

ISLANDS OF PARADISE



Photo: courtesy of Jean Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands

HONEYMOON EXPRESS By Jeniva Berger

Meeting a group of hot and dusty journalists at the tiny airstrip for a much appreciated meet and greet was just what we needed to begin the first of our three island resort stays.

That's the charm of Fiji. The welcome mat is always accompanied with a smile and a unique greeting from everyone. The fact that absolutely everyone knows and remembers your name is like a sunny homecoming. Fijians are among the friendliest people on earth and it truly is warmth you'll remember. You're met with a special "Bula" ("Hello" in Fijian) as well as a song when you arrive and a traditional farewell song when you depart.

Yasawa Island Resort, one of the more remote spots in the jewel-like Yasawa Islands chain, lives up to its name. "Yasawa" is one of 15 words in the Fijian language for "heaven" and it's an apt description.

Named South Pacific's best resort in 2003, Yasawa has only 18 thatched *bures*, or private villas. Bure means "sanctuary" in Fijian and from the moment you cross the threshold you're guaranteed the best of care and comfort in a totally stress-free atmosphere. There are day beds on the veranda as well as inside the bure — for a little reading or relaxation midday — and one's own hammock out back, which just happens to be set on a wide expanse of lush vegetation facing the ocean. Not a bad way to unwind from the overload of city life. Neither are the spa services and if you've never had a massage with the open-air sea breezes cooling you — you're in for a special treat.

Yasawa Resort promised loads of lobster — for the seafood lover in us all — and they delivered. Rock lobster omelets for breakfast, cold lobster for those intimate and wonderful picnics on a secluded beach somewhere, and lobster for dinners under the stars. Gourmet meals created by international chefs are a staple of each of the resorts we visited, with menus that earn them their exclusive five-star rating. Though diets are definitely not on anyone's mind, the food is wholesome as well as delicious.

It was my first taste of snorkeling in the care of the fine pros of one of Fiji's best diving locales, and it was my first taste of that celebrated Fijian drink, Kava, which has been part of Fiji's social and business life from time immemorial. The drinking ceremony showcases a giant kava receptacle as the centerpiece and is accompanied by chanting and hand-clapping. Kava is served in wooden bowls or coconut shells and passed around the group, and everyone is expected to take a generous sip. Kava is pounded into powder from the pepper tree and when mixed with water it turns into a liquid brownish grey shade. It was jokingly described by one of my colleagues as drinking "liquid mud," though the afterglow is decidedly non-muddy.

As with all of the resorts we visited, weddings and honeymoons are a large part of the Fijian resort business. A Fijian wedding dress is historical and in an island resort wedding you'll dress the part. There will also be a Fijian choir and warriors to escort you along a waterway with floral decorations on the bamboo raft to color your world for the water procession, and a conch shell is blown to announce your arrival. Though the wedding dinner may be a private affair, you can opt to have everyone at the resort, including the staff, join in the celebration and the reception. Where else would you find such an agreeable — and instant — extended family?

Turtle Island Resort, another luxury resort found in the Yasawa Island Chain and the locale of that impossibly romantic film, *The Blue Lagoon* movies were filmed at Turtle, both the 1949 original movie with Jean Simmons and the 1980 remake with Brooke Shields. Shields' original bure is still used, complete with her jaunty straw hat.

Turtle Island Resort is a South Pacific haven for celebrities who crave an exclusive but solitary atmosphere, and nowhere can you find the degree of pampering that you do at Turtle.

The resort's one totally unique feature represents the height of luxury: Turtle's addition of a bure manager for each of the property's 14 beautifully appointed burens that are built along the shores of the famous Blue Lagoon. Bure managers are in charge of laundry and housekeeping and cater, with a smile, of course, to visitors' needs. From the moment you arrive at the resort, your bure manager is there with a camera to snap your picture during every activity throughout your stay. Bure managers, a title that makes them sound like busy execs on a tight schedule, are actually more like doting stay-at-home moms.

They not only look after you when needed, but they can accompany you on your island tours, help you set up your picnic on a private beach (there are 14 white sand beaches to choose from) and even participate in sports activities with you.

Aside from the glamorous aspect, Turtle Island represents a spectacular example of how nature can be cared for and appreciated. It is a nature lover's paradise, with hiking trails through coconut groves, banana, mango and papaya plantations, other paths leading to a spectacular rainforest, and a rich marine life in the surrounding waters.

Our last stop on this gorgeous tour of some of Fiji's most renowned resorts was Jean-Michel Cousteau, a resort located on the big island of Vanua Levu within a former 17-acre coconut plantation. The resort, which is an international favorite for romance, honeymoons and weddings, water enthusiasts and families, won *Travel & Leisure* magazine's nod as best resort in Fiji in 2001. And it certainly lives up to the Cousteau name with its emphasis on ecology, certified world-class diving, day and night snorkeling and educational talks from the resort's on-site marine biologist. All of the fruits and vegetables are organically grown and a

wellness program ensures both a healthy happy stay. A friendly medicine man also gives some fascinating lectures about local customs and herbal remedies.

Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort prides itself on creating the perfect wedding or romantic interlude in paradise — imagine a private candlelit dinner at the end of a pier decorated with hundreds of lights, or supper on your own private island for the day — and to cap off a perfect day in paradise, the resort's new Honeymoon Point Reef Suite, a 750-square-foot bure with a private spa tub on the front balcony with breathtaking ocean views, a minibar, and a luxurious king-size bed with a custom-made mattress. The resort has just introduced two wonderful romance packages, one all about rest and relaxation, the other a perfect combination of romance and outdoor adventure.

Spa services, which are fast becoming a necessary addition to resort life everywhere, are popular at Jean-Michel Cousteau and among other treatments, it offers the traditional Fijian massage, the Bobo, a decadent blend of tropical nut and coconut oils and special percussive techniques.

Though shopping may not be considered the most romantic thing to do, no woman can resist being adorned with an elegant bauble as a memorable island keepsake. In between the resort's cornucopia of activities, a jaunt to the nearby town of Savusavu will introduce you to the island's young pearl industry, especially Fiji's renowned black pearls which are sold at wholesale prices by the small but friendly factory offices of J. Hunter Pearls. Other special reminders of your trip may include the many fine handmade shell jewelry sold by the Fijian women at the market places or on the beaches, beautiful woven baskets, or Tapa cloth, which is used in island dress and wall art hangings.

When all is said and done, it's still the people of Fiji you'll remember forever — whether it's the smiling children dressed in their Sunday best outside a pristine church or the village chief welcoming you to his simple house. As everywhere, it's the friendship that makes any place a true paradise.

HOW TO GO TO FIJI

From Canada: Air Canada to Los Angeles and then Air Pacific to Nandi, Fiji. There are also flights from Los Angeles with Air New Zealand and United Airlines. From Nandi, there are island hoppers that can go to the various outer islands such as Turtle Airways and Sun Air.

FIJI WEBSITES:

Sheraton Resort, Denarau Island: www.starwoodhotels.com/sheraton
From there follow the links to the various properties. The Fiji Visitors' Bureau for North America: www.bulafiji.com. Turtle Island Resort: www.turtlefiji.com Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort: www.fijiresort.com Yasawa: www.yasawa.com.