

travel

HAWAII'S BACKYARD
Ala Honolulu hosts a tour of UH Manoa's history and architecture >> **D3**

LAS VEGAS ADVISOR >> **D4**
SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE >> **D5**



The island awaits, with a seaplane to Yasawa Island Resort for a blissful stay

Photos and story by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star Advertiser

Flying across the Pacific pond and disembarking in Fiji's Nadi Airport, I found myself continuously looking over my shoulder. I was certain someone famous must be behind me. Nothing else could explain why every single person — gate agents, baggage handlers, even normally curmudgeonly customs and immigration officers — smiled broadly and cheerfully bellowed "Bula, bula," the Fijian equivalent of aloha.

I would soon learn that Fijians possess an incredibly abundant joie de vivre and geniality, unlike the people in any place I'd ever traveled before. Constantly made to feel like a cross between a returning war heroine and a revered aunt, I also received more hugs than a child's beloved teddy bear. If there's any truth to the phrase "Karma is like a menu and you're served what you deserve," then somewhere, sometime, I must have done something right to travel here.

Nadi is best seen through the eyes of a local. I went with Ryan Katoa, a giant of a man with a heart just as big and a hearty, infectious laugh, whose love of Fiji is evident and



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At top, the writer's aerial view of Yasawa Island, Fiji, from a seaplane. Inset photo, village men from nearby Bukama prepare kava, a brewed ceremonial drink served communally which leaves drinkers' tongues numb and causes drowsiness.

knowledge of Fijian history impressive. (679-931-3134, Toursbylocalstij@gmail.com)

Together we meandered Main Street, where one can buy famous South Sea black pearls, walked Nadi Market with its abundance of fresh produce and mountains of kava root, and strolled the Garden of the Sleeping Giant, once owned by actor Raymond Burr, who then lived nearby in Saweni. The gardens contain more than 30 varieties of Asian orchids amid the tropical rainforest pathways. With Katoa I was also able to go to the traditional village of Viseisei to see how the 800 villagers live surrounding their church, the chief's home in the center and the massive drum used to call villagers to meetings.

A must-go in Nadi is Tu's Place, which showcases local produce, ingredients and recipes. Try the Kokoda fish ceviche, Waciepoki taro leaf and coconut milk topped with mahi-and-holo fish stew. (37 Queens Road, Martintar; 679-67-22110; tusplace.webs.com)

A great base for exploring Nadi is the Sofitel Resort on Denerau island adjacent to Nadi. From here a short ride brings you to Nadi's important sites. And when you're done, there are plenty of on-site activities: Fijian history, kite making, beach soccer, among others. (Doubles from \$250, 800-221-4542, www.sofitel.com)

The bliss of Yasawa

Getting to Yasawa Island Resort requires taking a tiny 1962 Twin Otter or even tinier 1962 de Havilland Otter seaplane. Riding in the jump seat, I noticed that pilot Alex was barefoot, dressed in board shorts and bula shirt. It was one of the most picturesque flights I've taken: blue hues, coral reefs, verdant islands and atolls aplenty.

Arriving at the tiny airstrip, it looked much like the 1970s television series "Fantasy Island," with one big difference.

Please see **Fiji, D6**



A mouthwatering meal of ceviche, fish stew and taro leaf washed down with a mango soursop smoothie at Tu's Place in Fiji's capital, Nadi.

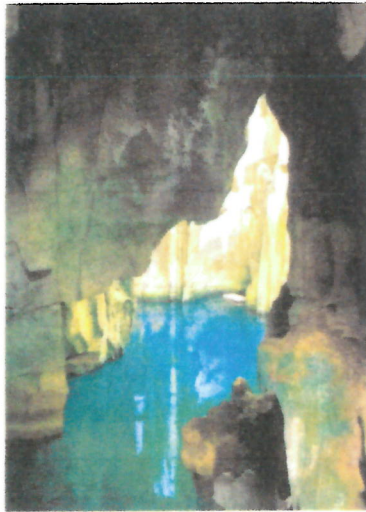
FIJI

Continued from D1

Here, when they bellow "Bula," they also say "Welcome home" while each employee shakes the hands of every arriving guest. It's a homecoming like no other.

The resort is secluded with 18 large, lovely-appointed, ocean-facing bures, or huts. The separate living areas are stocked with Nespresso machines, homemade chocolate chip cookies, minibars, luscious king-size beds, and enormous bathrooms with indoor and outdoor showers. The peaceful lanai and private beach hut with two more loungers and adjacent hammock strategically placed between swaying palms send you out to contemplate the lapping ocean's blissful sounds and deserted white sands. Yasawa is all-inclusive: Gourmet meals and all cultural and water activities (except scuba) are included. (Bures start at \$1,029 per night double occupancy; 679-672-2266; yasawa.com)

WITH JUST 1,200 islanders residing in Yasawa's six villages, visitors gets to experience a way of life largely unchanged. Manasa, who has tended bar at Yasawa since its opening 25 years ago, is also the village spokesman of nearby Bukama, where three clans comprise the 200 residents. Taking six guests to meet Bukama's 86-year-old Chief Ratu Semirokobecalevu, we stood at his door and in unison uttered "Dua, dua, dua," requesting permission to enter. The chief responded "Lamai," the Yasawan for "enter."



JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR ADVERTISER

The entrance to the Blue Lagoon Caves made famous by a 1980 movie starring Brooke Shields.

We sat in a semicircle on the floor in the small, spotless, tapa-walled house. The chief — through Manasa — welcomed us and proudly told us of his pride in the village school, our next stop. Even at \$6 and wheelchair-bound, the chief was engaging, smiling and bearing a twinkle in his eye.

At Bukama school the village children sang several songs for us, and the head teacher shared the challenges of teaching 71 students from two villages — theirs and

Yasawa village, which is a 3-mile walk from the school. The Yasawa children speak only their own dialect, thus much of the teaching day is spent translating from Yasawan to Bataun — Fiji's main dialect — and then to English and Hindi. More than one-third of Fijians are of Indian descent.

The children were quiet when, as Manasa asked, we told them from where we originally hailed: Seattle, Beijing, Sydney. However, three girls squealed when I said Honolulu. Later one of the squealers asked me to come to her classroom, and there she excitedly pointed to a worn, handwritten poster tacked to the wall. Amid other Pacific capitals, sandwiched between Honiara and Majuro, was Honolulu. The child was beaming with joy, and I became weepy-eyed and tongue-tied.

BESIDES cultural activities on Yasawa, including the traditional Sunday church visit, there is plenty to do: bush walks, picnics, tennis, paddleboarding, kayaking, windsurfing, snorkeling and scuba diving, not to mention simply relaxing and soaking up the scenery. But choices must be made. I opted for two water-based activities.

Captain Sam drove me 15 minutes north on a small powerboat to a secluded cove, and there he left me with an umbrella, tablecloth and cooler packed with grilled prawn salad, fresh fruit, brownies and several bottles of water. As he waved goodbye, Sam said he'd return in three hours. As the boat sped away, ringing in my ears was a line from the "Gilligan's Island" theme song: "a three-hour tour."

I had a great book with me, but the warm, turquoise waters beckoned. Donning my mask and fins, I entered the underwater

IF YOU GO ...

Fiji

► **The best way:** Fiji Airways offers nonstop service from Honolulu to Nadi three times weekly starting at \$843 round trip. 888-497-4389; fiji Airways.com

► **For more information:** Visit the official tourism site Fiji.travel.

dreams of Jacques Cousteau where throngs of neon-colored fish vied for my rapt attention.

The next morning Sam took four guests on the 30-minute ride to Turtle Island's Blue Lagoon Caves, made famous by Brooke Shields' 1980 film "The Blue Lagoon." The cobalt-blue water at the cave's entrance was utterly breathtaking. A guide with a waterproof flashlight lit the way as we held our breath and ducked under a lip into slightly colder water and into the second, narrower passage. It was gorgeous, but after seeing a sea snake meander nearby I started to feel a bit claustrophobic in the confined, dark area and swam back out.

Alas, it was then time to leave this picture-perfect paradise. As I embarked the seaplane to Nadi, I was reminded that there are 15 words in Fijian for "heaven," and "Yasawa" is the first. No surprise there.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, attorney and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."



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