



A sandy beach on the remote South Pacific island of Taueuni.

I STOOD ON THE edge of the day on the remote South Pacific island of Taueuni in the Republic of Fiji. Then, taking a deep breath, we stepped into yesterday. A tiny step back, and it

was today once more. Time travel was bafflingly easy as we straddled a deep channel in Millennium Park. The rocky outcrop of Taueuni is bisected by the 180° meridian. Today, the International Date Line twists around the archipelago for administrative convenience, but once upon a time, it did not deviate from the 180° meridian—indicated by the svelte channel in the park—and Taueuni experienced two days in one. To be honest, it did not really matter what day it was. We had landed in Fiji

BREATHLESS IN FIJI

On an island-hopping tour, GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI strike a balance between thrills and tranquility as they go scuba diving, partake in traditional feasts, zipline over rainforest canopies, and sing Fijian love songs.



Kayaks at Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort on the island of Vanua Levu.

that glides over palm trees and lands on a runway that stops just short of the ocean is a dramatic experience. From the minimalist shed-like terminal at Savusavu Airport, on the northern island of Vanua Levu, we drove to the 525-acre Namale Resort and Spa boutique luxury resort. The next day, at the crack of dawn, we set off on a trek to a waterfall armed with a picnic hamper. We tramped down a path that traced a sandy beach and then branched off into a rainforest that draped the slopes of a hill. We heard the angry roar of the waterfall long before we saw its silvery curtain. Breakfast with a gentle spray of water in our faces and a ringside view of the land, dropping away and into the embrace of the ocean, was rewarding.

Fiji has some of the finest soft coral dive sites on the planet. Below: Cook your own meal in a bamboo shoot at Nanuku Auberger Resort.



CLOCKWISE: GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI (2); SHOOTINGSTITCHES; FROM TOP: TORIYAKI ISLANDS RESORTS; GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI



in late 2019 with plans of zoning out in a proverbial paradise of palm-fringed beaches and deep-blue waters. But the archipelago of 333 dreamy islands scattered in the Koro Sea offered us the opportunity to punctuate periods of absolute serenity with high links. We also got to engage with the beauty of the land and the rich heritage and culture of its gentle people.

After touchdown at Nadi International Airport on Viti Levu, the largest island, we headed for Namuku Auberger Resort on the southern coast. At the 37-villa boutique luxury resort, we were greeted with throaty cries of "hula" (which means hello or welcome) and drums pounded by warriors with painted faces. Our villa overlooked the arc of a three-kilometre beach below and a vast canvas of breezy blues stretching across the sky and the ocean. At dusk, the resort was lit with tiki torches; the flames flickered in the water of an infinity-edge pool as we dined at the resort's Kanawata restaurant, where meals were a modern take on the land's traditional cuisine.

Clockwise from top left: Visitors are given a conch shell welcome at the Fiji Culture Village in the town of Nadi; tread forests, muddy streams, and cane fields on a quad bike; raise a sparkling toast to blue skies at Cloud 9, a two-level floating party zone; enjoy fresh coconut water at Malamala Beach Club.

In Fiji, they love to show off their panoply of islands, each with landscapes so breathtaking that boredom is instantly banished. And so, the next morning, we were ready to play Robinson Crusoe on the resort's private island. We tumbled out of a yacht wearing snorkelling gear and swam alongside our guide as he went spearfishing for our lunch. Fiji has some of the finest soft coral dive sites on the planet. Later, he marinated the catch in fresh coconut milk and grilled it over wood fire as we lounged under a beach umbrella. We three were the only souls on the island for the day—a luxury few can afford in a world spilling over with tourists. In retrospect, it would've been the perfect setting for a post-pandemic holiday. Island-hopping is the way to go on a Fiji holiday, and flying in a 20-seater airplane

white frangipani flowers tucked behind their ears, and swayed gracefully to lilting Fijian love songs. The men looked fierce with their bare chests and painted faces. The performers jumped through flaming hoops and twirled burning bamboo torches.

And then, we were invited to participate in the nation's favourite pastime: the kava ceremony. Kava is a local brew concocted from the root of a type of pepper plant. Tribal chiefs once settled disputes over kava bowls. It is a sacred drink, and we had to follow certain rituals when presented with a scoop of the muddy-brown liquid in a coconut-shell cup. Since it is bad form to refuse the first drink, we clapped once to express our thanks, lifted the cup to our lips and downed its contents in a single gulp. And then clapped thrice to express our appreciation.

There was no room for doubt or etiquette when we stood on the first launch platform of Zip Fiji Nadi on the main island of Viti Levu. The moment called for deep resolve: resolve to step out into empty space from a height of 25 metres. Suspended in a harness attached to sturdy cables that stretched 50 metres across the canopy of a rainforest, we hurtled over river canyons and gaping gullies on a series of ziplines. One line even took us through Fiji's largest cave (thankfully, it was bat-free). The longest line on the 16-stage course was 80 metres long!

Ziplining whetted our appetite for thrills, and we welcomed the opportunity to tear across the land on quad bikes—four-wheel beasts with 450cc engines. We raced through sugarcane plantations, rattled over mountain trails, sped down deserted beaches, and splashed through rivers before leading the devil bikes back to their lair.

The best way to cool off in Fiji is to plunge into the water. There are a multitude of water sports at the



Outdoor sit-out of a guest bare at Tokoriki Island Resort. Below: Shuttle over river canyons and forests with Zip Fiji Nadi.

resorts; we opted for scuba diving. It was an easy drift dive where we allowed a gentle current to carry us through an underwater gully teeming with marine life. We greeted three turtles, long-snouted yellow trumpetfish, parrotfish, purple-flip giant clams, blue starfish, and other creatures. We cruised over coral gardens awash in brilliant colours, until our air supply touched the reserve mark. The beauty of the island-nation took our breath away.

When it was finally time to say goodbye, we looked down from our aircraft at the cluster of magical emerald islands in the South Pacific Ocean. We found ourselves humming *Isa Lei*, a Fijian farewell song for one's beloved.

GETTING THERE

A number of airlines fly from major cities in India to Hong Kong and Singapore, from where one can catch a connecting flight on Fiji Airways (fiji Airways.com) to Nadi International Airport on Viti Levu. Fiji Link, a subsidiary of Fiji Airways, operates domestic flights. One can use taxis, ferries, and water taxis within Fiji.

STAY

Most of the international hotel chains, like Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa (doubles from \$14,500 per night; softel-fiji.com), are located on the main island of Viti Levu. The island also has boutique resorts like Nanuku Auberger Resort (from \$66,000 per night; aubergeresorts.com/nanuku). The smaller islands are studied with boutique resorts. Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort (from \$74,570 per night, 3N minimum; fjiresort.com)

EAT

Port Denarau has many waterfront dining options. Fiji Culture Village, outside Nadi on Viti Levu, serves a traditional lovo feast along with a cultural programme and a kava ceremony.

UPDATES

At the time of press, Fiji has no active cases of COVID-19. Borders remain closed to international tourists for now. Flight connectivity and hotel tariffs should be verified once borders open.