

(THE PRICE OF)
THE
PERFECT
RIDE

SUMMER '07



FOR 30 YEARS, **FIJI** HAS BEEN A PARADISE FOR INDEPENDENT SURFERS. BUT AS PRIVATE RESORTS MUSCLE IN, MORE AND MORE WAVE HUNTERS ARE BEING FORCED OFF THE BREAKS. **PORTER FOX** PADDLES OUT TO ANSWER THE QUESTION ON EVERYONE'S MIND—WHAT'S THE COST OF PROGRESS?

TUNNEL VISION: A surfer rides one of the exclusive breaks near Tavarua Island Resort, in Fiji.

THE THREE-FOOT SWELL lifts off the South Pacific like something out of a New England glass shop—its emerald back arched, its thin lip looping forward in an Escherian funnel.

As it approaches, I paddle hard through 80-degree water and pop

to my feet. My world dissolves into blue, green, and foamy white—a scene cut straight from a surf flick. The lip throws toward the shore and I draw a bottom turn across the chest-high face. The wave grows as it closes out behind me.

For someone who grew up fantasizing about traveling the globe in search of the perfect wave, this is my dream: to arrive in Fiji with a board, a few friends, and no definite plan; to hire a boat at dawn and be surfing a world-class break—Namotu Lefts, a slow-rolling, utterly reliable tube a few miles off the main island of Viti Levu—by mid-morning.

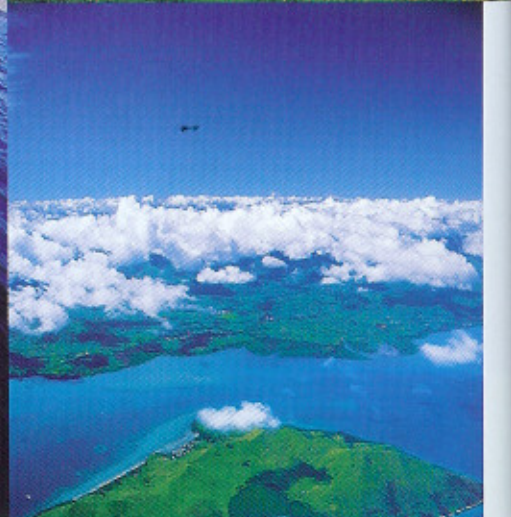
Suddenly a helicopter thunders above me, its blades pounding the air. Inside, surf tourists crowd the windows, eagerly inspecting the break. What the hell? I'm so distracted, so utterly confused, that a cresting wave slips beneath me unriden.

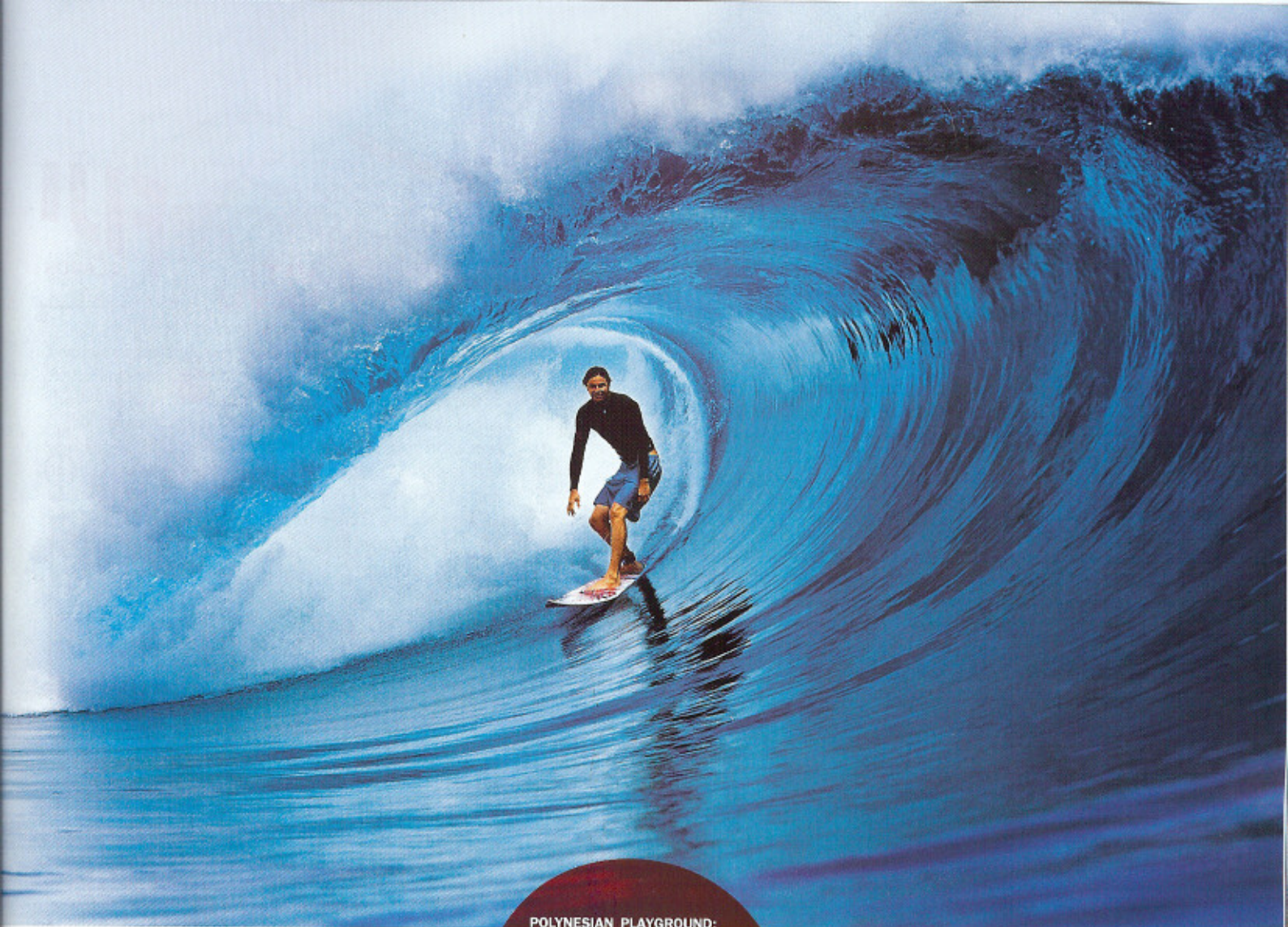
As quickly as it arrives, the chopper careens off to the southeast to scope out another break nearby. Stunned, I paddle back to the lineup, where 15 or so others are assembled. Just as I reach the break, a lanky, blond-haired surfer arrives from one of Fiji's premier surf resorts, Namotu, set on a small atoll a few hundred yards away.

"Guests are here," he shouts. "One more wave, then back to the boats."

Say what? I look back at the resort. Tourists, likely the same ones who were riding in the helicopter, are filing onto the beach. Hefty Fijians are loading boards onto boats, and a few surf guides are there too. They are pointing out the nuances of Swimming Pools and Namotu Lefts, breaks that—like Cloud-break at neighboring resort Tavarua—Namotu claims as its own. For the next week the break I'm sitting on is off-limits. Sorry, bro. Guests only.

This is when reality sets in: Right now, in this instant, I am staring into surfing's shifting heart—and it scares me.





POLYNESIAN PLAYGROUND:

Cloudbreak off Viti Levu is known for its consistent tubes (above). Opposite, clockwise from left: A group from Tavarua Island Resort; a traditional Fijian bure; an aerial view of Viti Levu.

In the past 30 years surf resorts have colonized nearly all the world's top waves, and now many are claiming exclusivity. As a result, independent surf trips—the freewheeling odysseys that have defined the sport since director Bruce Brown released his 1966 wave-hunting epic, *The Endless Summer*—are becoming harder and harder to execute. Some see this as inevitable progress; this past winter the *New York Times* reported the sport's shift toward the upscale. Still, I have to wonder: Is surfing losing something dear in the process?

I've come to Fiji to answer that question for myself.

THE BOAT RIDE BACK to Viti Levu should be depressing. My friends and I just got kicked off a break. But it isn't. Not at all. Maybe it's the sheer beauty of the place through which we're passing—all crystalline water, sandy atolls, and towering cumulus clouds—or maybe it's that we're in Fiji, bro, as in the wave capital of the cosmos, one of the few places on the planet where swells roll in year-round and where finding a surfable break is as easy as hiring a boat.

It also helps that we know something the fresh-off-the-helicopter surfers don't: According to local wave reports, Namotu Lefts, along with every break on the southwest side of Viti Levu, will be pancake flat for the

next few days. Supposedly, the swell is shifting south. We're hot on its trail.

The day before, an Australian diver told us about the Waidroka Bay Surf & Dive Resort, a classic surf outpost and the jumping-off point for the southern coast's best breaks. It's about 200 miles southwest of our boat launch, and when we get back to shore,

we pack up our rented Land Rover and set out. Viti Levu is the second largest island in the South Pacific (comparable in size to Hawaii's Big Island), and as we charge down the highway toward Waidroka, we see that it has big scenery to match. Coastal mountain ranges drop straight into the ocean. Stands of spidery banyan trees sprout by the roadside. And fields of sugarcane sway like dense green seas. In one village a group of 15 locals is gathered in a hut, drinking kava, a slightly psychotropic beverage favored by Fijians, from a communal bowl.

Every 20 miles or so, we pass a resort. There are one or two big ones, hulking all-inclusives built to contain hordes of Japanese vacationers, but most are collections of modest, three-star *bures* (traditional thatch-roof or A-frame bungalows planted around some impossibly beautiful lagoon). When the swell is right, a shifting tribe of itinerant wave seekers—Brazilians, Aussies, Kiwis, and Germans, among others—descend on these resorts, turning them into de facto surf camps, littering the bure with wet suits, surfboards, and the ever present sound of a strumming guitar.

To them, the soul surfers, Fiji is ground zero, a place where the breaks are many and rooms are cheap. It's one of the few places real seekers can still find that utterly free *Endless Summer*-style vibe. And that's true, but there's a

contradiction: Fiji is also the birthplace of destination surf resorts and exclusive waves—the reason we got kicked off Namotu Lefts. And over the past 30 years those trends have crept from Fiji to every corner of the globe. As a result, venerable surf haunts such as Nihiwatu on Sumba, in Indonesia, and Dhonveli Beach & Spa Resort, in the Maldives, are now restricting access to their breaks.

The most recent step in this progression toward exclusive waves is the Qoliqoli Bill. The bill, which was hotly debated in Fijian Parliament during our trip in the fall of 2006, would extend tribal fishing rights to recreation. If passed, locals could claim any break they please, exacting fees and shutting out the public.

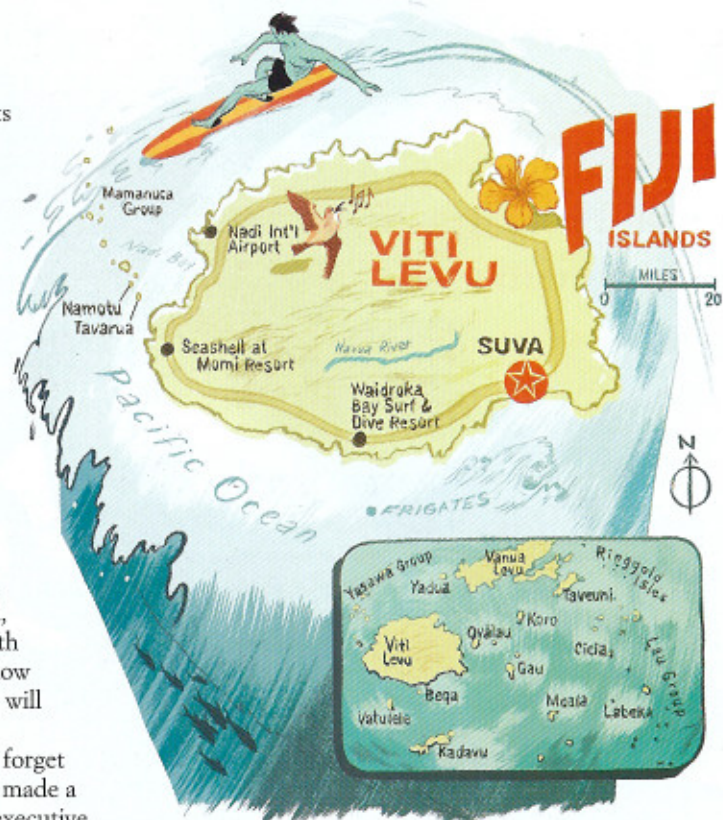
For wave hunters this is a dangerous precedent, one that could make every resort its own surf kingdom and the global commoditization of breaks commonplace. Among Fijians, opinion is deeply divided. Some claim that little would change while others say it would be disastrous for tourism. Indeed, the issue is so divisive that in December 2006 the bill, along with myriad other complaints, incited a full-blown military coup. (For now Qoliqoli has been tabled, but it has been debated since 1999 and will likely be reintroduced.)

Though the bill looms heavily for the duration of our trip, we forget about it when we pull up to Waidroka. It's dusk and someone has made a fire on the beach. The resort's owner, Boris Kaz, a retired MTV executive from New York City, greets us at the door ecstatically. This evening the resort cooks have arranged a traditional kava ceremony. Along with a couple of surfers from New Zealand, we slug down the muddy brown drink, which numbs the mouth and, as advertised, puts us all just this side of catatonic. We need the rest anyway. Tomorrow the swell hits.

THIS IS WHAT A SURF TRIP should look like: a pre-dawn rap on the window of your bure from a boat captain you arranged the night before;

SOUTH SEAS SURFARI:

Duck diving a wave at Cloudbreak. Opposite: The author and his friends gather at the Seashell at Momi resort after a day on the water.



a walk across tidal flats to a 30-foot aluminum skiff moored on the reef; a few moments loading boards and coolers into the boat with surf, big surf, pounding somewhere in the distance; a cough and a wheeze as an outboard shudders to life. Then as the sun crests the horizon, there's the slap of a hull on the water, a rush of salt air, and you're off chasing waves.



That's how it is when we head out from Waidroka. We'd met our captain, Ponti, a six-foot, full-bodied Fijian, at dinner the evening before.

"Chest-high sets wit no one in da lineup, bro," he'd told us. "Big swells if you git it when it's firin' from da west." Ponti's grasp of English was marginal, but he was fluent in surf speak.

On the island of Viti Levu only 10 to 15 breaks have been documented, but actually there are more than that. And Ponti seems to know them all. As he pilots his boat, the *Stingray*, across the slate blue expanse of the Pacific, he lists them like names on a roster—Pipe, Resort Lefts, and Serua Rights, among others. He knows tides and swell directions. He knows waves that see only a few surfers a year. He knows waves that have never been surfed at all. With more than 330 islands and the world's third longest barrier reef, the geography of Fiji is one of unbridled surf potential, a one-stop shop for intermediate and expert surfers alike.

This morning Ponti has us pointed toward Frigates, a reef break in open water some 18 miles south of Waidroka. It's a long ride, about 45 minutes, and when we pull up to a mooring 150 yards from the break, the wave, as predicted, is good. Really good. The takeoff is ideal; each set peels perfectly down the reef.

In minutes we're attaching leashes, rubbing wax on our boards, and hurling ourselves over the rail of the boat. The water is so clear I can see iridescent-blue fusilier fish swimming 50 feet straight down and giant Gorgonian fans waving in the current. The ocean and air are both 80 degrees, so closely matched it's hard to tell what part of your body is submerged and what is not.

Frigates is bigger and exponentially more powerful

OUR GUIDE, PONTI, KNOWS WAVES THAT SEE ONLY A FEW SURFERS A YEAR. HE KNOWS WAVES THAT HAVE NEVER BEEN SURFED AT ALL.

than Namotu Lefts, and when we reach the lineup we have to paddle constantly to fight a three-knot current pulling us into the impact zone. While Namotu Lefts was pleasant but achingly regular, Frigates is finicky, curling and caving whimsically. Out here, there are no rules, no lifeguards watching from the beach, no preset drop-ins. To catch a ride on Frigates is nothing less than pure exhilaration.

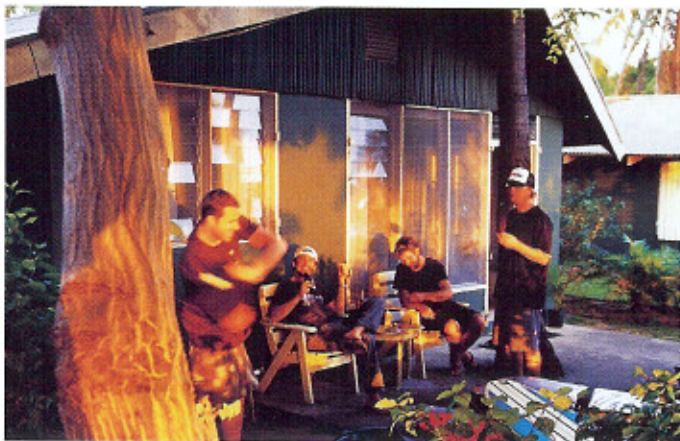
That is, unless you find yourself paddling back to the lineup when a set of four waves lands on your head. A thousand cubic feet of water stirred by a wave that has traveled across 5,000 miles of open ocean does not arrive subtly. The thrashing it gives me is not unlike jumping off a 60-foot ledge into a quarry. The water takes on the consistency of cement, and the hydraulics unleash a full-scale assault on my body. For a brief moment my life flashes (*Continued on page 101*)

ADVENTURE GUIDE: Viti Levu, Fiji

Fiji's main island of Viti Levu, the second largest in the South Pacific, is surrounded by one of the planet's most extensive reef systems and assailed with year-round swells. It might just be the most ideal surf destination of all time.

SURFING: Nearly all rideable waves on Viti Levu are reef breaks, ideal for intermediate and expert surfers but less forgiving for beginners. The southern coast and the western atolls off Nadi hold the best breaks, but you'll need a boat with a captain to reach them. **Fijian Surf Company** in Nadi arranges boat travel (\$51 per person for four hours, two-person minimum; www.fijiansurf.com), as do most hotels (see below), to breaks such

including round-trip airfare from Los Angeles, at Namotu; www.namotuisland.net). For breaks along the southern coast, the staging ground is **Waidroka Bay Surf & Dive Resort** (\$95 a night; www.waidroka.com). It recently underwent a major face-lift and now has a spa and pool in addition to five surf and dive boats. For high-end surf trips, consult **WaterWays Travel** (www.waterwaystravel.com), which can arrange



as Wilkes Passage, Frigates, Sigatoka River Mouth, and Lighthouse Rights. Most waves, aside from those claimed by Tavarua and Namotu Island Resorts, are public—though you'll have to pay a goodwill fee to the local tribe (often a gift of kava will suffice).

WHERE TO STAY: **Seashell at Momi resort** (\$39 per person, in a five-bed dormitory, including meals; www.seashellresort.com) near Nadi has been a surf stopover since the 1970s. The hotel runs boats to the waves of the western atolls. On Saturday mornings, Seashell visitors can access the exclusive breaks of Namotu Lefts, Cloudbreak, and Swimming Pools. If that's not enough time, **Tavarua and Namotu Island Resorts** offer one-week surf packages (\$3,666, including round-trip airfare from Los Angeles, at Tavarua; www.tavarua.com); \$3,409,

break-to-break yacht charters with a captain, cook, and deckhand (\$800 a night for four people).

GETTING AROUND: For the most part, driving is easy on Viti Levu. Rent a car from **Avis** (\$109 a day; www.avis.com.fj) or **Budget** (\$91 a day; www.budget.com.fj) at Nadi International Airport. If you want to check out the remote Mamanuca and Yasawa island groups, **South Sea Cruises** runs ferries (\$37 and \$52, respectively; www.ssc.com.fj) and **Air Fiji** has flights (\$270 for a four-flight pass; www.airfiji.com.fj).

SAFETY: When surfing reef breaks, you should take some precautions: Hire an experienced captain and check the boat for life jackets and a radio before leaving. Wear booties to protect your feet from sharp coral and consider a surfing or paddling helmet. —RF.