

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 6 | FEBRUARY 12, 2012

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# travel

## ESCAPE TO THE SOUTHERN SEAS

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# ALL YOURS: THE SOUTH

A Pacific island is the ultimate tropical retreat. To make sure you choose the right one, ask our man in the grass skirt, Richard Green

There's nothing to rival a Pacific island for total, daydreamy perfection. The sense of relaxation is beyond compare, as is the quality of the beaches, reefs and surf, and the friendliness of the islanders. This is not just a courtesy shown to tourists, but a deeply ingrained way of life that will buoy your spirits for months after you return home.

The Pacific is a gigantic ocean, however, arrived at only after a long and expensive flight — and, beyond the South Seas stereotype, the individual island nations are very different. Before you go, you need to choose the right one for you: here's our guide to the best.

⇨ *Package prices include flights from London and transfers. Ask the operators about regional departure options. The number of nights away will exceed those spent in hotels, due to overnight flights and the International Date Line.*

## FIJI

**What's it like?** Fiji is the South Pacific at its best — with 333 islands and a population nudging 1m, there are diversions aplenty. It has fabulous beaches, of course, as well as timeless traditions and decades of experience of welcoming tourists. It's one of the

easiest island groups to get around, too, and every budget, from top-end to backpacker, will find a beach to call home.

If you're just stopping over, head to the 20 Mamanuca Islands, off the coast from the main airport. Protected by a reef, they can be as beach party or secluded luxury as you like. On a longer trip, explore the main island, Viti Levu. It's a fabulous four-hour drive along the Coral Coast highway from the airport to Suva, the Fijian capital. Along the way, you'll find great family-friendly resorts, hiking in the central mountains and the pretty thatched village of Navala.

From Suva, you can hop on a ferry to many of the other islands, including Ovalau, home to the ramshackle town of Levuka; a former whaling station, it has a cutesy collection of clapboard colonial buildings. Stay at the faded but fabulous Royal Hotel, one of the oldest in the Pacific ([royalle-levu.com](http://royalle-levu.com)); doubles from £15, B&B.

In this part of the world, kava is a semi-ceremonial drink made from the root of a pepper-related plant. You'll find it across the Pacific, but Fijians drink lots of it. Slurp down the cloudy liquid, pass the bowl to your right, then feel your lips numb and your outlook mellow. It tastes like dishwater, but it's rude to refuse. **Did you know?** The grass skirt has evolved into the *sulu* on Fiji, and is worn by men and women. The smarter version is called the *sulu va taga* ("with pockets"), and is sported

by businessmen, the police and ceremonially by the armed forces. **Package:** Trailfinders (020 7368 1200, [trailfinders.com](http://trailfinders.com)) has 10 nights on the Coral Coast from £1,769pp. Visit [fiji.me.com](http://fiji.me.com) for more information.

## HAWAII

**What's it like?** Hawaii's most famous strip of sand is Waikiki beach, in Honolulu. As a city beach resort, it's a hoot, with a real holiday vibe, good restaurants and cracking nightlife. The gargantuan surfing waves at North Shore, snorkelling at Hanalei Bay and the evocative Pearl Harbor memorial are all a short drive away. Honolulu is very American, a world away from the more traditional islands of the Pacific. It's a world away from Hawaii's seven other main islands, too. Leave it and you leave behind three-quarters of the 1.4m population, and are set to stumble on experiences as wonderful as any in the Pacific.

On the Big Island, you can watch fresh lava fizzing into the sea and visit upland cowboyp ranches. On Maui, you can ride across the moonscapes of Haleakala Crater and drive the Hana Highway, over single-lane bridges and around heart-stopping hairpins. On Lanai, a ghostly tanker lies fast on the reef at Shipwreck Beach, and there's a weird rock-strewn desert called the Garden of the Gods. On Molokai, take a mule ride along a narrow cliff ledge, 1,650ft above the waves, and trek the Halawa Valley



for top-flight rainforest birding. And on Kauai, stroll boardwalks above the misty Alakai swamp and lie on Lumahai beach, where Mitzi Gaynor vowed "I'm gonna wash that man right outta my hair" in South Pacific. **Did you know?** The Union Jack is on the flag of Hawaii, reputedly because King Kamehameha flew the Royal Navy's red ensign from his palace after it was given to him as a present. **Package:** Bon Voyage (0800 316 3012, [bon-voyage.co.uk](http://bon-voyage.co.uk)) has a week at Waikiki from £1,395pp. A 10-night trip, with three nights at Waikiki and seven on Maui, starts at £1,985pp. For more information, see [gohawaii.com/uk](http://gohawaii.com/uk).

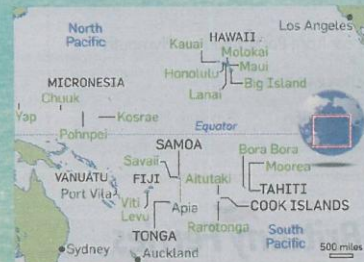
## COOK ISLANDS

**What's it like?** Arriving in Rarotonga is an instant tonic. It's the main island of the Cooks, home to three-quarters

of the archipelago's 20,000 people, yet the longest hotel transfer is 10 miles. The air is hibiscus-scented and the people are disarmingly friendly; you'll likely bump into the chap who stamped your passport in a bar later.

Waves crash onto the island's encircling reefs, protecting azure lagoons, white-sand beaches, palm trees and a thickly forested interior. The tourist industry is well developed, spanning barefoot luxury and barefoot backpacking, and it has good restaurants and raging nightlife. Sights are few, but do catch the Saturday markets, Sunday service in a coral-built church and an "island night" dance show.

If all that sounds too lively, make for Aitutaki, an hour's flight north. It's popular for its Bora Bora-style scenery and overwater bungalows. **Did you know?** Albert Royle Henry was the Cooks' first premier, but when it



## SEAS MADE SIMPLE



AWL Images; Shutterstock; Travel Pictures

was discovered that he had illegally flown in hundreds of supporters from Auckland on voting day, he was stripped of his knighthood. He remains much loved; his bust, often garlanded, is in a cemetery on Rarotonga.

**Package:** Transpacific Holidays (01342 840555, [transpacificolidays.co.uk](http://transpacificolidays.co.uk)) has a 12-night trip, with six nights on Rarotonga and six in Aitutaki, from £2,964pp. For more information, visit [cookislands.travel](http://cookislands.travel).

## SAMOA

**What's it like?** The main attractions here are the beauty of the islands and the unspoiled way of life. You'll soon unwind to the local rhythm, which in Samoa is very slow indeed. Apia is the capital — home to about 40,000 people, as well as the Palolo Deep Marine Reserve, the Maketi Fou

market and the Museum of Samoa. There are some excellent resort hotels around the main island. Aggie Grey's, in Apia, is the atmospheric option ([aggiegreys.com](http://aggiegreys.com); doubles from £142, B&B). Even if you aren't staying, catch the Wednesday-night *fiafia*, performed by the staff.

Take a gentle drive round the island and you'll pass villages with open-sided thatched *fales* (houses), women playing a form of cricket and men playing rugby — a religion here, as it is in Fiji and Tonga. Over on wilder Savaii are blowholes, waterfalls, lava fields and forests.

**Did you know?** Robert Louis Stevenson spent the last four years of his life at Vailima, a couple of miles south of Apia. It now has a fine museum. Climbing up to his tomb on Mount Vaea, behind the house, is sticky as hell, but the inscription and the views are worth it.

**Package:** Audley (01993 838000, [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)) has seven nights — one at Aggie Grey's, four at a beach resort and two on Savaii — from £3,050pp. For more information, visit [samoa.travel](http://samoa.travel).

## TANITI

**What's it like?** The turquoise lagoon and ragged peaks of Bora Bora are a seductive interplay of land and sea. The water is clear, the sharp-peaked mountains soar 2,000ft above the sea, and there is nothing to do but do nothing. Birthplace of the overwater bungalow, Bora Bora has dozens of superchic hotels fronting astonishingly beautiful beaches. It's magnificently fly-and-flop territory, but it's expensive and presents a rather Disneyfied version of the Pacific. If you aren't rich and famous, or plotting a

blowout honeymoon, you are better off on the black-sand beaches of Tahiti island or the white-sand sensations of Moorea, 10 miles to the west.

To find the pristine beauty of traditional Polynesia, you should venture to less visited parts of the Society Islands, of which Bora Bora, Tahiti and Moorea are all part. Inhabitants of Huahine, Raiatea and Tahaa share their magical islands and enviably uncomplicated lifestyle with just a handful of idyllic retreats. **Did you know?** Marlon Brando fell for a local girl, Tarita Teriipaia, while filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* in 1962. He built his bolt-hole 36 miles north of Tahiti, on Tetiaroa, and opened a hotel there in 1973. It has now closed its doors, but a new environmentally friendly hotel called, inevitably, the Brando, is under construction.

**Package:** Bridge & Wickers (020 7483 6555, [bridgeandwickers.co.uk](http://bridgeandwickers.co.uk))

has 10 nights in an overwater bungalow in Bora Bora from £3,435pp. Transpacific Holidays (01342 840555, [transpacificolidays.co.uk](http://transpacificolidays.co.uk)) can take you to the less frequented islands; it has a 12-night trip, with seven nights on Moorea and five on Bora Bora, from £2,945pp. For more information, visit [tahiti-tourisme.co.uk](http://tahiti-tourisme.co.uk).

## VANUATU

**What's it like?** Vanuatu is one of the closest island nations to Australia, and gets a fair number of Aussie package holidaymakers, but it's still friendly and far from overdeveloped, with good hotels and great beaches. It was once shared between the British and French empires, hence the French ambience in the lovely little capital, Port Vila, and the decidedly tasty food.

Things get livelier on the outlying islands. Tanna has wild horses, a half-mile coral reef drop-off, hot springs, waterfalls and Mount Yasur, the most accessible active volcano in the world, where you can stand and marvel as the earth trembles and spumes of lava spit skywards. Just off Espiritu Santo island, there's a pearl of a wreck dive — the luxury liner turned troop ship SS President Coolidge hit a friendly mine in 1942, and now lies with her stern 240ft underwater. **Did you know?** The land-diving ritual takes place on Pentecost Island on Saturdays between April and June. Young men jump from rickety towers with vines tied to their feet. It's bungee jumping without the elastic, helmets or safety equipment — too dangerous for tourists, but great to watch.

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Seal the deal on the Cook Islands. Above, from left: dive in Micronesia, paddle in Tahiti or surf in Hawaii

Continued from page 7

**Package:** Turquoise Holidays (01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk) has seven nights, with three in Tanna and four in Port Vila, from £2,550pp. For more information, visit [vanuatu.travel](http://vanuatu.travel).

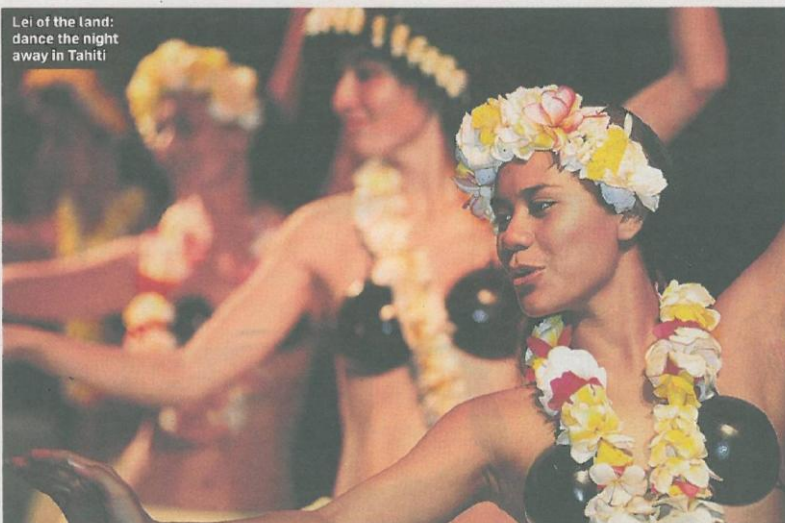
**TONGA**

**What's it like?** The kingdom of Tonga was never colonised by Europeans, something that has kept the island as a crucible of Polynesian tradition. The sleepy capital, Nuku'alofa ("Abode of Love"), is on the main island, Tongatapu. It's flat and largely cultivated, with watermelons, bananas and more. Sights are in short supply, but for a glimpse of royalty, scrub up and head to the Centenary Chapel for the Sunday service — even if the king isn't in town, the singing is heart-warming.

This is one of the poorest countries in the Pacific. It's totally unspoilt, but may be too laid-back for some — the extreme torpor could well become frustrating. If, however, you can adjust to the notoriously elastic "Tonga time", you are in for a treat.

**Did you know?** Tonga is the only kingdom in the Pacific. Queen Salote attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and thrilled spectators by riding in an open carriage, waving all the way despite the pouring rain. **Package:** Wexas (020 7838 5874, wexas.com) has seven nights in Nuku'alofa from £3,278pp. For more information, visit [thekingdomoftonga.com](http://thekingdomoftonga.com).

Lei of the land: dance the night away in Tahiti



Heiger Lee/Lonely Planet

**MICRONESIA**

**What's it like?** The Federated States of Micronesia occupy 1m square miles of ocean, yet have a combined land area just greater than the Isle of Man's — and they reward the effort of a visit.

Chuuk (formerly Truk) has more than 50 shipwrecks in its lagoon,

mainly Japanese ships from the second world war, and is a diving nirvana. Yap guards its traditions with gusto: here, dance is central and some men still wear loincloths. Kosrae is a lush island with great diving, and Pohnpei is home to Nan Madol, an extraordinary ruined city made up of 100 islets, in a system of canals dating from the 12th century.

**Did you know?** Yap is the home of stone coins, known as *rai*, which look like Flintstones car wheels. Up to 12ft across, they can weigh several tons. **Package:** Dive Worldwide (0845 130 6980, [www.diveworldwide.com](http://www.diveworldwide.com)) can arrange trips to Micronesia. Eight nights on Chuuk start at £2,695pp. For more information, see [visit-fsm.org](http://visit-fsm.org).

**HOW TO GET THERE**

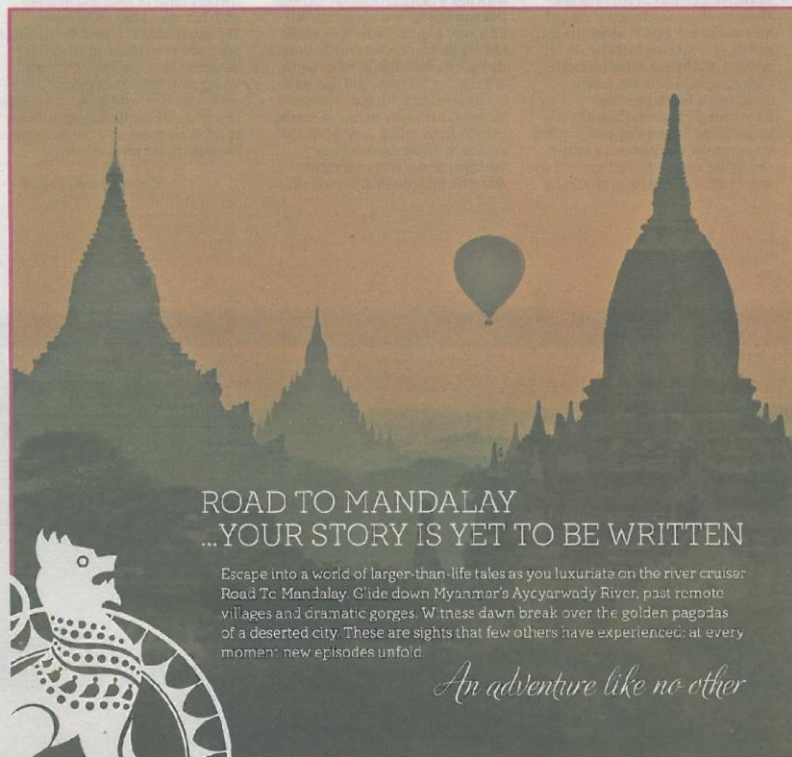
All the Pacific islands require a plane change on the way. Hawaii is about the easiest to get to, and return fares from London via Los Angeles start at about £700, with United (0845 844 4777, [unitedairlines.co.uk](http://unitedairlines.co.uk)) or Delta (0871 221 1222, [delta.com](http://delta.com)).

Air New Zealand (0800 028 4149, [airnewzealand.co.uk](http://airnewzealand.co.uk)) flies from Heathrow to Honolulu and Rarotonga, and to Fiji and Tahiti (with code-share partners), all via LA. It also flies to Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga via Auckland. Fares start at £1,239pp for a return to an island, or £1,574 for a return to Auckland, allowing a couple of island stopovers.

Alternatively, round-the-world tickets can work well for the Pacific. Trailfinders (020 7368 1200, [trailfinders.com](http://trailfinders.com)) has London, Hong Kong, Auckland, Rarotonga, Los Angeles and back to London from £1,210, or London, Fiji, Auckland, Tahiti, then back to London, from £1,669, both with Air New Zealand. Or try Flight Centre (0844 800 8660, [flightcentre.co.uk](http://flightcentre.co.uk)).

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**ST** Take a 360-degree tour of the Koko Crater, on Oahu, Hawaii: [thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel)



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