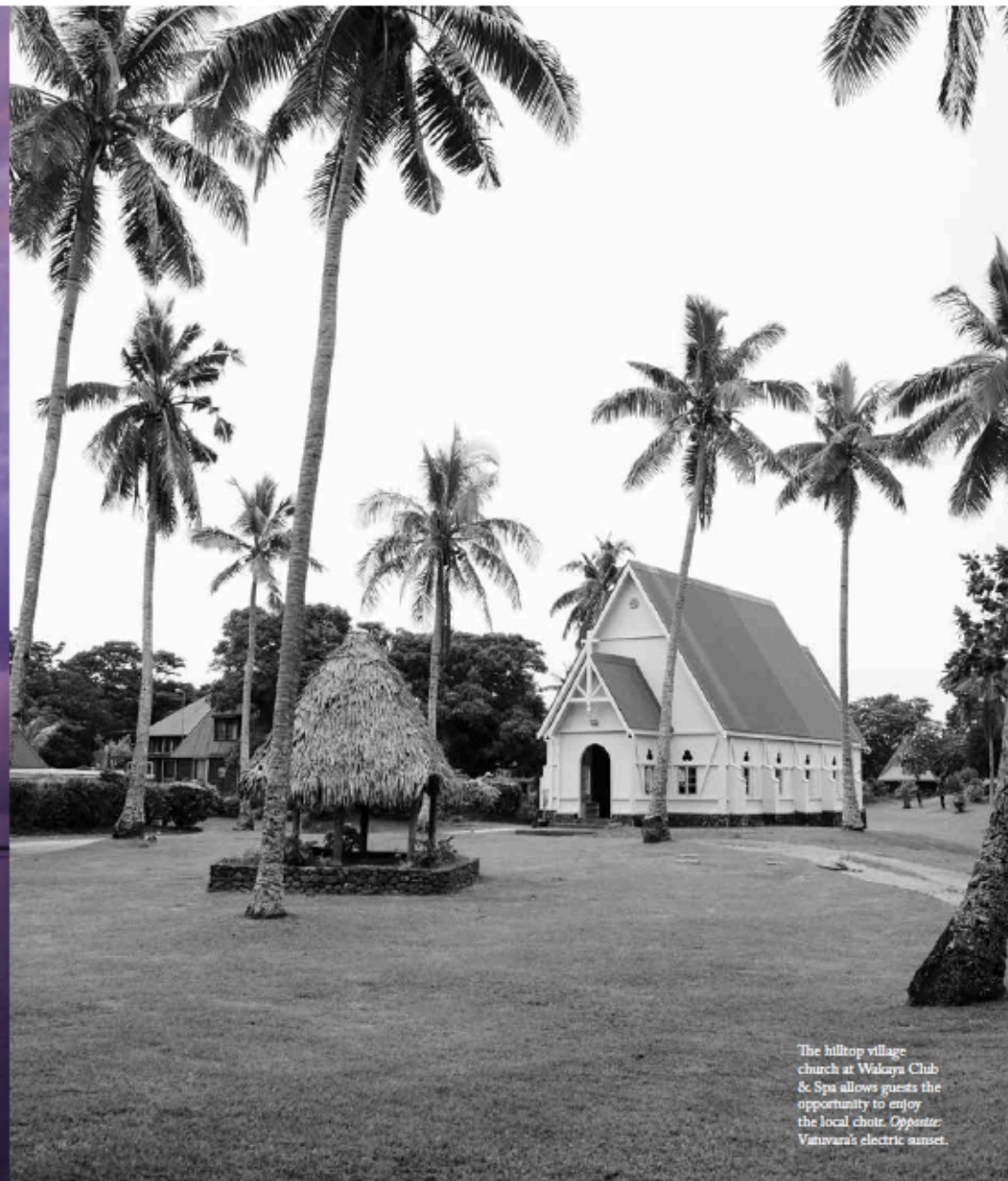
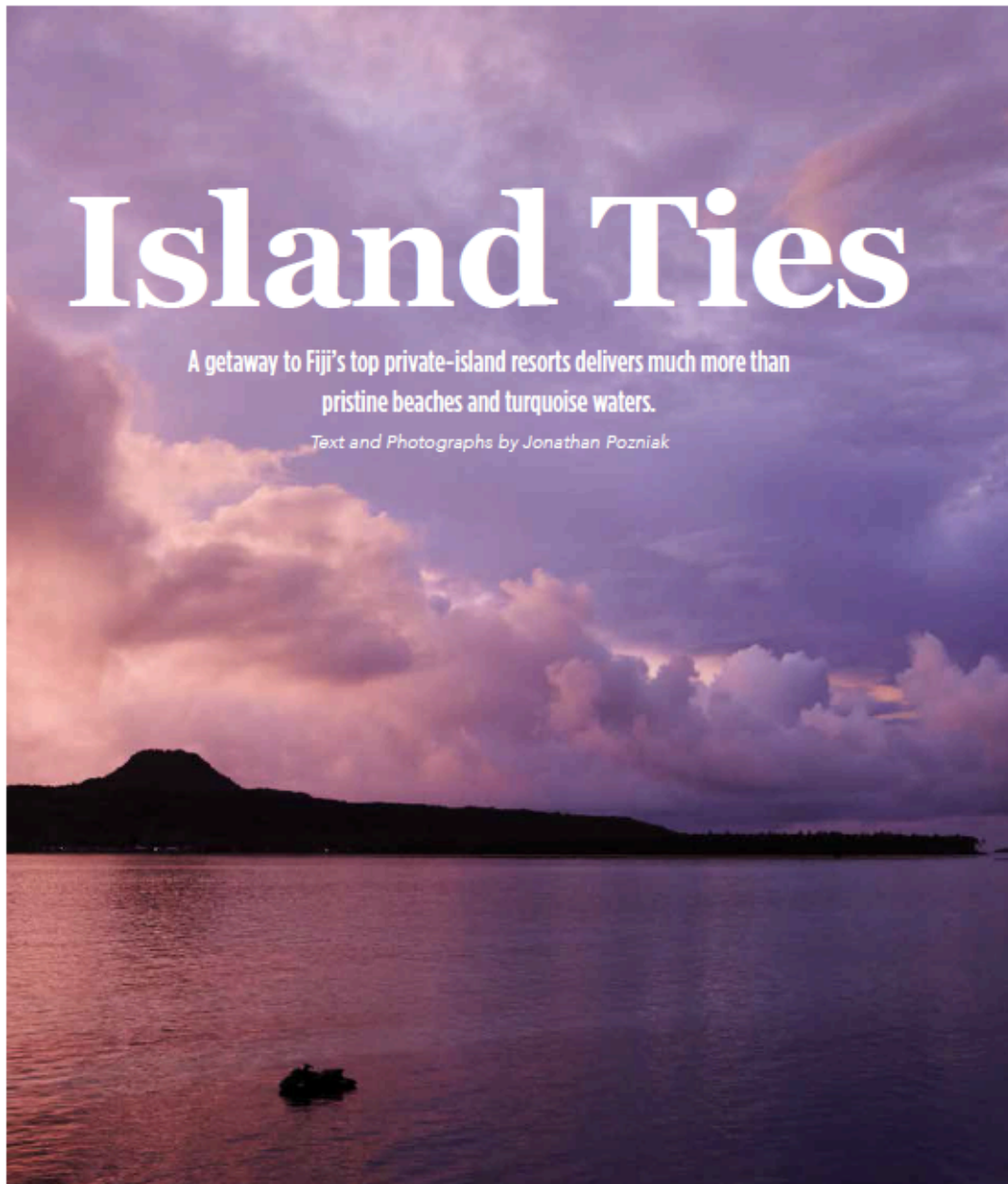


# Island Ties

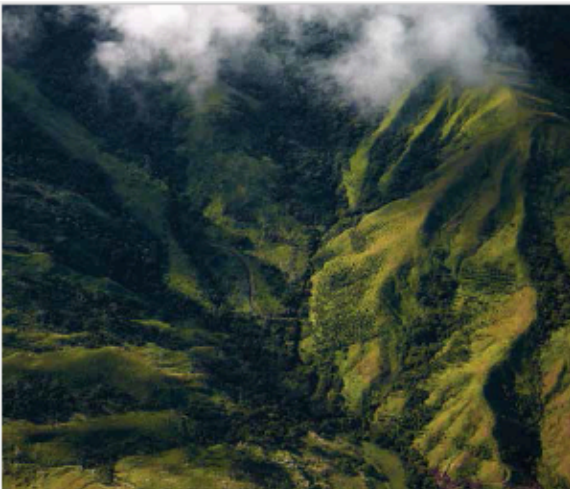
A getaway to Fiji's top private-island resorts delivers much more than  
pristine beaches and turquoise waters.

*Text and Photographs by Jonathan Pozniak*



The hilltop village church at Wakaya Club & Spa allows guests the opportunity to enjoy the local choir. *Opposite:* Vatuvara's electric sunset.





## Fijians walk through life with a melody in their hearts.

Every occasion has a song with a spirited tune and a sense of purity and warmth. So it's no surprise when greeting new arrivals on the private island of Wakaya, staff members of the **Wakaya Club & Spa** sing "Bula Maleya" and say, "Welcome home"—even though visitors might be quite far from it. To reach Fiji's Nadi Airport requires flying between continents, boarding a 45-minute private charter to a tiny airstrip, and taking a

rocky drive through the forest before reaching the resort. But the trip proves well worth it once the nine burees and three villas come into view, merging with earth and sea, forged of fallen trees and tucked in among tropical foliage.

A bustling activities desk or an energetic pool scene is nowhere to be found. Rather, Wakaya is for downshifting and experiencing relaxation in its most primal expressions: privacy without

isolation; sightseeing minus the agenda. Fijian-trained chefs put on grand feasts of marinated tuna ribbons, local venison simmered in just-picked coriander, a traditional *kokoda* of freshly caught fish soaked overnight in bush lemon juice and bathed in fresh coconut milk. The Fijian philosophy that food always tastes better when shared has ruled kitchens across the island from high-end resorts to remote villages. You'll taste a bit of

Indian, definitely some tropics, and rules don't apply. Food is not fancy, eclectic, or Melanesian-Indian. It's Fijian. Meals are not only about preparation techniques and ingredients, they are an extension of good hospitality.

Village life—that small-town reality of the people working at Wakaya and other resorts around Fiji—makes the place feel particularly friendly. This characteristic warmth exudes across the islands and

farther east to the remote Northern Lau chain, where the country looks wilder, even mysterious. General managers Rob and Lynda Miller (Australian and American, respectively) have lived the Fijian way for decades. They raised two kids remotely on Wakaya Island with little communication to the outside world beyond a ship-to-shore radio. Since building Wakaya from the ground up into Fiji's first five-star resort, they've

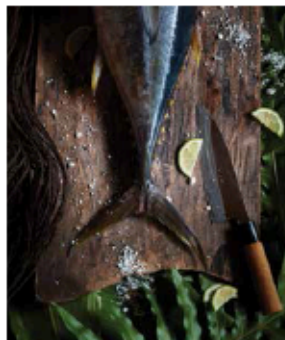
simultaneously built an incredibly unique life as real South Pacific pioneers.

From 2010 to 2015, they built **Vatuvu Private Islands**, where they inspire guests to connect with what's truly important—the arts of traveling, living, and protecting what we have. Working with many of the same staff for decades since Wakaya, the Millers foster a strong network of "family ties" that connect staff among top resorts. The three stone >



Fijian warriors at Wakaya watch the sun's last rays of the day. Opposite: Fiji's "Mainland" Viti Levu.





From left: Flying into Vatuvara on the resort's private plane; Pacific Ocean spiny lobster and yellowfin tuna with locally grown bush lemon and lagoon sea salt; Vatuvara's Valhalla restaurant. Opposite, from top: Vatuvara Foundation's giant clam being reintroduced to the wild; a traditional kava ceremony at Wakaya.

villas at Vatuvara were seemingly grown right out of jagged limestone terrain among eclectic pops of floral color. The dark, earthy interiors are grounding and balanced by the expanse of light and sea beyond their sun decks.

Outer reefs protect the island, ensuring absolute privacy. The entire resort is organically certified by U.S. and Australian standards, and 100 percent of the electricity comes from Tesla solar panels. All drinking water is drawn from desalination tanks and the sea salt from harvested coconuts.

The recent discovery of an ancient village settlement revealed a system of limestone caves where natives would hide from invaders. Dozens of medicinal plants and trees grow in the forests and the wealth of knowledge about them among local elders is immense. A few

years ago, a Fijian rugby player fractured his leg right before the 2015 Rugby World Cup. Charged with an eight-month recovery, he returned to Fiji three weeks before the World Cup. Following four nights of traditional healing from a medicine man known as "the bone healer," his leg improved. He stayed a few weeks, resting and taking herbal medicine. To the shock of doctors and coaches, one week before the World Cup, he was cleared to play.

Gifts like these are not apprenticed, but passed down intuitively, and the practice of natural medicine remains strong. "The real worth is in protecting what you love," says Lynda. "We want people to know that what they do impacts the world. With the beauty and conservation efforts here, we hope to inspire visitors to love and protect nature, wherever they love it."

At **Six Senses Fiji** in the Mamanucas island group, traditional Fijian practices

influence the spa menu. A range of treatments use the highest quality Ayurvedic products with essential oils, which are especially healing for facials and body treatments. Fijian-inspired detox treatments pair massages with banana leaves from the garden and locally harvested sea grapes caught offshore. Blending traditional spa treatments with an authentic sense of place opened the door to many natural healing elements.

Fijian bobo massage uses indigenous herbs, lemongrass, ginger shavings, and sea salt in a steamed herbal poultice. Coconut oil scrubs are handmade hours before they are used with ingredients grown on the property. Visiting practitioners stay for months at a time to share their expertise, and an aloe farm ensures visitors can find quick relief for sunburns. At the Alchemy Bar, guests make personalized beauty products like scrubs and soaps from island ingredients: lemongrass, chilies, kava, papaya. Plants

## NOT TO MISS

### *The Charity:* Vatuvara Foundation

Katy Miller, Rob and Lynda's daughter, lived a storybook upbringing on Wakaya Island and has learned the value of the natural world since her earliest days. The Northern Lau island group remains virtually untouched since the days of Captain Cook's expeditions. In early 2017, Katy became the director of the Vatuvara Foundation with the goal of protecting local wildlife and their fragile breeding grounds, preventing poaching, educating local communities about conservation, and becoming a model for resorts around the world. Neighboring islands that are virtually unexplored support rare, endemic, threatened, and endangered species, all thriving thanks to their isolation.

Katy's favorite project is reintroducing giant clams back into the wild. The foundation supports three cages 164 feet offshore from the resort that house 200 giant clams in various stages of growth and protects them from predators. Local fisheries supervised spawning, and Katy receives the 2-inch-long babies. Staff monitor the juvenile giant clams daily, marking water changes, tide shifts, and ocean acidification. Giant clams have been extinct in the wild in Fiji due to humans both consuming and poaching them to be sold to aquariums. In three to five years, thanks to this work, they'll be repopulated back into surrounding waters, thriving in the clear sunlit water with abundant nutrients and a moving current.

The foundation has also surveyed local reefs, repopulating them with heat-resistant corals and moving fragile corals into cooler waters to survive heat waves. Coconut crabs have also been on the decline, so the team has been keeping a watchful eye on them to prevent poaching. Despite being a delicacy in many places, they're the largest land crab on earth and have pincher strength greater than that of a lion's jaw.

Educational programs for local villagers and youth teach about topics from coral bleaching to plastic waste. "I believe we are all entirely connected to the sea and all life on Earth is dependent on the health of our oceans," says Katy. "I was immersed in Fijian culture from a young age, and this connection between land, sea, and people has been an important grounding throughout my life. Through the foundation's initiatives, I'm able to promote marine environmental awareness and work closely with local communities in a place I hold close to my heart."

### *The Drink:* Kava

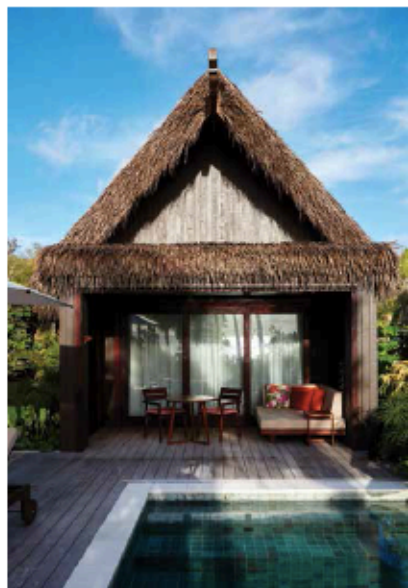
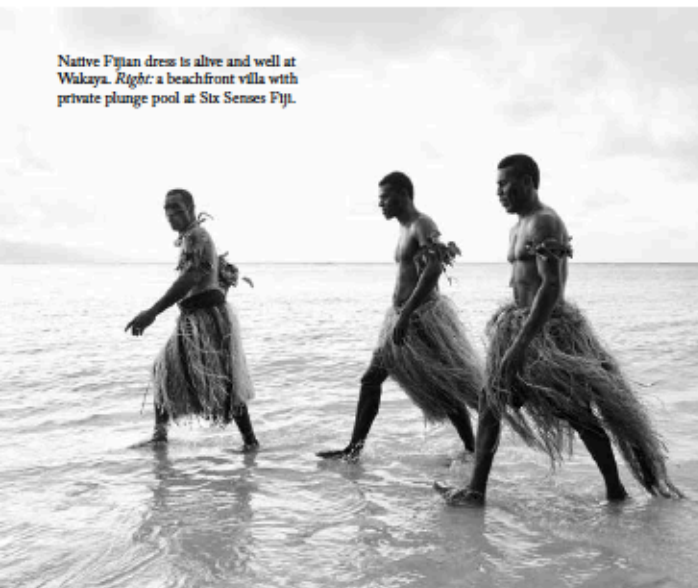
Almost no one leaves Fiji without trying kava. This muddy, late-night drink made of ground pepper roots is a tongue-numbing, lip-tingling tradition. Originally served only in ceremony with chiefs, it's now enjoyed around a large bowl, or tanoa, with friends holding their portion in bilos, or half coconut shells. What's the magic effect? It's oh-so-relaxing and you'll sleep like a baby.

### *The Sport:* Rugby

The national obsession here is rugby, and Fijians are naturally built for it. Historically, chasing wild boar required hunters to run through thick rainforest, jumping in and out of the water. Fast and agile with a natural aggressiveness, Fijian athletes are born to play. The Fiji Sevens train minutes from Nausuku at Uprising Beach Resort. The day they won gold at the Rio Olympics, the whole country stopped. "It was the craziest thing in Fijian history. Not a single car or bus was on the road," recounts a local. "There was pin-drop silence, and then the collective roars of celebration were heard across every island." It took 48 hours for the team to travel from Nadi to Suva, instead of the usual four. No villager would let them pass without cheers and thanks. To mark their most-celebrated event in history, the government issued a limited-edition \$7 bill and 50-cent coin. If you get one, don't spend it! >



Native Fijian dress is alive and well at Wakaya. *Right:* a beachfront villa with private plunge pool at Six Senses Fiji.



and herbs used to treat the common cold as well as broken bones begin as seedlings in small bamboo pods.

Much of the garden's wealth is sent straight to the kitchen. Check Cluckingham Palace (the resort chicken coop) for eggs to bring to the chef for breakfast. An open channel from the spa to the kitchen connects guests to the best ingredients, whether detoxing, relaxing, or sleeping.

**Nanuku Auberge Resort**, located on the country's main island of Viti Levu, a two-hour drive from Nadi Airport, caters to two types of vacationers: those who need to relax and those who crave an adventure. Guests lounge by the pool, receiving any comfort and service they desire. In contrast, Viti Levu is the gateway to exploration, offering experiences found nowhere else. Among the 50 or so excursions available are opportunities to go cageless shark diving or traipse in the rainforest with medicine

men, go underwater spearfishing or train with the Fiji Sevens rugby team.

To give back, the team at Nanuku has worked with guests to plant more than 3,000 mangrove seedlings since early 2017. Storing 50 times more carbon than rainforests, mangroves serve as breeding grounds for sea animals and protect beaches from erosion.

Each week a team uses old plastic water bottles to introduce new plantings. The resort pays local villagers to collect bottles, which keeps the beaches clean and funnels money back into the local communities.

On the flight home, looking out across the ocean from above, mile after mile of precise, geometric waves resembles a patchwork. The revelation is that surrounding these freckles of land, the patchwork just isn't that big. When the chef at one resort says their son is expecting a guest at the next resort,

the guests can expect to hear the son's stories of growing up with kids from a previous resort. Fiji feels like one big extended family that works, shares, and grows up with each other, solidifying a bond that spans generations.

The best thing any visitor can do is to talk to people, share some late-night kava with locals, and listen to stories from the staff. Each island is beautiful, but the real experience of Fiji lies within its people. No matter the resort you depart from, the entire staff will come out to sing you their traditional, tear-inducing farewell song, "Isa Lei."

There's an uncanny sense of something familiar here, as though these strangers have led you back to yourself. Many who visit don't quite know what to expect beyond turquoise sea and palm trees. Leba, a masseuse at Vatuvuara, said it best, "We know our secrets; why would we give it all away before you arrive? It's for us to know and you to find out."

## WHERE TO STAY

### Wakaya Club & Spa

This private island resort features eight one-bedroom Oceanfront bures (Fijian for "house"), a two-bedroom Ambassador's Bure with a private pool, and a sprawling 4,500-square-foot, three-bedroom Valeo Bure (meaning "home in the clouds"). Segi Na Leqa is a design-heavy, 12,000-square-foot one-bedroom mansion plus guest villa, three pools, a gym, a spa, and a full chef's kitchen. The resort's spa and restaurant are unbeatable. From \$2,600, all-inclusive, plus one-hour private flight to and from Nadi, \$2,500/couple; [wakayarresort.com](http://wakayarresort.com)

### Vatuvuara Private Islands

This ultra-private, organically certified resort has just three one-bedroom villas ranging from 4,000 to 7,000 square feet, all featuring spacious sun decks, infinity pools, direct beach access, and views of neighboring islands. Stays are tailor-made with land and water activities, in-villa massage treatments, and chefs specializing in organic, Pacific Rim cuisine, all caught and grown locally, and prepared to guest specifications. The resort is all-inclusive with transport to and from Nadi or Suva on its private aircraft. While the island caters to adults, the entire island may be booked for families seeking the ultimate in privacy. Four-night minimum, prices upon request; [vatuvuara.com](http://vatuvuara.com)

### Six Senses Fiji

Opened in April, these 24 villas and nine multi-bedroom residences are a 35-minute boat ride or 10-minute helicopter flight from Nadi. With wellness as a main focus, a Guest Experience Maker, or GEM, arranges spa treatments as well as water sports throughout each guest's stay. The resort's own marina welcomes travelers arriving by yacht. From \$1,000; [stosenses.com](http://stosenses.com)

### Nanuku Auberge Resort

Thirty-seven suites, villas, and multi-bedroom residences comprise the resort, located a two-hour drive or a quick helicopter ride from Nadi International Airport. Each guest is assigned an *itobani*, meaning "best buddy" in Fijian. This person oversees every element of guests' stays and works with them to build their adventure itinerary outside the resort. Kids of all ages are assigned nannies or can live their best lives at the kids club. From \$450; [auberge.com](http://auberge.com)



*Clockwise from top right:* Wakaya Club & Spa's signature soaking tub; Nanuku Auberge Resort's beachfront pool; the stone and wood interior of Vatuvuara's Delana Villa; a private treatment room at Six Senses Fiji.

## GETTING THERE

Fiji's 300-plus islands are served by **Fiji Airways** ([fiji Airways.com](http://fiji Airways.com)), offering direct 11-hour flights from both LAX and SFO. Refurbished aircraft feature lie-flat business class seats and arguably the most-friendly service in the sky.

