



Discovery

Getting Away From It All

Diving in to the heart of Fiji, Fiona Harper discovers the true beauty of the Yasawa Islands.

Conjure up a tropical island paradise and you'll probably find a turquoise sea lapping dazzling white beach sand. Overhead, cotton puff clouds are dotted against an implausibly blue sky. Coconut palms bend towards the sun.

You've spent the morning swimming, snorkelling and reading that novel you've longed to find the time to get stuck into. Your skin is ever so slightly tanned, your hair is streaked with salt and the soles of your feet are naturally exfoliated from long beach walks.

The sun is warm. The air smells of seashells washed ashore beyond the high tide line.

An attractive Fijian man wearing a tropical shirt and with a frangipani tucked behind his ear carries chilled drinks in

coconut cups trimmed with umbrellas.

'Bula,' he calls out through his wide-mouth grin. He tells you that fresh-caught lobster is on the menu tonight. Will that be alright?

You can't wipe the silly grin off your face.

It sounds like the biggest cliché in the holiday book, right? It's not. In fact, this pretty much sums up life for those fortunate souls who make the journey to visit the string of Fijian gems known as the Yasawa Islands. Especially those in the know who check into Yasawa Island Resort.

One of those idyllic remote retreats where it's all but impossible not to succumb to Fiji's charm, Yasawa Island Resort is less resort and more extended Fijian family.

Arriving by small aircraft after skimming over a mosaic of



Above: Now that's an island! Fringed by coral reefs, a nice mountain in the middle, sandy beaches and lots of greenery, perfect.

coral reefs and forest-clad islands, new arrivals are greeted like long lost friends returning home.

Later, the inevitable departure is a guaranteed tearjerker as soulful voices sing Fiji's famous farewell song *Isa Lei*. Make sure you've got some tissues handy!

Delineating Fiji's western border from the rest of the South Pacific Ocean, Lt William Bligh is credited as the first European to sight the Yasawas after he was set adrift by mutinous crew on board the HMS *Bounty*. Had he gone ashore he would have met Melanesian navigators and sea gypsies who had inhabited the archipelago since around 500BC.

With no weapons in his small boat and anticipating a hostile reception, Bligh probably made the right choice to forgo a Fijian landfall. Once known as the Cannibal Isles, cannibalism was

heavily practiced at the time Bligh sailed through what we now know as Bligh Water.

These days' hostility is the last thing on visitor's minds as they are welcomed warmly with the trademark Fijian greeting 'Bula' and a floral or shell lei draped around their necks.

With little industry and few commercial opportunities, tourism got its start with the arrival of island-hopping ferry service the *Yasawa Flyer*. It's now a popular option for exploring the islands, particularly for travellers with plenty of time to hop between islands.

The 20 islands that make up the Yasawas with their pristine coral reefs and untouched beaches have since become the favoured hangout for traveller's keen to unwind and relax. The ultimate digital detox destination, there are few televisions,

PICTURES: Captain Cook Cruises and Yasawa Island Resort.



Yasawa Island Resort's main bure offers plenty of room to do, well, nothing if you choose.

intermittent mobile phone reception and sporadic internet access making it virtually impossible not to log off.

Once Brooke Shields emerged from the *Blue Lagoon* to fall into the arms of blonde Adonis Christopher Atkins in the 1980's movie of the same name, island hedonists had the Yasawas pegged for their own romantic island paradise.

Much of the film was shot at Nanuya Levu Island, which is now known as Turtle Island. After hosting the Columbia Pictures crew the American island owner and burnt-out entrepreneur Richard Evanson decided that he quite enjoyed company after all and subsequently built Turtle Island Resort.

The island had been ravaged by wild goats before Evanson embraced the local communities, employing Fijians and befriending village elders to help restore vegetation. Maintaining

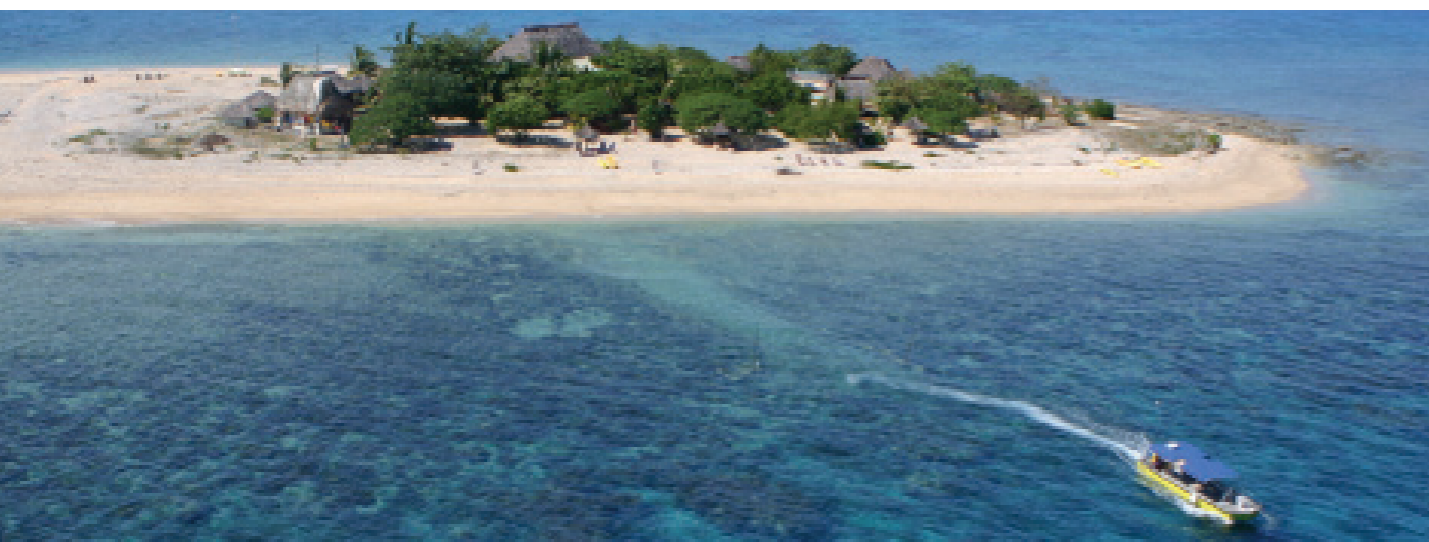
a minimal environmental footprint, 14 exquisite 'rustic luxury' beachfront bures comprise the extent of Turtle Island Resort.

Northwards and even further removed from civilisation sits the aforementioned Yasawa Island Resort. Besides six villages the resort is the sole haven of tranquillity on an otherwise commercially undeveloped volcanic island. The largest island in the Yasawa Group, the luxury resort provides valuable employment for villagers.

The island retreat is known for pristine beaches that are rarely disturbed by human footprints. Towards the west an endlessly blue horizon remains unbroken all the way to Vanuatu. If there is a better retreat to completely unwind and pretend that the rest of the world exists, this is the spot to do so. Be warned – it won't be easy to leave!



A massage with a view or a snorkel over clear waters? The Yasawas are the true heart of beautiful Fiji.



Blue Lagoon Cruises, with their flagship Fiji Princess, take their name from the aptly named lagoon that comes in every shade of blue imaginable. The location for the 1949 version of the film Blue Lagoon, Nanuya Lailai Island sits in the middle of the vast lagoon.

Blue Lagoon maintains exclusive use over the long strip of beach, mooring Fiji Princess to a coconut palm ashore, laying out sun lounges, kayaks and SUP boards for passenger use. Dinner is a traditional lovo feast, where food is cooked in a fire pit dug into the sand and served on the beach beneath star-studded skies. •

More information:

Blue Lagoon Cruises www.bluelagooncruises.com
The Fiji Princess (above and below) Blue Lagoon Cruises' ship, has been purpose-built for cruising and selected for the ocean-going conditions of the Fiji waters, especially around the Yasawa Islands.

