

Lifestyles of the rich and fabled

PAUL MYERS THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 13, 2010 12:00AM

IT takes me several minutes to work out the two figures silhouetted in the pre-dawn light in front of my villa are sweeping the beach.

But I don't need to wonder why because it confirms what I have come to realise during three days of sheer indulgence on Laucala Island: no detail has been omitted on the private Fijian retreat of Red Bull owner and Austrian billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz.

And I mean nothing: not the smoothness of the sand on the beach nor the perfect magi magi patterns of dyed coconut husk twine that connect poles supporting thatched roofs. Not the clockwork precision and undivided attention of 350 staff, nor the enthusiasm of the native choir that greets and farewells me at this sumptuous South Seas hideaway. And certainly not the owner's absolute control over who visits the island, flies over it or sails past. Like everything else, that detail has been sorted.

The beach sweepers don't know I can see them. Obviously, they and Laucala's managers - German husband-and -wife team Thomas and Maja Kilgore - would prefer that I, and other guests, didn't.

Because when you're paying \$4000 a night to stay in the villa from which I'm playing peeping tom, or \$7000 for one spectacularly perched on a peninsula high above the aquamarine sea, and about \$30,000 for the owner's hilltop hideaway, everything should, well, just happen.

It does, in spades. Laucala (pronounced lo-thar-la), one of the most northeasterly of Fiji's 322 islands, is to landlubbers what super-yachts are to cruising types, with an intriguing mix of European super-efficiency, contemporary chic design and Fijian charm. Some say that the former copra plantation, bought by US publishing magnate Malcolm Forbes in 1972 and sold in 2002, 12 years after Forbes's death, to the now 65-year-old enigmatic entrepreneur and sports team owner Mateschitz, has no rival.

The Red Bull maestro, who visits for two or three weeks twice a year, won't reveal how much he spent on the redevelopment, but it's estimated at \$US300 million (\$331.7m); the Kilgores won't say who has been here or who is coming in the future. It's all part of Laucala's privacy pledge, to the point that the island can arrange for guests arriving by private jet or yacht to be cleared by Fiji customs and immigration in situ. Others, like me, transfer at Nadi International Airport to Laucala's private hangar, to be met by a new Beechcraft King Air turboprop for the 50-minute flight to paradise.

Laucala's redevelopment, completed in 2008, required 2500 contractors to be on site for two years building the 25 sumptuous residences (no typical Fijian bures here), five restaurants, numerous swimming pools, an airstrip, port facilities, a world-class golf course, opulent hilltop spa, power, water and other infrastructure.

Officially, you have to apply to come to this virtual private kingdom as a guest, and seek permission to fly overhead at less than 10,000m or sail within its territorial waters. Once here, you quickly realise how much thought, planning and detail has gone into the redevelopment. One of the great successes of the design by London architect Stephen Albert is that everything is separated. From the air, the coconut trees and thick jungle reveal only specks of human intervention and, quite deliberately, 90 per cent of the 1200ha island remains pristine.

The residences are in clusters, identified by location and price. Although I'm in one of 12 lower-cost Plantation villas, set amid hundreds of coconut palms that were neatly planted by the island's long-gone copra pioneers, it's pretty special. There are six thatched-roof structures in my private enclave facing that perfectly swept beach; four are interconnected and comprise the living areas (entrance, lounge, bedroom



Seagrass pool on luxurious Laucala private island resort in Fiji.

Picture: Paul Myers

and bathroom) and two external relaxation areas are adjacent to my private pool. Seagrass, Overwater, Plateau and Peninsula residences - as well as the owner's villa complex - are also available, at escalating prices and each in its own special secluded location.

The furnishings, selected by London interior design consultant Lynne Hunt, are an eclectic mix of contemporary, funky design and Oceania chic. There are bright handmade rugs, patterned cushions, artistic lights, rustic carved tables, bowl-shaped rattan chairs, spacious sitting areas and huge deep wood bathtubs.

The Kilgores manage Laucala with the European efficiency and aplomb that reflects their background in high-end Relais & Chateaux establishments in Germany, Bali and The Philippines. The couple arrived on Laucala in June 2007, 18 months before the resort opened.

Thomas, a former executive chef, and Maja set about overseeing Laucala's transformation into what may be the world's most exclusive island retreat. Some of the outcome is their initiative: near self-sufficiency by producing most of the food on the island's farm and on-site production of all soaps and spa products. Innovative international dishes are prepared and served with the resort's trademark attention to detail.

The evening meal in the main restaurant, a recreated white weatherboard plantation house, is sheer indulgence. After champagne and canapes, ever-attentive Fijian staff announce each of the seven courses as it is served, premium international wines are selected and poured by Laucala's German sommelier, and the Kilgores, along with two other guests from Hong Kong, prove to be perfect company.

It's so good that I completely forget my unforgettable round on Laucala's 18-hole championship golf course with its resident professional, Kiwi tour pro Tony Christie. Designed by Scotsman David McLay Kidd, whose portfolio includes the new Castle Course at St Andrews and the top-ranked course in the US at Bandon Dunes, Oregon, Laucala's course already rates as one of the best in the islands.

If you're not into golf, there's a restored 10m crewed yacht, a flybridge cruiser for fishing the reef, Hobie Cats, jet skis and other watercraft. Or there's horseriding along the beach, and swimming in a giant glass cube next to the island's pool bar. You could say that one tropical island is like any other, so why spend \$30,000 (or more) for a week's indulgence? Thomas Kilgore believes there are enough people who will. Time will tell. "Heaven on earth" is how Laucala has been described. It certainly was for Forbes, whose ashes are interred on his former slice of paradise.

www.laucala.com (<http://www.laucala.com>)

Paul Myers was a guest of Laucala Island.