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Get wet in Fiji's garden playground

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The picturesque island of Taveuni is home to many hidden adventures. Picture: Flickr user petersbar



Navigating the waters of Bouma Falls. Picture: Escape

THE raging torrent of water surges over my head, hurling me down the slimy chute at a ferocious pace. I splutter, gag and spit as my feet shoot up over my head, nearly spinning me around.

Then, all of a sudden, the wild ride ends and I'm ejected into a cauldron of foaming water, upside down, and I grab my first desperate breath.

"Whoo hoo!" yells Gemma, our guide, with obvious approval. Clearly I had made the local kids' waterslide look like the climactic scene from *The Dambusters*. "You wanna do it again?"

On Taveuni

Today's shore excursion is at Waitavala Falls on the gorgeous tropical haven of Taveuni, the third largest of Fiji's 300-plus islands. It's a distant third though, less than a tenth the size of Vanua Levu, the second largest. But size isn't what Taveuni is all about. Still heavily foliated, it enjoys the local title of Garden Island and is largely free of destructive feral pests such as the naughty mongoose.

Taveuni draws birders, bushwalkers, divers and frolickers like the proverbial bees to a honey pot, but thankfully not in swarms.

From our berth on the delightful 24-passenger motor schooner *Tui Tai*, we've come ashore to revel in the tropical delights of this secluded natural playground. The massage table is laid out beneath the shady fronds bordering an Olympic-sized freshwater pool fed by the energetic Bouma (Tavoro) Falls, part of the namesake heritage park that occupies almost half of the 436sq km island.

The 25m drop creates a din that is hard to talk over and positively deafening if you try to swim into it. The local lads, who can shoot the Waitavala chute standing up, dive from a platform behind the falls into the pond and encourage us to make the leap too. Cliff diving was never my

strong point, but a couple of fearless voyagers take the plunge, earning the admiration of the timid onlookers.

Taveuni is everything you imagine that mythical tropical island paradise to be. It's sparsely populated, intensely green and dissected by streams of liquid silk. Narrow paths guide you through the undergrowth to the next waterfall, and then the next.

Every so often a cranky, bright red land crab will challenge us to pass. Had we not spent so much time cavorting in the falls, we could have trekked all the way to the volcanic crater at 800m, where Lake Tagimaucia nurtures its legendary namesake bloom.

Despite its status as the national flower of Fiji, the tagimaucia bloom is so rare that songs and legends have sprung up around it. Translated, tagimaucia means crying tears in vain, supposedly from a mythical chief's disobedient daughter whose tears turned into flowers.

Island makeup

The island's population of about 10,000 mainly Indo-Fijians farms copra, taro and kava alongside a few specialty crops such as vanilla, fruit and coffee. The fewer native Fijians are apparently banished former Tongan allies who moved there after defeat by the great chief Tui Cakau in the mid-19th century.

At the little outpost of Wairiki on the northwestern coast, the 180th meridian makes landfall and you can stand simultaneously in today and tomorrow.

The village boasts the first shop to open in the world, right across the road from the quirky, now abandoned, Meridian Cinema, location of the silly 2004 docu-drama Reel Paradise.

Up on the hill is the imposing, century-old Catholic Mission and school, while offshore in Somosomo Strait, a Tongan invasion force was repelled in 1860 by local warriors with strategic advice from a French missionary, Father Favre.

Taveuni's colourful past is largely overlooked by the trickle of tourists who arrive either by small cruise ship, ferry or light aircraft and disperse to their respective activity or resort.

It's possible to stay at any of the dozen or so B&Bs, hotels or resorts catering to all tiers of the travelling public, from the \$20-a-night Dolphin Bay Divers Retreat to the ritzy \$1500 a night Taveuni Island Resort & Spa.

Read more: <http://www.news.com.au/travel/world/plunge-into-wet-and-wild-thrills/story-e6frfqai-1226033911176#ixzz1LK07xZo7>