

# TRAVEL



HILLARY HAUSER

From the air, the tiny South Seas isle of Tavarua appears as a reef-fringed jewel in an aquamarine sea. Obscured by the distance are beachside Fijian-style huts, where surfers and other guests stay.

## Fantasy Islands



MIKE MOIR

Surfers at Cloudbreak, famous for its left-breaking waves.

It's Hard to Find an Escape More Remote Than Any of These South Pacific Outposts. With the Current Transpacific Air-Fare Bargains, There's No Better Time to Go.

### Tavarua: Surfers' Paradise

By HILLARY HAUSER

TAVARUA, Fiji— It is early morning on this island and the gentle trade winds are blowing a humid breeze into the restaurant. I'm sitting at a table by myself, scribbling into my notebook half a dozen scenes that I want to paint when I get home. The sea water on my arms has dried into streaks of salt, but my fingers are still pickled from being in the water so long.

For two hours I've been snorkeling off the beach where the surf boats are anchored, in an area I call the Flower Gardens. In my notebook I've sketched some scenes I want to remember: the big brown unicornfish with the pokey thing sticking out of its forehead, the swarms of iridescent blue *chromis* (damselfishes) that hover

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# II: Tavarua Island Proves Paradise for Surfers

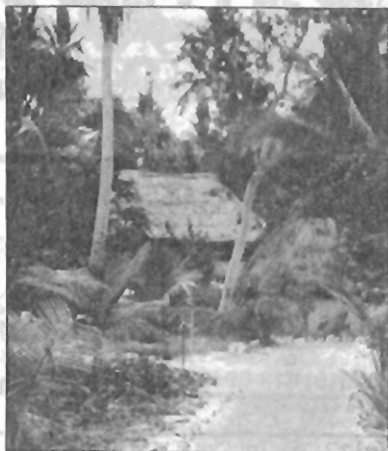
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iden-ocher staghorn corals, funny little Picasso triggerfish that hide in the shallows along the bottom. Also, I remember the plain gray, ke fishes with vividly tails that swim on the and bottom near the shore. ar the faint sound of a oat. The surfers who have he early morning run to reak are back for breakfast. sband, Jim, comes off the report that the waves out re "awesome." He says I bring my camera and go n him on the afternoon boat. rfers line up for buffet st, and soon all the tables in aurant are filled. There's a pppy talk in the air.

oudbreak" means only one hing to most surfers: It's an us left-breaking wave that up onto a reef off Tavarua outside of Nadi Bay. It's like ountain climbers, Zermatt rs—the ultimate of ulti-King of the Lefts. "Goofy" surfers who ride with ght foot forward, favor lefts e they can face the waves. ars" (left foot forward) fah-breaking waves for the eason. Jim is a regular, but s Cloudbreak, as does every rfer on the planet.

ever forget my first view of and, when Jim and I first several years ago. It is a haped, palm-studded jewel he midst of an aquamarine e Fijian-style thatched-roof r huts, are strung along a palm-tree path bordering ach, and there are two es where surfers can view ore breaks through binoc-

main paths of the island.



HILLARY HAUSER

Path leads to thatched-roof hut.

which intersect in a big "X" somewhere near the middle, lead at one end to the Fijian village where about 25 island workers and their families live. At the other end, through a miniature Fijian jungle, is David and Jeannie's idyllic two-bedroom-plus-veranda treehouse. I have loved sleeping on the veranda, which overlooks a white sandy beach that invites you to roll into the ocean first thing in the morning when no one else is up.

On Tavarua, there are 12 Fijian bures near the beach, which rent for \$125 a night per person for surfers and \$70 a night for spouses or non-surfing mates. This price includes all your meals and everything else you do on the island—windsurfing, snorkeling, fishing, beachcombing, daydreaming. One of my favorite things to do on Tavarua is to walk around the island on the beautiful coral-sand beach, which you can do in about half an hour if you're in a hurry, collecting the beautiful shells that wash up each day. I have spent hours with the Fijian children of the Tavarua village, stringing

these shells on monofilament line, and Jim and I have dishes of Tavarua shells all around our house in California.

The emphasis on Tavarua is, of course, on surfing—uncrowded surfing. David Clark, a Californian who owns the resort with Scott Funk, went to the South Pacific in the first place to escape the crowds of Southern California surf spots. Clark and Funk try to keep the numbers to 20 surfers at a time at Cloudbreak. This means that everyone gets plenty of his own solitary supreme moments on these waves.

David and his wife, Jeannie, are themselves talented surfers. You'll see David out at Cloudbreak on the biggest swells, and Jeannie's abilities shine when the wind blows. She is one of the most graceful board sailors this side of the moon.

Both of the Clarks grew up surfing in Southern California. After graduating from UC Santa Barbara, they migrated to the South Pacific in 1979, teaching school in American Samoa and looking for less-crowded surf spots during their time off. David discovered Tavarua during a trip to Fiji in 1981, when he and his cousin, Norm Clark, camped on the uninhabited 20-acre atoll for \$3 a day. David realized that the island could go the way of many tropical paradises: overdevelopment and ruination. He envisioned for the island an "eco-resort"—a small Fijian-style complex that blends with the landscape and the people.

With financial backing from Funk, the resort on Tavarua was built by hand and with the help of local Fijians. When the resort opened for business in 1984, it caught on like a 15-foot wave and is today a legend among surfers. I learned of this legendary status firsthand during one of my lecture

circuits in grade schools, junior highs and high schools. If I ever mention that I've been to Tavarua, some young voice inevitably responds with something like, "Really? Wow! That's rad!"

Part of the legend comes from countless magazine stories and television specials that have focused on Tavarua. These have continued unabated since the resort opened. During the coup of May, 1987, by ethnic Fijians against the Indian-dominated government, many resorts were hard-hit by tourists staying away from the country. But life at Tavarua went on as if nothing had happened. A professional surf tournament went on as planned, with a large protective vessel provided by the Fijian government overseeing the events taking place at Cloudbreak. The resort was full.

I am not a surfer, but David and Jeannie have taken me out for impromptu surfing lessons in "Kid-dieland," directly in front of the restaurant. Here, in safe and sane waters, I've actually stood up on a board to the amusement of all—and to the amazement of me. I have figured that surfers zooming down the face of a wave at Cloudbreak feel one zillion times the amazement I felt on a Kiddieland wave three inches high.

Besides Cloudbreak, there are other waves around the island that can be every bit as exciting as the King of the Lefts. There is Restaurants, a long, left-breaking wave that travels fast along a beautiful reef encircling the northwest side of the island. (This break is also called Tavarua Lefts.) Then there is Tavarua Rights, which is, as its name implies, a right-breaking wave. Jim and I have made some truly exploratory scuba dives along the Tavarua Rights reef, down to

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# FIJI

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80 feet, where we've found big fish swimming along a steep, unspoiled coral wall; sharks sleeping on the bottom, and zillions of colorful reef fish.

On the afternoon I went out with Jim and the other surfers to Cloudbreak, I saw why everyone was so enthusiastic about the place. The waves were, to my mind, completely wild. It seemed as if the barometric pressure was up in the entire area, with a rising mist over an ocean stirred into a furious foam. The boat driver dropped off the surfers near the break, then drove closer to the action so that I could take pictures. Druku Lalabalavu, son of the Fijian chief whose family owns the island, took off first in a crazy ride down a big wave. He made it and came back to the boat for a bigger board. Druku, who works at the Tavarua resort, was taught to surf by David, thus becoming "First Fijian Surfer." This was the first time I'd ever seen him in action and he was ecstatic.

Then came Duke, a radio talk-show host from Makaha, Hawaii. He took off on a monstrous bone-masher with his big old board, carved down to the bottom of the wave and was at the top of it again before I could blink. Jim then came flying down the face of the next big wave, whereupon I clicked away as if there were a motor drive on my camera.

David had explained to me why Cloudbreak is as magnificent as it is: One mile west of Navula Reef, the depth of the sea is more than 6,000 feet. When the water surges up onto the reef, David said, a shoaly effect triples the size of the surf, making a perfect wave every time. To me, those waves were beyond perfect—they were terrifying. Every time our boat went over one of them, a sudden *whoosh* of wind stood my hair on end.

After awhile we anchored farther away from the action, and the driver put on his crash helmet and went to join the others. Another guest, Megan, and I went over the

## GUIDEBOOK

### Surfing Tavarua

**Getting there:** Qantas and Air New Zealand fly direct from Los Angeles to Nadi, Fiji. Both offer seven-day advance purchase fares of about \$800 (Qantas until July 22; New Zealand until May 31). Flights can be booked through Aquarius Tours, which is also the sole booking agent for accommodations at the Tavarua Island resort; Aquarius Tours, 18411 Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance 90504; (805) 683-6696 in Santa Ynez.

Guests are met at Nadi airport by vans for 45-minute drive from Nadi to Nabila Village (also arranged through Aquarius Tours). Cost is \$25 for the first person, \$5 for each additional person, divided between passengers.

**Where to stay:** Rustic huts, called *bures*, \$125 a night per person for surfers; \$70 for non-surfers (spouses and friends who are not using boats). Prices include all meals, transportation to and from island and activities such as skin diving, game fishing and windsurfing.

**For more information:** Fiji Visitors Bureau, 5777 W. Century Blvd., Suite 220, Los Angeles 90045, (213) 568-1616.

—H.H.

side to have a look around with our masks and snorkels. The minute I put my face in the water, I saw a big turtle about 40 feet below me attacking a giant blue jellyfish. The turtle gulped down the jellyfish with big, throaty gulps, batting at it whenever it dared to drift away. The jellyfish completely disappeared within five minutes. Jim told me later that the throats of turtles are rough and tough, which they must be to withstand such a brutal diet.

In this part of the world, action like turtles eating jellyfish is not unusual. What is usual for Tavarua is this: no telephones (except for one in the office), no televisions and no nightclubs. No wallets, money or credit cards are needed—until you settle your tab at the end of your stay. No beads for drinks—Druku just marks whatever you've had on a clipboard. When you book your vacation on this island, almost everything else comes with the deal—your meals, fishing, snorkeling, windsurfing, surfing, beach-combing and great new friends.

David and I went to the meteorological station at the airport to get long-range weather and surf forecasts. Fiji is exposed to one of the largest disturbance centers on

Earth—the Tasman Sea. The two main islands of Fiji—Viti Levu and Vanua Levu—are in the direct line of waves generated in this area.

When we got to the station, a meteorologist greeted David with a weather map, pointing to a series of tight lines near Tahiti and New Zealand. David explained that the tight lines meant big waves. It was June, during Tavarua's dry season. It lasts from April through November, and is the time of the biggest swells around the island and at Cloudbreak.

After a day on the mainland, you can hardly wait to get back to your little island, so quickly does it become your own Robinson Crusoe home. The water is pure, the air is clean and your Fijian friends are glad to see you back. You are

spoiled by the simplicity of it all. As soon as we reached the beach at Tavarua, I jumped from the boat into the ocean, still wearing my dress, and just lay there in the water vowing never to take another side trip again.

On the day of our leaving, Jim went surfing a last time at Cloudbreak and I went snorkeling in my Flower Gardens. As I surfaced, I saw a boat approaching—Anare was coming back to say goodbye. Little did I know what sort of goodbye this would be!

After spending a long and lovely afternoon together, Jim and I, Anare and his group prepared to leave. On the beach we said goodbye to David, Jeannie and the Tavaruans, who waved to us from the beach as we left in the open boat. It was to be a wet ride, and we had plastic tarps over everything.

Druku was at the helm, looking like a pirate with a brown towel tied around his head. Jim was in the bow (prepared to get the wettest), and Anare sat next to me. We were barely under way when I mentioned to Anare that I loved the "Isa Lei," Fiji's farewell song. Written during World War II, it says things like:

*You'll hear the calling of your land  
And the sounds of the big waves.  
My love for you cannot be broken  
Because our love is strong.*

We had heard the "Isa Lei" performed at many *mekes* in Fiji, beautifully sung and staged. But now in the boat, Anare began to sing, and one by one he was joined by his people, each taking a different melodic line. Soon, Druku was singing, too. . . .

*"Isa Lei, all my wanting,  
Is because you'll be leaving tomor-*

*row.*

*But in Fiji, I'll be waiting here for you. . . ."*

I looked toward the beach, where David, Jeannie and the Tavaruans were still waving us goodbye. The Fijians in the boat were in full a cappella harmony when the first sea spray hit me in the face,

but it didn't matter: I couldn't tell the difference between the ocean and my own tears. I think that I might never experience such a parting again, but I can hardly wait to go back to see if this is true.

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