



*Life on*

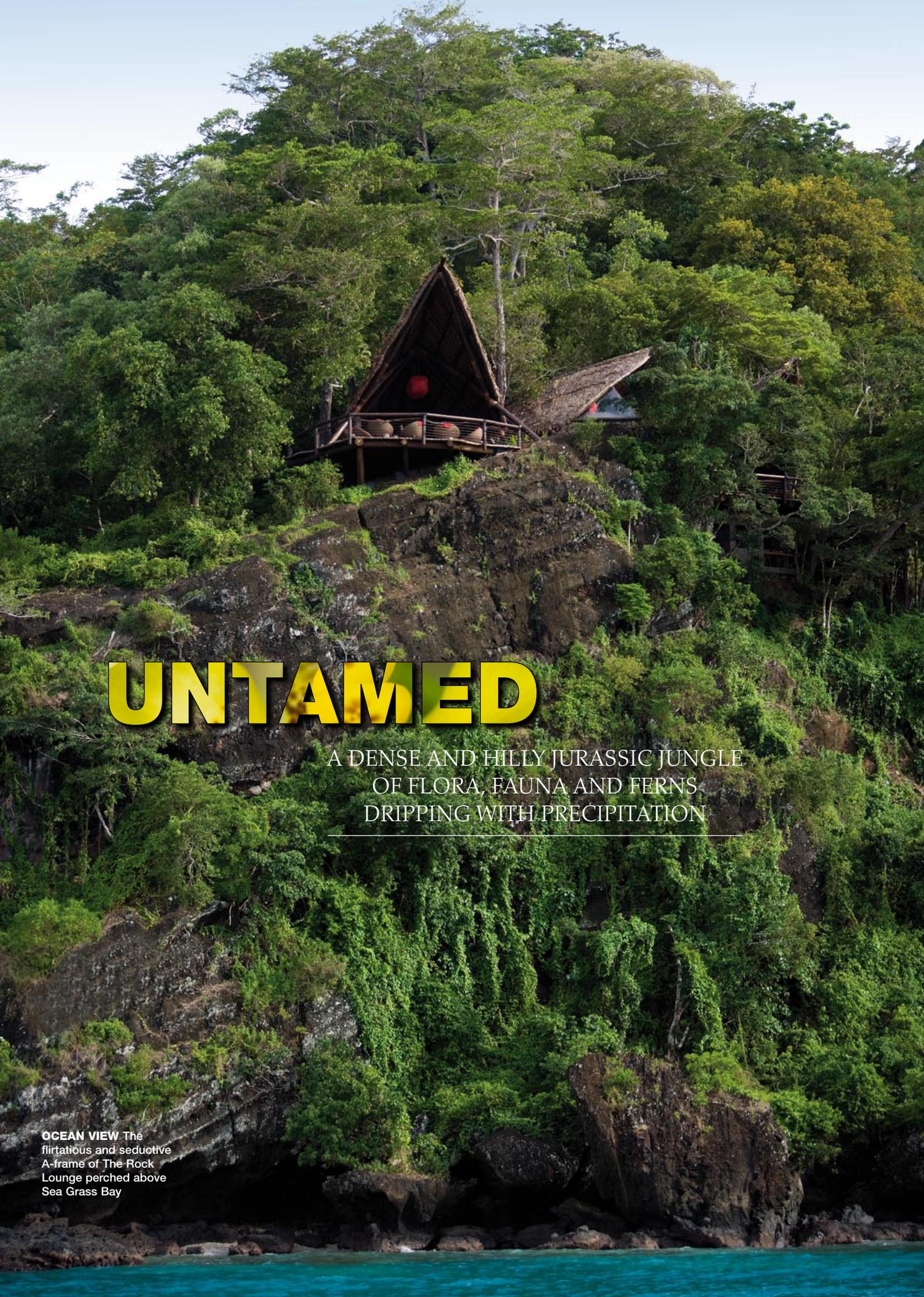
# LAUCALA

Set in the clear cerulean waters surrounding northern Fiji, Laucala – an amalgam of lush Jurassic jungle, palm-studded beaches and cinematic views – offers an Elysian private island escape

**THE ROCK LOUNGE**

Designer noodle chairs and whimsical, locally made cushions are arranged beneath an awning lined with woven palm leaves



A dense, hilly Jurassic jungle with a wooden A-frame lounge perched on a rocky cliffside overlooking the ocean. The scene is filled with lush green foliage, including various trees and ferns. The A-frame lounge is built on a dark, rocky outcrop and features a wooden deck with a railing. The ocean is visible at the bottom of the frame, with a clear blue-green hue.

# UNTAMED

A DENSE AND HILLY JURASSIC JUNGLE  
OF FLORA, FAUNA AND FERNS  
DRIPPING WITH PRECIPITATION

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**OCEAN VIEW** The  
flirtatious and seductive  
A-frame of The Rock  
Lounge perched above  
Sea Grass Bay



**SO CHIC**  
The library lounge  
with bespoke  
fittings from Fiji,  
Bali and Australia



**NATURAL TOUCH** Boulder baths

The indifference of a particular Fijian proverb resonates as we begin our descent through the clouds for a sodden runway surrounded by thick vegetation and bookended by water. "Life is like this," goes the phlegmatic maxim: "sometimes sun, sometimes rain," and, as the heavens open once more, with our King Air 200 now grinding to a halt on the ashen landing strip, I wonder whether I'll see the promise of the former in that age-old adage.

"Of course you will," reassures my buoyant host, Maja Kilgore, as I disembark on one of the easternmost atolls in Fiji's Cakaudrove province. "We're hoping to have a breakthrough soon." But the fact is that this is no transitory downpour or wet season spurt: I've arrived following an eventful one-hour hop from Fiji's main airport during what can be conservatively described as a tropical depression. Or, more accurately, amid a marginal cyclone, complete with palm-bending gales and drenching rain, which have left this remote outpost nothing if not waterlogged.

One of nine islands in the Vanua Levu archipelago of northern Fiji, Laucala is a lush, double-humped land mass of 1,220ha and, as we drive through a dense and hilly Jurassic jungle of flora, fauna and ferns dripping with precipitation, I learn it's a volcanic one too. The ride beneath the forested canopy aboard one of the island's Defenders delivers me to my thatched waterfront villa, tucked away among lush vegetation on a raked, palm-studded beach, where the cinematic views – made even more dazzling by the drama of the ominous sky – are surpassed only by the island's prelapsarian purity.

A former cattle and coconut plantation belonging to the late publishing tycoon Malcolm Forbes, Laucala Island was purchased by Austrian Dietrich Mateschitz in 2002 as an ultra-private retreat for the well-heeled but camera-shy. Mateschitz, who made his fortune as founder of Red Bull, "had a very strong vision for the island", according to the project's lead architect, London-based Stephen Albert. "This wasn't to be in any way

a typical resort. We were to create a place that overcame the shortcomings of other high-end destinations."

As one of the resort's first guests I'm only too happy to put Laucala through its paces; but given the state of the weather, I'm resigned to the comfortable confines of my

conical bungalow, or *bure*, of which there are another 24 dotted harmoniously across the island's beaches, mountainsides and cliffsides. "Every villa was meticulously orientated so the best views were taken," explains Albert. "If there was a sea view which caught some outer island flanked by a palm tree, every effort was made to showcase this."

Created from locally sourced timber with ceilings improbably made from woven palm leaves and with whimsical Fijian names like Kalokalo (star) and Buca (bird), the *bures* feature their own amoeba-shaped pools, indoor and outdoor showers and boulder baths. Mine, Maqo, is named after a sizable mango tree that stands patron alongside an arc of gold at the island's epicentre, the Plantation, which is speckled by a fraction of the coconut groves that cover more than a quarter of the island.

The Plantation is also home to a vast man-made lagoon of cascading terraced pools fashioned from pebbles and strewn with boulders, where a dramatic 25m glass cube, doubling not only as an infinity-style lap pool but also the resort's lone concession to unabashed breakout modernism, takes centre stage. A stylish bi-level library stocked with oversized art books and lofty lounge overlook this 5,000sq m aquatic union, the resort's communal heart, which is complemented by a pair of the thatch-and-timber eateries that, as Albert explains, "sprout out of the ground with great leafy canopies".

But the Elysian escapism offered by the resort's manicured trappings – which feature xeriscaped flowerbeds designed to cut down on supplemental irrigation – is only half the story. "Over 40 per cent of the island is covered with original rainforest," explains Thomas Kilgore, Laucala's German-born managing director. ➤

A large infinity pool with clear blue water, bordered by a rough stone edge. The pool is set on a hillside overlooking a tropical coastline. Several tall palm trees are scattered across the landscape, and the ocean is visible in the distance under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. In the foreground, there are some green plants and a small white flower.

**HILLTOP RESIDENCE**

The pebble-encrusted infinity pool and jacuzzi are accessorised by David Trubridge-designed skeletal loungers

# ENCHANTING

A SPRAWLING PERCH BOASTING 360° VIEWS OF THE ISLAND'S CLEAR CERULEAN WATERS

\* Occupying one of the island's highest points, the three-bedroom residence sprawls with over 1,200sq m of living space and another 11,000sq m reserved for private quarters



**CREATING** intricate handwoven baskets



**THE PENINSULA** villa at dusk



**NATURAL SURROUNDINGS** at dinner



**STEAMED PACIFIC** lobster with bele cannelloni, cassava rosti, fragrant fennel and pepper oil



**WILD HORSES** at play



**PUTTING FOR PAR** at the tenth hole



**LOCAL COLOUR** from area craftsmen



**CHEF** Taki Panayotakos



**THE ISLAND** is filled with colour

“And the resort only covers roughly 20 per cent of the island, meaning the rest is still very wild and inaccessible.” Indeed, as we drive the narrow gravelled route around the island, passing saturated mangroves, towering palms, flame trees and undulating peaks, as well as 22 head of cattle and an inquisitive flock of sheep, it becomes apparent how rugged Laucala really is.

Or, in deference to its rarefied locale, how sustainable and self-sufficient its custodians are aiming for it to remain. To wit, passing some of the nearly 100ha of farmland that produce crops including coffee, cocoa, vanilla, pepper and tea, we arrive at a trio of spotless hydroponic greenhouses, sitting alongside a nursery and one of two conservatories home to thousands of anthurium and orchids. “We don’t import anything,” says Kilgore, pointing to the content of the various greenhouses and explaining that they grow anything they can – from avocados to papayas. “We even have a 6,000-plant citrus plantation on the other side of the island, not to mention a thriving vegetable and herb garden.”

Preserving the island’s unspoiled ecology was one of the central tenets of the three-year-long project, according to Albert. “Maintaining the trees and the wildlife was always paramount,” he says, noting that structures (be they pedestrian walkways, staircases or overhanging roofs) would be regularly redrawn so as to accommodate the vegetation and to ensure an especially light footprint. “The bigger challenge was building in difficult locations where it was impossible to get a truck to. At the Peninsula Villa, for example, all materials had to be carried in by hand as it was so inaccessible.”

Together with the Overwater and Hilltop residences, the equally aptly named Peninsula villa – precariously crowning a rock outcropping with a private cove – is one of three outstanding villas at Laucala. While Overwater’s thatched succession of structures provides the prototypical South Pacific experience and Peninsula the utmost in privacy, the *ne plus ultra* is Hilltop villa: boasting 360° views of the island’s clear waters and the surrounding 30km horseshoe-shaped Heemskerck coral reef.

# PURE

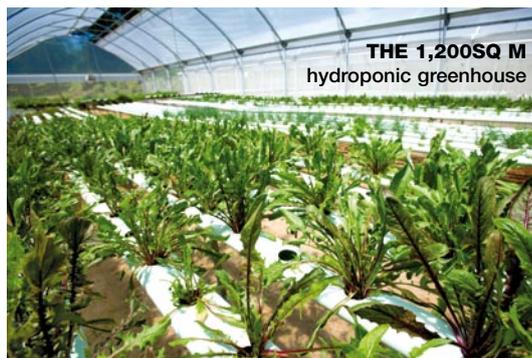
## [AIMING TO PRESERVE] THE ISLAND’S UNSPOILED ECOLOGY



**THE EXPANSIVE**  
communal poolscape



**THE BEECHCRAFT King Air**  
200 in a bespoke hangar



**THE 1,200SQ M**  
hydroponic greenhouse

All accommodation benefits from an interior design vernacular that is decidedly Fijian, with natural fixtures, fittings, furnishings and fabrics sourced exclusively from Southeast Asia and Oceania. “We wanted to be true to its location and to enhance and draw from its natural beauty,” says Lynne Hunt, the London-based interior designer who was tasked with translating the proprietor’s request for “inviting curves, soft edges and free-flowing shapes” into reality. “So, we created jellyfish chandeliers, wind chimes, driftwood lamps, coral sand plaster and pacific island printed fabrics.”

Hunt’s relaxed contemporary approach also manifests itself in Plantation House, the colonial mansion where guests take breakfast and, should they choose, pre-prandials and dinner, which are prepared with aplomb by Australian chef Taki Panayotakos. In fact, all five of the food outlets scattered across the island, including Sea Grass Lounge and Restaurant with its Teppanyaki barbecue and Rock Lounge, tucked snugly in a thicket above the Sea Grass Bay, subscribe to the same natural design language, which is also apparent in the spa, where four sea-facing massage villas are arranged around a natural water garden dotted with ivory-coloured lily pads and wild reeds.

For those guests who simply cannot unwind, Laucala’s diversionary bounty is a full one. In addition to an equestrian centre, the island features a championship

golf course (kept green by treated sewage water) designed by Scotsman David McLay Kidd. On the water, the resort’s own 13m Flybridge, one of 14 sport boats, enables anglers to have a spot of game fishing, to say nothing of activities like kite-surfing, sailing, diving and snorkelling.

Despite an itinerary truncated by inclement weather, I’m won over by this incomparable Xanadu and lying on the talcum-like crescent of strand, I recall the words of another easy-going proverb: “Each bay, its own wind.” I’m not sure what they’ve christened the local zephyr but Laucala’s will certainly be calling me back.

*Farhad Heydari*