy.

We weren’t sure what we’d find at Matamanoa, next on our itinerary, but it proved as marvelous as Castaway, just different. Catering to guests ages 16 and older, people who come every year, Matamanoa reminded us of a private club, where everyone knows everyone else and we’d been invited to join.

The cocktail hour began on time and was followed by a single dinner seating, with everyone served at once. The ocean-view “villas” were inviting, and the elegant new hilltop suites were the latest in comfort, privacy and spectacular views. Meanwhile, Dillon and the cousins headed straight for the dive shop, for the next round of lessons.

Our last island resort, the Sheraton Tokoriki, surprised us. We'd expected a hotel, but relieved to find a long, low modern building, with an office, gift shop, several dining rooms and a beautiful pool, all overlooking a long beach. The bures, some with plunge pools, formed a small village. The property, swept clean in 2016 by Cyclone Winston, looked bare, and recently planted bushes and trees were still small. But the dining areas were open all day and the pool deck, looking over the ocean, was our meeting place after the dive boat — and the divers — returned.

On our last day, sad to be leaving, we went for one last ocean swim, walking out to a sandy spot where everyone hung out, splashing and bobbing about, wallowing in that delicious warm water, like a giant bathtub. For an hour we bobbed up and down, talking, remembering each day what we'd seen and laughing over the funny things we'd done.

When we close our eyes right now, we can feel it all over again.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

Learn about Fiji at www.fijitravel.com. For more about the resorts, find them as follows:

Castaways Island Resort: www.castawayfiji.com

Matamanoa Island Resort: www.matamanoa.com

Sheraton Tokoriki Resort and Spa: www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/nanti-sheraton-resort-and-spa-tokoriki-island-fiji/

Ferry trips to the Mamanuca Islands: South Sea Cruises at www.ssc.com.fj

Flying from Los Angeles: www.fijiairways.com

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