

Fiji fling

Once a year I make the mammoth journey to visit family in New Zealand, and since my most recent trip would be the first over winter, my sister suggested we escape the winter chills with a week in Fiji. Discovering it was a short ocean-hop from New Zealand, I jumped at the idea. **BY JARED RUTTENBERG**

Being footloose and fancy-free, family travel has never been on my radar so it would be a double first for me: a new country and travelling with kids. Admittedly, I've seen the terrified look on nearby parents' faces mid-flight, as their children noisily squirmed about in their airline seats, and wondered how our journey would be with Fiji Airlines.

With early boarding, special meals and great entertainment – the four-year-old asked earnestly, “You mean we can watch Mario Brothers and Sonic and ask for drinks whenever we want?” – the three-and-a-half hour journey could not have been easier.

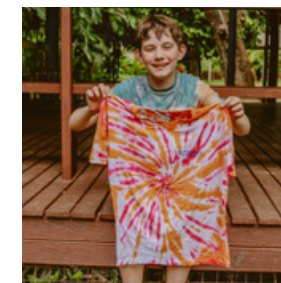
Touching down, we were eager to explore the far-flung islands and meet their friendly and rather rugby-crazed islanders. Our transport circled the West of Nadi – the biggest of the 330 islands – dropping us off at Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort.

We had searched for a beachfront hotel perfect for both kids and adults and Outrigger seemed to tick all the boxes. The resort spreads across several acres of prime beachfront land where we quickly encountered the postcard beaches we dreamed of. The lush and manicured gardens are dissected by rivulets running down to the ocean, creating ‘islands’ that house the various accommodation options and activities.

Very quickly we found a hospitality akin to that in South Africa: warm and engaging. At every turn, we were effusively greeted with customary Fijian bula and a genuine smile.



The kids kicked up their heels, jumping joyfully into every pool and activity available. And the adults weren't missing out on the fun, alternating between joining the kids for tie-dye T-shirt making and coconuts and my first-ever night snorkelling, which revealed much more than I imagined I would ever see. With an ocean temperature fluctuating between a sultry 25 and 30°C it was bliss, especially for a Capetonian who has often had to endure sea temperatures of 12°C.





On day three we decided it was time to leave the kids behind in the capable hands of the Outrigger staff and head to the Bebe Spa (yes, it was hard to say the name without hearing the voice of *Schitt's Creek's* Moira Rose, who would have been right at home here). A short buggy ride snakes up through the tropical vegetation until you arrive at the spa entrance at the property's highest point.

From here the spa gazed out proudly over the entire property and ocean-filled horizon. Our time of pampering included a massage for my mother, and then a heated-

pool experience for my sister and me. Alongside us, the chapel seemed to float over the landscape, providing a popular spot for destination weddings. There is also an elevated bar that we enjoyed briefly after our treatment.

Of the Outrigger accommodation options available, the beachfront bures (cabins) are the property's crowning glory. Stepping out of your freestanding bure, a short grassy terrace with gently swaying palm trees paves the way to the waiting water.

www.outrigger.com





Last on our agenda, was boarding a ferry for one of the archipelago's more remote islands, staying at the barefoot no-frills paradise of Mana Island Resort and Spa. After a 90-minute boat trip from the mainland, passing a string of idyllic islands en route, we finally pulled up at ours.

Life in Fiji is an education in slow-paced living, with joie de vivre that reminded me of South Africa. Our rates included breakfast and dinner, and here the activities slowed a little and it seemed all we did was swim, eat, snorkel, sleep and repeat. I discovered that elements of the reality TV series *Survivor* was filmed on the island mere weeks before we arrived.

Languishing on the beach with my piña colada within reach, I was perfectly happy to be doing the opposite of the contestants; who,



I imagined, were starved, sweating and being forced through strenuous activities. I, however, was happily agreeing with Fiji's unofficial mantra; the destination 'where happiness comes naturally'.

Unmissable at Mana is a visit to the spa where treatment rooms nest around a central pond, and elevated walkways guide you under the lush fig trees. My Mana Bliss treatment was a regional speciality using rhythmic movements of hands, arms and palms along with a choice of local fragrances.

While it may seem far to journey to, if your travels take you to family or friends in Australia or New Zealand, Fiji makes for an idyllic tropical add on, and with your visa from the former two countries valid, there's no extra consulate work needed for South Africans.

For our last evening, I arranged with the resort for a surprise beach-setup dinner for my family. While a heavy sun sank slowly in the distance, with the kids frolicking in the gently lapping waves, we toasted my late father with Rum and Coke cocktails. It was his favourite drink, and since he had often spoken about visiting the country, we couldn't have imagined a better way to salute our time in our island paradise.

www.manafiji.com

