

# ON SUNDAY Travel Mail



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A boat from the Yasawa Island Resort & Spa drops off a few guests on a beach all to themselves.



# FALLING IN LOVE WITH FIJI

By Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

**T**HE RUNWAY was a rippling grassy field which, at the far end, seemed to plunge into the inky-blue ocean beyond. Our seven-seater plane soft-landed on it even as the friendly pilot told us: "This is one of the most difficult runways in Fiji, but I love flying into the beautiful Yasawa islands." (The Yasawa group of 20 volcanic islands lies to the north-west of the main island of Viti Levu in Fiji and was opened to tourism only in the 1990s.)

When we disembarked at the airport — essentially just two charming open-sided thatched shelters enveloped in a haze of green — we understood why people in the know fall in love with the sensuous beauty of these lush volcanic outcrops. A handful of Fijian islanders, dressed in local sulus or sarongs, with a blood-red hibiscus flower behind one ear, held aloft garlands of frangipani. (A flower worn behind the right ear means the man or woman is single; if tucked behind the left ear, it is a signal that he or she is married or spoken for.)

Faces wreathed in broad smiles, they cried, "Bula" (a cheery greeting), as we ducked to accept the garlands. The flurry of happy bulas made our spirits soar even as we were driven over a bumpy road to the Yasawa Island Resort and Spa, the only resort at the isolated northernmost tip of the Yasawas. Each morning, we would wake up in our spacious beachfront villa (one of 18 snoozing beneath tall palms) and head for breakfast to the uplifting cries of bula. The happy calls followed us as we headed for breakfast, walked on the beach, snorkelled or picnicked on any one of 11 isolated beaches that girdle the resort.

The greeting reassured us that we were still in paradise where the colours were so blinding that it almost seemed like the creator had mastered the modern art of photo-shopping his creation!

"How many bottles of ink do you empty into the ocean each day?" we would joke with the innocent staff at the Yasawa Island Resort and Spa; most of them are drawn from a village over the hill and have an in-built sense of hospitality and caring. A flash of white teeth against brown polished skin would be the answer. "Yes, we know we live in paradise," some of them would counter, heads and flower behind the ear bobbing vigorously!

It was hard to believe that one could survive so

happily in a world without paved roads, banks or shops... but the Fijian village is a blissful place where villagers depend on each other and live like an extended family with a powerful chief at the apex. Indeed, according to a 2012 Gallup Poll, the Fijians are the happiest people in the world; totally at peace with their environment, inhabiting only 100 of the 333 sun-stunned islands, scattered like jewels in the South Pacific. "No one goes hungry in Fiji," we were told. All they have to do is cast a line in the ocean to ensnare some fish; shimmy up a palm tree to get a coconut and pluck some tropical fruits from their neighbour's garden!

But not too long ago, till the 19th

century, the Fijian archipelago was dubbed the Cannibal Islands. In those days, the Fijians were a fierce warrior-like race constantly at war with the neighbouring island of Tonga. The villagers would express their loyalty to the village chief with the entreaty: "Eat me, Chief!" The Chiefs would carry "brain mashers" to bludgeon their enemies and then eat only the brains and the heart — in order to, they believed, acquire their foe's knowledge. The last reported act of cannibalism happened in 1867 when a missionary, Reverend Thomas Baker, who had converted an entire tribe to Christianity, imagined that he knew the chief well enough to remove a comb from his hair. This was considered a grave insult, akin to a slap, and before he knew it, the reverend landed up in the hot pot and was the main course for dinner for the entire village that



night! In Fiji, even today, it is considered bad form to touch another person's head but these gentle souls have now left their human flesh-eating days way behind them.

In the Yasawas, we felt adrift in a world of yesteryears, unwinding languorously to that elastic phenomenon called Fijian time. We felt a Robinson-Crusoe-style apartness; and the days unscrolled in a blur of blue-green shades. We never tired of gazing at the gin-clear sea and tranquil lagoons lapping powder-soft sandy beaches. We picnicked each day on different isolated beaches, snorkelled amidst the corals alive with marine life, swam and later un-wrapped our hamper of fresh seafood and wine in the shade of a beach umbrella. We then snoozed till our boat returned to ferry us back to our resort. Indeed the Yasawas with their get-away-from-it-all-feel were the locale of the 1980s romantic adventure film *Blue Lagoon* starring the nubile Brooke Shields. Parts of the film were shot in the Sawau-lau caves, at the southern end of the Yasawas, where the mysterious blue lagoon ripples.

One evening we heard the pounding of stirring native lali

The Fijian village is a blissful place where villagers depend on each other and live like an extended family with a chief





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PHOTOS: GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI



(Above) The pristine beaches of the island offer magical sunset views; (below) be a part of the kava ceremony when you are on the Yasawas islands



drums, signalling that something was afoot. Villagers from one of the local hamlets had arrived at the resort in grass skirts and grass anklets, faces painted with fierce black streaks, and necks strung with whale tooth necklaces called tabua. (The whale tooth is a prized object in Fijian society and is presented on ceremonial occasions by one chief to another or by the groom to his bride.)

To the strum of guitars and the ukulele, the young 'warriors' made the picture postcard setting come alive with romance as they sang Fijian ballads, love songs that seemed to waft up in the air, perfumed with the scent of frangipani. Honeymooning couples snuggled up to each other carried away by raw emotion; the sun set in a flare of colour and the world was then aglow with candles and paraffin lamps placed around the resort.

The kava ceremony then took place as guests were made to sit in a circle as kava, a drink made with the sun-dried and powdered root of the pepper plant, was ceremoniously stirred in a large wood bowl of water. The chief presented it to the eldest guest who had to swallow it in a shot... clap once before drinking and then thrice after. The cup of kava was then passed around as some

guests had second and third rounds, revelling in its slightly numbing tranquillising effect on the tongue. After the drinking and sharing, we felt a greater sense of kinship with the village folk.

**O**N OUR last evening, to complete our full-on Fiji experience, we had a traditional deep-tissue Fijian Bobo massage at the resort's beachfront Baravi Spa. The wide sweeping strokes, enhanced with Pure Fiji oil, a mix of cold pressed nut oils and infused with tropical flowers, uncoiled our muscles that were clenched like bunched up fists. Combined with the soundtrack — the ebb and flow of the sea — the massage almost did us in. We left the enchanted Yasawas the next morning, after a three-day stay, again from the minuscule thatched 'airport.' The islanders had gathered to bid goodbye, belting out Isa Lei, the popular Fijian farewell song with heartfelt passion. We did not know the words of the song but our hearts thrummed in unison with the soaring voices, as the propeller blades whirred and we were lifted out of paradise.

**FACT FILE**

■ Fiji is an ideal finale to a holiday in New Zealand and Australia, as well as for New Year celebrations, honeymoons and destination weddings.

■ Several airlines have direct flights from Australia (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane) and New Zealand (Auckland and Christchurch).

■ Fiji Airways flies thrice a week from Hong Kong (offering connectivity with partner airlines from Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and Kolkata) to Nadi. Korean Air flies thrice a week from Mumbai to Fiji via Seoul.

■ The Yasawas have a smattering of backpacker and mid-budget resorts, while the isolated northern-end just has the Yasawa Island Resort and Spa.

For more information, visit: [www.fiji.travel](http://www.fiji.travel)

**JHEEL MAHOTSAV**

The Madhya Pradesh Lake Festival will be held in Bhopal, Sagar, Indore (Choral Dam, Pipaliyapala), Jabalpur (Bargi), Gwalior (Tigra), Tawa, Bansagar, Gandhisagar and Indirasagar from February 13 to 22, 2015

For promoting Water Tourism in the state, The Lake Festival: Jheel Mahotsav will be held from February 13 to 22, 2015, at Bhopal, Sagar, Indore (Choral Dam, Pipaliyapala), Jabalpur(Bargi), Gwalior(Tigra). Apart from these cities, cultural and sports activities will also be held under Jheel Mahotsav at Tawa, Ban Sagar, Gandhi Sagar and Indira Sagar reservoirs to popularise these islands as major tourist destinations.

Jheel Mahotsav is being held to create awareness among people regarding conservation of lakes, promote tourism, expand water sports and increase investment potential. This festival aims to promote Madhya Pradesh as a preferred destination for tourism among Indian states and to increase contribution of water-bound tourism towards increasing the footfall of tourists (domestic and international). Different set of activities have been planned



Gandhisagar

at urban and rural locations to attract tourists & local residents which include cultural events, water sports, local cuisine fiesta, tents/camping, trekking & adventure sports, etc. Jheel Mahotsav also provides a stage to local artistes in programmes. A number of cultural programmes will also be held during the Mahotsav. Number of artists belonging to various art forms shall be invited from all over the country to give performances of cultural activities, vocal, instrumental etc, in the festival.



Upper lake, Bhopal



Tawa



Bargi

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