

## Island-hopping in the Yasawas

by Louise Southerden

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It's 3 o'clock on a Fiji afternoon, the sun is starting to lose its bite and the headwind we've been paddling against all day is beginning to ease. It's been a great day, but a long one, so it's a relief when Al, our guide, points to a beach just up ahead and shouts across the water, "That's where we're camping tonight."

As we paddle closer, the village of Navotua on the island of Nacula, comes into view. From the front seat of our double kayak, I can just make out several huts lining a strip of sand, the sea breeze ruffling their thatched roofs. And if I hadn't been concentrating on keeping the bow of our kayak pointed at the beach so that the shorebreak doesn't flip us, I might have noticed something else: more than 20 people have wandered onto the beach to watch us.

Two hundred years ago, when Fiji was known as the Cannibal Isles, that might have been a worry. In fact, when Captain William Bligh first stumbled across the Yasawa Islands – a string of 20 rugged and largely inaccessible islands in Fiji's north west – after the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789, he and his fellow castaways were chased by human man-eaters in war canoes.

These days the Fijians are renowned for being among the friendliest people on the planet, and as we paddle towards our informal 'welcoming committee' they burst into song. By the time we step out of our kayaks onto the sand, we're surrounded by large Fijian men and women, tiny children, even dogs, all wanting to shake our hands and say, "Bula!" Welcome to the Yasawas.

Whenever I'd been sea kayaking before, it had been in uninhabited natural places around Australia. Sea kayaking through the Yasawas is different.

Of course the islands' natural environment is reason enough to visit. Each day we'd set off from a perfect beach, paddle out through a shallow coral-edged lagoon and spend the morning gliding over a sea of see-through greens and blues. Sometimes schools of tiny silver fish would leap across our bows like a handful of five cent pieces thrown across the water, or a turtle would raise its brick-like head to watch our colourful kayaks cruise by.

But what makes paddling through the Yasawas unique is experiencing its cultural side as well. With permission from Navotua's chief, we'd pitched our tents on a clearing that served as the village football field, and on the morning of Day 2 we're woken at sunrise by Navotua's walking 'alarm clocks', the free-range roosters that wander the village.

At least we got an early start for our day trip across the bay and back to nature: to the caves of Sawa-I-lau, a limestone island where both *Blue Lagoon* movies (the most recent starring Brooke Shields in 1980) were filmed.

It feels strange walking into a cave armed with masks and snorkels as well as torches, but the only way to explore Sawa-I-lau's caves is by swimming. Our echoey shouts bounce off the high limestone walls as we clamber down into the main cave and splash into its cool, water-filled belly. It's eerie and exciting, particularly when we swim through an underwater tunnel into a darker, adjoining cave, and when we emerge back into the blinding sunlight to do some 'normal' snorkelling an hour later, it feels like we've been underground for days.

Meanwhile back in Navotua the village women had been baking and we return to find the table inside our 'kitchen hut' piled high with fresh scones and pancakes; an afternoon tea fit for a chief. Later that night, after dinner, the village puts on a show for us: a *meke*, a colourful Fijian dance performed by men in grass skirts and women in floral mu-mus, followed by a *kava* ceremony that goes on into the wee hours.

On the morning of Day 4, we wave goodbye to Navotua for the last time and paddle north, deeper into the Yasawas to the uninhabited island of Vawa.

There's no singing welcome as we thread our way through low-tide coral heads and step onto Vawa's curved beach of crushed coral that afternoon. "No roosters, either," observes Judy, from Melbourne, relieved at the prospect of a sleep-in.

The island might be uninhabited, but we're not exactly alone. Whilst we're unpacking the boats and setting up camp, Henry, one of our Fijian guides, suggests a hermit crab race on the beach at sunset. Having not sighted a single hermit crab on the island, I ask him where we're going to find them. "Don't worry," he replies ominously, "they will find you."

Later that afternoon, after a dip in the wind-smoothed ocean in front of our row of tents, I find out what he means. It's getting late but the shells littering the beach are so tempting I decide to do a bit of beachcombing. I reach down to pick one up and...Ow! The shell's inhabitant reaches out like Thing from *The Addams Family* and pinches me with a surprisingly large claw. Then I notice that the deserted beach has come alive with hundreds of crawling shells: hermit crabs beginning their nocturnal wanderings.

Night time in the tropics is often overshadowed by the brilliance of tropical days, but our island nights on Vawa were one of the highlights of the entire trip. They'd start with a sunset on the beach, where we'd gather at dusk to sip tropical punch from our plastic mugs. Then, under a sky thick with stars and spooky palm tree shadows, we'd dine on fresh fish caught by Henry. One night we dragged our sleeping mats onto the beach after dinner, and lay on our backs side by side looking up at the stars and talking, until sleepiness overcame us and we reluctantly retreated to our tents.

Spending nine days sea kayaking through Fiji's most untouched islands is more than a holiday. By the last day of our trip, I feel transformed: there's sand between my toes and in my ears, my unwashed hair feels like straw and I feel like I'm inside an empty shell

that's washed up on the beach. The Yasawas and its people have spring-cleaned my psyche, and as we board the fast boat for the trip back to Viti Levu, I look longingly back to 'our' islands and wish that I could live permanently on 'Fiji time.'

*The writer paddled the Yasawa Islands courtesy of Southern Sea Ventures and Air Pacific.*

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