

IN THE KNOW

OUTRIGGER Fiji Beach Resort is on Viti Levu Island. Plantation pool bure from \$F877 (\$602) a night, based on a minimum four-night stay (excludes tax). outrigger.com



WATER WORKS

Good deeds are rewarded at this rejuvenated Fijian getaway

DENISE CULLEN

Startled triggerfish dart in all directions as I kick my fins and shimmy down to the sandy ocean floor opposite OUTRIGGER Fiji Beach Resort. Taking advantage of the high tide, my task is to collect live coral fragments that have broken off during bad weather and deliver them to the surface. Here, Maryanne Shaw, the resort's environment officer, is waiting with a kayak loaded with "coral cones" made from silica sand. Shaw places a fragment in a hole in each cone and wedges it into place with putty. She then directs me to put the cones in special underwater "tables" comprising metallic grids that hold them secure and provide scaffolding as they grow.

OUTRIGGER Fiji has been engaged in coral planting for a decade, long before the recent launch of Loloma Hour, a Fiji-wide initiative that encourages visitors to spend an hour making a positive environmental, cultural or community impact during their stay.

After my hour of good deeds, I take the short, sandy walk back to my plantation pool bure, one of seven that are so new the final few are still having their landscaping completed. Inspired by traditional Fijian village homes, these villas feature soaring tapa (bark cloth) ceilings with dramatic Fijian motifs, thatched roofs, timber accents, spacious bathrooms, and private plunge pools with terraces and daybeds surrounded by lush foliage.

I step with relief out of the humidity and into the airconditioning, shower off the salt, and flop onto the crisply made king bed. I'm still jetlagged after a 13-plus hour flight from Dallas, and battling twin urges – for food and sleep. Ultimately, hunger wins, sending me in the direction of Vahavu Bistro, which offers an a la carte breakfast and lunch menu.

Set overlooking a lap pool and a separate, more languorous swim-up pool bar, the venue is adults only. It's a welcome addition, for although Fijians love family groups, they're aware that not everyone wants children (even their own) around constantly (or at all). In this section of the resort, you wouldn't even know it was school holidays. Loved-up couples sprawl on sun loungers, groups of friends take turns ordering cocktails, and solo travellers like me read, snack or plan the next excursion.



Plantation pool bure, main; Fijian-style ceviche at Ivi restaurant, above; Bebe spa; Vahavu adults-only pool, bottom

After considering the menu, I order crispy calamari and a Citrus Storm mocktail and settle back to enjoy a stint of people-watching before my afternoon appointment at the Bebe Spa Fiji.

Say what you like about "Fiji time" elsewhere, but my experience is that staff here are super-efficient, having conspired to ensure that guests arrive at the activities desk at least half an hour before their scheduled spa appointment. This ensures there's sufficient time for a transfer by buggy up the steep Vakalomalagi (Heavenly) Hill. Most importantly, it encourages guests to unwind before the treatment even starts.

I pass a "silence please" sign en route to the entrance – a set of wooden doors featuring an oversized carved butterfly (bebe means butterfly in Fijian). Once I'm seated in the lounge, a tray bearing a chilled mint-scented refresher towel, a hot lemon-grass tea, and a sunset-coloured frangipani blossom appear. From this vantage point, I spend several minutes surveying the views over the Coral Coast, where low tide has exposed long swathes of sand. I'm then led away to change, before being ushered into one of eight open-air treatment rooms for a Fijian boba massage. This sequence of steps means that instead of rushing from one activity to the next and throwing myself down on the table at the last minute with an inner directive to "relax", I've already unwound before the massage starts. After every

muscle has been pushed and pummelled, I'm returned to the lounge for a cool drink and a sampling of tropical fruit.

For dinner that night, I venture into the signature seafood restaurant Ivi, so named because it is adjacent to a century-old ivi (Tahitian or Polynesian chestnut) tree. Though children aged 10 years and above may dine here, there are none present during my visit.

I'm eager to try ika kokoda, a traditional Fijian-style ceviche in which fresh fish – tonight, tuna – is marinated in lemon or lime juice and served swimming in coconut milk. It arrives in a large bowl resembling a coconut shell and, although it's delicious, the portion sizes are much more generous than I'm used to. My failure to eat more than half of this entree causes such consternation in the kitchen that a manager is dispatched to ensure that everything is all right. I make marginally more progress on the excellent Fijian lobster curry, which blends local ingredients with Indian spices, but dessert is out of the question.

Plantation pool bure come with daily talai (butler) service, which includes the offer of sparkling wine and canapes at sunset, personalised assistance with restaurant reservations, and a nightly turndown with liqueur nightcap and sweet treat. Each night, I return to my room wondering what I'll find. Will it be a shot of banana, coffee or coconut rum (from the Rum Co of Fiji)? And will this be accompanied by profiteroles, cookies or chocolate truffles?

Plantation pool bure guests may also avail themselves of a high tea delivered to the room once during their stay. It comprises two layers of dainty sandwiches, arancini, bite-sized black forest mousse, and other sweet and savoury treats. Floating breakfasts are also in the works.

At 25 years old, OUTRIGGER Fiji may not be the fanciest property in this archipelago of some 330 islands. However, the new pool bure add a luxurious dimension to the long-established resort and promote a sense of relaxation that lasts long after the tide rolls out.

Denise Cullen was a guest of OUTRIGGER Fiji Beach Resort, Fiji Airways and Tourism Fiji. fiji.travel

