

# Catching a Wave

## Fiji's perfect ride

BY ROB DUNTON

*Fiji waves are challenging and perfect.* Photo: Ricardo Serpa

For more than a decade I have heard tales of legendary surf in the Fiji Islands. Whenever I'd grab a glossy surf magazine, I'd find full-page pictures of surfers tucked into glassy barrels of translucent water at Fijian breaks with names like Desperation or Frigates Passage.

AS AN EXOTIC DESTINATION WITH WARM, PRISTINE WATER, broad empty beaches and perfectly sculpted waves, Fiji has earned its reputation on the global surfing circuit as home to some of the finest waves on the planet.

World Championship competitions such as Globe Pro and Roxy Pro Fiji convene at infamous surfing spots like Cloudbreak and Restaurants which break over shallow reefs off Fiji's Tavarua Island.

"One of the great surf discoveries ever," said world-champion surfer Kelly Slater about Cloudbreak, which featured in the movie *Endless Summer 2*.

When planning our honeymoon, we both hoped to surf the promised land but were concerned Fiji might cater only to experts and those on the pro circuit. We were delighted with what we found.

“The South Pacific waters off Fiji offer the perfect temperature and a really good swell window for timing waves,” Slater explained. “The wave has so many different faces to it. It’s challenging and perfect.”

What Slater calls challenging equates to impossible for me. I’m no Kelly Slater. At best, I’m a middle-aged, intermediate surfer who enjoys a good wave as much as the next guy, while my wife Susan is a novice with two days of lessons and eight hours of board time. When planning our honeymoon, we both hoped to surf the promised land but were concerned Fiji might cater only to experts and those on the pro circuit. We were delighted with what we found.

*A local surfer in action. Photo: Ricardo Serpa*



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The water surrounding the reef resembles Bombay Sapphire Gin. A subtle swell from parts unknown meets the reef and rises up, creating perfectly formed 7-foot barrels ridden by expert surfers.



*Searching for suitable waves. Photo: Rob Dunton*

In our search for suitable waves, we contacted Ian Ravouvou Muller, owner of Fijian Surf Company, one of the first surf businesses in Fiji. “I’m what you call a Pacific fruit salad with many different flavours!” explains Ian, when I asked about his middle name. “My great grandmother on my mum’s side is Fijian and comes from Namoli Village in Lautoka. My nickname when I go to the village is Kini. My grandmother on my dad’s side is Kiribati, a small group of atolls in the middle of the Pacific.”

Having guided surf trips for 15 years, Ian assures us his team can match us with conditions to suit our level.

Susan and I find ourselves with a collection of other surfers from Australia and New Zealand motoring northwest out of Nadi towards the Mamanuca Islands. Forty minutes later, we arrive at an isolated reef called Wilkes Passage, far from any land mass. The water surrounding the reef resembles Bombay Sapphire Gin. A subtle swell from parts unknown meets the reef and rises up, creating perfectly formed 7-foot barrels ridden by expert surfers...and totally out of our league.

“Don’t worry,” our boat captain assures us.

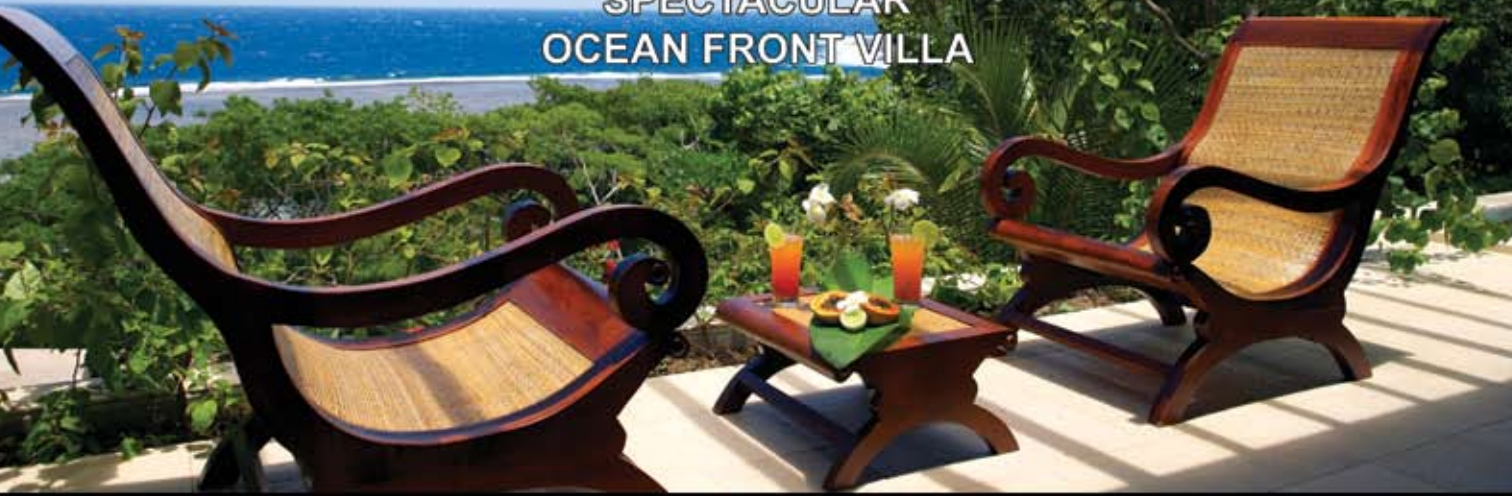
He drops off the most experienced surfers, then motors along the reef. The waves grow steadily smaller, moving from advanced to intermediate to beginner in size. I jump in at the intermediate section, and Susan enters at the beginner zone - this one break satisfies us all.

For the next three hours, we are in surfer heaven. Soft, easy-to-catch waves almost pick us up without paddling and carry us for 50 yards. Paddling back through the soft, glassy waves is a breeze compared to the beach breaks in California.



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## WHERE TO SURF



## BEST BREAKS

The best surf breaks in all the Fijian Islands (for top level surfers) are found off Tavarua in the Mamanuca Group and off Beqa and Kadavu in the Southern Islands. But ultimately the “best” surf break for you is the one that suits your ability and is a pleasure to ride. Here are a range of well-known reef and beach breaks you can ask about when you are in Fiji.

**WILKES PASSAGE** is a fast, long right-hand wave located in the Mamanuca Group, about 40 minutes by boat from the mainland. Depending on the swell and what part of the wave you ride, it can suit beginners to advanced surfers. This is where we surfed while in Fiji.

**TAVARUA** in the Mamanuca Group is a private island resort with rights to Cloudbreak and Restaurants, two of the most famous surf

spots in all of Fiji. Contact the island’s resort for reservations. <http://www.tavarua.com/>

**FRIGATES PASSAGE** is a left-hand break in the middle of the ocean and is growing a reputation amongst surfers for its reliable barrels and long rides. Often called the Fijian Pipeline, departures leave from a few hotels west of Pacific Harbour. Batiluva, Waidroka, The Pearl, Mango Bay or Uprising can organise the one-hour boat ride to Frigates. Depending on the swell and winds, Frigates is a world-class left that reels for a few hundred metres. It can be surfed at all tides.

**SIGATOKA SAND DUNES** is beach break and a good option for beginners and intermediates – it does not require a boat trip. It works best at low to mid-tides...high tides can be too mushy. Generally, the river mouth is the best area to surf with the best banks. The Sand Dunes distinct break is dependent on the silt brought down by the Sigatoka River. Undercurrents can be dangerous.

**HIDEAWAY RESORT** is another beach break located half way down the Coral Coast. It is a high-tide surfing spot with a short wave that often barrels. Most reefs along the Coral Coast are worth surfing. If it looks surfable, it probably is. Just be sure you are surfing within 2-3 hours of the high tide otherwise the water will be too low to surf. It can be accessed from the beach by a short paddle. Undercurrents can be dangerous.

**NATADOLA BEACH** has both a small beach break and a challenging outside reef break. It is one of the nicest beaches on the mainland and well worth a visit just for the swim. The break is located near the entrance to the bay,

which provides surfers with a very hollow and powerful left wave.

## WANT TO LEARN?

Folks from 4 to 55 who can swim, are fit and want to learn to surf can do so in the warm tropical waters of Fiji. Beginner surf breaks allow learners to stand so they aren’t always paddling. Many students have said they have tried to surf in Australia, New Zealand, in the mainland U.S. or Hawaii but have not been as successful as in the forgiving Fijian waves. Most students are able to catch their own waves (albeit small) unassisted after one day. Rates include instruction and use of soft (safe) longboards.

## INSIDERS TIP

It can be frustrating if you come to surf unprepared and unfit. I urge you to train a little before you come to save yourself from exhaustion and frustration. When the waves are perfect, you want to be surfing, not panting. Be safe: get local knowledge before you go. Swells, tides, storms, local rules, access points vary from site to site – don’t waste your time searching when you could be surfing. Last, be courteous to the locals and other surfers in the water, and be honest with your experience level so your guides can recommend the best suitable waves.

## IF YOU GO...

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*Hold tight...testing out the surf boards.*

We catch more rides in a few hours than we would catch in a week at home. And every ride is epic. The water is so clear and the reef below so vibrant, I wish we had extra time to snorkel or dive.

When our arms wear out, I wave my hand and the boat circles around to pick us up: door-to-door service. We dry off beneath the rich blue sky as we idle closer to the big waves and watch in awe as the hotshots tear up the fast moving barrels.

Back home, we describe Wilkes Passage to our friends as “the perfect wave,” far and above the best wave either of us have ever ridden. When I show pictures of us surfing to some of my world-travelled surf buds, they laugh: “That’s it? Wilkes gets so much bigger than that.”

Under different conditions, Wilkes Passage can be flat or twice as big – but when we went, it was perfect – exactly the reason we entrusted ourselves to local pros who knew when and where to take us.

Vakavodo Ua (Catch a Wave)! ■