

# Journey to paradise

Richard Moore slips off his shoes and dips his toes into the Yasawas



PHOTOS/RICHARD MOORE

**A** LOT of people spend their lives waiting to go to heaven, yet only three hours away from Auckland by plane — and another couple of hours on a ferry — is a tropical paradise you'll not easily forget.

It is the Yasawa Islands to the northwest of Fiji's main island of Viti Levu, an area filled with stunning white-sand beaches and tropical landscapes, beautiful coral reefs and blue waters calling for you to bathe in their warmth.

The island group not only offers a feast for your eyes, but also relaxation for body and soul as Fiji time kicks in for even the most stressed.

Taking a top-deck spot while cruising out of Port Denarau on the Yasawa Flyer is a great way to start your journey from tense to calm.

As the main island slips lower on the horizon, the small resort isles of the Mamanuca Islands fill you with a sense of excitement about what is in store a few hours away.

Then, quite suddenly, you are in open ocean, heading towards craggy mountains and, as the swells increase, so do thoughts that you are leaving the modern world behind.

On a warm, clear-blue-sky day there can be few nicer trips to go on.

You can add a bit of adventure as you embark and disembark the ferry.

Few, if any, of the resorts have even a semblance of a wharf or jetty, so tenders collect and drop off passengers. That means being ready to either take off your shoes and socks, or get them wet as you head for dry sands.

Not easy to do with 12 plus kilos of camera gear on your back.

The first island resort is Kuata, where a warrior greets you from atop a giant rock,



swinging a wooden club and shouting a challenge.

Barefoot Kuata is a hub for scuba divers. The resort offers solid wooden huts and dorms just back from a lovely sandy beach with great views of the surrounding island peaks.

The major offering on Kuata is diving or swimming with sharks — a fantastic activity that will likely end up being the highlight of your stay. The shark reef is a 40-minute boat trip from Kuata and is in about 20m of clear water with plenty of coral and sea life to enjoy.

If serenity and complete relaxation are what you are after, then I would recommend Wayalailai, just across the channel from Kuata. The resort has been around for 20 years and has superb views over the ocean. It is on a fertile island and this may be why it has a

cool expanse of lawn between the large, comfortable bures and the main dining area. Perfect for a game of cricket, or footy.

Wayalailai has a wonderfully laidback charm and I felt at ease as soon as I put my bags down.

The locals are terrific — very approachable and quite inquisitive — they will want to know everything about you.

Saukarasa Ravinasaga owns the dive shop and runs Yasawa Tropical Diver trips out to dive spots when he is not working in Switzerland. He says he knows all the good spots — including ones no one else does — and his confidence tells you if you want to visit the best sites he is the man to sign on with.

Some of Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away* was filmed across on Kuata. You can see the high

point of the island from which he tried to do away with himself and his watery cave lies near it. Ravinasaga tells how he told off a person who landed in his helicopter, later discovering it was Hanks himself.

He still laughs about that.

When I go back to Wayalailai I'll take a scuba refresher course with him to be able to enjoy the beautiful waters even more.

From Waya Island it is another hour on to Paradise Cove, Mantaray Island Resort and Barefoot Manta Resort on Drawaqa Island.

Barefoot Manta was our home for two days and is home to a host of visitors and volunteers who are working on the Vinaka Fiji programme, to create sustainable communities, and helping with education or conservation.

There is almost every European nationality here, giving the island a United Nations feel.

Meal times are communal affairs in the meeting/restaurant area and the food is pretty good.

Accommodation on Manta ranges from older bures that are very basic to more modern versions, dormitories and tent bures with en suites.

These are the bee's knees as the tents — styled on African safari shelters — have mesh sides that can be covered for privacy, big comfortable beds, electricity and ceiling fans that are godsend on sultry nights.

The en suite is an open-to-the-elements shower and a covered loo.

Permanent guests found at all resorts are the bure geckos that chirp to you at irregular intervals.

North to south, Drawaqa Island has two distinctive weather sides. If the winds are blowing hard from the sunrise side then activities are held on the sheltered side and when the winds come from the sunset side the opposite is true.

Both sides have good snorkelling spots just off the beaches. From Manta you can snorkel with manta rays or on various reefs, go scuba diving, sunbathe, join the hunt for crown of thorn starfish, relax or swim.

You will quickly clock on to Fiji time at Barefoot Manta.

Our two days went far too quickly — very much like the rest of our time in the Yasawas. They are a wonderful destination if you like to get back to nature on your holidays. Forget your mobile and wave the internet goodbye, instead chill out in a place that can easily be called a paradise.

*Richard Moore was in Fiji courtesy of Awesome Adventures Fiji and Vinaka Fiji.*