



barefootbliss

THE SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN IS A TROPICAL PARADISE DOTTED WITH HIGH-END RESORTS MAKING THE MOST OF PEOPLE'S DESERT ISLAND FANTASIES. LITTLE TURTLE ISLAND IS, BEYOND ITS NATURAL SPLENDOUR, UNIQUE AMONG THEM.

Having had enough of the corporate life, American Richard Evanson bought it in 1972 as his own private hideaway. And after Columbia Pictures chose it as the location for the remake of *Blue Lagoon*, starring Brooke Shields (the original 1948 Jean Simmons version was also shot here), Evanson decided in 1980 to open the 500-acre island to a small number of paying guests—a maximum of 14 couples. This gives the Fijian staff on Turtle Island the opportunity to pamper guests in a way that just isn't possible at larger resorts. But as I found out, four days relaxing in paradise can also be quite an adventure.

WEDNESDAY

The experience begins with a seaplane flight from the island of Nadi (west of Viti Levu, the capital of Fiji, where the international airport is). Gliding over reefs and tiny islands for half an hour before spotting

Turtle Island, it looked comparatively greener than the surrounding islands due to Evanson's extensive reforestation programme. The plane taxis into knee-deep water and a welcoming committee wades out to meet us, bearing coconut drinks—the holiday's begun before we're even ashore! We're introduced to our 'bure mama', Markareta who will take care of all our needs during our stay. For the next four days, we're the only guests she has to worry about.

We're shown to our bure—a traditional Fijian dwelling with thatched roof, polished floors and beautifully crafted wooden furniture made

on the island. Half an hour later, we wander barefoot down the beach to lunch, served buffet-style at a communal table under a large open-sided bure. Salad greens (grown on the island) feature strongly, and a huge 3-kilogramme lobster pulled from the water this morning makes a delicious salad. A guided tour of the island in an electric cart follows, then a couple of hours to relax on the daybed on our veranda overlooking the Blue Lagoon.

Local turtles are endangered, and tonight (before our dinner) one bought from a local fisherman the day before and auctioned at a dinner the same night, is released. The

winning bidders have decorated his shell with marine paint, rendering the shell of no commercial value so he won't be caught again.

Dinner is a communal affair at a long table set on the sand. Several of the couples at the table are honeymooners while others are celebrating anniversaries or special birthdays. The conversation and wine flow easily as we devour more fresh greens from the island's garden and some delicious local seafood. After dinner, we're invited to join the staff for kava (ceremonial drink), a nightly ritual (and a means for everyone to gather over a few drinks; also held in honour of visitors to a village). The kava bowl is passed ceremoniously to all the guests before the staff join in; the guitars come out and the singing starts. Guests gradually drift off to bed. Back in our bure, I fall asleep to the frogs' serenade from the pond outside my window and the more distant strains of the Fijian songs still being sung.



THURSDAY

Breakfast on the beach is a flower-laden buffet with sweet and savoury pastries, cereals, fresh fruit and juices, where we're greeted by name and a friendly "bula bula", the all-encompassing Fijian greeting. Chef comes and takes our order: lobster eggs (poached eggs topped with grilled lobster meat and hollandaise) for Franz and pancakes with grilled banana and bacon for me. After breakfast, we have a massage in our bure before motoring out to Devil's Beach, booked exclusively for us today. Our eskies, cushions, floaties, beach towels, chairs, picnic rug and hammock are unloaded, the hammock is strung up under the picnic bure and we're left with a two-way radio in case we needed anything more during the afternoon. We swim, feast on spicy prawns, noodles, grilled lobster, green salad and an ice-cold bottle of Grosset Polish Hill Riesling. Cheese, crackers and a plate of fruit complete the feast and after lunch, a little nap in the shade of the picnic bure.

Upon returning to our bure, which had been decorated with fresh flowers, we find plates of snacks as well as fresh limeade that have been left to tide us over until dinner. At 7.30 in the evening, we wander down the beach for pre-dinner cocktails. Over a drink, we meet the three new couples that arrived today; this constant gentle mixing of the inhabitants of Turtle is part of the magic. Tonight's dinner is a lovo, the Fijian version of food cooked in an earth-oven, popular all over the South Pacific. We watch the food being transferred from the pit and onto the buffet table: fish, lamb, chicken, beef, and pork, all wrapped in woven pandanus leaves, as well as potatoes, cassava, yams and other vegetables smoky from the fire. A superb dessert of mango and

raspberry vacherin follows. After dinner, the staff entertain us with traditional songs and dancing, followed by kava.

FRIDAY

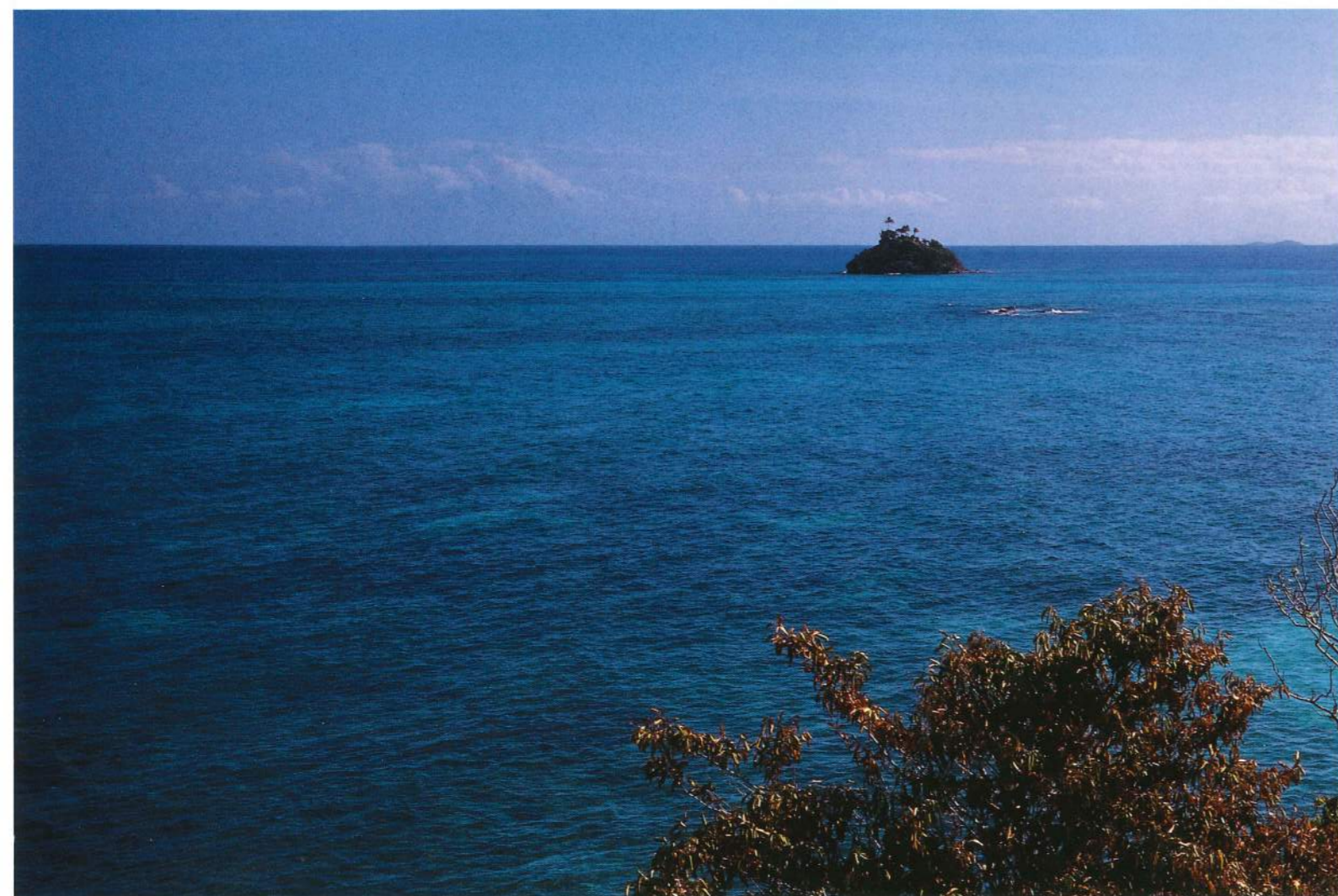
I realise when I wake that days have passed without hearing a phone or fax machine, the 'ping' of incoming email or the alarm from my palm pilot. After breakfast, we decline the option of clam digging in the mangroves on the far side of the lagoon and choose instead to stroll to the end of the dock to feed the fish—a daily ritual. They're a riot of colour and I especially love the parrotfish with the lime green side-fins. Then a golf cart takes us out to Nudie Beach, ours for the day, where once again, our hammock is strung up under the picnic bure and goodies are unloaded for us. A swim before lunch, then we unpack the eskies—we've ordered a lighter lunch today: chicken and cheese quesadillas, salad, fruit, bread and cheese. After lunch, I read and doze in the hammock and before we know it, it's 4.30pm and this time a boat arrives to collect us. Back at the bure, we wash off the sand and relax in the deck chairs on the beach. Just before sunset, we wander along the dock with two glasses and an Oregon pinot gris from our bar fridge; sitting at the end of the dock watching the sunset is idyllic.

Cocktails tonight are outside Bure 1 on the point. The view from here is glorious; the bar is set up on the terrace and everyone's in a festive mood. Then it's time to motor out to the pontoon on the lagoon where we have a private dinner booked. One of the staff sets the table, opens a bottle of 1996 Dom Pérignon and puts out plates of delicious kokoda (a salad of local fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk). Our main course and more wine are in the esky and they leave us to it. The lights

from the main dinner table twinkle back on the beach, and the stars (with no pollution or city lights to dim them) are amazing. After dinner, we sit on the pontoon and spot the constellations in the night sky before joining the others back on the beach for dessert, followed by a special celebration of Diwali (the Indian festival of lights) organised by the staff.

SATURDAY

We've booked a sunrise horse ride and at first light, head off along a trail to Long Beach. It's a beautiful time of day and as the sky is turning from inky grey to pink, we take a track down onto the beach. It's high tide and we splash along the water's edge. And just as the sun peeks above the horizon, we arrive at a picnic table where Markareta has set up a beautiful breakfast. After breakfast, we make a short circuit of the island, and by 8.30am, before it's too hot, we're back at the bures and saunter down the beach for the second part of breakfast, after which Markareta takes me for a snorkelling lesson off the end of the dock. At midday, our golf cart arrives to take us along shady paths past hibiscus and orchids gardens to Honeymoon Beach, a very small, secluded



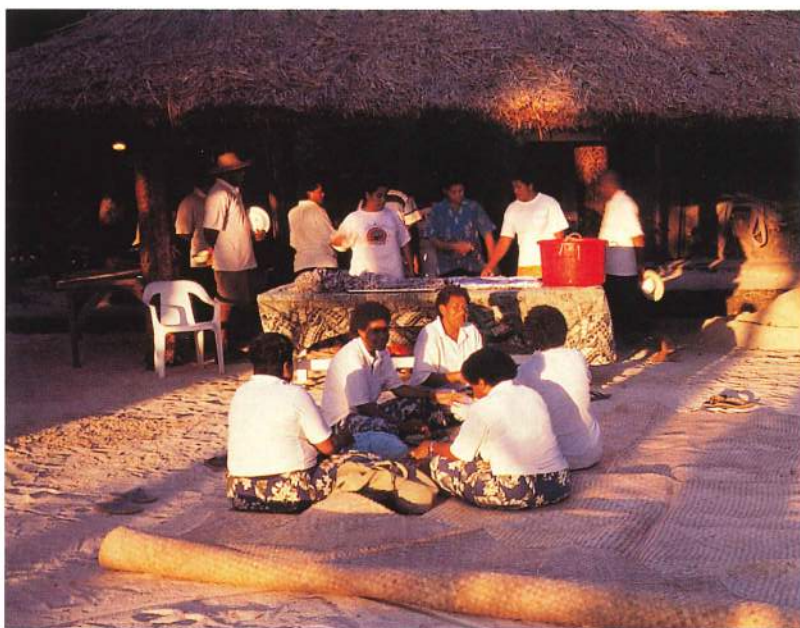


beach flanked by black volcanic rocks. A swim, then lunch under the shade of the bure—we've ordered the chilli prawns we enjoyed so much, grilled slipper lobsters, green salad, bread, cheese and crackers and a bottle of Moët & Chandon. After lunch, we snorkel around the rocks where some large crabs lurk, followed by a doze in the hammock before the cart arrives to collect us. Back at the bure, I relax in the spa for a while, reflecting on just how exhausting a day in paradise can be! Tonight's dinner is at the top of Mount Ford, the highest point on the island (named after Richard's eldest son). Everyone roams up the track, stopping along the way to admire the view and enjoy the serenades from the staff. At the top, we're greeted by more singing and long cool cocktails, which we enjoy with fresh coconut strips dipped in chilli honey sauce, as the sun sets—it's a great party atmosphere. Dinner is at a long wooden table, and the highlight is a wonderfully succulent trevally caught by one of the guests this morning, wrapped in pandanus leaves and steamed to perfection on the barbecue. Conversations continue as we pick up a hurricane lamp and meander back down the track to the beach for dessert. Then it's time for the Turtle Island Hermit Crab Race: crabs collected earlier in the day and painted with bure numbers are placed in a circle and cheered on by their 'owners'. Bure 5 (that's us!) is the winner, and we're presented with the coconut trophy! Everyone strolls up the dock to see the fish swimming, lit by underwater lights. It's a moment we enjoy, as the simple pleasure of a warm breeze and watching the fish darting around the light is a good note on which to say farewell to newfound friends, which we do.

Some will go back to the kava mat, but we have an early plane ride tomorrow.

SUNDAY

We wake at sunrise and wander down the beach for the last time. Coffee and pastries are already out for us and Markareta and Graeme, the island's manager, are there to present us with a photo album and DVD of all our special moments here on the island, before we motor out to meet the seaplane. As the plane skims across the lagoon and climbs up over the island we look down and recognise the beaches where we picnicked and the clearing on the mountaintop where we enjoyed last night's dinner and I realise I'm still barefoot, as I've been for the last four days. **WD**



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

TURTLE ISLAND HOLIDAYS
38 - 40 Garden St, South Yarra VIC 3141 Australia
Tel: (61) 3 9823-8300
web: www.turtlefiji.com to book Turtle Island stay and the sea plane flight from Nadi to Turtle Island

GETTING THERE:

Travel to Nadi, Fiji via Sydney—Air Pacific flies daily from Sydney to Nadi (1.20pm) 4 hour flight
Air Pacific also fly Tokyo-Nadi 3 times a week (overnight flight 8 hours)