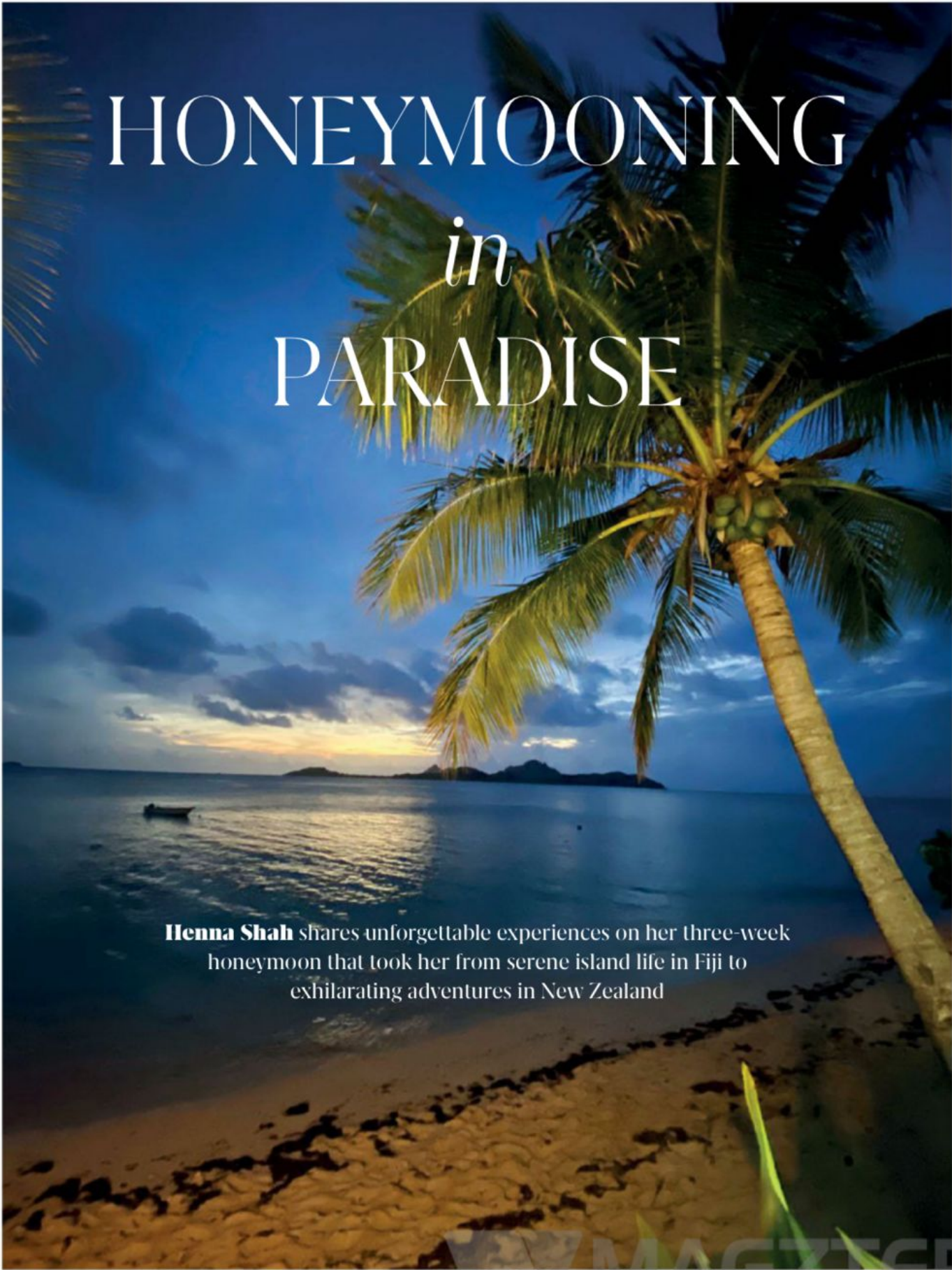




HONEYMOONING *in* PARADISE

Henna Shah shares unforgettable experiences on her three-week honeymoon that took her from serene island life in Fiji to exhilarating adventures in New Zealand

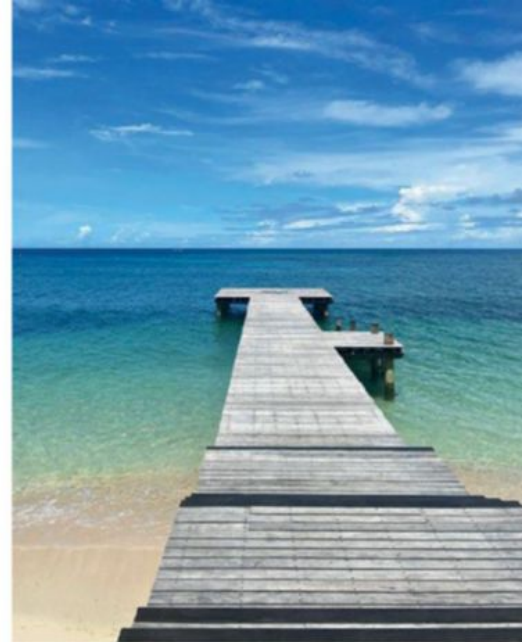
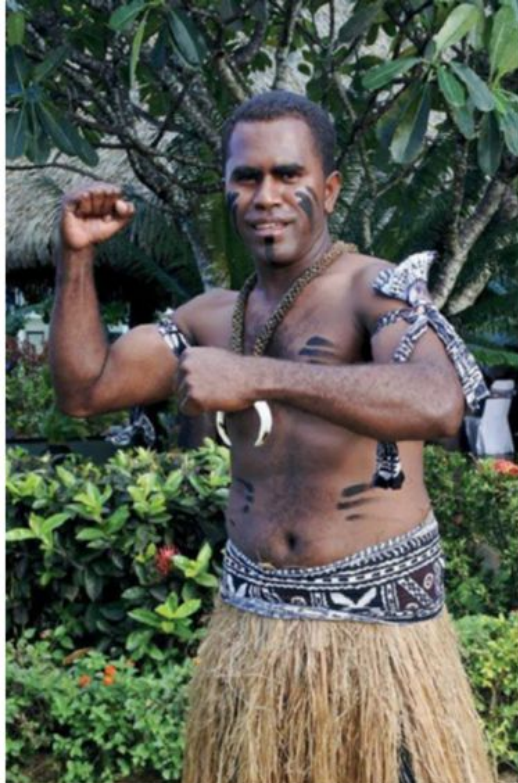
86 TRAVEL+LEISURE WEDDINGS & HONEYMOONS 2024-25

MAGZTER



Clipped from [Travel+Leisure Weddings & Honeymoons](#) - Issue 2024-2025

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From far left: Nadi is perfect to and immerse yourself in vibrant Fijian culture; the Fijian custom of Kava, a traditional ceremonial drink that's shared among locals, offers guest a taste of island culture and community; explore secluded beaches and enjoy the untouched natural beauty that surrounds Tokoriki Island.

AS THE WEDDING BELLS faded and our elaborate Gujarati wedding wrapped up, my husband Yash and I yearned for a hiatus from our newfound reality. We crossed six time zones for our first stop on our long and “leave-us-alone” honeymoon, watching the Indian winter melt into a Pacific summer in Fiji.

“Bula! Welcome to Nadi, Mr. and Mrs. Merchant,” beamed our bellboy, glowing on account of his crimson undertone. I almost mirrored his complexion as I let my brand-new identity sink in. After spending half a day soaking in the Pacific flora, Melanesian culture, and the déjà vu of taking off our shoes at the Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple, we hopped aboard a catamaran to touch down on the white sandy shores of Tokoriki Island.

“We’re so glad you chose Sheraton Tokoriki (marriott.com) for your honeymoon. Did you fly in from Sydney or Melbourne?” our friendly receptionist asked during check-in. While we were puzzled by this assumption, we discovered that the few Indian faces we encountered during our week at the resort were from neighbouring Australia, making us an exception.

Our first impression of Tokoriki was painted in orange and pink as we watched a classic Fijian sunset from the resort’s helipad. For aspiring castaways like us, Sheraton Tokoriki had blissful *bure*-style rooms only a heartbeat away from the ocean, with hammocks and sun loungers beneath the palm fronds lining the resort’s periphery. We embraced the mellow vibes of island time, letting the clock fade away and our wishful hearts take over to mark the rhythm of the day.

Our day began with decadent breakfasts with cerulean views, followed by a serene duo therapy at the spa that whetted our appetite for lunch. We then spent a leisurely afternoon indulging in cocktails by the pool, toasting under the blazing Fijian sun. As tropical twilight took over the skies, the resort came to life with a game of mini golf alongside fellow honeymooners, which led to a communal *Kava* ceremony, where we realised that the earthy drink was an acquired taste. Nibbling away at some cassava fries, we watched the delightful Meke dance.

At the tail end of our week in Fiji, we set foot in the glistening ocean on a kayak, trying not to lose sight of the coastline. As adrenaline renewed in our laid-back bodies, we jet-skied our way to the neighbouring Monuriki Island to uncover secluded beaches. If our 11-year love story with all its ups and downs were a movie, I would serendipitously end it here—zooming out from our time in Fiji.

However, since weddings are not happy endings but happy beginnings, our week in Fiji was the stepping stone to another two enchanting weeks spent across the sea in New Zealand.

As we refreshed our memory of Middle-Earth by watching a Hobbit movie on our flight from Nadi to Auckland, we gazed out at the rolling fields of the



From here: From exploring the magical Hobbiton Movie Set to relaxing in geothermal pools in Rotorua, New Zealand offers an adventure for every traveller—whether it's black water rafting through glowworm caves in Waitomo, jetboating through Queenstown's rugged terrain, or other thrilling activities set against the stunning backdrop of the Southern Alps and pristine lakes.



North Island. Both the second week of our honeymoon and New Zealand are best experienced on four wheels, except for Auckland, which is best navigated on foot to avoid steep parking charges.

Since it was New Year's Eve, we spent our first evening in Auckland finding the perfect spot by the harbour to watch the Sky Tower light up with fireworks, ushering in the New Year in a new country. The next day began with a swig of velvety flat white at Sky Café on the 50th floor of the Sky Tower (skycityauckland.co.nz) while observing the city's striking skyline.

With Auckland in the rearview, our road trip came alive as we approached Waitomo for a three-hour blackwater rafting and cave-tubing experience through the Waitomo caves to spot the bioluminescent glowworms. We continued on to Matamata, passing fields devoid of humans and dotted with sheep, as we geared up to dive into the Middle Ages at the Hobbiton Movie Set (hobbitontours.com). Along with a refreshing gulp of the English Ale at The Green Dragon Inn, we savoured one of the best vegetarian burgers in New Zealand at The Shire's Rest. After another scenic hour-long drive, Yash surprised me with a stop at the Polynesian Spa as we entered the lake city of Rotorua. The unmistakable smell of sulphur engulfed us as we dipped into our private mineral pool overlooking the lake, soaking in the geothermal goodness that healed our long-drive fatigue.

While the Shaky Isles had been nothing short of heavenly, we found ourselves at Hell's Gate (hellsgate.co.nz) in Rotorua, witnessing the earth come alive with spitting geysers, bubbling mud volcanoes, and the earth hissing beneath our feet. After this brief tryst with hell, we grounded ourselves at Agrodome, where sheep walked the ramp to take their respective places on their social pyramid, with the Merino sheep at the top for its superior wool. We left, reeking of the barn after taking a selfie with the black sheep, frolicking with ducks, and feeding the endearing alpacas on the farm tour. Our otherworldly experiences in Rotorua culminated in conquering a Grade 5 rapid in the raging white waters of the Kaituna River before heading back to Auckland to board our flight to Queenstown.

"William, come here, honey. This lovely couple from India is visiting our favourite Cardrona Hotel (cardronahotel.co.nz)," an elderly woman with crinkled cheeks, highlighted with blush, called to her husband at a pit stop on the Crown Range Road. We had stopped to give in to the allure of the lupins, a beautiful weed that lines the roads of the South Island. As our road trip continued, we took in the late evening daylight on a coastal drive from Glenorchy to Queenstown. We visited the Gibbston Valley Winery to sample some wine in a rustic wine cave and stopped by a charming lavender farm run by an old Kiwi couple, who gently warned us about the bumblebees buzzing amid the lavender. Our senses, now somewhat jaded by all the breathtaking beauty of the past two weeks of travel, responded only to surreal vistas perceived from different travel perspectives.

We marvelled at the urban silhouette of Queenstown merging with the mountainous terrain from the Skyline Gondola, and then zoomed in on the landscape from a luge cart. While Yash took



▲ Cruising through Milford Sound's dramatic fjords feels like stepping into a dream, with towering cliffs, cascading waterfalls, and playful dolphins.

the plunge, leaping out of a plane to take in the aerial views of Queenstown, my acrophobic self was content navigating the rugged terrain in a high-velocity jetboat.

Indeed, the land is best viewed from the water, and we were captivated by the majestic fjords plunging into the sea, roaring waterfalls cascading with mist, dolphins flipping away, and sea lions sunbathing on boulders from aboard the Milford Sound Cruise boat. As we set off from Queenstown, we stopped by Lake Wanaka for a hearty Indian meal to soothe that twinge of homesickness, before making our way to Glacier Country.

We then took a helicopter ride to observe the Franz Josef Glacier up close, encountering a breathtaking glacier landing, and witnessing the glacial waters melt into the sea. While I thought nothing could surpass the stunning helicopter views, our final journey on the TransAlpine train from Greymouth to Christchurch offered dramatic panoramas. During the unperturbed five-hour train ride, we gazed at the beauty of the Southern Alps, bore witness to the formation of deltas along the coast, and passed by the scenic Arthur's Pass National Park, pondering how life would unfold after our honeymoon. With tan lines from the fierce Antipodean sun and a stash of Whittaker's bars tucked away, we stepped onto our flight back to reality. 🌍