

ISSUE 53 | DECEMBER 2023 | [ASPIRETRAVELCLUB.CO.UK](https://aspiretravelclub.co.uk)

# aspire

THE LUXURY TRAVEL CLUB FROM TRAVEL WEEKLY



## **BURGUNDY**

Embracing slow travel  
on a Belmond barge

## **FIJI**

This island paradise is a  
playground for the affluent

## **BERLIN**

A guide to exploring  
this über trendy city

**TRAVELWEEKLY**

# FIJI FAVOURITES

*With 300 islands to explore, Fiji is brimming with exquisite luxury product. Nigel Tisdall discovers more*

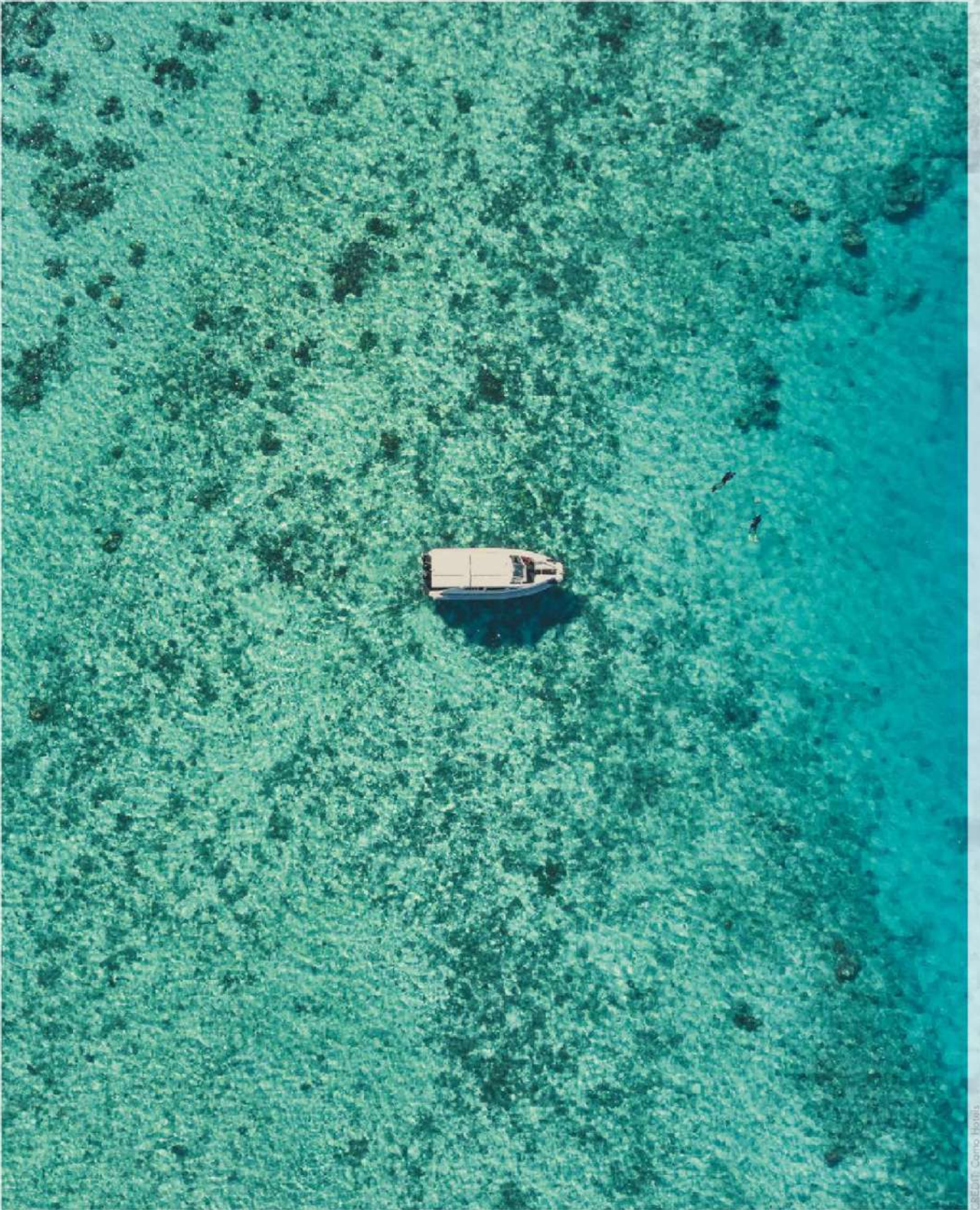
**F**orget welcome drinks. When guests check into the five-star Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort Fiji on Vanua Levu, they are treated to a complimentary 10-minute foot massage. It's a brilliant step up from the customary cocktail, and when a smiling lady with a red hibiscus flower behind her ear arrives at my beachfront villa to massage away the stresses of travel, it's a clear sign that in Fiji, holidays are refreshingly different.

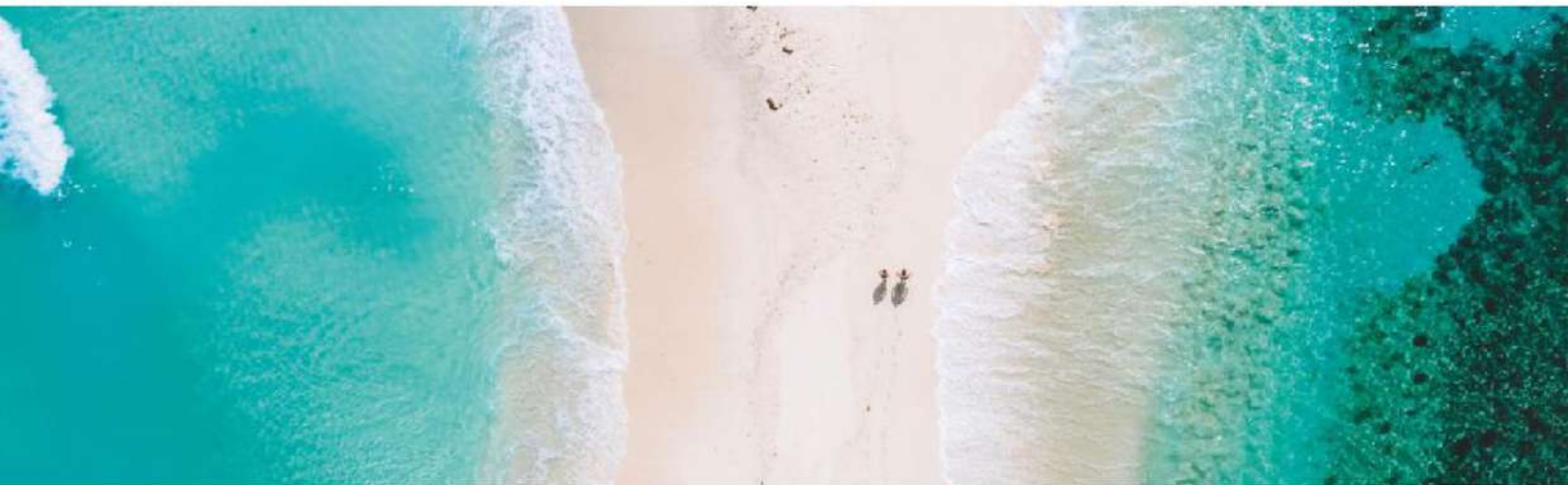
Deciding where to start in this enchanting South Pacific archipelago of some 300 tropical islands is easy – there's only one international airport, Nadi, which lies on the west coast of the largest island, Viti Levu. Some travellers get no further and for good reason. There's plenty to enjoy here, with a string of beach resorts lining the southern Coral Coast that work

well for families and anyone up for an adventure, such as the 40-acre Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort where the hilltop Bebe Spa, with its panoramic view out to sea, is a standout feature.

Most thrills are centred around Sigatoka, aka Rugby Town (Fijians are obsessed with the sport), and a mountain ridge north of Nadi known as the Sleeping Giant. Unlimited rides are a chief lure at the Jurassic Park-themed Sleeping Giant Zipline, while a Tifajek mud bath is a fun way to have a laugh and pamper your skin. Top of any to-do list should be the half-day Sigatoka River Safari, which pairs an insightful visit to a traditional village with a jetboat ride along Fiji's longest river – expect a thorough soaking when the captain does 360-degree spins.

And who knew Fiji had colossal sand dunes? Framed in the country's oldest ➔







national park, these rise to 80 metres and offer terrific hiking combined with far-reaching coastal vistas.

### Cultural and natural highs

Many travellers rightly assume Fiji is ideal for a castaway escape on a romantic, palm-fringed island, but that's not the only reason to visit. Once home, what everyone talks about is their encounters with the super-friendly Fijians and their well-preserved cultural traditions centred around family, religion and community.

The first word every visitor learns is *bula*, which is so much more than hello – if I'd had a dollar every time it was said to me on my two-week tour I'd now be happily retired. Fijians welcome travellers in a sincere and heartfelt way and there's little sense of the tourist churn you find

in more trafficked destinations. Many resorts put on a spirited *meke* (traditional storytelling dance) with grass-skirted performers. It's the same with the *kava* ceremony – a serious ritual celebrating a revered drink made from the powdered root of the pepper plant. Muddy-hued and non-alcoholic, this tippie left me unmoved, but I loved staple Fijian dishes such as *kokoda* (ceviche), *palusami* (taro leaves with coconut cream) and pork cooked in a *lovo* (underground oven). You can also add delicious curries – Fiji has a sizeable Indian community descended from indentured labourers first brought here in 1876 to work on the sugar plantations.

Figures released by Tourism Fiji show that the average stay for UK visitors in 2022 was 16 nights, with a 98% satisfaction rating. It's a sign that the country is much →

**OPPOSITE:** FIRST ROW: A clownfish in anemone; Tavoro Falls SECOND ROW: Hawksbill turtle; writer Nigel Tisdall; Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort Fiji THIRD ROW: Aerial view of the sand cay off Mana Island FOURTH ROW: Horse riding; cocktails in the evening **ABOVE:** Drinks and canapés at Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort **Credits:** Andrea Rothlisberger; Chris McLennan, Andrew Lewthwaite; Jason Busch

## Spa BLISS



There's an interesting twist when you book a traditional Fijian *bobo* massage. Instead of getting on a couch I'm invited to lie down on a mattress on the floor. A skilled therapist then uses their hands, forearms, elbows and feet to tease out all those aches and pains over the next hour. It's the nicest way I know to get walked all over, and the aromatic oils put me in a mellow mood as I drift off to the sound of singing birds and a warm breeze ruffling the palms outside.

Treatments invariably feature coconut oil and cream, tropical fruits such as pineapple and papaya, and flowers such as hibiscus and *mokoso* (ylang ylang). Sometimes the body is wrapped in banana leaves to help the absorption of vital minerals while oil extracted from the candlenut tree and island-grown sugar are used in exfoliating scrubs. Baths are indulgently filled with colourful petals or freshly harvested coconut milk for a revitalising soak. Many top-end hotels here offer complimentary yoga and with the islands' sunshine, natural beauty and unhurried lifestyle, a sense of wellness comes easily: the Fijians call it *maucokona*, meaning complete.

Spa treatment room,  
Como Laucala Island



more than a South Seas stopover en route to Australia or New Zealand, and a good part of this is down to the amazing sights that await underwater. As veteran oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau puts it, "the quality of the ocean in Fiji is the best you can find". Don a snorkelling mask or dive suit and you can be assured of warm, clear waters pulsating with radiant corals and brightly coloured fish along with reef sharks and turtles.

One of the most scenic spots to do this is the Yasawa Islands, a chain of jagged volcanic peaks in the northwest. These can be reached on a scenic cruise by a high-speed catamaran that calls into various idyllic resorts, like a bee flitting between gorgeous flowers.

At the Paradise Cove Resort on tiny Naukacuvu Island captivating snorkelling awaits simply by stepping from the beach, while a brief boat trip away lie vivid coral gardens and a channel where migrating manta rays can be seen from May to October.

### Dream escapes

For high-end clients with something to celebrate, or who simply request only the very best, there is an attractive range of one-stop resorts set on picture-perfect islands. Many have passion-project owners who have gradually developed them, and there's none of that desperate urge to impress you can come across in Dubai or the Maldives.

One resort ideal for honeymooners and 'relaxees' (older couples with time and money) is adult-only Tokoriki in the Mamanuca Islands, which enjoys consistently high occupancy rates. As well as having a golden, half-mile beach, it benefits from being just a 15-minute helicopter flight from Nadi. Landing on its wooden jetty, smiling staff in flowery shirts sing a rousing welcome song.

Tokoriki is small enough to kayak around in an hour and its rates include complimentary snorkelling trips. Popular activities include a private beach picnic on Monu Island and a package offering unlimited massages over a three-day period. While most weddings are held on the beach, there's also a delightful stone chapel with stained glass windows. A 'romance coordinator' is also on hand to tailor those special moments. The 36 *bures* (huts) and villas come free of TV, phone or internet and are exquisitely composed with warm woods, patterned robes and outdoor showers. →



TOP: Tokoriki Island Resort

ABOVE: Peninsula Villa, Como Laucala Island Credit: Jason Busch

Culinary highs are assured at a teppanyaki chef's table that only seats four couples, while breakfast or lunch can be served in your villa pool on a floating tray.

For a trip to the very best the South Seas can offer, look no further than Como Laucala Island. This ultra-private island in the east of Fiji was once owned by publishing tycoon Malcolm Forbes and was then bought in 2002 by Dietrich Mateschitz, the Austrian co-founder of energy drinks company Red Bull, who passed away in 2022. Celebrity guests have included George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey and Elle Macpherson, plus a host of top musicians and sports stars, but this is an escape more suited to lovers of nature than the starstruck.

Mateschitz designed this ultimate escape to be sustainable and self-sufficient, a mission Laucala's English general manager, Gary Henden, is continuing. Joining him for an early morning bike ride, I'm impressed by how much of the island remains untouched, while offering guests everything they could possibly want, from a never-crowded golf course and equestrian centre to a vast, palm-fringed lagoon pool with a second, glass-walled infinity pool inside. The 24 villa-sized residences are a triumph of serene indoor-outdoor living with multiple baths, daybeds and a private pool. "Some guests never leave them for days," my tau (butler) confides. "What are they doing?" I ask. "Sudoku?" "Maybe not," she replies.

Given that so many 'toys' are included in the all-inclusive rates, such as jetskis, waterskiing and sunset cruises on vintage yachts, it seems rude not to try something out. Whisked down to the marina by golf cart, I step aboard an immaculately restored Croatian sailboat built in 1918. As we set off for a gentle chug around the neighbouring islands, relishing the evening light and tranquillity, a uniformed waiter magically appears on deck with a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon and a tray of canapés.

"Bula!", he says with a big grin, as I mentally clock up another imaginary dollar. ●

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OF THE BEST

high-end offerings in Fiji to suit  
all types of holidaymakers →

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FIJI

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## OF THE BEST

*High-end offerings in Fiji suit all types of holidaymakers.*

*Here Nigel Tisdall rounds up his favourites*



### Best for... families

Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort Fiji, Vanua Levu Sustainability is at the heart of this eco-luxury resort, which has a School Under the Sea initiative where children learn about sharks and plant mangrove seedlings. The property also has a Junior Chef's programme for those between six and 12 years old. The nearby Namena Marine Reserve is one of the world's top dive sites and guests can choose to buy pearls from a local farm.

**BOOK IT:** From £811 per night all-inclusive, with two children under 13 staying free. Minimum stay three nights.

[FIJIRESORT.COM](http://FIJIRESORT.COM)

### Best for... honeymooners

Tokoriki Island Resort, Mamanuca Islands

Honeymoon resorts can be a bit hush-hush, but adult-only Tokoriki rocks thanks to its central bar with free cocktail tastings three times a week. Most guests come for five nights, but book customers in for seven nights between January and March and they'll throw in a complimentary return transfer by helicopter.

**BOOK IT:** From £933 per night, room-only, minimum stay two nights.

[TOKORIKI.COM](http://TOKORIKI.COM)



CREDITS: Jason Busch; Mark Rossi; Chris McLennan Photography

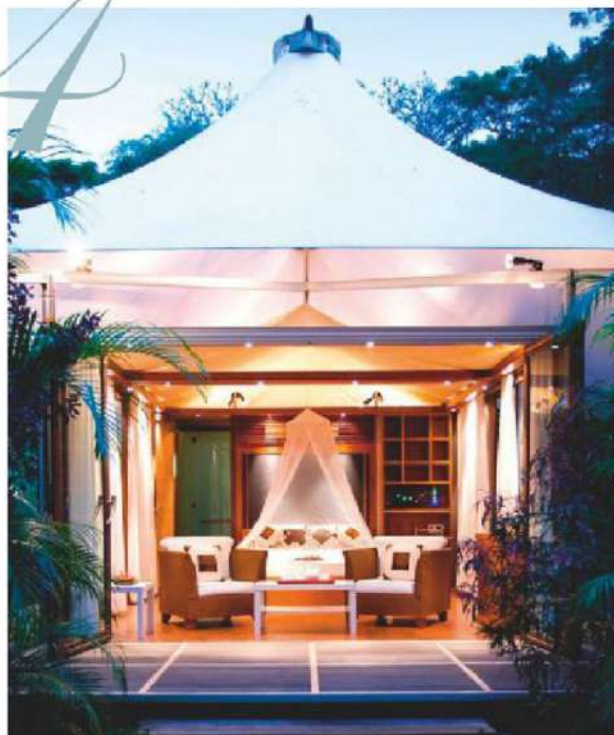
### Best for... ultra-luxury

Como Laucala, Laucala Island

Most guests get here from Nadi on a 45-minute flight using the resort's private aircraft. Rates include a tour of Laucala's farm, which has a Wagyu beef herd, citrus trees, orchid nursery, beehives and a breed of sheep the locals call Fiji Fantastic.

**BOOK IT:** Residences are available from £5,650 all-inclusive for a minimum stay of five nights.

[COMOHOTELS.COM](http://COMOHOTELS.COM)



### Best for... airport stopovers

The Fiji Orchard, Lautoka

Flight arrival and departure times can be inconvenient in Fiji, so book clients into this boutique hotel, 20 minutes from Nadi airport. Six tent-roofed *bures* (huts), a good-sized pool, a restaurant and bar are set in tropical gardens. Day rooms available.

**BOOK IT:** From £256 bed and breakfast, airport transfers included.

[FIJIORCHID.COM](http://FIJIORCHID.COM)

### Best for... water-based thrills

Paradise Cove Resort, Naukacuvu Island

With 30 dive sites close by, Paradise Cove offers plenty of water-based fun, including Champagne tubing where you float around at sunset sipping a glass of bubbly. Restaurant options include Donu, which serves Japanese small plates, and there is live Fijian music most nights.

**BOOK IT:** Bungalows from £230 per night room-only. Compulsory meal plan can be purchased for £85 per person per night.

[PARADISECOVERESORTFIJI.COM](http://PARADISECOVERESORTFIJI.COM)

