

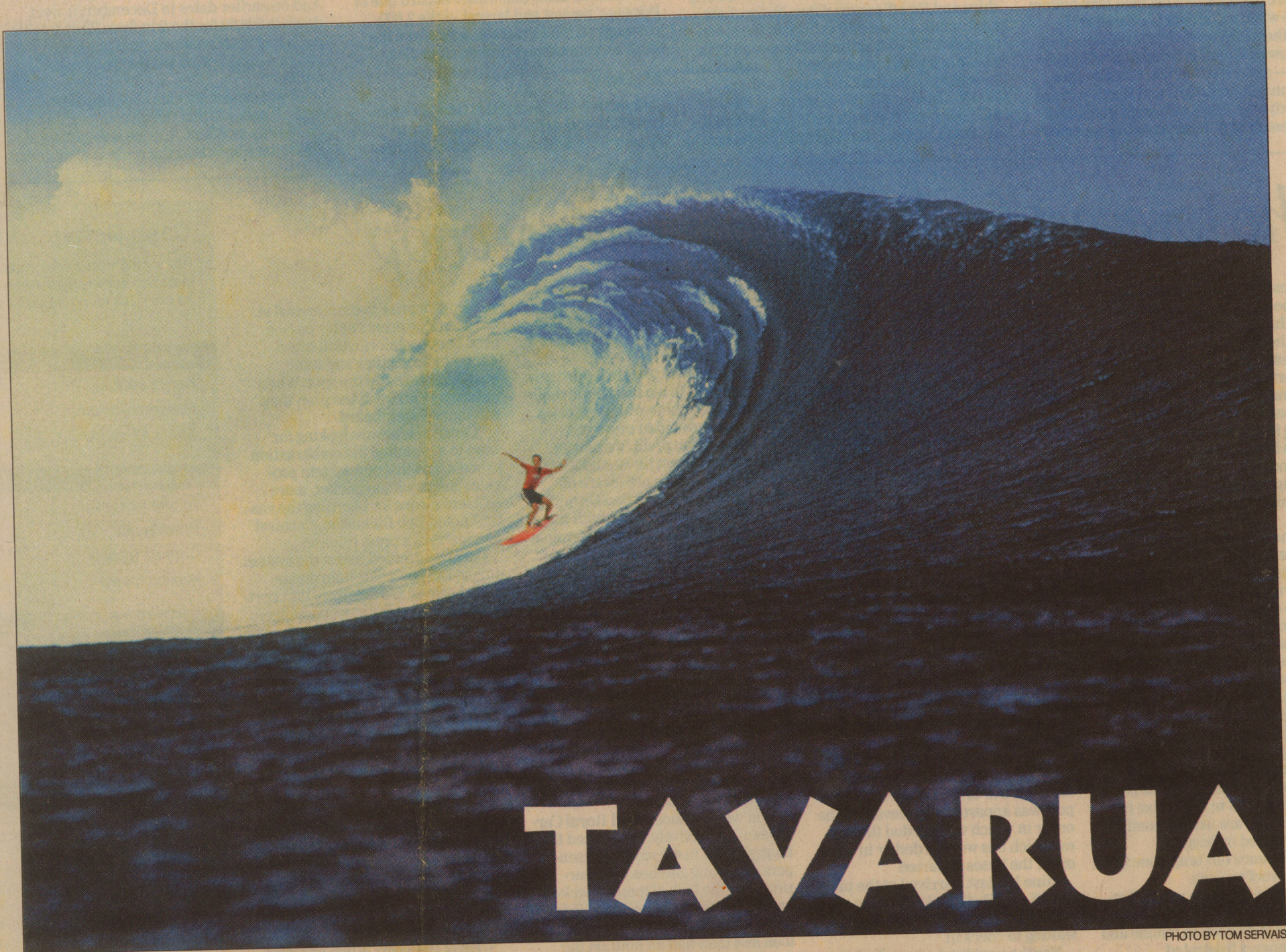
# TRAVEL

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## TAVARUA

PHOTO BY TOM SERVAIS

Jon Roseman surfs "Cloudbreak," the wave used to trap Tom Hanks on a deserted island in the new movie "Cast Away."

### THE ISLAND OF 'CAST AWAY'

By HILLARY HAUSER  
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In the just-opened film "Cast Away," Tom Hanks goes through a couple of oceanic nightmares. After surviving an air crash at sea, he manages to get thrashed around in monstrous, powerful surf that rings a calm lagoon, nearly drowns, and ends up on a deserted island.

Four years later, weatherworn and much skinnier, Hanks fashions a raft and tries to get out through the same humongous ocean waves that nearly killed him the first time around.

The colossal surf in this movie is Cloudbreak — the backyard playground of Tavarua Island, a unique eco-resort island in Fiji. Here, surfers have been booking in for years just so they can tangle with the powerful ocean wave they call "the King of the Lefts" — which is the exact same wave that creates the terrible barrier between entrapment and freedom for Hanks' character in "Cast Away."

In fact, the stuntman/double for Hanks in the surf scenes is one of the owners of the Tavarua Resort, Jon Roseman. An expert big-wave rider, Roseman tangled with solid six to eight foot "Hawaiian-sized" waves at Cloudbreak over and over again, while surf-cinematographer Don King filmed him from the vantage-point of the water in front of the wave. Usually, Cloudbreak conditions of this size are no big deal for Roseman, but for the movie he had to

maneuver up and over these powerful sea mountains while dealing with unwieldy rafts, including one made of logs and a sail fashioned from a porta-potty. (You have to see the movie to learn how a porta-potty happened to be available for sail material.)

"Cast Away" will be shining more international light on Tavarua Island, which since its inception in 1984, has not only been a top

draw to big wave surfers from all over the world — it's been the place of my own personal dreams. Soon after its opening, I went to this exotic, 20-acre atoll on the outside of Nadi Bay, and I have been back repeatedly since. I discovered about 15 years ago what the cast and crew of "Cast Away" is saying about Tavarua today — that it is the world's most perfect island.

Located in the Mamanuca island chain on the outside of Nadi Bay, Tavarua looks from the air exactly like a heart — a sand- and palm-fringed jewel in the midst of an aquamarine sea. Visible from the coastal roads of southwest Viti Levu, it appears to be a tiny, uninhabited atoll until you get aboard an open boat for the 45-minute ride to the island. As you get nearer, the environmentally-sensitive, thatched bures and buildings come into view, and the magic and beauty of this coral world opens up like a spreading flower. Tavarua means, literally, "Two On Top Of," a reference to the island's close



TOM DEWALT / NEWS-PRESS



PHOTO BY WARREN BOLSTER

Tavarua is a heart-shaped 29-acre island off Fiji's west coast.



PHOTO BY JON ROSEMAN

If surfers ever tire of challenging the sea, they can chill by the resort's oddly-shaped pool.



# Radical surf in the middle of nowhere



PHOTO BY WARREN BOLSTER

A small sandbar provides a 360-degree ocean view.

## FIJI Continued from Page H1

positioning to its satellite island, Namotu. From Malolo Lailai, ten miles to the north, the two islands seem thrown together by a geologic god, one on top of the other. To me, the island name symbolizes two lands of reality and dream, so intertwined that when you're here you don't know the difference.

There is an association between Tavarua and Santa Barbara, in that the original builders of this resort are UCSB graduates who are now full-time Santa Barbara county residents. In 1979, when hardly anyone knew about Tavarua, David and Jeannie Clark graduated from UCSB and took off on a South Pacific journey of teaching (high school science in American Samoa) and travelling that landed them, eventually, in Fiji.

In 1981, the Clarks discovered for themselves the uniqueness of Cloudbreak. "I've never seen anything like it on the planet," David said. "It breaks perfectly, whether the wave is two or 20 feet."

Fiji, which is composed of two main islands — Viti Levu and Vanua Levu — as well as hundreds of smaller satellite islands, is exposed to one of the largest disturbance centers on earth, the Tasman Sea. Tavarua, located off the southwest shore of Viti Levu, is in the direct line of waves generated in this area.

Five miles away from Navula Reef, where the Cloudbreak surf comes up near Tavarua, the depth of the sea is more than 1,000 fathoms. When the wave hits the shoal, it converges energy into itself, making its peak higher. David figures this shoaling effect triples the size of the incoming surf and creates a perfect wave no matter what its size.

Soon after their personal discovery of Tavarua, the Clarks began to envision a low-key resort that would neither exploit nor conflict with Fijian culture and tradition. They wanted to build a resort that would allow guests to intermingle with Fijians on a day-to-day basis, not a place where native people are known only as beachboys or waitresses serving drinks and dinners to tourists.

With their business partner, Scott Funk, the Clarks supervised the construction of a low-key camp-hotel for surfers, and Camp Tavarua, as it was called, is perhaps among the first establishments in the world that could sport the title of "eco-resort." Thatched bures were built along a sandy palm-tree path bordering the beach. The main paths of the island, which intersect in a big "x" somewhere in the middle, lead at one end to the Fijian village where about 50 island workers and their families live. All of the Fijian villagers work in the resort, but today, as then, they also have time to sit and talk to island guests. In this manner, stories are told, friendships are made, and cultures are shared.

Jane "Big John" Natava, became the magistrate of the Fijian work force, and after David began to teach the Fijian men to surf, Druku Lalabalavu, son of the Fijian chief whose family owns the island, became known as "First Fijian Surfer." Today, Druku and Big John are synonymous with Tavarua — and in

general, with surfing in Fiji. The land portions of "Cast Away" were in fact filmed on Jone Natava's home island of Monriki, which is not far from Tavarua.

Soon after Camp Tavarua opened for business in 1984, it hit the cover of Surfer Magazine, and the resort caught on like a 20-foot wave. I remember the Tavarua of those early days. The men would get up early and load themselves into open boats to make the ten-minute trip out to Cloudbreak. They'd get back about three hours later, by the time their wives or girlfriends were getting up. Then they'd go out again. Some women guests found plenty to be amused about on Tavarua, which is a Robinson Crusoe fantasy island where you can play all day, like a child. Other women, however, had trouble with their men being gone all day and went into rebellion. Most surfers came to Tavarua alone, or with their guy-friends.

Some women also found the early accommodations a little too "rustic." The old Camp Tavarua bures had outdoor showers — solar water bags, filled each day from rain catchment tanks and warmed in the sun. Bathrooms were in a communal brick building behind the restaurant,

which on occasion doubled as a shelter when a hurricane hit.

Today on Tavarua, there are spacious new tiled bures with indoor baths and running showers. Some of them have two bedrooms, living rooms and bars. A spacious wooden veranda now extends out

from the restaurant, and a freeform swimming pool reflects the mirrored blue-on-blue of Fijian sky and sea. The beach-sand volleyball court is now a permanent installation, and so is the air-conditioned boutique, stocked with everything from paintings to surfwear, toiletries, hats and Fijian trinkets.

Tavarua is no longer an island where male surfers dominate the guest list. Women are encouraged to go out on the fishing trips, kayak excursions, to snorkel, walk, work out, play volleyball. "It's also cool to go out in the boats and watch the guys surf," says Hilary Hotchkiss, a Santa Barbara realtor. "And there are a lot of women I know who will come here to learn how to learn to surf themselves." When the waves aren't breaking at Cloudbreak, one can always petition a surfer for an initiation to riding waves in Kiddyland, and few of them will refuse.

The definition of the island's lure shifted in 1993, when the Tavarua Island resort went through a management change. That year, two of its former boatmen, Jon Roseman and Rick Isbell, both expert surfers, bought principal shares in the island, and began expanding the concept of the resort to include upgraded accommodations, as well as activities and niceties for women.

"The hard-core surfers matured, got married, had children — and to keep pace with them," Roseman said. The consideration of wives and girlfriends results in the "ultimate philosophy — the guy can still have the hard-core surfing experience, and keep his family happy."

Roseman is keeping himself happy, too — when the surf is up, he is out there, while wife Cynthia happily

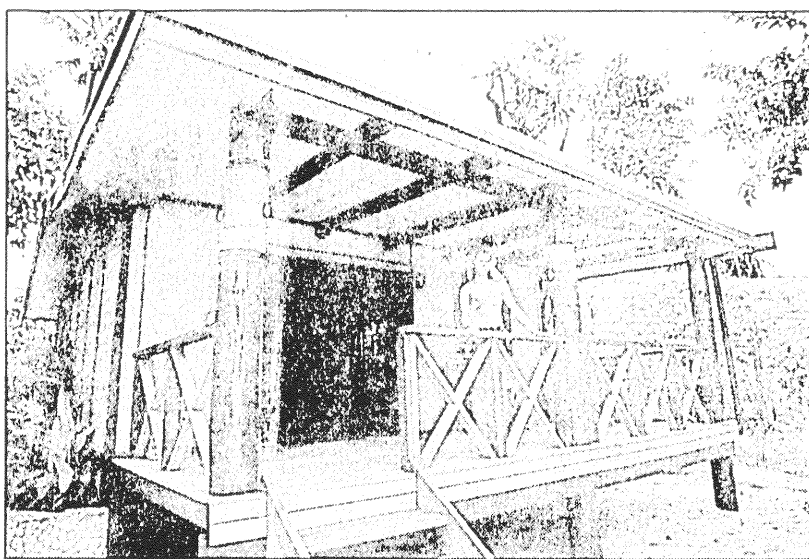


PHOTO BY HILLARY HAUSER

One of the bures, or guest cottages, of the Tavarua Resort.

manages the daily workforce of the resort. Often featured in surfing publications for his at-home abilities on the Cloudbreak wave, Roseman takes in his stride horrendous ocean conditions that would scare the chest hair off many other men.

Said "Cast Away" second unit director and producer Steve Starkey, "Jon helped us make this escape look realistic, daring and dramatic. He also generated some breathless moments with his courage and ability to take on the biggest surf I have ever seen."

Having gone "over the falls" on a Cloudbreak wave myself — on the front of a surfboard someone else was maneuvering — I can personally attest to the power of the sea in this part of the world, and its scariness. I cannot imagine what it would be like to punch through surf with a bunch of raft material, and wearing a wig to boot. But knowing Jon Roseman, I can only imagine he was doing all this while thinking the whole thing was just a lot of fun. Cloudbreak is, after all, his backyard playground.

Although Tavarua and big surf are synonymous, the island represents far more than wave riding. It occupies a unique place in Fiji, in that it is one of the few resorts whose policy is to turn back a certain percentage of earnings to the country in which it operates. Since its inception, Tavarua has been giving aid to nearby Momi and Nabila villages, in the form of food, equipment, help with animal husbandry, sanitation and recycling, medical supplies and medical assistance that sometimes includes flying Fijian villagers to the United States for surgery.

Just as the Clarks had originally envisioned when they created the Tavarua resort, the interaction of tourists with the local villagers is the essence of the island's magic. When you stay here, the local Fijians become your friends. Anyone visiting a nearby big-chain hotel on Viti Levu will know the difference in cultural contact, the difference between a meke performance and the meke party that goes on once a week at Tavarua.

During "Fiji Night" on Tavarua, hotel guests take part in a kava ceremony, dine on authentic Fijian food, and watch a spectacularly moving show of native song and dance. Until recently, the song and dance performances were done by a visiting troupe from nearby Nabila village, but during my recent visit to the island, the Nabila group could not make it.

Roseman turned to Druku and said, "Why don't you guys do it?" Proudly, Druku took up the challenge, and in two days he had a show together. This was one amazing show! None of the guests had known anything about this changeover, but

## If you go

Although the recent unrest in Fiji never influenced the safety of travel to Tavarua Island, the settling of the country's internal difficulties has rekindled Fiji as an attractive tourist destination.

Tavarua Island accommodations are sold in a one-week package that includes airfare (Air New Zealand), as well as all activities on the island (surfing, fishing, snorkeling, surfing, volleyball, etc.). The one-week rate from LAX is \$2,495, based on double occupancy. Air/ accommodations packages originating in Honolulu are also offered.

Guests are met at Nadi airport by vans for a 45-minute drive from Nadi to Nabila village. Cost is \$30 U.S. per person, round trip.

Booking is exclusively through Tavarua Island Tours, Inc., P.O. Box 60159, Santa Barbara, CA 93160. Phone (805) 686-4551; fax (805) 683-6696.

in the rousing opening "Bula," everyone suddenly noticed Druku in the front row, face painted, dressed in traditional grass skirt, grass bands on his ankles and upper arms. He was singing and dancing his heart out! Then the hotel guests noticed Citi, and Eloni, Ilyesa, Lorima, Noel, all the women in the kitchen — the whole resort staff — all in costume, dancing and singing like the most professional meke performers anybody had ever seen.

One afternoon during my recent stay on Tavarua, I could hear Druku rehearsing his performers with strenuous, hellfire-and-brimstone instructions: "Come on! This is what you are singing! This is what it means! This is the tradition!"

In a world where so much tradition has been reduced to a formula, this fiery attention to Fijian meaning is the heart and soul of Tavarua. Men will always come to this island to surf big waves, and women are having a fine time here in an updated resort with wonderful amenities. And now Hollywood has crash-landed on the island's shore, with "Cast Away" turning world attention on Fiji as did the movie "Blue Lagoon."

Apart from the sensational nature of cinema, however, the permanent beauty of Tavarua continues to be the soul of its people, and what they share with you when you're there. Today you don't have to be a surfer to drop in on an authentic Fiji, which is mixed together on this island in perfect proportion. Two on Top Of, just as its name promises.

Hillary Hauser is a long-time diver and ocean-adventure journalist who co-founded the Santa Barbara-based citizens' activist group Heal the Ocean.