



Kaptivating

Fiji's best-kept tourist secret. By Erin Phelan

The six tourists look at the small plane, and then each other, with great trepidation. Everyone is thinking the same thing, but no one is verbalizing it: "Is this thing going to get us there all the way?" Finally, someone cracks a joke about rubber bands, and we climb aboard for our flight. Thus begins the journey to Kadavu, breathtaking from the word go.

Though this might sound funny, many travellers to Fiji never see spots like Kadavu because of fear of small planes. I am not a member of the faint-hearted club, so when we take off I peer out the window to enjoy the stunning scenery below. As we climb over the hills of the west, I am reminded of the diverse topography of Fiji. And, like a bird in motion, suddenly we are gliding over the sparkling Pacific. An ink-blotted canvas, crystal clear turquoise waters stretch for miles, stained by small masses of navy blue - a sign that the reefs run deep. Personally, I can't wait to get under the sea. This is

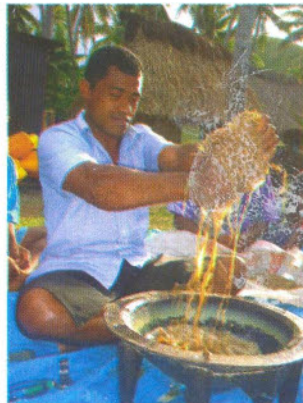
why I - and so many other tourists before me - have come to Kadavu.

Kadavu is best known for its world-class scuba diving on the Great Astrolabe. The fourth largest island in Fiji, Kadavu's terrain is made up of several high mountains and numerous cliffs, making it very unique to the Fiji Islands. It has limited roadways, so travel to any point in the islands is by boat. This explains why the population of 8000 remains traditional and conservative, untouched by the spoils of excessive development and isolated from other communities, even ones only miles away.

Kadavu is also becoming known for eco-tourism, trekking, bird watching, and kayaking is easy and beautiful, with calm waters in many parts.

However, the tourist path is nowhere near as trodden as that of the Mamanucas, or the Yasawas. Travellers to these parts can sense that uniqueness immediately.

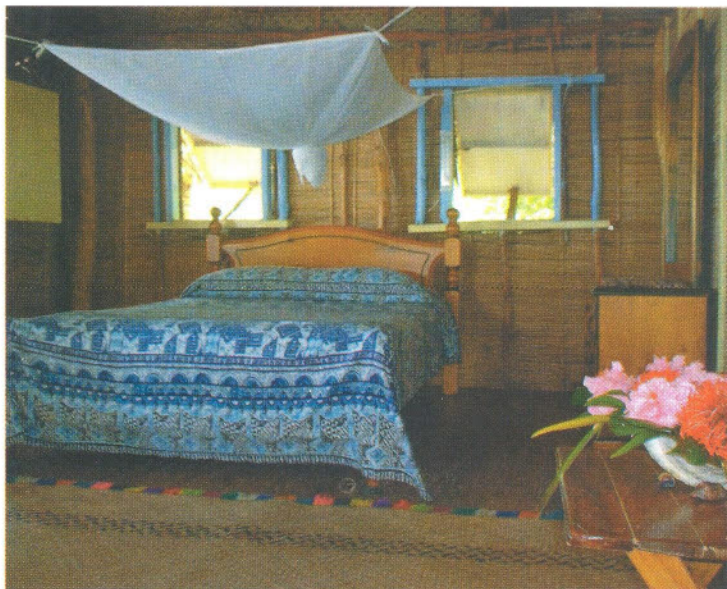
After passing by Vatulele, the poster-



child for the Fiji Visitors Bureau with its perfect circumference of white sandy beaches, we glimpse Kadavu in the distance. It looks daunting, like the island that appears out of the fog in the movie Jurassic Park. I understand immediately why Kadavu is commonly described as “rugged”.

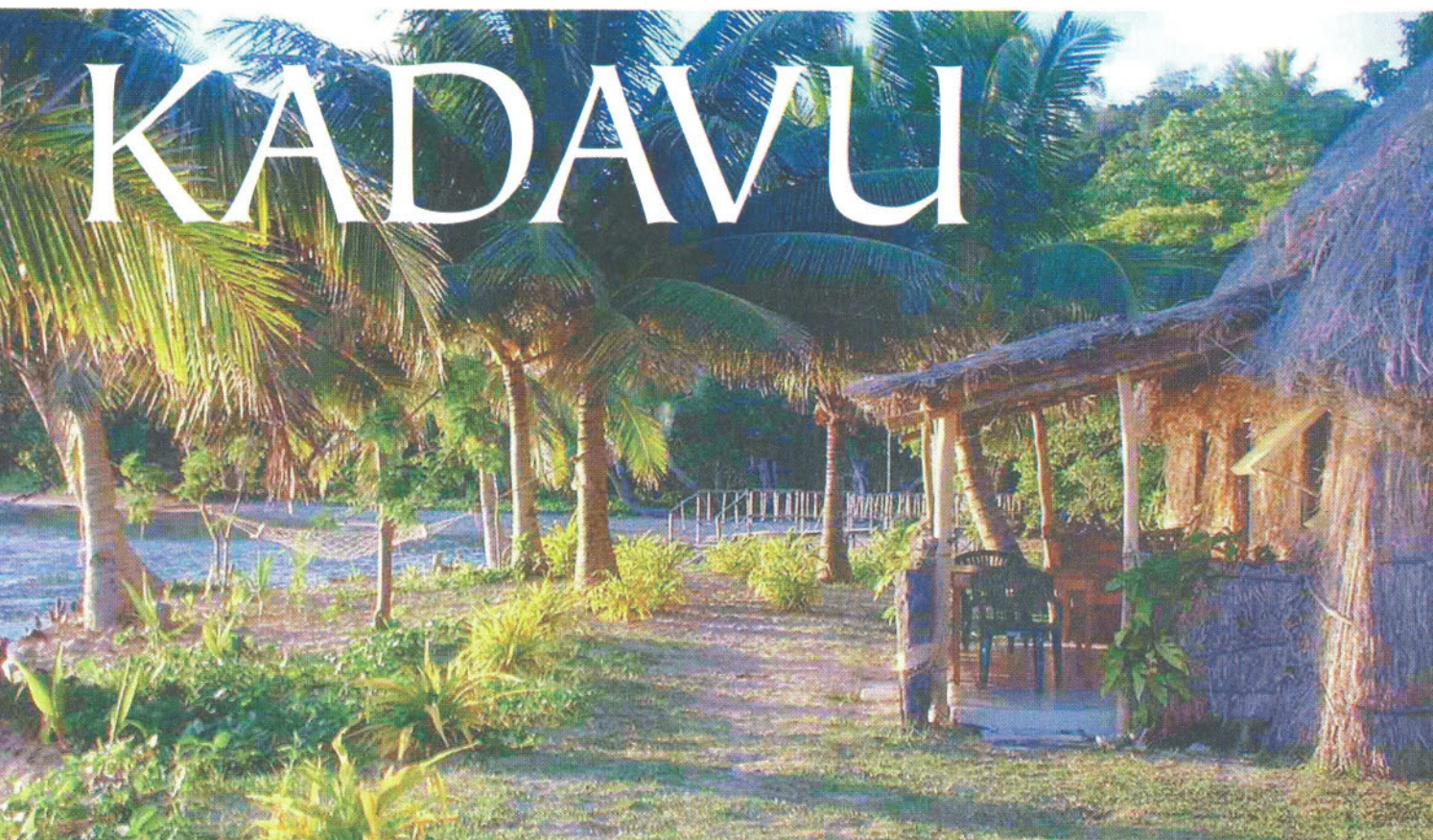
The resorts on Kadavu are scattered along the lengthy coastline. Though there are a few upmarket resorts, such as Matana Dive Kadavu, none of the travellers on-board are going there - we're all on budget, so we head north to resorts such as Matava, Jona's Paradise, and Waisalima Island Resort. The biggest hindrance to resort hopping on Kadavu is that all resorts operate their own transfer boats, and charge up to F\$120 for a round trip ride, making moving about a costly venture. Therefore, once you've picked your spot, you'll likely to stay put.

January and February are Kadavu's wettest months, and we happen to make our way to Matava on one of the wetter days. The downpour drenches us, without going into the pains from the bumpy ride. A hot shower and a cold beer quickly reverse the mood and I can take in the surroundings: Matava is a beautiful, romantic spot with traditional bures nestled into the hillside, reminiscent of Lord of the Flies. I half-expect deranged children to run out with spears, but instead am treated to the patter of rain as I read the visitor's book.

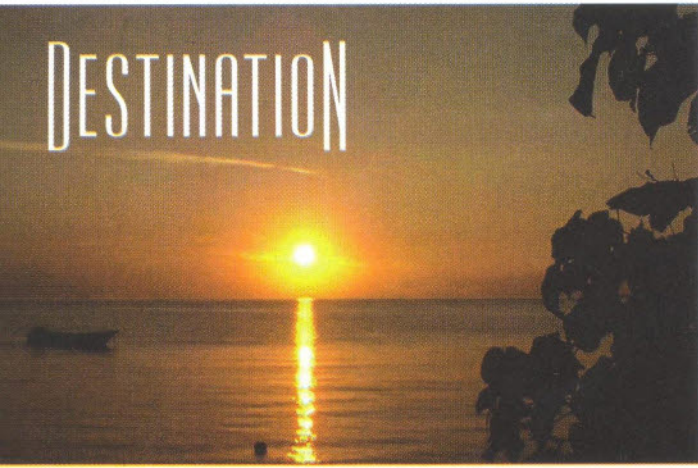


Waisalima Resort...for budget travellers.

Many a traveller has left these parts happy and relaxed and it is easy to see why. The food is delicious, the local staff accommodating and the pace of life tortoise-like. Tours to villages, waterfalls and bird watching are quickly arranged, and suppertime is like a relaxed family affair with divers swapping stories. I hear two English guys talk about seeing dozens of barracudas that morning, and I'm green with envy.



DESTINATION



Sadly, my aspirations for diving are quelled the next day as the rain continues to thrash the shores, though the dive master says visibility won't be too bad. I decide to save my pennies and wait for a sunny day, and chill out before the next stop. Matava does provide a good chill-out space. Infact, one traveller wrote, "I'm so mellow I can hardly move"...a pretty good synopsis.

Matava's biggest downfall is the lack of white sandy beaches. However, further up the coast Waisalima Island Resort, Albert's Place, and Jona's Paradise all offer nice beaches.

Albert's Place has become more run-down over the years, but is a good low-budget alternative for diving enthusiasts who are serviced by Waisalima's Dive Shop. Jonah's Paradise on Ono has a quaint feel to it, and is 100% Fijian and family owned with the best snorkelling in the area. One German traveller spoke of snorkelling one afternoon to the sounds of the family singing in the garden - an experience he'll never forget.

Waisalima Island Resort and Dive Centre changed ownership a couple of years ago, with Maureen Riggs taking over this lovely resort. Sitting on the tip of Kadavu, across from the smaller island of Ono, traditional Fijian bures are close enough to the water to hear the gentle lapping of the ocean - a good marketing point, an even better soundtrack for sleep. Maureen, or "Mo" has a close relationship with the traditional landowners and this is evident in the wonderful friendliness of the staff, who are all locals.

Mo is also establishing Kadavu's first Marine Ecology and Resource Center. Working with the Coral Alliance based in Suva, they have already done workshops with

locals on reef preservation. In addition, several of the conservation dives in traditional sea grounds are at additional cost, with monies put back into the centre and conservation practices.

Immediately upon arriving, I'm scurried off for a dive, so as not to miss one of the many incredible sites. I hardly express my glee before heading to Naigoro Pass, one of the many infamous dives along the Great Astolabe Reef. Drifting along, like an astronaut in underwater space, I'm surrounded by gorgeous red and purple soft corals, and what looks like millions of reef fish. Forty-five minutes later I start to feel satiated; understanding why this reef is voted one of the top three in the world.

Saturday night is lovo night and we are treated to a feast of chicken, fish, kokoda and dalo and vegetables from the resort's organic garden, an added treat. With a full belly we sit on the mat for kava and singing; unlike many resorts I've been to in Fiji this doesn't feel contrived - it isn't put on for the tourists. There are only a handful of us, and we're outnumbered four to one by Fijians. Uro, the resident Kadavu parrot, walks around the floor looking for scraps of food. I'm numb from the kava as I

walk back to my bure, noticing that the moon is almost full. It casts a beam of light on the seemingly shadow-filled ocean. I feel lucky: I've just experienced a near-perfect day

Another day, another dive, this time along an ice-cream coloured canvas of soft and hard corals are sublime. Swimming through tunnels, we rise up upon one hill after another of incredible reef. A hammerhead shark sees us and makes a run for it, too fast for any of us to follow. The coral bleaching is evident, and makes me sad to think of how the reef is going to look in a few years' time.

After too short a vacation, it is time to head back and catch my daredevil ride. This time I'm lucky, dealt a glorious, sunny day with perfect calm waters. Whisking along the coastline, the only other passenger, an American backpacker, and I marvel at the beauty of Kadavu. He tells me the extra money it cost him was worth it, because he feels he's seen a part of the world few people experience.

We smile knowingly at each other, sharing the best-kept tourist secret of Fiji.

• For more information check out their website - www.waisalima.com.fj

