

Yasawa Group



The Yasawas pick up where the Mamanucas left off. They're grander in stature, more isolated in location and mellower in temperament. And even though the Yasawas are just as beautiful as the Mamanucas they have, until relatively recently, long been overshadowed by those bolder upstarts nearby.

But times change. In the 1990s the Yasawa chain was considered prohibitively isolated and, apart from a few hardy souls and an occasional cruise ship, these islands saw few travellers. Today a high-speed catamaran threads its way between these rugged volcanic islands, pulling into one blue lagoon after another to offload passengers into a waiting armada of small boats.

The Yasawas have it all – abundant sunshine, exquisite beaches, friendly locals and just enough creature comforts to ward off any hankerings for an early return to 'civilisation'. The quality of resorts here varies dramatically. A *bure* could be anything from a hut that you could blow down with a hair dryer to an upmarket villa with an outdoor shower. A new wave of midrange and top-end accommodation options is now enticing families and well-heeled couples into what has traditionally been the stomping ground of backpackers. Before long, they too are nudged surreptitiously into the true meaning of 'Fijian time', where anything more than two snorkels a day and half an hour on the volleyball court constitutes a busy day at the beach.

The Yasawa chain is composed of 20 or so sparsely populated and surprisingly barren islands. There are no roads, cars, banks or shops and most of the locals live in small, isolated villages, surviving on agriculture and tourism for their livelihoods.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Frolic in the **Blue Lagoon** (p161) waters that helped shoot Brooke Shields to fame and then catch a water taxi to the **Sawa-i-Lau Cave** (p164) where she swam
- Island-hop on a **Bula Pass** (p155) to see if the sand is any whiter at the other end of the island chain
- Dive off a boat and do your best to keep up with the giant **manta rays** (p158)
- Don a snorkel or tank and cavort with turtles, reef sharks and other vivid marine life around **Tavewa** (p160), **Nacula** (p163) or **Nanuya Lailai** (p161)
- Suit up in your Sunday best for a **village church service** (p163) on Nacula, or hang out with the locals during **Friday afternoon rugby** (p156)



■ POPULATION: 5000

■ AREA: 135 SQ KM

Geography & Geology

The Yasawas stretch for around 90km, beginning about 40km northwest of Viti Levu. The group forms a roughly straight line within the Great Sea Reef. The land is mostly hilly; four of the larger islands have summits close to 600m above sea level. While the relatively dry climate is a plus for visitors, the land is prone to drought. During such times locals and visitors need to conserve water and you may be asked to take fewer and shorter showers.

History

There is archaeological evidence to suggest that some of the Yasawa islands were occupied thousands of years ago, but with a paucity of fresh water and the threat of tribal war, people have come and gone over that time. The present *mataqali* (extended family or land-owning group) of Waya island, for example, are believed to have arrived about five generations, or around 250 to 300 years, ago.

At that time most people lived in the mountains, only occasionally venturing down to the foreshore in search of food and fish. Once Christianity was introduced and the wars subsided, the villagers moved down to the sea and have remained there ever since.

Information

The Yasawas are still remote and there are no shops, banks, postal or medical services, although increased mobile phone ranges mean that if you stand in the right spot, and hold your tongue just so, you might get a signal.

A dozen or so resorts in the Nacula Tikina (ie on Nacula, Tavewa, Nanuya Lailai and Matakawalevu islands) have banded together and, with the help of Turtle Island Resort management, formed the **NTTA** (Nacula Tikina Tourist Association; www.fijibudget.com) to promote their area. The website provides reliable information on accommodation, transport and activities for budget travellers.

For detailed information on diving in the Yasawas, see p68.

Tours

CRUISES

The floating hotel/cruise ships are an excellent midrange to top-end option for visiting the Yasawas. With good food and comfortable accommodation laid on, you can take it easy aboard your luxury vessel, pop overboard for excellent snorkelling and diving, drop in on

beautiful white-sand beaches and stop to visit local villagers.

Captain Cook Cruises (☎ 670 1823; www.captaincook.com.au; 15 Narewa Rd, Nadi) offers a three-night Mamanuca and southern Yasawa cruise, a four-night Yasawa cruise, and a seven-night combination cruise onboard the *MV Reef Escape*. The 68m cruise boat has a swimming pool, bars, lounges and air-conditioned accommodation spread over three decks. Accommodation options include cabins with bunk beds, staterooms and deluxe staterooms. Prices per person, twin-share, for cabins/staterooms including all meals and activities (except diving) are \$1410/1758 (three nights) or \$3125/3896 (seven nights). Children under two years travel free of charge; those up to 15 years pay \$480/840 for a three-/seven-day trip, regardless of the type of accommodation. Those who book early qualify for a 20% discount. Cruises depart from Denarau Marina on Denarau island, west of Nadi.

Blue Lagoon Cruises (Map p94; ☎ 666 1662; www.bluelagooncruises.com; 183 Vitogo Pde, Lautoka) offers three-, four- and seven-day Club Cruises to the Yasawas aboard huge motor-yachts. Club Cruises cost from \$1364/2810 for two/four nights per twin-share cabin. Seven-day Gold Club Cruises aboard the luxury *MV Mystique Princess* start at \$5342 for a twin-share cabin on the saloon deck. Children under 15 pay 11% to 15% of the full fare depending on the cruise, and those aged under two travel for free. Transfers, on-board activities and food are included but drinks, snorkelling and diving are extra. Cruises depart from Lautoka's Queens Wharf on Viti Levu.

Blue Lagoon Cruises also has a seven-day Luxury Dive Cruise aboard the *Fijian Princess*. It includes all the activities (village visits, *kava* ceremonies, shore excursions, walks etc) and comforts of a luxury cruise in addition to 15 dives. The dive sites are scattered from the southernmost to the northernmost tips of the island group and take in some of the most pristine areas. Prices start at \$7691 per cabin, if both occupants are diving.

Awesome Adventures Fiji (☎ 675 0499; www.awesomefiji.com) offers three-night cruises on board the 27m *Wanna Taki* for \$363/541 per person in a dorm/double room. Rates include all meals, transfers and activities. The boat's bunk-bed dorm accommodates 27 people and the three doubles are areas partitioned off from the main sleeping area by a curtain.