



# Half a world away

So far that you can't go any further without coming back, but with a choice of over 300 tropical paradises perhaps you won't want to – Michael Gunn looks at some Fijian hideaways

**W**e've all wanted to live a certain day over again and until the US military declassify their temporal-transportation device (and get a blinding write-up in *Electric Avenue*), the archipelago of Fiji allows the literalist to indulge this pleasure. By taking a fast connection and crossing the international dateline you can just about touch ground before you leave. Unfortunately this isn't repeatable – else we'd all be on a permanent Groundhog Day vacation – but this absolute remoteness surely adds a certain frisson to the Pacific Islands, almost as if being half a world away puts them on another planet.

It can be a little wearying to catalogue desert island pleasures, especially for one such as I who slips into a coma at the thought of yet another pristine beach and shares Hollywood funnyman W.C. Field's attitude to

seawater (I'll leave you to look that one up). But, suffice it to say, if sugar-white beaches and a south-sea tropical climate blow your skirt up then Fiji is sure to thrill. Along with miles of national parks, rainforest and traditional villages, the offshore waters are perfect for yachting, fishing and diving enthusiasts. The 'soft coral capital of the world' is packed with underwater caves, marine life (turtles, manta rays and even the odd whale) and palm-fringed lagoons. Small wonder that it's long been a favourite honeymoon spot for our Antipodean cousins but, just recently, Europeans are starting to get in on the act, cramming themselves on marathon flights and taking a look at the opportunities for part-time property ownership.

Entry point for all but the hardened sailor will be Viti Levu, the largest island (and hence 'the mainland')

and home to the capital of Suva and Fiji's two international airports. That takes care of your first destination, but now that you've got another 332 islands to choose from, where should you start? It really depends on what kind of trip you'd like – the backpacking island-hopper can take advantage of regular ferry services and head as far west as the Southern Lau Group of islands, those with strong sea-legs can charter a yacht and, if your ambition is to get to a luxurious beach-shack and zone-out as quickly as possible, then there are countless agents desperate to exchange your money for a worry-free, all inclusive lounge on their self-contained resorts. The big three islands - the 'mainland', Vanua Levu and Taevuni - are the most visited and hence developed spots in Fiji (though this is a rather relative concept, Fiji isn't exactly Club Med even in peak season) and much smaller neighbouring islands like Mamanuku and Koro are where you'll find the flashier, more exclusive resorts. Whatever else you do, you owe it to yourself to pay a visit to the Yasawas islands, the picture perfect group used as the location for both *Blue Lagoon* movies.

The scattered population is a cosmopolitan mix of Indian, Chinese, European and indigenous Fijians and

the traditional culture blossoms alongside the burgeoning tourist trade. It's a rare visitor to Fiji that doesn't return with tales of warm welcomes or opportunities to sip a kava with the locals and take part in the celebratory 'meke' dance, for among Fijians, community is at a premium. Village life is central to the culture – if you're visiting a small community then it's customary to present a gift of 'yaqona' to the 'Turaga ni Koro', the head of the village.

## Local etiquette

Make sure that you're dressed modestly and – perhaps most importantly – avoid touching anyone's head, which is apparently a deadly insult! (Interestingly, several Fiji guidebooks point this out, is there a subset of holidaymakers getting strange kicks from fondling native's skulls?) But if you keep your hands to yourself you could get the chance to sample local delicacies like coconut pancakes, kokoda (fresh fish marinated in lime juice) and seasoned yams, all washed down with green coconut water and sweet banana juice among some of the most hospitable people of the South Pacific. ▶



EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

**Somerset House**

Coastal cliff top property on two acres with three spacious private oceanfront suites, all with en suite facilities and tastefully decorated with a 17th century art collection. Each suite is self-contained with private gardens and thatched walkways leading on to the central living area and veranda overlooking the Somosomo Straits. There are dining facilities for up to 12 guests and lounge and sitting areas that include a personal library and full entertainment centre. The house is part of the exclusive freehold development, Taveuni Estates, with 4,000 acres of tropical rainforest and beachfront golf, tennis and clubhouse for residents, along with a professional dive centre and marina that provide access to the Great White Wall and the extensive Rainbow Reef, just 20 minutes offshore.

**£988,663 (F\$3,192,620)**  
Call +44 (0)1245 358877 and quote reference IH1108/TE13



**Matanuku Resorts**

Located on Matanuku Island, just a stone's throw from Kadavu, this nine-acre resort hosts a variety of options for those planning regular trips to Fiji. Plots of land sell from £19,500 (US\$35,000), fractional ownership (with an annual allowance of a month's stay) starts at £9,760 (US\$17,500). New build homes come in three varieties, the self-explanatory Absolute Beachfront Villas (from £96,120 - US\$175,000 – only seven available) and Hilltop Ocean View Villas (eight in total, £109,838 - \$200,000 - apiece) and Penthouse (just one, going for £137,319 - US\$250,000). Ownership comes with exclusive access to the resort and spa club, restaurants and leisure activities.

From **£96,120 (F\$310,390)**  
Call +44 (0)1245 358877 and quote reference IH1108/C14



**Koro Island**

Timber villa sitting in an acre of beachfront on unspoilt Koro Island. There's a master suite and private balcony on the top floor and two bedrooms and bathrooms below. A large balcony gives Pacific views and is perfect for dining and entertaining. With pristine beachfront and a tropical flower garden at your doorstep you couldn't be any closer to the great Fijian outdoors – and all this for an eminently reasonable price.

**£151,050 (F\$487,760)**  
Fiji Real Estate +1-808-924-1320  
Call +44 (0)1245 358877 and quote reference IH1108/FRE15



**Oneva**

Custom-built bungalow, just 10 minutes from Savusavu, on over an acre of coconut groves and orchards with clear views of the reef and unbeatable beach access. It has 1,600 sq ft of inside living area in a spacious open-plan arrangement – two bedrooms and two bathrooms at either end of the home with a large central lounge between and a ridiculously well equipped kitchen (commercial gas-range, large oven, two refrigerators and dishwashers). There's 900 sq ft of covered terrace facing the ocean, giving ample room for entertaining, along with a garage and storage area that can be converted into a guest cottage.

**£200,000 (F\$638,231)**  
Call +44 (0)1245 358877 and quote reference IH1108/FH16



**Wavi Island**

This 27-acre island, just a quarter of a kilometre from Vanua Levu, is the site of 23 fully serviced freehold lots on the oceanfront. Four will be beachfront properties (the rest will have access to the island's private beach) and all have a stake in the resort facilities of swimming pool, spa, fitness centre, restaurant, bar and tennis courts. Visitors will be strictly vetted by 24-hour security making Wavi Island the ultimate in exclusive Pacific living.

**£217,331-£423,518 (F\$693,000-F\$1,350,630)**  
Call +44 (0)1245 358877 and quote reference IH1108/WI17

Your trip to a local village might prompt a longing for one of those thatched cottages (or 'vurues' as they're known) and thankfully there's a profusion of agents with cabins, villas and apartments to sell. South Pacific Real Estate provides the most extensive listings of land plots and finished homes, passing on business to its mostly private sellers. You can pick up a freehold acre on one of the main islands for as little as £12,222 (\$22,000) - most transactions are in US, and not Fijian, dollars - but if you're after a resale of a custom-built home on an acre or so of land, then prices are well over \$100,000 (£55,555). This is rather reasonable as most of these retreats are self-contained plots with their own water and power networks, at least a couple of bedrooms, covered decking and, almost without exception, splendid ocean views.

Fiji may be a wonderful place but, unless the property buyer is retired, able to visit frequently or carve out a Fijian living, it may be a rather impractical place to live year-round. In which case, the owner-managed resort is an attractive proposition. First Landing, just nine miles from Nadi airport, is perhaps the most convenient, offering two-storey beachfront villas at prices ranging from £150,000 to £250,000 (F\$478,830 – F\$798,050), with the new owner able to recoup at least 10% of their investment by having the resort rent out the property during their absence.

Taveuni Estates, on the eponymous island, operate as both a holiday resort renting villas to holidaymakers and as a residential community with beachfront homes to buy. Prices range from £21,100-£278,000 (US\$38,000 - US\$500,000) and interest-free finance allows buyers to pay a third as deposit and settle the remaining balance over five years. The community has private golf, tennis and diving facilities while the island itself has spectacular hiking trails to the Bouma Falls and the central (and thankfully dormant) volcano. Matanuku, Koro and Wavi islands are similarly exclusive resorts – the former will only sport 15 properties while Koro has the edge in terms of remoteness and Wavi offers the most expensive homes with prices reaching almost £500,000 (F\$1.6 million). More of the same are surely on the way but for now our Top 5 presents some excellent value-for-money properties. Take a look at our choice opposite and ponder, surely some of these are worth that 22-hour flight? ■