





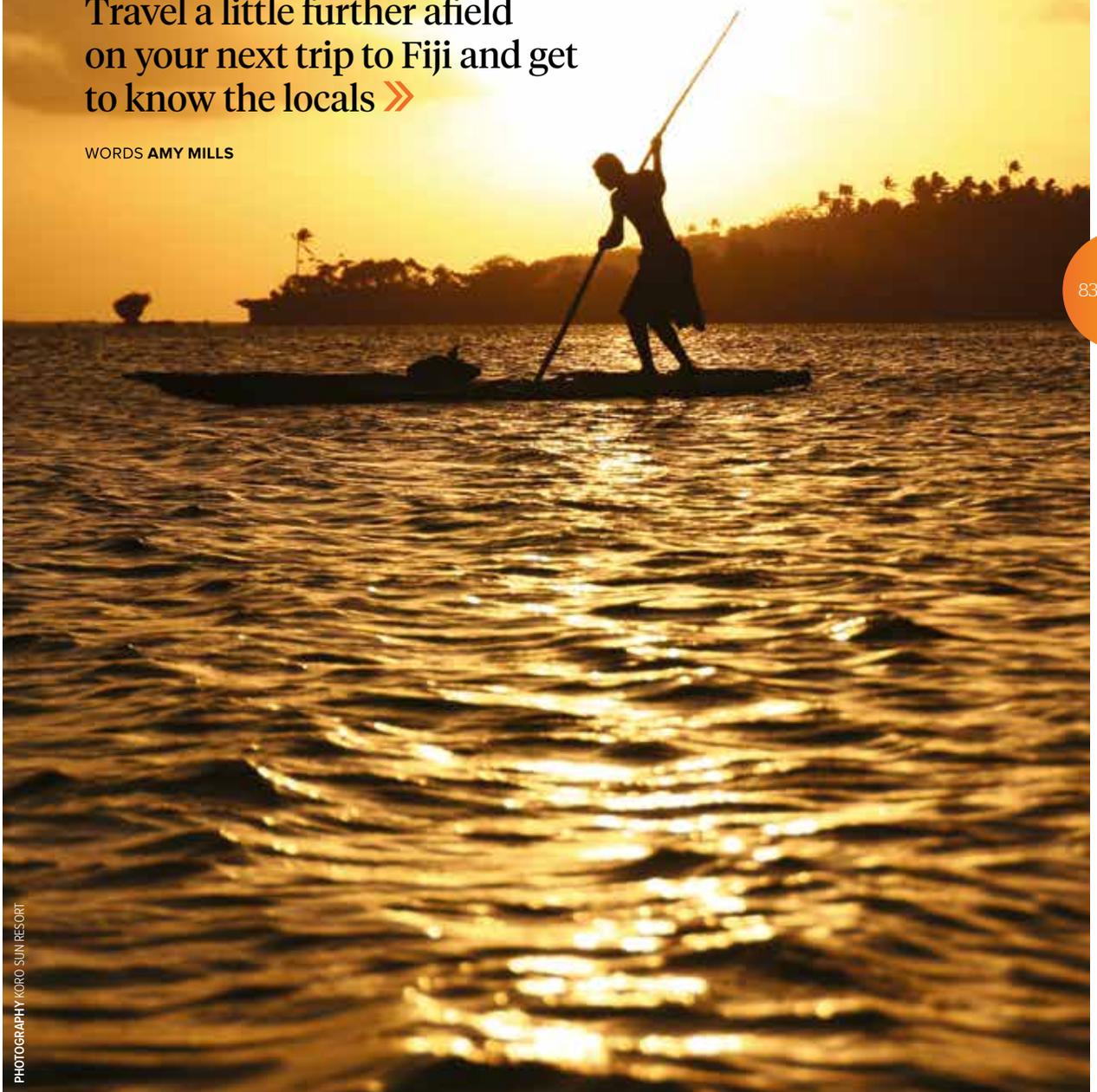
FIJI ISLANDS



Secret Savusavu

Travel a little further afield
on your next trip to Fiji and get
to know the locals >>

WORDS AMY MILLS





The young girl's warm brown eyes light up as she looks down at the protected bay below her island home. "It is so beautiful and peaceful here," she says, smiling. "Every night, I watch the sun set over the water and I feel so lucky. Savusavu is paradise to me."

We are climbing the bumpy, winding road with our cab driver Bobbie and his daughter and son to their home, perched high in the tropical hills overlooking Savusavu, a town on the south coast of Vanua Levu, Fiji's second-largest but less-frequented island.

My family and I met Bobbie days earlier when he drove us from the shack of an airport at the island's largest town of Labasa to our accommodation at Savusavu.

Many visitors opt to fly directly into the tiny Savusavu airport – a 50-minute inter-island flight from Nadi – but we enjoyed every second of our scenic 90-minute drive through remote villages and lush green mountains, past myriad colourful shacks and friendly locals waving and yelling the greeting, "Bula".

"We are known as the hidden paradise of Fiji," Bobbie says proudly. "More tourists have found us but it still has the magic."



We discover this to be true during our nine-day stay at Savusavu, where we see only a handful of other tourists during our regular trips to town. With a population of less than 5000, Savusavu's village-like charm, vibrant culture, natural beauty, warm people and laid-back way of life is enchanting.

Resorts reinvented

US motivational speaker and author Tony Robbins owns Namale Resort at Savusavu but there are no international hotel chains, upmarket boutique shopping or kitsch tourist attractions here. We stay at a family-owned boutique resort called Koro Sun, a sprawling 150-acre former copra plantation with virgin rainforest on one side and the aquamarine waters of the Koro Sea on the other.

Owned by the hands-on Young family for the past 15 years, Koro Sun offers a range of accommodation from original Fijian

More tourists have found us but it still has the magic



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Families find a warm welcome in Savusavu; view to the marina; children on their way to school; Edgewater bures at Koro Sun.



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Great views
of the
marina



garden bures to overwater villas, and the resort's famous adults-only Edgewater bures.

The US-based owners foster a strong sense of community with the surrounding villages and were instrumental in helping rebuild villages after Tropical Cyclone Winston devastated the area in February.

"Our guests are looking for something more authentic; luxurious but also rustic," general manager Margaret Rayawa says. "We attract those wanting to experience the real Fiji and all it has to offer. The beauty of Savusavu is in the authenticity of the people. Tourism is not such a big thing here, so our staff look forward

to coming to work and meeting new people."

Life lessons

At the primary school in the seaside village of Nagigi (population 150) the next day, the teachers told us that many of the children have to leave home very early in the morning to travel to school from neighbouring villages. They asked us questions and sang songs, their joy infectious.

We had heard the school was in desperate need of stationery and brought a bag of supplies, plus a rugby ball that was soon thrown around the playground.

The pristine reef, visible from the school's playground, beckoned later and we paddled kayaks out to the reef, »



passing smiling locals hand-line fishing for their lunch. As we snorkelled, our four-year-old son shrieked with joy each time he saw a brilliant blue starfish, a colourful fish, or a piece of coral. He was not as excited when he saw reef shark darting below him, and opted to snorkel on my back.

Kava currency

The following day, our guides Solo and Romano drive us to visit Vuadomo Village, where we offer a gift of kava root to the locals in return for a visit to the waterfall.

The tiny, self-sufficient village is peppered with multi-hued bures and the locals laugh as our sons chase chickens around the gardens and marvel at a bamboo raft used for nightly fishing trips.

The 10-minute walk to the waterfall is just as scenic as the falls themselves. Along the way, Solo points out kava plants, passionfruit vines, wild chillies and ginger. We are greeted by a cascading waterfall and waste no time cooling off in the fresh water.

Savusavu offers many adventures – fishing, diving at Namena Marine Reserve, a visit to J. Hunter pearl farm, exploring local villages, kayaking on the island's tranquil salt lake – or the opportunity to relax and enjoy the natural beauty

of the surroundings.

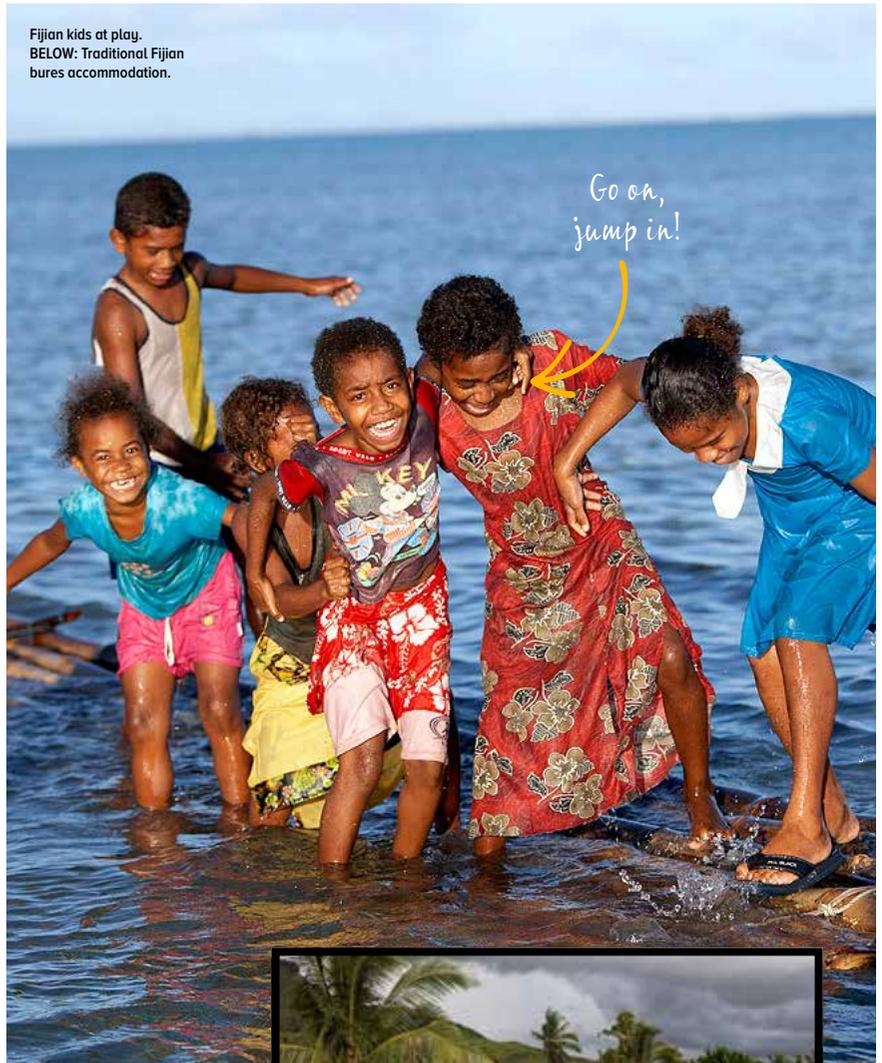
A trip to Koro Sun's Rainforest Spa – where a cascading waterfall and native birds provide the background music – for its signature banana-leaf body wrap is also an option.

Island dining

The food in Savusavu is also a delicious surprise. We enjoy Koro Sun's smoky, traditional lovo feast, where an array of meats and homegrown vegetables are placed into

an earth oven, lined with palms and hot coals, and cooked for several hours. And we eat lunch a few times at popular curry house, Country Kitchen, across the road from the marketplace.

Despite its dubious »



Fijian kids at play. BELOW: Traditional Fijian bures accommodation.



The tiny, self-sufficient village is peppered with multi-hued bures





Aerial view of Koro Sun Resort.
 INSERT: Young Fijian boy fishing.
 BELOW: Savusavu's waterfalls.

You can almost touch the reef

name and dilapidated entrance, one of our most memorable meals is at Surf'n'Turf in Savusavu town. It might be the local fine dining restaurant but there's definitely no need to dress up, and the big timber deck overlooking the water is great for families.

We loved chef Vijendra Kumar's mud-crab curry and the kingfish sashimi. The staff is on laid-back 'Fiji time' here, but if you're patient enough to stick around for dessert, the homemade coconut ice-cream is well worth the wait.

For fresh fruit and produce, the Savusavu farmer's market is a hive of activity, especially on Saturdays, the main market day. We loved chatting to the locals selling everything from organic fruit and vegetables, fish and spices and arts and craft.

Perfect play date

One of the highlights of our stay in Savusavu is meeting affable local Jope on a fishing trip. He invites us to his home so our kids can have a play date with his boys, who are the same age as ours, the following day.

Jope picks us up and drives us to his scenic village where we are welcomed into the family's home. Jope offers kava and his wife cooks for us as we watch our boys play.

The kids couldn't understand each other but they bonded over a game of rugby, chasing chickens and sharing food. Later, my husband and I agree the people in Savusavu have an unrivalled generosity of spirit.

Adopted family

We meet 84-year-old Zelma Gartner, of Victoria, who has been



visiting Savusavu for more than 40 years. She loves that it is still very much "bush Fiji". Much loved by Koro Sun staff and locals, Zelma, or "Nau" as they affectionately call her, travels alone and stays in a bure that has a plaque bearing her name.

"I have no family so I think of the people here as my family," she says. "I come away feeling refreshed, very loved, but very sad because I'm leaving my family."

As a parting gift, the staff at Koro Sun give our two sons each a coconut tree and let them help plant them on the grounds. Now we have the perfect excuse to go back to Savusavu with our boys and watch how the trees have grown. ✈️

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Fiji from Sydney.

To book, visit JETSTAR.COM

