



Photo by Chaney Kwak

THE BESTS

# Fiji Isn't Just for Honeymooners Anymore

*After the devastating Cyclone Winston, the  
Pacific islands have reinvented themselves.*

BY CHANEY KWAK

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When the freight-and-passenger ferry to **Fiji's** capital, Suva, pulls away from the mangrove-flanked jetty on the island of Kadavu, the village of Kavala reverts to its sleepy self. The town's waterfront snack stand shutters. I stand

there, a bit at a loss, the passengers waving at the lone foreigner on the pier. This rainforest-covered volcanic island is Fiji's fourth largest, but tourism has barely made a mark. There are no flag-carrying tour groups; no doe-eyed **honeymooners** sharing a single towel on the beach. Most of the 10,000 locals work as sustenance fishers and farmers. They don't really care that *Celebrity Survivor* was filmed in Fiji.

Kadavu is what some people would call unspoiled—hell, **Fiji's tourism board does**—and it's newly on our radar, given the changes that have happened to the country in the last two years. In 2016, Winston, the most devastating cyclone recorded in the Southern Hemisphere, battered the Melanesian nation, damaging upwards of 40,000 homes and affecting about 40 percent of the population, especially in the outlying regions like the “garden island” Taveuni and the northeastern corner of the main island Viti Levu.

But instead of shutting down tourism, Fiji has pushed the reset button, rewriting its narrative in the process: Not content as a destination for the indulgent honeymoon or the **adventure scuba diver**, the new world of Fiji tourism is embodied in places like the 26-pool **Six Senses**, slated to open this year, where everything is powered by off-grid solar panels and Tesla batteries. New players, like Kadavu, put as much emphasis on conserving the diversity of the islands' ecosystems—and cultures—as they do on luxury. In Fiji, a greener, more sustainable tourism future is in sight—and everyone wants in.

Most get around on foot or by boat on Fiji's fourth-largest island Kadavu.

Photo by Chaney Kwak

A beautiful waterfall called Wainitu is about an hour's walk away from Kavala's port. When asked for directions, the snack stand's kind-faced owner tells her nieces and nephew to guide me there—and they oblige without as much as a shrug.

“There's only one road on this side of the island,” 21-year-old Joseph says as he leads the way. “Where?” I ask. He looks puzzled, then points at the ground. This dirt path, at times barely wide enough for one person, is it.

Roots of kava, the mouth-numbing plant used in traditional tea ceremonies, dry on corrugated rooftops. Soon the cluster of homes opens out to steep, lush tropical terrain. Acres and acres of palms and mango trees cover the sloping hills. The winding path is lined with hibiscus and frangipani flowers that Fijians traditionally wear behind the ear (left for single, right for taken).

Once we reach the waterfall, Joseph and his cousin Mihana scale the slippery

rocks to jump into the swimming hole, each time upping the ante by about ten feet until they are outdoing Olympic divers.

They're hamming it up a bit, perhaps. They confide, after asking to take a group selfie, that though it's different in Suva, where they're both attending hospitality schools, they don't often see foreigners on Kadavu. The island's endemic birds like the whistling fruit dove bring the occasional birdwatcher to the shore; divers in the know also come for unspoiled reefs off of the handful of scuba-oriented resorts. But away from the few coastal villages scattered about, the island is sparsely visited, by locals or foreigners.

Locals on Dravuni Island, part of Kadavu, welcome visitors with a kava ceremony. Photo by Chaney Kwak

That might not be the case for long in this mellow corner of Fiji. More and more visitors are headed to the country—**tourism from the U.S. was up 18 percent in 2017 from the year before**—and they’re wandering farther away from established destinations. And rightfully so. Only last year, the ultra-luxurious **Kokomo** opened on a 140-acre private island a few miles away from Kadavu, a few minutes’ boat ride from the pristine Great Astrolabe Reef, where tourists are encouraged to think of the bigger picture when seeing the wildlife that call it home. As if the devastating cyclone proved the fragility of the country’s ecosystems, the emphasis now is on responsible tourism.

Kokomo, for instance, keeps a database of manta rays, turtles, and reef sharks, spotted by the staff, divers, and snorkelers. “Many resorts like the idea of having a marine biologist on staff as a gesture,” says Cliona O’Flaherty, Kokomo’s staff conservationist, who leads snorkeling and diving trips. “But in Fiji, we are pushing the idea one step forward.”

A private in-villa pool at Kokomo Photo by Chaney Kwak

Existing hotels and resorts are upping their green cred, too. On palm-fringed Malolo, Ahura Resorts, which runs the island's two 2017 Readers' Choice Award winners [Malolo Island Resort](#) and [Likuliku Lagoon Resort](#), spearheads a reforestation program to replenish the island's dry forest. Already struggling due to agricultural and commercial logging, the greenery received an extra blow when Winston passed through.

Those forests have historically been home to the critically endangered Fijian Crested Iguana. By keeping a tree nursery—in addition to financing the reforestation project and running a pioneering iguana breeding program—Likuliku Lagoon Resort is placing an emphasis on making sure these animals survive another generation: The country's major tourism players know too well that while traditional *bure*-inspired villas in an isolated,

sheltered cove are lovely, it's the richness of Fiji's flora and fauna that will keep the tourists coming.

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