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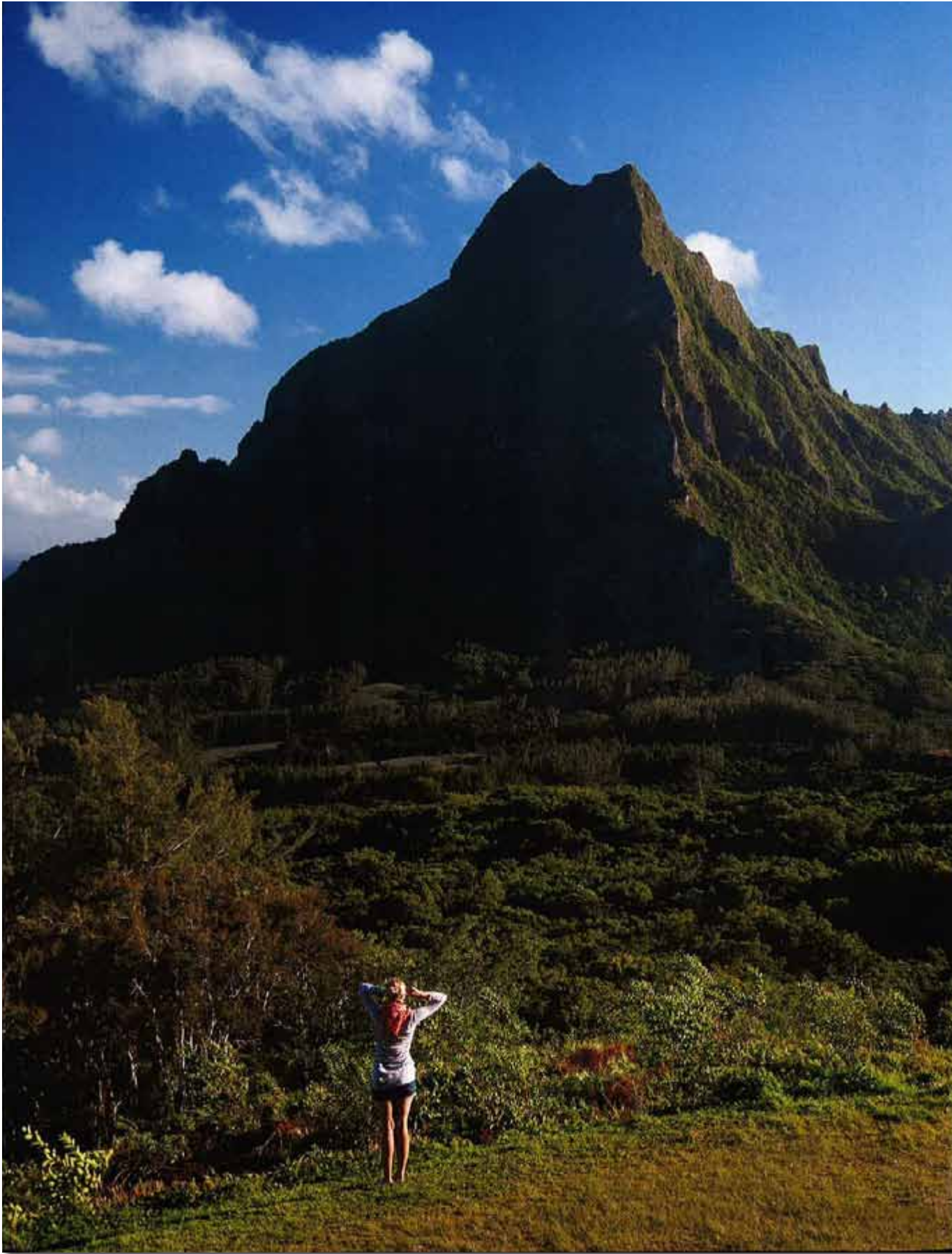
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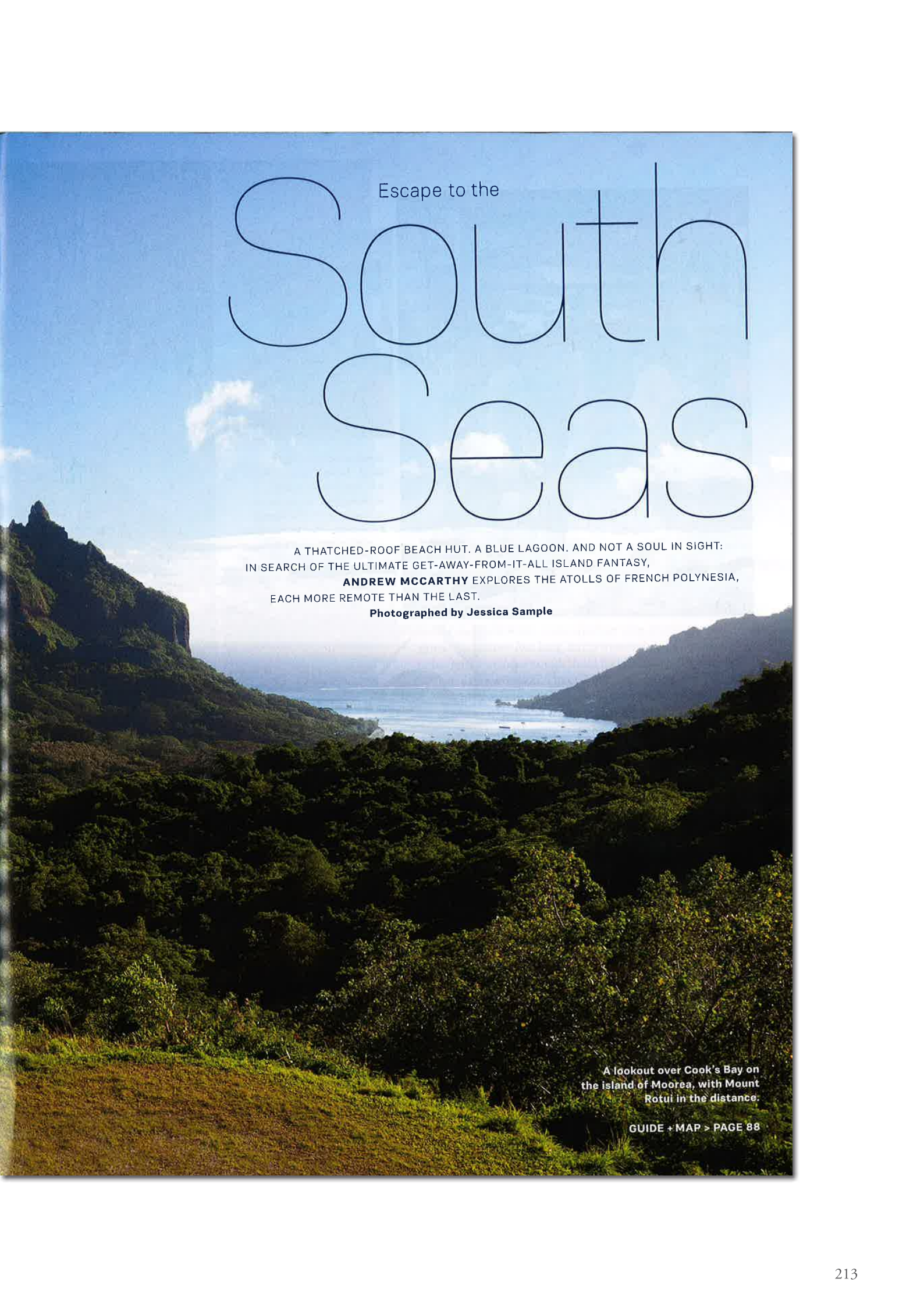
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Escape to the

South Seas

A THATCHED-ROOF BEACH HUT. A BLUE LAGOON. AND NOT A SOUL IN SIGHT:
IN SEARCH OF THE ULTIMATE GET-AWAY-FROM-IT-ALL ISLAND FANTASY,
ANDREW MCCARTHY EXPLORES THE ATOLLS OF FRENCH POLYNESIA,
EACH MORE REMOTE THAN THE LAST.

Photographed by Jessica Sample

A lookout over Cook's Bay on
the island of Moorea, with Mount
Rotui in the distance.

GUIDE + MAP > PAGE 88

outside for a Sunday chat. By the water, beside the long canoes, I watch and am eventually pulled into a game of *pétanque*. Men drink Hinano (the local beer), fish smokes on the open grill, and a mother dances with her small daughter to French pop music playing from someone's boom box.

Farther round Cook's Bay, I find Ron Hall, a native of southern California who came to French Polynesia back in the 1970's to crew on actor Peter Fonda's yacht. Fonda went back, Hall didn't. "No wonder there was a mutiny," he says, referring the famous uprising that occurred on the *HMS Bounty* in 1789 (two film versions of the mutiny were shot on these islands). "Would you have gone back to Manchester?"

There's an easy welcome on Moorea, and riotous beauty, but there are fences and locked gates as well as several large resorts with the obligatory overwater bungalows, and when I get caught in a traffic jam behind a garbage truck, it's time to move on. "The modern world has arrived here. They've gotten to us," Hall tells me with a shrug. "You need to head out to the Tuamotus. You're at nature's mercy out there, on the edge of the world."

Sounds perfect.

Rising barely 10 feet above sea level at their highest point, the 78 atolls that make up French Polynesia's Tuamotu Archipelago are palm trees, sand, and that's about it. Small coral islets—motus—string themselves out like beads on a necklace and encircle vast and tranquil lagoons, while the open Pacific pounds the outer reefs. It's in the lagoons of these tentative claims at land that most of the world's black pearls are farmed; in their ocean passes that some of the sea's best scuba diving is done; and in their coral-rich soil that there is exactly one winery.

Sébastien Thepenier, from Burgundy, in France, arrived on Rangiroa—220 miles northeast of Tahiti and the largest atoll in the Tuamotus—to become the head winemaker for Vin de Tahiti in 2002. "It is crazy, completely," he confesses immediately. "When I arrived, I did not know if we could do it. That first year we produced five hundred liters. But this

year, thirty thousand." Thepenier, with his thick glasses and serious manner, seems more like a college professor than a winemaker. He takes me by boat out to the motu where his 24,000 vines grow over 17 acres. It's an incongruous sight—rows of neatly ordered vines about a forest of shaggy palm trees beside the lapping lagoon under a blistering sun. "It is not an easy choice, but it is a beautiful life," he says.

The other oasis of sophistication on scruffy Rangiroa sits on the bank of the Tiputa Pass, one of two deepwater channels that funnel life in and out of the massive lagoon. Denise Caroggio, an elegant grande dame in pearls and full makeup, arrived in Papeete from Paris in 1979 and found her way here nearly 15 years ago. "When I first arrived," Caroggio leans close, her blue eye shadow perfectly applied, "there was one plane a week. After two days I called Air Tahiti and said there was an emergency and that I needed to get off." She laughs and looks out across the churning pass from the deck of her chic, seven-suite pensione, Les Relais de Joséphine. "Then I fell in love with this spot, this pass. All life has to go right past my backyard."

The majority of Rangiroa's 3,000 residents live in the village of Avatoru—the main metropolis of the Tuamotus, with its two banks, post office, and handful of stores. There is one paved road, and in the evenings I ride my bicycle under the few dim streetlamps, past simple homes, some with satellite dishes affixed to corrugated-metal roofs, while blue light flickers out from otherwise unlit windows. The air is pungent with the smell of tiare, the white, star-shaped flower that keeps French Polynesia smelling like perfume. Inside one of the island's five churches, a choir practices, voices carry across the open water of the lagoon.

Back at Les Relais de Joséphine, my simple, elegant, thatched-roof bungalow furnished with reproductions of French-colonial antiques is steps from the pass. I lie in my four-poster bed, the sliding doors open wide, and watch dolphins leap from the water ahead of the incoming tide as it races to fill the lagoon at dawn.

Aside from the charms of Caroggio's salon, and the overwater bungalows at the glamorous Hotel Kia Ora Resort & Spa, Rangiroa's appeal is a raw one. "It's what Bora-Bora

Also in the South Seas

KOSRAE

Micronesia

Often overlooked for more popular islands such as Bora-Bora, 42-square-mile Kosrae is ideal for those who prefer adventure to sunbathing. Search for ancient ruins along jungle paths or dive to see reefs and a pirate shipwreck. The rooms at eco-lodge Kosrae Village (kosraevillage.com; \$) are rustic but comfortable.

LAUCALA ISLAND

Fiji

Set on an exclusive private island, Laucala resort (laucala.com; \$\$\$\$) is located on a 3,000-acre former coconut plantation with an 18-hole golf course, equestrian center, and hilltop spa. The 25 villas are outfitted with plunge pools; the resort's four restaurants source ingredients from local farms.

PALAU

Micronesia

The 586 mushroom-shaped atolls of this island republic are famous for their marine life: the coral reef, with its 1,450 known fish species, is one of the most biodiverse places on earth. At the Palau Pacific Resort (palauppr.com; \$\$), on Koror, guests can snorkel right off the beach.

PITCAIRN ISLANDS

Halfway between New Zealand and Peru, the four volcanic and coral specks that make up this British Overseas Territory include the pristine, uninhabited Henderson, a UNESCO World Heritage site. On Pitcairn Island, the Pitcairn Museum has surprisingly impressive exhibits on ancient Polynesian and naval history (visitpitcairn.pn).

VANUA LEVU

Fiji

Hike to waterfalls or picnic on one of the beaches that ring Fiji's second-largest island. High-profile guests such as Edward Norton and Donna Karan stay at Namale (namalefiji.com; \$\$\$\$), a resort on the Koro Sea with 19 villas and *bures*, or traditional Fijian houses.

—STIRLING KELSO