

SIMPLY HEAVEN

Patrick Smith kicks back at an exclusive Fijian resort 'where less is more than enough'.





If you've been to Paradise it's understandable you'd want to return. Paradise is what locals call their Fijian island. Return is what guests at exclusive Yasawa Island Resort & Spa tend to do – year after year.

“At least 30 percent of our business is from repeat visits,” managing director Garth Downey told us during our stay. “Sometimes 90 percent of the guests staying here will have been before – one Italian couple have been here 10 times.”

Why do people come back? “Obviously, the beauty of the place and the waterborne activities,” Garth said, gesturing towards the kilometre-long sweep of coral sand and the blue, blue waters of the lagoon. “But it's the staff, too. They're very much part of the family and when people have been here a couple of days they feel part of the family too.”

For Ken, a third-time visitor from Melbourne, the lure of this secluded spot is quite simple: “There's nothing to do,” he told me with a contented smile, “that's the beauty of the place – no TV, no internet, no phone ...”

Ken's assessment echoes the resort's boast: “Where less is more than enough.” Enough, that is, to have won this slice of heaven numerous accolades, including Fiji's Leading Spa Resort at the 2007 World Travel Awards and, in 2006, *Condé Nast* Johansens' Most Excellent Romantic Hideaway in the Atlantic, Pacific and Caribbean. But, like any true world-class establishment, Yasawa's success comes as much from the stuff you can't see as the obvious signals.

“We get a lot of feedback from guests saying the service from staff was just enough, not in your face all the time,” said Maggie, Garth's Fijian-born wife. “I think our staff do a good job of anticipating what you want – and that's the real art of service.”

It certainly didn't take us long to feel at home. From the moment we

Facing page: The resort's romantic and secluded Lomalagi buree has its own infinity pool.

Above from left: Kilometre-long sweep of golden sand; the famous Blue Lagoon Caves on Sawa-i-Lau Island are a nearby attraction; the Yasawas offer spectacular diving.



Above from left: Delicious cocktails are a speciality of barman Manasa; Yasawa Island Resort does romance well; infinity pool and lagoon.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: The main buree and pool; lobster is a daily menu staple; infinity pool at sunset; fresh Pacific Islands fare.

stepped out of the little Pacific Island Air plane onto the resort's grassy airstrip, we were taken into the fold, greeted with leis and cool fruit cocktails. "Welcome to Paradise," said Eugene, the smiling duty manager, who ushered us aboard the resort's minivan for the short trip across the narrow island.

The resort is the only one on the island and provides work for a good number of local villagers. Because they live on the island, staff turnover is unusually low. "If you came back in 10 years' time, they'd remember your name," said Maggie. Manasa, the barman, has worked at the resort since the day it opened and is "probably the best-known barman in Fiji".

Garth and Maggie took over the Yasawa Island Resort 12 years ago and are deeply involved in the island culture. Garth sponsors a medical centre at nearby Bukama village and has educational scholarships in place at the island's three primary schools. He also sponsors staff wanting to study for trade qualifications at the polytech in Nadi. The resort has its own plumbers, electricians and chippies. A fulltime engineer looks after the generator, desalinator, sewerage system, vehicles and fleet of boats, which includes a luxurious 44-foot game-fishing vessel.

The resort underwent a major refurbishment in 2003 and today, while the Fijian-style architecture remains, there's a smart, contemporary feel to the 18 palm-thatched burees that run along the shore. The big, airy main buree houses reception, lounge, bar, dining room and kitchen, and lets on to a palm-fringed terrace surrounding an infinity swimming pool.

We took all this in as, decked out in our sweet-smelling leis, we were led across the terrace and along a shady path beside the tennis court to our deluxe beachside buree, which rose out of the sand behind a gnarled old tree. The first impression was of size: huge front decks and, inside, a cool and spacious living area, a raised king-sized bedroom, a separate dressing room and double bathroom. Outside the bathroom on the side deck was a second shower, discreetly screened off from beach.

The tiled floor was cool to the touch, the high ceiling formed a great timber canopy above us and wooden louvres covered screened windows, while big French doors opened onto a generous deck. Simple and tasteful, the buree had every modern convenience – air conditioning, ceiling fans, Bose stereo – but, as Ken had said, no TV and no telephone. And that was fine by us.

Further along the beach was the new Baravi Spa, its open-air massage platform jutting out above the sand. Later in the week I'd fall asleep on one of the massage tables to the hissing of surf as two Fijian masseuses performed four-handing "Baravi Rhythm" therapy on my back. A small wooden sign down on the beach warns, "Spa quiet pliz".

Our days passed lazily: swimming; reading in our hammock on the sand; swimming; taking trips to secluded beaches with names like "Lovers" and "Paradise" for private picnics; snorkelling from one of the resort's aluminium boats; watching the sun set; sipping cocktails at the bar before dinner; and eating the resort's fabulous food prepared by a team of local chefs under Australian-based executive chef Athol Wark.

Fresh fish is caught daily (if you get up in time you can watch it arrive on the beach). Lobster and other kinds of seafood are plentiful and form the basis of most menus. The wine list (Garth is a former viticulturalist) is considered to be the best in the Pacific.

It's not cheap to stay here but the daily tariff includes all meals, a buree day menu, all non-alcoholic drinks, twice-weekly trips to the famous Blue Lagoon caves, private beach picnics, romantic pool- or beachside dinners, snorkelling and handline fishing trips, watersports such as sailing, kayaking and windsurfing, village visits, cultural performances and traditional feasts. It was certainly more than enough for us.

"Yasawa", we learned during our stay, really does mean heaven in Fijian. Heaven? If this is where I'm headed when I die, I thought, bring it on. www.yasawa.com

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