



Staff at the resort help visitors to busily do nothing all day.



Mana Resort's waterside restaurant.

HOLIDAY OF FIRST RESORT

It doesn't take long to be seduced by Mana Island. By **Peter Feeney**.

UNTIL I VISITED Mana Island my most recent resort experience was two decades earlier — a 10-day stay at a less-than-salubrious motel at another Pacific destination.

Then, I scootered past fishing villages and acres of cultivated fields to find the local convenience store selling only cabin biscuits, tuna and Steinlager. A prang with a banana truck brought such adventures to an end and the rest of the trip was spent leg-elevated poolside watching a graze fester into something rather life-threatening in the bug bath that is a tropical climate.

Aside from that, I've avoided resorts. I never understood the idea of going somewhere different to be so pampered you might as well be anywhere. But since then three children have arrived and the idea of having my aching bunions massaged and someone else doing the cooking now holds a

more heady appeal.

So it was that your intrepid reporter arrived, family travelling circus in tow, at Mana Island Resort and Spa. It opened in 1972, and with ongoing extensions and additions since achieves a sprawling family-friendly vibe. A shot of authenticity can be found at the village at the east side of the island where our two girls have their hair braided and our eldest, Arlo, climbs a coconut tree and drinks fresh coconut juice. We see kava — the knock-you-dead local poison — prepared and the kids check out some sea turtle hatchlings. Back at the resort, the kids' club's cultural programme encompasses Fijian singing, drumming, dressing, chatting and dancing. Arlo takes the nightly competitions at the resort's Island Nights immensely seriously.

I wince at first at the hi-de-hi aspect of these gatherings, with their crab races, cultural

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Peter Feeney tries out the free kayaking with the kids.

shows, bingo nights and happy hour, but soon recognise a Kiwi caravan park conviviality and am seduced. I can be found as the sun descends in the lounge bar blathering nonsense to another tipsy tourist, watching my son do a homegrown version of the hula. Sunburnt, satiated and feeling like an overpaid extra in a Merchant Ivory film.

Of course we are paying. A week's stay for a family of five in a four-star Fiji resort can easily set you back \$10,000, including airfares and transfers. Most things on the island have to be brought in — expensively — by boat. But the staff start out on about FJ\$3 an hour (\$2) so you wonder sometimes where the money goes. Still, there are legions of workers, clearing the beaches of seaweed at dawn, hammering nails, sweeping leaves and repairing thatch.

Mana is unusual in that it boasts a north and south beach — no matter the wind direction there's always one you can enjoy.

Water sports cost an arm, a leg and several vital organs, but kayaking and swimming to an old raft moored in the bay is free. So, too, is snorkelling to the drop off, swarming with a marine cast of characters straight out of *Finding Nemo*.

The days pass in a languid haze of being very busy doing absolutely nothing. You could get used to this. Buffet tables groan under exotic and traditional dishes.

There's local seafood and about half the fresh produce is grown on the island, with different-themed tucker every night. The kids leap-frog over the local delicacies and go for fish and chips and Coco Pops.

One night, taking in the sunset after dinner, I sniff a free drink in the air and crash the Returners Club do. I clink cocktails with the redoubtable Audrey Cook, a sprightly lass in her 80s who has visited the resort no less than 85 times since it opened in 1972 — including one memorable year when she won



at scratchies and shouted her extended family over.

Her daughter was married in the chapel on the island. No water taxis for Audrey — she embarks next day from the island in true Noel Coward style — via seaplane.

The resort surprises us with a wedding anniversary ceremony on the beach. Repeating the vows after the pastor proves something of a challenge, as he has an almost unintelligible door-stop accent. The whole family gets to dance in the sunset to the sound of a ukulele and stout Fijian tenors. Cheesy in the extreme, it's also irresistibly romantic.

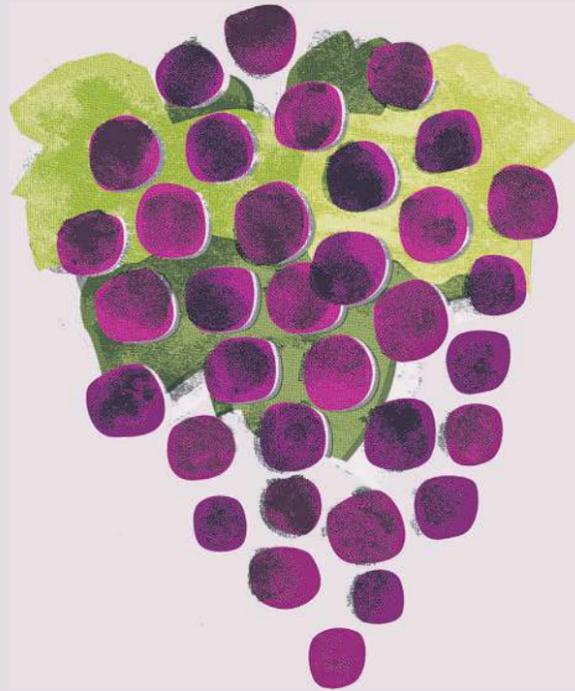
Suddenly, horribly, the holiday is over, and it's off home to confront the hard truth that we are, in fact, nobody special. But first there's the tearful farewell at the pier where it seems all the staff turn out to serenade us away.

There's not a hint of machismo in the adorable Fijians we've met here, despite a culture that's rugby mad and that has suffered four coup d'etats in 19 years. Our kids love them all ("Big Bear" Rupeni, Serai and Meriani, we salute you).

Happy shrieks of "Bula!" the traditional Fijian greeting, still ring through our house a month after our return. We finally had to cut off the children's greasy and matted braids. Insects were about to nest in them.

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