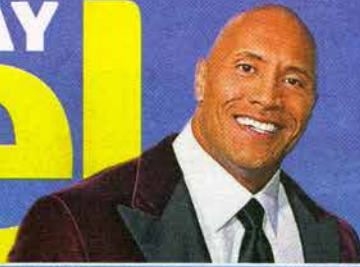


# SUNDAY travel

MAY 21, 2017



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## FANTASY ISLAND

A private resort paradise in Fiji



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# WHERE GETAWAY MEANS

**Stephanie Holmes** enjoys a Fijian resort so exclusive Customs doesn't know it.

Often the worst thing about a resort holiday is other people. You can choose those you travel with in terms of partner, friends or family, but you can't choose those you share the resort with. The screaming kids, the drunken youths, the PDA-ing honeymooners can all impinge on your relaxing pool time and set your teeth on edge over the buffet dinner.

There's no such problem at Fiji's Dolphin Island. This private paradise offers guests exclusive use of the 5.5ha island for the duration of their stay, whether that encompasses your family, a group of friends, or even just a couple. Which is how my partner and I found ourselves with an entire island to play with for two glorious nights in March. Spoilt? Yes we were, thank you very much, and we enjoyed every luxurious tropical minute.

The immigration officer at Nadi airport is baffled when she reads our arrival forms. She's never heard of Dolphin Island and insinuates I must have got the name wrong. "You mean Castaway Island, right?" she keeps asking, and despite my assurance that Dolphin Island really does exist, she insists on looking up the website and having a good read before she lets us through. She even beckons her colleagues over to ask if they've heard of it and while they peruse the website, they leave us hanging for a good 10 minutes. I'm still not sure if she thought we were suspicious of some crime, or if she was just enjoying looking at the photos of Dolphin so much that she forgot to tell us we could go on our way.

The welcome is much warmer minutes later, as our driver, George, whisks us away in his 4WD Jeep for the 25-hour drive up to Ellington Wharf on the northern coast of Viti Levu. His tinny Alcatel phone rings and he passes it over to me.

"Hello darling," says a voice as smooth as syrup on the end of the line. "We're looking forward to welcoming you home. Now, what would you like for dinner?"

This is Dawn Simpson, Dolphin Island's manager, chef and, it seems, our adoptive mother for the weekend. She promises to have a fresh fish dinner ready for us and I come off the phone already feeling



For your chance to win a trip for two to Fiji and to hang out with two of Shortland Street's stars, see the news section.

instantly relaxed, knowing I won't have to worry about anything for the rest of the weekend.

The car journey is lengthy, not helped by torrential rain that begins almost as soon as we leave Nadi. The skies darken and the clouds come in so low we can no longer see the coastline or the lush mountains, only the roadside villages and the drenched locals playing Friday night games of touch in the muddy grass outside their homes. The rain stops but the sun has set by the time we turn on to a bumpy dirt road, headed for the wharf. George points to faint blue lights in the distance and tells us "This is Dolphin Island", before loading our bags on to the waiting boat.

It's a quick trip and we're soon pulling up at the floating pavilion of "our" island. Dawn and her team are there to greet us

with warm hugs, a cool tropical juice and another declaration of "Welcome home".

We pad across the springy grass, our path guided by lanterns dotted among the palm trees, and up the wooden steps to our bungalow. It's a beauty — spacious, high ceilings and perfectly appointed, with an airy ocean-facing bedroom, separate

dressing room, twin vanities, free-standing bath and a courtyard with outdoor rain-head shower. The attention to detail is impeccable — Fijian-influenced design touches, fresh hibiscus flowers, an abundance of Pure Fiji toiletries, high-quality linens, and a stunning chandelier made from strings of tiny conch shells.

Dawn tells us we are the boss now, whatever we want, whenever we want it, will be no trouble at all. It feels as if we're visiting a particularly warm-hearted family member and we soon feel right at home. We make our way to the main pavilion

— another exceptionally designed building with indoor and outdoor dining areas, comfortable couches, piles of books, games and a well-stocked kitchen, where Dawn and her team are putting the finishing touches to our dinner.

The food is one of the highlights of our stay — from the first night's dinner of whole-cooked fish, to fresh tropical fruits for breakfast, to delicately cooked lobster and smoked fish for lunch — we're always happy and well fed. There's no set menu; Dawn asks us what we'd like for each meal and if she has it, she will cook it. And this is really no exaggeration — when *Travel* Editor Winston Aldworth visited Dolphin Island in 2013, he says he had crayfish for every meal... just because he could.

Enveloped in the comfort of the cushiony king bed and crisp dolphin-monogrammed linen, my dreams are filled with my usual inner-city nighttime soundtrack at home — car alarms, emergency service sirens and drunken hollering. But when I wake up to the pitch black night, all I can hear is the lapping ocean and the steady breeze through the palm trees. It's peaceful and warm and I



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# FROM EVERYONE



Clockwise from main: Infinity pool at Dolphin Island.

A luxury bure. Bure bathroom looking out to bedroom and beach. Dawn Simpson, Dolphin Island manager.

in hammocks, helping ourselves to drinks from the chilly bins strategically placed around the island, and making use of the complimentary kayaks, paddle boards, snorkels and fins. Although we know Dawn is around if we need her, she leaves us to our own devices so we never feel crowded.

Relaxation comes easy, decision-making is simple. At one point I look over at Nathani and he has a deep frown in his brow.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask, concerned.

"I'm wondering if I've got time to lie on the day bed and read before our massage," he says. "And that maybe I should grab another beer."

We laugh at just how ridiculously indulgent our current situation is, and promise to remember this moment next time we're stuck in rush-hour Auckland traffic.

After dark, we're treated to entertainment from a group of mainland villagers. Dawn has arranged for them to come over and, by the light of a bonfire on the beach, they sing and dance and share kava with us, and we feel honoured to have this experience all to ourselves. We're even gladder no other guests are around when we're gently forced to get up and dance – badly – along with the group.

Too soon we're waking up on the morning of our last day, with the boat back to the mainland due to pick us up mid-afternoon. Determined to make the most of our private island paradise while we still can, we kayak to the northern side and snorkel along the drop off. With beautifully warm waters and about 6m visibility, it's some of the best snorkelling I've ever experienced. We bob about long enough for my fingers to wrinkle and my butt to get sunburnt, entranced by the sapphire starfish, the clownfish guarding their anemones, the colourful brain coral and vibrant fish of varied shapes and sizes.

Submerged in this tropical water, with our luxurious bure and a lunch feast not far away, the real world feels very distant. If only it would stay that way a little longer.

## FACT BOX

### GETTING THERE

Fiji Airways operates up to 13 weekly services between Auckland and Fiji, with a daily Business Class travel option and child discounted airfares available. Return fares start from \$664 for Economy Class and \$1196 for Business Class. At Nadi Airport, the Tabua Club Lounge is complimentary for Business Class passengers, or for F\$75 a day [fijiairways.com](http://fijiairways.com)

### STAYING THERE

Dolphin Island has three different packages available for booking until September 30, 2018:

- **Romance Package:** \$2349 per person, per night, based on two adults sharing a guest bure, with a four-night minimum stay required. Price includes exclusive use of the island and its facilities; transfers to and from Nadi Airport; all meals, a standard bar, a Champagne breakfast, two spa treatments, a picnic, and a traditional lovo feast.
- **Family Package:** Two adults and two children aged 12 or younger staying in two guest bures, costs \$2619 per adult, per night, with a four-night minimum stay required. Price includes exclusive use of the island, return transfers to and from the island, all meals – with special children's menus available – and a standard bar for the adults.
- **The Intrepid Package:** \$2204 per person, per night, based on double occupancy, with a minimum three-night stay. Includes exclusive use of the island, a two-tank diving adventure with a dive master, an all-day outdoor adventure, all meals and a standard bar.

[dolphinislandfiji.com](http://dolphinislandfiji.com)

drop back to sleep with ease, Nathani, on the other hand, is so excited about seeing the island in the light he is awake before dawn, like a kid on Christmas Day, and goes off to explore. Before 7am he has walked across the island, kayaked around it and snorkelled its coral reefs. Yes, Dolphin Island is small but it's perfectly formed, and we could not be luckier to have it to ourselves for the weekend.

There are subtle signs of Tropical Cyclone Winston's wrath, the deadly natural disaster that hit Fiji in February 2016. Just off the beach, a sad-looking yacht is beached on shallow sands, blown off its mooring across the bay, on the opposite island a capsized catamaran sits

abandoned off shore. On Dolphin Island itself, there was no damage to the main building, which has stood for 30 years, but the grounds were badly affected. New trees have been planted around the island and they're growing steadily. To the untrained eye, you'd have no idea this perfect paradise isn't what it used to be. But the memories of Winston, where 44 people lost their lives and more than 350,000 were significantly impacted – won't be easily forgotten.

Enjoying our introduction to how the other half live, Nathani and I divide our time between lazing on day beds, dipping in the infinity pool, reading

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