



LANGUISHING ON Laucala Island



Perfection has a new location: it's called Laucala Island. Fiona Harper does next to nothing on this South-Pacific idyll.

There is something decidedly exotic about hopping on a private jet and being whisked away to a far-flung South Pacific island. Particularly so when your destination is a newly opened Fijian island retreat recently declared one of the 100 most beautiful hotels and resorts of the world. But what exactly defines such a resort? What is it that allows one to ascend above a very crowded field of highly credentialed contenders? Sure, at this level of excellence, exceptional service, extraordinary cuisine, a fine wine cellar, exquisite surroundings, combined with enough leisure and cultural options to suit the most fastidious guest are *de rigueur*. Some would say, if you've seen one fine resort, you've seen them all. In Laucala Island's case (pronounced Lauthala), however, you'd also be wrong. Hideaway Hotels travel guides allocates Laucala seven stars, an unquantifiable rating as there is no such category. Laucala is simply so unique, raising the bar far beyond mere exceptional, that words are somewhat inadequate. Against a backdrop of manicured coconut plantation silhouetted against a cerulean sea, Laucala has the goods. Add to the mix the fact that the island manages

its own airline (with a hangar-side fully serviced corporate lounge in Nadi enabling guests arriving on international commercial flights to complete arrival formalities in private), has a fleet of vessels docked in the marina at guests' disposal, is a Customs Clearance Port with rights over the surrounding air and sea traffic, and that it has built a self-sustaining village on neighbouring Qamea Island to house over 300 staff and it quickly becomes apparent that Laucala is far from your average luxury Fijian resort.

With just 25 residences (for a maximum of 80 guests), built around 27 swimming pools oriented for maximum privacy, it's highly likely that you won't see any other guests during your stay. Particularly if you take up the Destination Dining option, just one significant element of the all-inclusive tariff. Beyond mere room service, in villa dining involves a culinary team of at least six staff to prepare, cook, serve and clear. If you're not sure which of the champagnes in your villa's fridge is an appropriate accompaniment, the Sommelier will obligingly offer his recommendation, which naturally is served in bottomless fine crystal glasses, no matter whether it's breakfast or dinner time.

In fact, so discreet is Laucala Island, 45 minutes from Nadi in the King Air Beechcraft B200 Turboprop aircraft, that guests don't actually make a reservation so much as submit an application to visit.

Laucala is all about creating extraordinary,

personalised guest experiences, anticipating, and then meeting guests' every need. It's about discretion, opulence and the very finest service ethos: a philosophy that cascades down from Austrian managers Thomas and Maja Kilgore, who have overseen the islands' evolution from construction site to today's acclaimed retreat. Significantly, superyacht owners and their crew are welcome, utilising the islands' status as a port of refuge to enable vessel owners to clear in or out of Fiji without the hassle of Suva customs formalities. Currently there are two deepwater superyacht moorings with plans to expand the marina breakwater and floating pier to permit large vessels to berth dockside. Crew can also be accommodated in house if required, while owners jet in and out, making it a delightfully exotic South Pacific yacht base with the Lau Group offering pristine cruising grounds nearby.

The single Overwater Residence is designed to suit water babies who like to roll out of their bed and into the sea of a morning. With water depth around five metres through the reef-strewn channel, along with a 15m dock abutting the two-bedroom residence that sits atop the rock face, guests can come and go by boat. Of course there are also a couple of electric Club Cars in the thatched-roof garage for getting around on land. The swimming pool, carved into the natural rock face, is accessed by overwater boardwalks that link the living, bathing and sleeping pavilions. Taking full advantage of cooling ocean breezes,



walls disappear, allowing the sounds, smells and colours of the Pacific to waft through. Open sided indoor bathrooms are merely delineated from bedrooms by stone floors beneath a pitched roof with enormous overhead rain-shower rose. Just as in the outdoor bathrooms and dining pavilion, spaces meld seamlessly with one another, with a profusion of jungle-like garden linking suspended boardwalks as the only real indicator where one room ends and another begins.

Chilling out at Rock Lounge high above Seagrass Bay, guests recline on low slung couches set around polished tree root tables. Positioned beneath coconut trees, the dazzling white mansion replicating the original colonial plantation style of architecture represents fine cuisine, wine and hospitality. Dining at Plantation House is like an intriguing journey through divine culinary artistry. With such offerings as Lobster and champagne risotto, soya marinated chicken lollypop and lime and coconut sorbet, each complemented by appropriately fine wines.

Maja and Thomas are gifted, intuitive hosts, guiding and inviting conversation over dinner, sharing stories about their adventures in hotel management across the world, while Troy their beloved Rhodesian Ridgeback lolls on the terrace

outside waiting for them.

Upon arrival, guests are invited to a personal cocktail sunset cruise onboard the Riviera 41. Maja and Thomas take this opportunity to welcome guests personally and ascertain their particular desires, whether they want to be entertained or simply left alone.

While the front of house facilities and services are beyond reproach, it's the background infrastructure supporting the islands' total independence and sustainability that is quite remarkable. In developing an intimate private retreat, the islands' owner, an Austrian businessman with a penchant for fast cars, required that the island to be totally self sufficient. From power plants, water makers, fully developed animal farm with breeding programme, egg hatchery, vegetable and herb gardens, fruit orchard, hydroponic nursery and bee hives, along with a seafood harvesting programme, every possible need is catered for. There's even a program to utilise wild goats and bush turkeys that roam the island. By producing everything themselves, the island is not dependent on fresh produce being flown in, giving themselves an edge over other remote island resorts. Just one advantage of the owner's very deep pockets.

There's also a full medical centre with doctor and nurse, a staff marina positioned well away from guests, with boats plying to and fro between Laucala and Qamea Islands, laundries, mechanical and maintenance workshops. All of which guests are welcome to visit, if they so desire.

Guests don't venture much further than the 18 hole golf course, the marina and outlying waters and reef for sailing, scuba and game fishing, or past the horse stables which have their own bar for post ride refreshments.

I had scoffed when it was suggested that staying on Laucala was like being personally welcomed into a large, warm family. Just like the cynics who suggest one luxury resort is as good as another, I was proved wrong. On my departures, Fijian voices lift heavenwards in unison as the traditional farewell song "Nisa Lei" hangs in the breeze. A gentleman steps forward and bids us travel in peace. Mr Erkhart, the Sommelier discreetly proffers a tissue box to emotional departing guests. While much of Laucala is remarkable, it is this anticipation and intuition that ensures Laucala will feature in many future 'best of' lists. Redefining excellence, perfection has a new location in north eastern Fiji. 

More at www.laucala.com

Spa Laucala



Arriving at Spa Laucala, I've enrolled in a Spa Journey based on traditional Fijian rituals, combining South Pacific traditions with modern techniques. Branching off from the alfresco lounge, four secluded spa suites have their own changing pavilions hidden in the garden, while enormous open air stone baths are concealed behind reassuringly dense foliage. Stepping across the boardwalk straddling the water lily covered lake, once in the privacy of the spa suite I seem to have lost the ability to make any decisions. So I opt for the recommended Bombo massage on my first visit and arrange to continue my journey the following day with a Hot Stone massage.

Earlier, I had visited the perfume pavilion in the Spa Garden & Kitchen, the soul and spirit of the spa, if not the entire island. Personal care lotions, soaps and shampoos are prepared and bottled according to age old recipes for use in the spa, beauty salon and in guest pavilions. From four signature scents, I choose Wainimate

(an uplifting herbal medicine using local curing botany) to accompany me on my Spa Journey, though I'm also tempted by the beguiling aromas of Molikaro, (cultivated citrus fruits), Senikau, (tropical blooms) and Qele (indigenous roots, woods and spices).

Therapists continuously concoct fresh healing lotions and potions, presented in quaint, recycled glass bottles. Guests can take the opportunity for tutoring to create their own distinct essential oils, soaps or lotions, enabling them to transport the distinct aromas of Laucala home with them. I retreat to the relaxation lounge for chilled lemongrass tea and fine slivers of crisp watermelon. Seemingly floating an inch above the bare earth, I am in no condition to concentrate on driving my buggy back down the hill to my pavilion, the spa attendant has anticipated my state of mind and arranged for a driver to deliver me safely home. Just another example of pre-empting guests' needs before they're even aware of it themselves. 