

Fiji magic

Story & Photography by Diane Covington-Carter

Likuliku Lagoon Resort in Fiji
not only offers a luxurious island experience,
it is insuring that it will all be there for generations to come

“Sipping champagne and relaxing on a lounge chair, I laid back and felt the sun on my face, listened to the gentle lapping of the lagoon, the call of a bird and the soft silence. Oh yes, this is paradise.”

My husband and I have a home in New Zealand and travel there each year to swap winter for summer in the Southern Hemisphere. This year, I happened upon an ad for Fiji Air, with flights to New Zealand by way of Fiji. Why not? We booked it and scheduled a four-night stay to explore and experience the islands.

But with over fifty resorts and hotels spread over the more than three hundred islands in Fiji, how to even go about choosing one? I was interested in eco-tourism and one resort kept popping up, Likuliku Lagoon Resort on the island of Malolo Levu. We booked it for our first three nights.

The new Airbus plane was quite comfortable, even in economy. The ten-hour flight from San Francisco had us arrive early in the morning in Nadi, the international airport on the main island of Viti Levu. Everywhere we turned, we heard a warm and enthusiastic chorus of “Bula!” “Welcome!” Even in our jet-lagged haze, we couldn’t help smiling back.

I located Tour Managers, the company that would drive us to our ferry to Likuliku, but when I got there, I couldn’t find the paper with our reservation information. The kind woman who greeted us just smiled and said, “take a seat, relax, you’re



on Fiji time now,” and handed me a cold drink. A few minutes later, after her continual smiles, the welcome drink and a few deep breaths, I remembered where I had left the paper, ran back and got it.

We settled in for the half hour drive to the ferry port. After more “Bulas!” and a coffee and pastry, we boarded the South Seas Cruise liner, which would take us to our resort on Malolo Levu Island, one of the outer islands in the island group called Mamanuca.

On the ferry trip, I turned my face into the fresh sea air and felt the wonder of being on my way to an island in the South Seas. How had we missed this? We had flown over it so many times. From the ferry, we were carefully handed down into a small boat for the last leg to our island.

As our boat approached Likuliku Lagoon Resort, it looked like an ancient Fijian village, its thatched roof huts set back under palm trees at the edge of the natural lagoon, the crystal-clear water teeming with fish. At the pier, smiling staff greeted us, singing, clapping and shouting “Bula”!

“Welcome home,” a man declared as he helped me out of the boat. Looking down the pier to the resort, I felt like I finally had a true experience of what the word ‘paradise’ meant.

We had three days and nights to soak in the magic of being on this Fijian island. Already, I wished we’d planned to stay longer.

Our spacious thatched roof cottage, or bure,



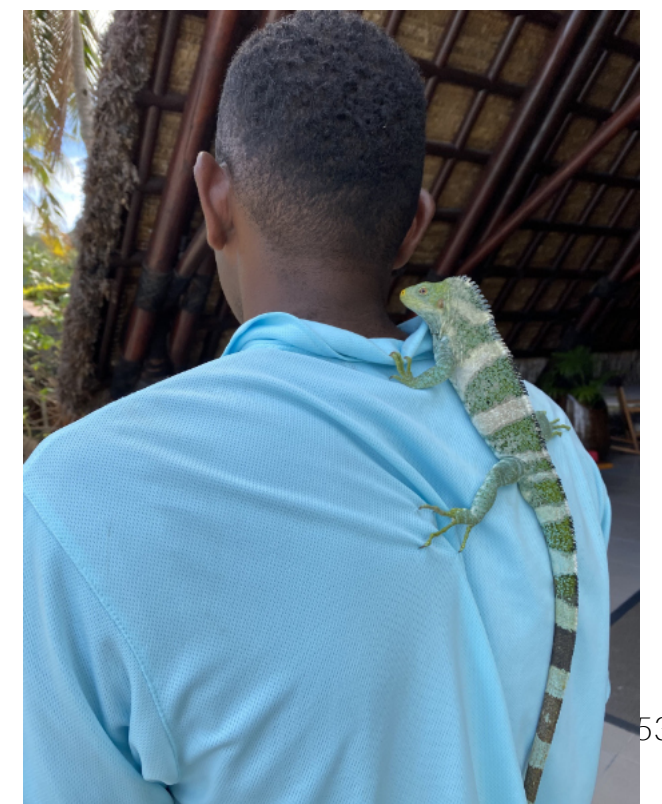


had a private outdoor shower, in addition to a large indoor one, a comfy king-sized bed, and a view straight out to sea. A lanai and lounging area was adjacent to our own salt water soaking pool. Sipping champagne and relaxing on a lounge chair, I laid back and felt the sun on my face, listened to the gentle lapping of the lagoon, the call of a bird and the soft silence. Oh yes, this is paradise.

There is a quality of relaxation you can experience when you arrive at an island and your only agenda is to slow down, breathe in the fresh, clean air and absorb the beauty. Or swim, nap, enjoy delicious food, have a massage, read or maybe head off on an adventure. Snorkeling excursion to the island where *Castaways* was filmed? Sign us up! Sunrise hike on Honeymoon Island, with coffee, tea, muffins and croissants served on the island after? You bet.

Likuliku fulfills all the requirements of a luxury resort. But the resort is also committed to preserving its natural, pristine and fragile beauty for future generations and to contributing to the local staff, villages, and communities. Woven into the relaxation, I was able to find out about the eco-programs that set this resort apart.

National Geographic named Likuliku as one of its sixty-one 'Unique Lodges of the World', a rare distinction. They describe their criteria as: "Where sustainability meets splendor. Each lodge is deeply rooted in its community and dedicated



to protecting the surrounding habitats and cultures—and harnessing their magic to safeguard them for the future.”

Signs of sustainability efforts were evident in our bure. A five-gallon water dispenser hidden in a closet and two reusable aluminum water bottles replaced plastic water bottles. Ceramic in-room amenity dispensers took the place of the usual small, disposable containers. We were urged to reuse our towels, no problem. Paper straws and wooden drink stirrers replaced plastic.

In Fiji, sustainable tourism means not only caring for the land and the pristine and fragile marine environment, but also caring for and contributing to the people and preserving the culture of the islands. That includes developing businesses that provide jobs, training and on-going development.

Fijian owned Ahura Resorts, which owns Likuliku Lagoon Resort and its sister property Malolo Island Resort, is an equal opportunity employer. The resorts are built on land that has a 99-year lease, with royalties paid to the local village clan, who are the landowners, as well as a monthly sum calculated on a percentage of income. Ahura also provides an education fund for the landowners.

Tropical Dry Forest and a resurgence of a species thought extinct

Once, most islands in the Mamanuca island group were covered in tropical dry forest. Now, this type of vegetation is among the most endangered ecosystems on the planet, with only 1% remaining. Dry forests are also home to a variety of



endangered species, such as the Fijian Crested Iguana and the Fijian Free-tailed Bat, Pacific Boas and Peregrine Falcons.

In 2012, Steve Anstey, General Manager of Likuliku and Malolo Island Resort, took on a dry forest restoration plan in an effort to bring back the Fijian Crested Iguana. Anstey established a nursery which has since produced more than 6500 native tree species that have been planted within the resort leases, to try to stitch together dry forest patches.

In addition, Anstey implemented an invasive species management program to control the local feral cat and rat populations that were killing the iguanas. Because of these programs, the resort has seen a resurgence of the Fijian crested iguana, thought to be extinct, and many other native birds and animals.

Talking about the resurgence of the iguanas, Anstey said, "The idea that we could possibly bring a species back from the brink of extinction, how could we possibly turn away?"

In 2017, Anstey hired Fijian Sia Rasalato as a Group Environment Manager, to oversee a full-time program of conservation initiatives and terrestrial and marine restoration programs. Rasalato is the first in the country to have that title. The conservation trainings, education and advocacy programs are open to resort staff, guests and local villagers. In addition to the iguana program, other projects include turtle conservation, coral gardening and restoration, crown of thorns eradication, giant clam restoration, mangrove restoration, water quality monitoring and reef health assessments.

The resort's conservation efforts have also been successful in eliminating eighty percent of single-use plastics at Likuliku. Other efforts include energy efficient light bulbs, environmentally friendly clean-

ing products, and regular on-going training and education of staff on environmental practices. The resorts' state of the art sewage treatment plants use the treated residue for irrigation and reforestation projects. They also re-route resort run-off from entering the sea.

At the sister resort, Malolo Island Resort, they have included environmental education into the Kids Club program, teaching the children about the iguana program and planting trees as part of their activities.

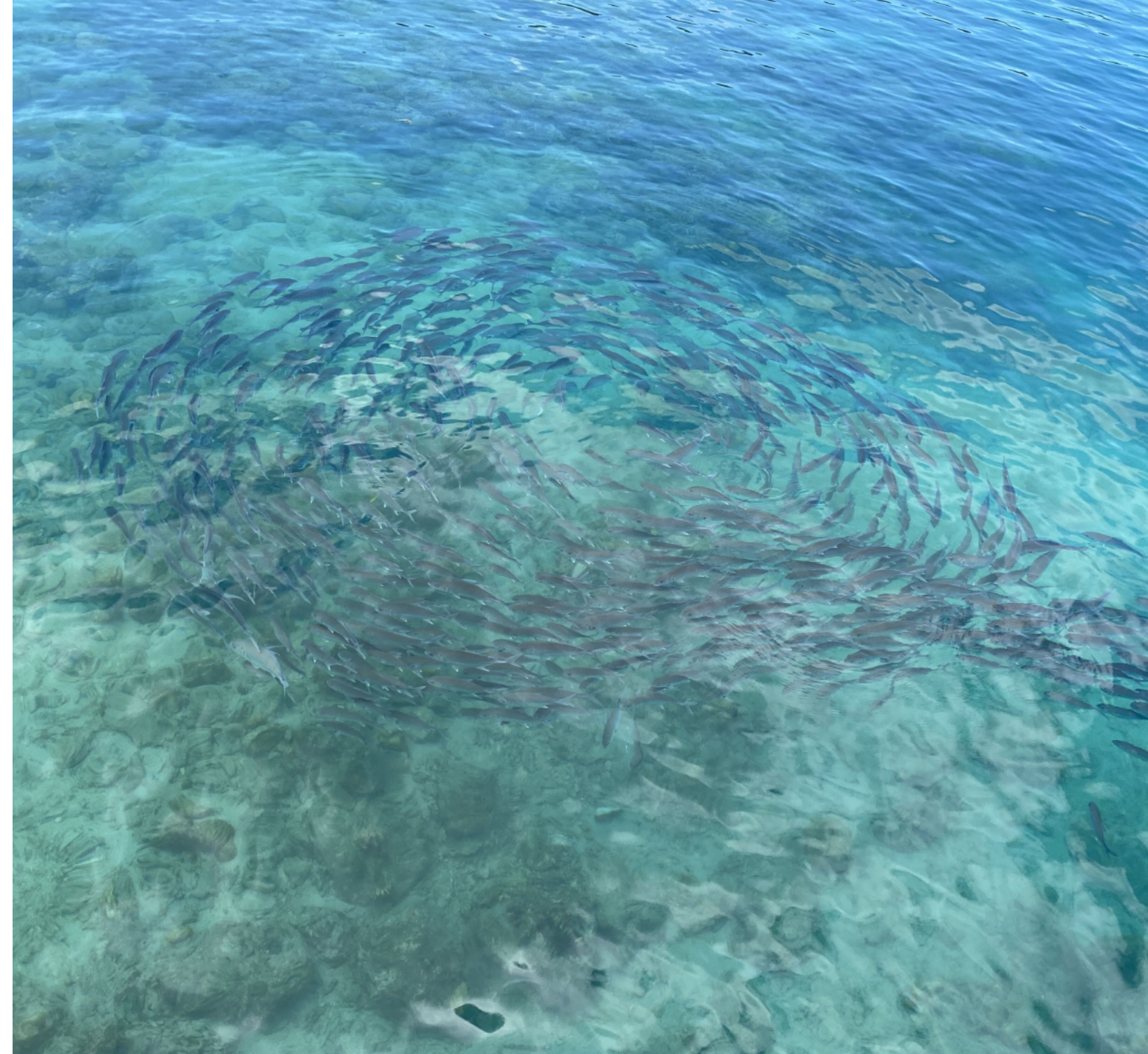
Cuisine at the resort also reflects sustainable values. Executive Chef, Ryan Ward creates a new menu every day to focus on the abundant fresh seafood and local produce such as pineapple, papaya, coconuts and fair-trade chocolate. A large garden provides herbs and vegetables and the resort's beehives produced 150 kilos of fresh honey this past year, found in Salted Honey Ice Cream and many other luscious desserts.

"The essence of hospitality is in Fiji. When you come here, you can feel it," Ward said. "In addition to our fresh food, being surrounded by that is a healthy thing."

"This place melts your heart open. At the neighboring resort, the kids cry when they leave," he said. "This is real, this is good, this is healthy. We are lucky and privileged."

Ahura Resorts is doing its best to preserve this unique beauty and culture for generations to come. It states:

"We support wholly the concept of sustainable tourism and believe that any development carries not only a legal but also a moral responsibility to ensure that the environment is not degraded through irresponsible activities and practices."



IF YOU GO

Fiji consists of over 330 islands; about one third of them are inhabited. You fly into Nadi International Airport, on the main island of Viti Levu. Fiji Airways offers reasonable flights <http://fijiairways.com>

Once you arrive at Nadi, transfer to the port of Denarau to take a ferry to arrive at Malolo Levu island. We had excellent service from Tour Managers, for all of our transfers to and from the ferry and to the airport at 6am the day we left. <https://tourmanagersfiji.com/contact-us/> The trip on the South Sea Cruises ferry to Malolo Levu island and Likuliku Resort was fast and comfortable.

https://www.directferries.com/south-sea_cruises.htm
Likuliku Resort:
Ahura Resorts, Likuliku
Mamanuca Group of islands
Malolo Levu island
<http://likulikulagoon.com>

For an early morning flight, spend the night on the main island of Viti Levu, to get to the airport in time for check in. We enjoyed the Hilton Fiji Beach Resort & Spa, then an easy trip to the airport. <https://www3.hilton.com/en/hotels/fiji/hilton-fiji-beach-resort-and-spa-NANHIHI/index.html>