

The happy isles

Luxury resorts, idyllic beaches and friendly locals are all part of the Fiji experience.

Fiona Harper reports.

In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama connects the wisdom of the east with desires of the west. He says: "I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness ... I think the very motion of our life is towards happiness."

annual rainfall ensuring that Taveuni is green and lush year round. Though most arrive in the Yasawas in boats that ferry passengers throughout the Mamanuca and Yasawa Island groups, flying to the Yasawas at low altitude is a real treat.

A turquoise mosaic of coral reef-strewn South Pacific magnificence stretches below me.

Our small aircraft flies low, before swooping down onto the grass airstrip on Yasawa Island.

At Yasawa Island Resort, harmonious Fijian voices ring out as a scented floral lei is draped around my neck. Taking in the dreamy view of sand, sea and sky through the open-sided lobby, it feels like I've been welcomed home. Settling easily into island life, we start our days with long leisurely walks along the beach where few footprints disturb the serenity.

This is the Fiji that many return visitors know and love. Indeed, a lifelong love affair with the island archipelago has lured me to its sun-drenched shores yet again. Few destinations seem to promise as much happiness as Fiji

does. Admittedly her drop-dead gorgeous land and seascapes hold much allure, but Fiji's real charm has more to do with the warmth of her people and their seemingly ingrained happiness.

We board a boat to visit the Blue Lagoon made famous by Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins in the 1980 movie of the same name. At Sawa-i-Lau Cave, a grotto carved from limestone, we float around in a cool pool of silken water, so deep it's almost black. For the brave, there's a second smaller cave that requires placing an amount of trust in a local guide who leads the faithful underwater through a narrow tunnel before popping up in the smaller cave. I can't bring myself to do it and am content to splash around in the main cave.

Out east, on Taveuni Island, it's just as laid back but we do ramp-up the activity level a notch. Between exquisite meals and sundowners served in one of five intimately romantic dining locations spread around the Beach Villa at Taveuni Palms Resort, there's lots to do.

Bouma National Heritage Park occupies much of Taveuni's central highlands and east coast. Thanks to a tropical climate, lushness abounds. Banana and papaya trees are heavy with fruit in various stages of ripeness, scarlet flowers bloom from hibiscus bushes and ginger plants, frangipani petals litter the ground, their fragrance wafting on the trade wind breeze.



Fiji seems to have taken a page from the Dalai Lama's book and cornered the happiness market. Indeed, the apparent happiness of Fijians is one of the attractions that lured almost 800,000 holidaymakers to Fiji's sun-kissed shores last year.

In the western archipelago of the Yasawa Islands, the 20 or so volcanic islands are blessed with stretches of white-sand beaches lined with coconut palms. In eastern Fiji, Taveuni Island, otherwise known as the Garden Island, is a perennial favourite with nature lovers with substantial



Footprints in the sand ... a lonely beach at sunset in the Yasawa Islands (far left); Taveuni Palms Resort (left); the site of Blue Lagoon (above); food and accommodation at Yasawa Resort (below).



We slide down a natural rock slide worn smooth by centuries of rushing water, plopping ungraciously into a boulder-strewn pool.

Guide Pita takes us by boat along the east coast where we stop beneath waterfalls that cascade into the sea. He tells us that in days gone by European sailing ships used to tie up their tenders beneath the falls to resupply their water provisions.

Hiking to another waterfall, guide Simone's eagle eyes spot the vibrant colour of the rare orange

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” dove. Contrasting starkly against the tree it's perched in, we're fortunate enough to zero in on it through the binoculars before it takes flight.

Nearby, the ruins of a fort remain as a reminder of the

battles Taveuni Islanders fought against invading Tongans. A well-known battle, fought in canoes off the beach near Wairiki, was recently commemorated, marking 200 years since the Tongans were defeated. Legend

has it that this victory was celebrated at the time by the victors cooking the vanquished and eating them. It was around this time that European and American missionaries sought to stamp out barbaric practices, including cannibalism that was rife across Fiji.

These days, Fijians are far more likely to kill with kindness. ■

Air Niugini flies from Port Moresby to Nadi, Fiji, three times weekly. See airniugini.com.pg.

