



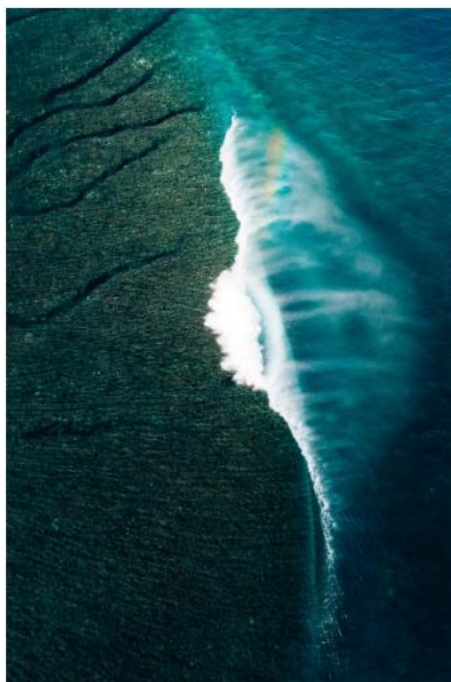
The wild interiors, cerulean blues, and winding rivers of Fiji

At the crossroads of the South Pacific, Fiji is a nation of lush, colourful settings and locals whose warmth knows no bounds

I was expecting to spend most of my time in Fiji, a nation of more than 300 islands, on or in the water, but I'd mostly been thinking of the ocean. Yet, on a warm morning in May, I found myself deep within the mountainous interior of Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu, roaring in a red jet boat down a winding, mud-brown river, past sheer cliffs, dense jungle, and gentle banks where locals watered their horses or fished for tilapia or mud crabs. The river was one of Viti Levu's longest, the Sigatoka, whose fertile, farmable banks are known as Fiji's "salad bowl."



A welcoming ceremony at Nanuku Resort Fiji in south Viti Levu Jack Johns

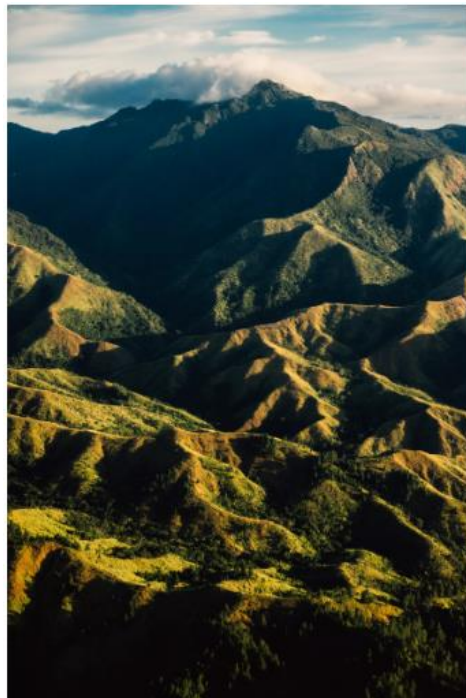


Surf crashing along Fiji's Coral Coast, an offshore reef Jack Johns

After a while, the boat driver, an Indigenous Fijian who introduced himself as Captain Nox, steered us into some shaded shallows and cut the engine to tell his 14 passengers a story. Missionaries and reverends, back when the nation was first ruled by the British, in the late 1800s, met their violent deaths along these riverbanks at the hands of the island's tribal members, at times for committing acts of tabu (or taboo, as Captain James Cook imported the word to English in 1777) like touching people's heads. "Fiji was the worst cannibal island," Nox said. "But now Fiji is the friendliest island, eh?"

It's true; nothing compares to the plosive enthusiasm of the Fijian greeting: "Bula!" It's a word that floats like a bubble. Everyone says "Bula!" to everyone, even passing strangers. And historically, many have passed through here. A crossroads in the heart of the South Pacific, Fiji spans from eastern Melanesia, the region populated in prehistory by ethnically African people, into the western edge of Polynesia, which was inhabited later, by people who migrated from Southeast Asia by outrigger and double-hulled canoe. A little more than half of Fiji's 900,000 people are Indigenous, or iTaukei, and nearly 40 percent are ethnically Indian, descended from indentured laborers brought to work on sugar plantations during the British colonial rule.

Captain Nox steered the jet boat back out into the middle of the placid Sigatoka, and we roared off. We were now on our way to the village (1 of the 17 this excursion visits), and someone asked—due diligence—what tabus we should know about. All the women had been given sarongs to wrap modestly around their waists, so there was that. And still no head touching, Nox said, and no hats. But things seem to have relaxed since the day of those ill-fated colonialists because as soon as we arrived in the village of Mavua, our guide, a local who said to call him Jerry, told us we could leave our hats on. "It's okay," he said. "It's hot today."



Kokomo's private seaplane takes guests on aerial adventures, including over the island's mountain ranges. Jack Johns



At Korou, a village along the Sigatoka Jack Johns

Mavua is a humble place, typical of a rural iTaukei village: a few dozen brightly painted cement houses with corrugated roofs, a church, a community hall, and roaming chickens and children. Its residents are mostly subsistence farmers. On the weekends, women take surplus produce to local markets to sell, while the men hunt for wild pigs using dogs and

spears. “We are trying to live in the life of our forefathers,” Jerry said.

In the community hall, a big, open-raftered room with louvered windows, 30 villagers welcomed us with a kava ceremony. Beloved throughout the South Pacific, kava is an earthy-tasting, sediment-forward brown beverage made from the macerated root of a shrub in the pepper family (black, not bell pepper) called yaqona. On first sip, kava makes your tongue go a little numb, and if you keep drinking, it induces a state of mellow good vibes. Drink enough of it, and you may find yourself more or less immobilised. Fijians are passionate about kava, which they call grog, and the slo-mo communal act of drinking it has long served as a tool for forging relationships and mitigating disputes.

As the kava was prepared, the village chief and the oldest man in our jet boat (by default, our chief) engaged in a ritualised dialogue, punctuated by clapping and eventual sipping. As the bilos—cups for drinking kava—were passed around, a heavy rain fell, drumming on the roof. Women in brightly printed dresses draped us with salusalu, or leaf garlands. The village dogs, drawn by the smell of lunch, waited hopefully outside the open doors. Sitting in long rows on the floor, we ate cassava and banana, greens, roti bread, sweet fried bread, ramen with curry sauce, chicken. Afterward, while men played guitars and ukuleles, everyone danced together, shuffling back and forth across the hall side by side with arms around one another’s waists, laughing and sweating, and then we jet-boated away in driving rain, engine growling ferociously as Captain Nox spun us in circles.



A beach hut at Kokomo Jack Johns



The pristine, warm waters off Nanuku island
Jack Johns

Later, back at the sprawling Nanuku Resort Fiji on Viti Levu’s south coast, where I was staying, I would have a private kava ceremony of my own. Organised by the resort’s cultural ambassador, an iTaukei man named Josua Cakautini, it was performed by four burly, bare-chested men who sat around a huge wooden bowl, in which they prepared the kava. During the ceremony, Josua explained that, pre-COVID, the yaqona root was often chewed by women rather than pounded. “COVID clashed with everything we stand for,” Josua said. “Unity and sharing. But you have to survive. And now we can welcome you here, and we say ‘Bula!’ to you to show we are respecting you as a human being.” He showed me how to clap to receive my bilo, or coconut shell, of kava. Then, he instructed, I

was to say “Bula!” and drink it all in one gulp. I did. My lips tingled. “Fijian culture is changing,” he said. “The language. The way we dress. The way we live. But kava is the same.”

Bula means “hello,” but it also means life. And indeed Fiji is a place that drums on your senses, reminds you that you are alive. It’s lush and colourful, busy. No one will let you arrive at or leave a place without singing a song of welcome or farewell. The roadsides are full of grazing horses and children in school uniforms walking or hitchhiking, the boys in dapper narrow skirts called sulus, the girls in sleeveless shirtdresses in mint green or coral. Snack bars try to outdo one another with clever names: Road Krill, Cannibal Country, Cuppabula. People sell fruit, yaqona root, and strings of fish from simple stands. Outfitters offer cage-free shark dives and advertise snorkelling and scuba excursions with laminated photos of reefs bustling with fish. Water, always water.

One day I went out snorkelling at Nanuku’s teensy private island with Kelly-Dawn Bentley, a native of nearby Pacific Harbour and the resort’s resident marine biologist. We glided over a reef in water so shallow I barely dared move my fins. Little black reef fish bustled out of the coral as though to shoo us away. A school of silvery thumbprint emperors flashed around us like a swarm of UFOs. Kelly-Dawn explained that a familiar practice was being used to conserve Fiji’s aquatic resources. “We are working with the local chief to hopefully designate this area as tabu,” she said, gesturing at the water between us and a nearby outlying island.

Throughout the South Pacific, tabu is a sacred prohibition that, traditionally, wasn’t used only to forbid offensive behaviours but also to manage community resources. For example, if a chief decided a mountain had been too heavily hunted for pigs, he might declare it tabu until the pigs had time to recover. After overfishing in Fiji reached crisis levels in the ‘90s, communities banded together to resurrect the practice of designating reefs as tabu so that fish could breed and mature in peace. The system is not perfectly effective (enforcement is a problem), but it’s an intriguingly modern application of an ancient idea. “Sustainability isn’t just environment,” Kelly-Dawn told me. “It’s socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental.”



Kokomo's reception area, replete with rattan decor Jack Johns



Mateo Vuniyalo, Kokomo's surf instructor, on his board in the Outer Island Reef Pass at Kokomo Jack Johns

At Kokomo Private Island, the luxury is so assured and pervasive as to seem effortless and casual, even homey. The passion project of Australian real estate billionaire Lang Walker, Kokomo occupies all 140 acres of an island south of Viti Levu called Yaukuve Levu that is a 45-minute seaplane flight from Fiji's international airport at Nadi. As we approached, the barefoot pilot descended over the aquamarine shallows of the surrounding Great Astrolabe Reef, circled once over a green, bottle-shaped dollop of land with villas studding the long sandy beaches on either side of its neck, and splashed gently down.

Kokomo has 21 villas and five larger residences nestled in grounds that have been manicured into an idealised version of Fiji's wild jungles: dense, rustling green ranks of thriving palms and shrubs and broad-leafed banana plants, punctuated with vibrant maroon ti plants and sprays of white frangipani blossoms. The clientele tends to be Australian or Kiwi—and often families. There is a spa, of course, and a terraced 5.5-acre organic farm, and a floating platform off the main beach where guests can have drinks delivered by paddleboard. You know the room-service sashimi is fresh because the person on the other end of the phone will have to check with “the boys” to see if any fish has been caught yet. A grand, open, timbered, and thatched building known modestly as The Beach Shack serves as the lobby and main restaurant. A second restaurant, Walker d'Plank, is perched above shallow waters patrolled by black tip reef sharks.

My aquatic lifestyle flourished. I could swim in my private pool or walk a few steps down to the beach, passing under a budding tree swarmed by black butterflies. I could snorkel off my beach, or I could go out on one of the resort boats with iTaukei marine biologist Viviana Taubera to see Kokomo's coral-restoration project or, as we did one afternoon, to search for manta rays. (One of the resort's conservation projects is manta tagging.) We motored across water made dark by an overcast sky, headed for a cleaning station off a neighbouring island, a place where the massive creatures were known to hang out and let smaller fish nibble the parasites off their bodies. “It's too quiet out here,” Viviana said, scanning the sea. Just then the water around us exploded with a silvery disturbance: mackerel. “A school of thousands!” Viviana said, lighting up. On the remote island where she grew up, she'd spent all her time in the ocean. “Marine biology was always a passion,” she told me. “For a while I regretted studying it, because I couldn't find a job. But now...” She smiled. Now there was Kokomo. When no mantas showed, she was as bummed as a first-time visitor who didn't chase mantas every day. “I really wanted to see one!” she exclaimed.



Preparing kava to share and drink in Korou village on the Sigatoka Jack Johns

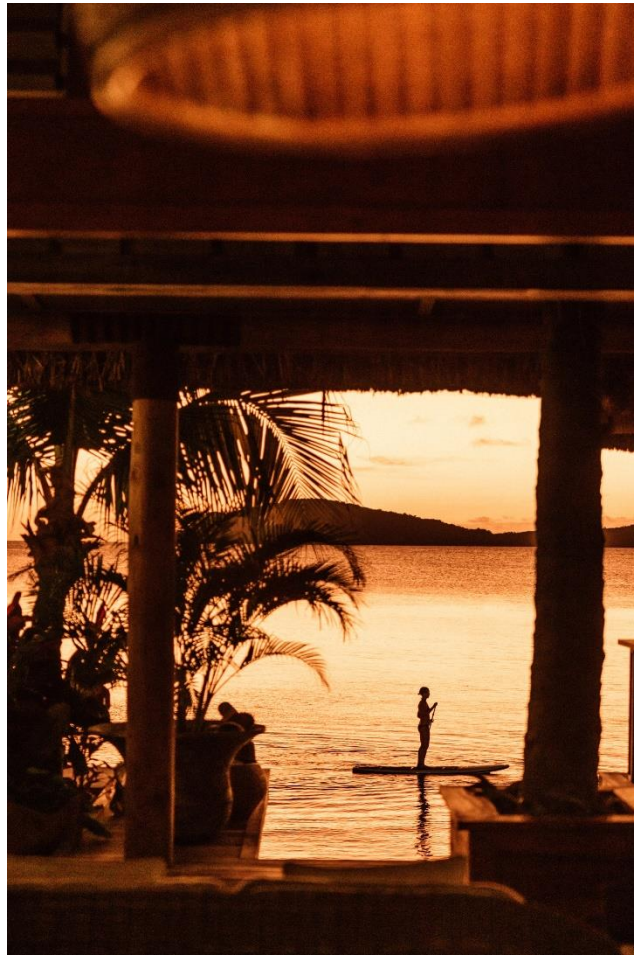


Fresh mussels at Kokomo's Beach Shack restaurant Jack Johns

My second-to-last morning, I was on Kokomo's main dock before dawn. A two-level, 51-foot fishing boat was waiting for me, as was Jaga Crossingham, an Australian transplant and master sportfishing guide and spear fisherman. I'd seen recent photos on Instagram of guests with giant wahoos—"slime logs," Jaga called them—which he said had shown up early this year. "The kitchen officially told me no more fish," he added. Showing me around the boat, he pointed out the padded bolted-down chair at the stern, complete with a seat belt and footrests, where I would theoretically sit to reel in a big fish. "This is where we fight," he said. A pile of neon rubber squid-like lures and silver decoy fish with hooks as long as my hand lay at the ready.

When the fish weren't biting inside the reef, we went outside to where waves were breaking on the protective coral of Astrolabe. As the boat rolled heavily, we trolled along, booms extended like wings, trailing six lines. One zinged out, and I was sent to the chair. I reeled and reeled until my arm burned, finally pulling in a rainbow runner about three feet long. "Just a little one," Jaga said, dropping the fish in an ice-filled cooler against the kitchen's edict. "It'll make good sashimi for the staff." We stayed out for a couple more hours, but the fish showed no more interest. "You did well," Jaga said when I stepped back onto Kokomo's dock, and at first I thought he meant reeling in my little big fish. But then he added, "99.9 percent of people would have been very seasick."

Out on that reef, I am reminded that any ocean nation is inherently a wild place, governed by water, for better or for worse. We may have missed the manta rays, but it's nice to think that they may be busy elsewhere; thrashing waters may have the ability to turn a seaman green, though their energy is in part sheltering the marine life below. Warming seas endanger the reefs that protect the islands and the creatures that live in and around them, feeding Fiji's people. You'll never see or do everything there, but it's worth leaving the resort, getting into all the different waters. There's life there, in all its complexity. There's bula.



Getting there

Fiji Airways, which is part of Oneworld Connect, has direct flights to the gateway city of Nadi from Los Angeles and San Francisco. There are also nonstops from various New Zealand and Australian cities, should you wish to make Fiji a tack-on during a trip elsewhere in the region. The best time to enjoy its good weather and beaches is May through September, after cyclone season.

Where to stay

The majority of Fiji's resorts are located off the shores of its two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, and many include private transfers for guests. The pristine Kokomo Private Island, in Fiji's southern archipelago, sits at the intersection of high-end luxury and sustainability. Local artisans create the atmosphere, and the fish on your plate has never been out of the water for more than a few hours. The reef beyond the resort's doors is a snorkeler's dream, and top-notch staff see to every desire, from diving with manta rays to ordering a perfectly seared Tomahawk steak at 3 a.m. (The all-inclusive rate includes 24-hour room service.) Back toward Viti Levu, Nanuku Resort Fiji is a smart choice for those wanting to explore the villages and culture of the larger island between ocean dives and spa treatments. While there, guests can whitewater raft through volcanic tunnels and hike mangrove forests. Closer to the airport, the sophisticated Intercontinental Fiji Golf Resort and Spa is set amid 35 acres of tropical gardens and coconut groves right on the Pacific Ocean.

What to do

Though you can expect activities like snorkelling and sailing at all of Fiji's resorts, there is much to discover off-property. On Viti Levu, the mighty Sigatoka is one of Fiji's longest rivers, and the **Sigatoka River Safari** will take you past emerald hillsides and local villages with tales of its history. The eco-minded **Talanoa Treks** bring hikers through Fiji's lush interiors, with dense forests and waterfalls.

<https://www.cntraveller.in/story/the-wild-interiors-cerulean-blues-and-winding-rivers-of-fiji/>