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**SATURDAY STAR**

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ON3 ON

SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2024 TORONTO STAR

## L4 | LIVING | TRAVEL

## OCEANIA

## Dazzling beaches and deep traditions in Fiji

ANNE Z. COOKE

"That's Tom Hanks' island, in 'Cast Away' the movie," said the passenger sitting nearby, on the rear deck.

We'd seen him standing in line, a college kid in a red shirt, packing and repacking a knapsack while we waited to board the early morning ferry out of Viti Levu, largest of Fiji's 320 islands. Leaning over the railing, he pointed at the horizon and a faint grey-green shape.

"Its real name is Modiki, and it's small, just 100 acres," he said. "But the beach is awesome. Tourists can't wait to go."

No surprise there. For most South Pacific travellers, nothing rivals Fiji's sandy beaches, palm-shaded gardens, starry nights and Melanesian hospitality. We'd island-hopped over the years, tried a dozen different beach resorts, and liked most of them. Until 2019, when we joined a hiking group for a long look at the island's mountains.

Finally last fall, with COVID-19 in decline and Fiji open for tourists, we hopped a plane and headed back, this time for another look at what makes the country tick. Finding hotels wasn't easy: Fiji is to Australians what Hawaii is to Americans. But we crossed our fingers, found five with rooms and struck gold at three places begging for a repeat visit.

The Fiji Orchid, a stately manor house near Viti Levu's northwest shore and the former home of actor Raymond Burr, star of the detective series "Perry Mason," felt nothing like a hotel and everything like a home away from home. With an inviting living room and framed memorabilia, it beckoned at the end of a very long day.

Hotel Manager Deepika Dimlesh

arranged an authentic Fijian dinner, and co-owner Gordon Leewie told tales of Fiji life in the early days. Though Nadi International Airport was 20 minutes away, our cure (BOO-ray, room, house), one of six in the lush tropical garden, was as quiet as a cemetery.

"We've had guests who stayed for weeks," said Dimlesh at dinner. "One was even writing a book. But most are international travellers, businessmen flying through. We tell them, if you have a layover don't try to sleep in the lounge. We'll pick you up, you can use the pool, eat dinner or go to bed, and we'll drive you back."

Curious about Lautoka, Viti Levu's second-largest town on the northwest shore, we hired our guide and driver Kesbo Goundar, who (like many Fijians) speaks Fijian, English and Hindi. Stopping at the town's huge covered market, he bought a couple of lava "sticks," the gifts we would need — for the chief — if we visited a village.

Then it was on to the Sabeto Mountains and the Garden of the Sleeping Giant. A popular park, it was founded by Burr, a worldwide orchid collector. Hundreds of orchids, planted along the trail to the summit, a large headlike rock, are the highlight of a visit. And the adjacent forest — a tower of vines, shadowy branches and strange flowers — was a set waiting for a movie.

The next day we headed up-country to Navala Village, the country's best thatched village, driving past barnyards, gardens, sugar cane fields, villages, the occasional manufacturing plant and Methodist, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Catholic-oriented primary schools.

At first glance Navala looked imp-



ty, until guide Mark Navaroka came out to collect our \$25 entrance fee and a kava stick for the chief.

Turning onto the Nausori Highway Road — not another car in sight — we lurched uphill over a rocky, potholed track for more than an hour, each hill steeper than the one before, until we rounded the top, a photographer's delight. Finally, around the corner, we passed two hunters on horseback with rifles and dogs.

Moving to Viti Levu's southwest corner, we checked into the Inter-Continental Fiji Golf Resort & Spa, a 14-hectare landscaped property on Natadola Bay. And instead of salespeople in suits, the hotel was busy as a country club on a holiday weekend. Dads and kids played volleyball, moms worked out at a fitness centre. We spotted kids racing hermit crabs, and others learning Fijian words and Polynesian dances. Menus at the hotel's several restaurants listed continental and some Fijian dishes, and our favourite, the lively Toba Bar & Grill, took our order in five minutes and served the food in 10.

Most memorable was the river cruise with Singatoka River Safari. Wide and long, the river winds through an endless valley, weaving past rocky hills, farms and meadows. Children splashed in it and men scrubbed their horses, waving

as we passed. Pastoral and peaceful, it was a nod to an older country.

The trip ended at a village, with a tour, lunch at the community centre and a kava ceremony — shared cups — with the chief and town fathers. Kava is calming, some say. Just more weak tea, say others.

How many villages are there, we wondered. "Hundreds, but that's not all," said the hotel's desk clerk. Each Indigenous Fijian family belongs to a village that owns the land it's on. It's like a clan, she explained. And only Indigenous Fijians can own land. So all the villages and their own land is its nearly 90 per cent of the country. "The government makes Fiji's laws, but the villages rule themselves. That's why they're important."

As our last week approached, we took the ferry to Lomani Island Resort — yes, an adults-only beach resort — on Malolo Lailai island, a single hour's ferry ride to the mainland and Nadi International Airport. You can stay overnight and still make it to the airport on time.

But it wasn't the beach that earned the gold star. It was the charming cottages, each with a private yard and plunge pool. The smiling waiters and creative, chef-designed meals, served at candlelit tables. The "double-X" swimming pool and the water sports centre.

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Folklore says that ancient spirits left the world from Ulivunavatu Mountain, on Viti Levu's northeast shore.

STEVE HAGGERTY  
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