

TRAVELLER

ON SUNDAY

BIGGEST-EVER
SUNDAY EDITION:
BUMPER 56
PAGES

TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

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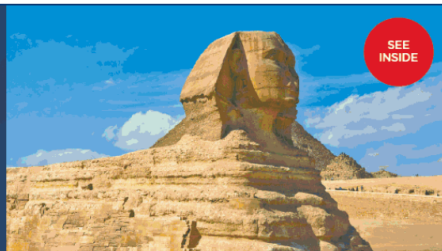
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WHERE FIJI



A RUN OF GOOD LUXE

With its wealth of natural beauty and a range of new destinations, Fiji is firmly back on the luxury radar, writes **Sue Williams**.



It rains the night I arrive in Fiji, big fat globules slamming down, carving divots in the sandy paths and leaving glossy tree branches bending under the weight of the onslaught. I sit eating dinner, watching sheets of rain veil any view of the beach. The ruts steadily transform into ponds, and I listen to the rain drumming on the coconut palm thatch of the roof.

This wasn't how it was meant to be. The forecast said dry, sunny and warm for every day of my visit, and I start to feel cheated.

The waiter senses my gloom and flashes me a glorious grin. "Don't worry, this is Fiji," he says. "It will stop soon."

I try to smile back. "But when?" I ask plaintively. It looks to me as if this rain has set in for the month.

"Soon," he repeats. "Don't worry, don't hurry; you're on Fiji time now."

The next morning, it's as if the night before never happened. The sun is shining brightly, the sky is blue and the sea – just a hop, skip and jump away – back to its trademark stunning turquoise. The water I waded through on the splashy walk to my villa for the night has dried up, the paths have been repaired and the day is as clear as the ocean lapping the white-sand beach.

The same waiter is back on breakfast duty. "You see," he says, not even bothering to disguise the note of triumph in his voice. "Fiji is like that. It always has a way of surprising us."

Of course, he's right. And not only with its weather. Just as we'd become used to Fiji being firmly back on our radar as a favourite cheap and cheerful package holiday destination (closer than both Bali and Thailand with just a four-hour flight), it catches us unawares again with a flurry of new upmarket hotel and resort openings, with more to come.

Today, for instance, I'm road-testing one of them, lolling around the private pool of

my beachfront villa at Six Senses Fiji on Malolo Island, which has just celebrated its first birthday. It's the true five-star luxury experience, with your own butler – aka a Guest Experience Maker – a health and wellness edge, a commitment to sustainability that makes you feel warm and fuzzy and – just to help along that comfortable fuzziness – an in-room wine fridge stocked by the resort's sommelier.

Later in the week, I'm checking out another: this time the six-star private island resort Kokomo, now considered not only one of the most exclusive "barefoot luxury" places to stay in Fiji but, yes, in the world. Other hotel and resorts have also set up shop with more flooding in. The Pullman brand, for instance, has just made its debut in Fiji with its brand new multimillion-dollar Pullman Nadi Bay Resort & Spa; there's been a massive revamp of old favourite the Plantation Island Resort; the Marriott Resort Momi Bay has opened; and Hilton has announced two more hotels.

The surprises don't stop. Last time I was in Fiji, I remember driving out of Nadi around the main island of Viti Levu in the dark and having to swerve wildly to avoid a horse wandering along the narrow winding road. Now there is an array of handsome infrastructure, including wide roads, well-lit and often with pavements, largely put in by China when Fiji's nearer neighbours, like us, weren't paying attention. The sheer volume of Chinese money prompted Prime Minister Scott Morrison to pledge \$1 billion in new spending in the Pacific region in a bid to reassure the locals of our interest.

Perhaps the most important element these days, however, is Fiji's political stability. It's just been through its second election since the 2006 military coup, with a campaign predicted to be so uneventful, royals Prince Harry and Meghan Markle even dropped in.

TRAVELLERFACT LAST YEAR 365,660 AUSTRALIANS VISITED FIJI, HALF OF ALL THEIR TOURISTS



IF YOU HAD TO PICTURE YOUR PERSONAL HAPPY PLACE, IT WOULD CERTAINLY BE HARD TO GO BEYOND AN IMAGE OF SWAYING COCONUT PALMS, WHITE BEACHES, CLEAR WATER, GLOWING CORAL AND BRIGHTLY COLOURED FISH.

This bright new dawn for Fiji hasn't been lost on other Australian interests, either. On March 31, Qantas flew from Sydney to Nadi for the first time in nearly 20 years, announcing flights four times a week from then on. These are in addition to Jetstar's four-times-a-week service, while Fiji Airways – which code-shares with Qantas – also runs flights twice daily.

The airline puts its new flights down to the increase in demand for "premium holidays", driven by the aforementioned wave of new and refurbished luxury properties. In addition, Qantas Hotels now has more than 200 properties in and around Fiji, too. The country is one of the airline's fastest growing holiday resort destinations.

Last year, 365,660 Australians visited Fiji – half of all their tourists – up nearly 5 per cent from 2014. There are now ambitious plans in place to accelerate that growth with even more hotels and resorts catering for budget travellers, families and high-end visitors, improved internet accessibility, and more advertising campaigns in line with the recent one focused on a Gallup International poll, naming Fiji as the world's happiest, and most hopeful, country.

If you had to picture your personal happy place, it would certainly be hard to go beyond an image of swaying coconut palms, white beaches, clear water, glowing coral, brightly coloured fish, hammocks strung between trees, friendly locals and sunshine. Add that English is one of Fiji's official languages, that the nation is now in its ninth consecutive year of economic growth, and how keen the locals are to share their culture, and you do have a holiday destination that's hard to beat.

At Six Senses, a 45-minute speedboat ride from Nadi, I spend my days swimming, snorkelling, sailing, trying local crafts and walking the beach, wondering why I haven't visited Fiji more often over the years.

At the restaurant, I eat fish fresh off the boat, and salads, vegetables, herbs and fruits all grown in the resort garden, and feel a million dollars.

At the spa, I have a variety of body treatments and massages and, depending on which one, emerge either invigorated or so relaxed, it's as much as I can do to slither back to the villa for a lie-down.

Later, I catch the seaplane to Kokomo Private Island, an idyllic retreat that feels a

world away from anywhere. Here, I stay in a vast beachfront villa with its own private infinity pool, looking out to the beach, the ocean and my hammock swinging invitingly between two coconut palms.

I try my hand at scuba diving for the first time with my own personal tutor; snorkel, swim, conquer the stand-up paddleboard; and have more massages in the vast, and sumptuous spa. Just when you think life can't make you any happier, you're served fruit tea and chocolate bliss balls.

And when it spits for a few minutes with rain as I'm leaving Fiji, I can't help wishing myself back in that initial downpour, with the long days of islands sunshine ahead.

TRIP NOTES

FLY

Qantas now flies four times a week between Sydney and Nadi, on Tuesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. See qantas.com

STAY

Six Senses Fiji is a luxury resort with 24 pool villas on Malolo Island, a 45-minute speedboat ride from Denarau. See sixsenses.com

Kokomo Private Island is a 45-minute seaplane ride in the Kadavu Group of islands with 21 beachfront villas and five luxury residences. See kokomolandfiji.com

MORE

traveller.com.au/fiji
fiji.travel

Sue Williams was a guest of Qantas, Six Senses Fiji and Kokomo Private Island Fiji



Clockwise from main: Sunset at Six Senses Fiji on Malolo Island; a beachfront pool villa at the resort; a celebration of Qantas' return to Fiji in March; taking a dip at Six Senses; and a beachfront villa at Kokomo Private Island.