



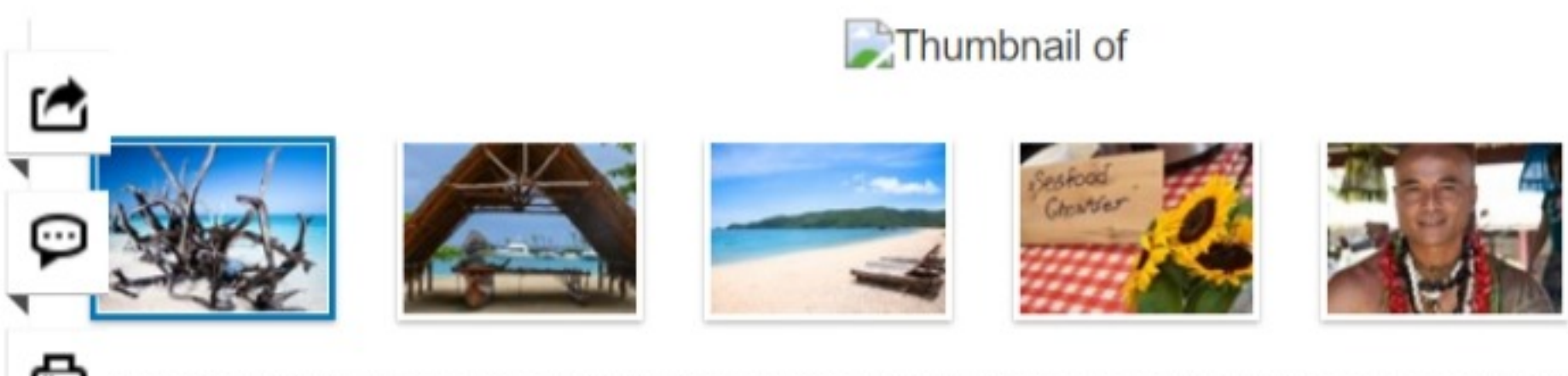
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My 5 Favourite Island Escapes

by Fiona Harper



LifeStyle Channel Travel Expert, Fiona Harper, reveals five of her top island getaways.

I'm a water baby at heart and confess that sometimes I just want to lob onto an island and opt out of reality for a while. Preferably a balmy tropical atoll surrounded by ivory-hued sand, kissed by gin-clear water and, with coconut palms spaced wide enough to string a two person-sized hammock. If there's a barman on hand to keep the mojitos topped up, even better.

Sounds dreamy, doesn't it? And also rather unrealistic for most of us who have pesky jobs, mortgages and overdrawn credit cards clamouring for attention. But what's the point of dreaming about something mundane when the extraordinary is far more interesting?

As winter sends us scurrying indoors, there's no better time to plot an island escape. Here are five of my favourites:

1. Laucala Island, Fiji

An hour's flight north east of Nadi by the islands own jet, guests don't really make a reservation so much as submit an application to visit. If there were such a thing as a seven star resort, Laucala Island would be a serious contender. Sure, guest residences (calling them rooms is a serious understatement) are exquisite, dining is exceptional and the golf course, spa, swimming pools, (all 27 of them!) should satisfy the fussiest guest. But what sets Laucala apart is discrete, intuitive hospitality that has staff anticipating, then exceeding expectations. It's quite a skill and reflects the impeccable training that all staff undergo.

2. Lady Musgrave Island, Queensland

A teeny coral atoll 60-odd kilometres off the Queensland south coast that barely rises above the Coral Sea, Lady Musgrave is a significant turtle and bird nesting habitat. The island exists thanks to gazillions of noddies and terns depositing nutrient rich guano that has allowed vegetation to take root atop the Great Barrier Reef. Self-sufficient campers who aren't freaked out being surrounded by nothing but the wide blue sea for as far as the eye can see bed down in a handful of shaded beachside campsites. Beneath a vast sky unhindered by light pollution, the Milky Way turns night into day so that torches at are barely necessary.

3. Prince Edward Island, Canada

Prince Edward Island, or just PEI as everyone calls it, is seriously credentialed as foodie heaven. Located on Canada's east coast, with a thriving seafood industry, PEI has perfected the art of great food, from humble street food to fine dining. The International Seafood Chowder Championship is hotly contested, attracting Chefs from across the globe. Visit during the annual Fall Flavours Festival (September) to sample some of the best chowder on the planet.

4. Upolu Island, Samoa

With their full body tattoos and sturdy build, Samoans can appear rather intimidating. Nothing could be further from the truth however. Hail the driver of one of the colourfully painted local buses and you'll likely find yourself engaged in convivial conversation within minutes of finding a seat. Bed down as the locals do on a mattress on the floor of an open-sided beach hut beneath a coconut palm and you'll soon drift onto island time, lulled by the gentle lapping of the South Pacific Ocean.

5. Lombok, Indonesia

Content to allow Bali, her media tart cousin to the west hog the tourism limelight, Lombok is the bashful beautiful cousin to Bali's brash wild child. Emerging from Bali's shadow, Lombok offers charm and charisma concealed in an intriguing cultural basket. From simple beach shacks to low key village resorts, the pace of life rarely gets above first gear. Scooters laden with surfboards, free-ranging chooks, random dogs and bovine farmers driving their herds accounts for most traffic. Unspoilt beaches, simple food laden with spices and friendly subsistence-living locals make Lombok an island paradise. Get there soon before word gets out.

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