



Beach nests
Laucaia Island is the
ultimate hideaway in
the South Pacific

Reservation by application

Secluded in the northernmost corner of Fiji, Nick Walton discovers a private island hideaway where privacy and luxury reign supreme

I've always fought against becoming a jaded travel journalist. I've seen it happen to so many older writers; those for whom the wonders of the world have become little more than a means to an end, a bed to crash in, an invoice to pen. But it can be hard – hotels can look the same, once noble brands can crumble like ancient civilizations, and the novelty of seeing this glorious planet can wilt like leaves on a once promising vine.

Fortunately, now and then, a place comes along that rekindles the passion, that shakes the shoulders of the travel writer's muse and screams at the top of its lungs "now for something completely different." Enter Laucala, Fiji's hidden paradise.

Owned and in the most part conceptualised by Dietrich Mateschitz, billionaire owner of Red Bull, Laucala (pronounced lo-thar-la) is one of the most northern of Fiji's 332 islands.

These picturesque but distant isles once offered little but crops of copra and respite for local fishermen, but they're now the epicentre of Fiji's new ultra luxury boom (an underwater resort is under construction further up the chain), and Laucala, which reopened in August after a post-tropical cyclone clean up, is the region's most lavish poster boy.

And with good reason. Mateschitz is pretty careful about who he lets in (or even fly over or sail around) his slice of paradise, and his guests are often just as wary about their privacy (even Google Earth is blurred over the island).

Reservation is upon application and access is via the resort's own twin-prop Beechcraft King Air plane (unless you, like many of Laucala's well-to-do guests, happen to have your own), which, after an hour's flight, lands on a modern day/night air strip.

Guests can even be cleared by Fijian immigration in situ; their itineraries and identities kept tightly under wraps. A fleet of gleaming black Land Rovers ferry the newly arrived directly from the air strip to their villa; the closest thing to a reception desk on the entire island would be the long bar in the beautifully recreated Plantation House.

Accompanied by manager/host/gatekeeper Maja Kilgore, who with husband Thomas rules over the island with a European efficiency, we pass between rows of coconut palms, past a tiny boutique and around a main pool that winds and ducks its way river-like under bridges and around boulders, coming to rest on the sandy shores of the Beach Bar's man-made lagoon.

Our villa, number six, is a thing of castaway dreams. The living room, poolside sala, master bedroom and outdoor bathroom branch away from the



Tropical paradise
Laucala is spread over a 1,200 hectare island, so you might not see any other guests while you're there



entrance like arms embracing the white sandy beach and azure seas before them. An inviting plunge pool lies at the villa's centre.

As you can probably tell, Laucala isn't your average resort. No expense has been spared; no desire unanticipated. With just 25 villas strewn across the island's southern coast, there are three penthouses – the Overwater Villa, the Peninsula Villa and the island's crowning glory, Hilltop – as well as Plateau Residences on the gentle slopes of the hinterland, and Plantation Villas down by the beach.

Every villa has its own persona and despite the fact that the showers (emphasis on the plural) and a deep bath tub fashioned from volcanic granite are both in the open air, there is little in the way of strategically placed shrubbery and lockable gates to keep out prying eyes – there is simply no need.

Thanks to London-based architect Stephen Albert, the distance between villas is ample enough to ensure privacy, and the space between hideaways is always considerable. In fact the whole resort only takes up ten percent of the 1,200-hectare island.

We set off in the morning in one of the island's souped-up golf carts for a behind-the-scenes tour with a difference. Laucala is as self-sufficient as is practical (it's not exactly an eco resort but it's doing its part) and crossing through thick native jungle, we enter The Farm. Laucala produces everything from its own pork, beef, chicken and quails eggs to bath bombs, coconut oils, lettuce leaves and sparkling water. There is an emphasis on organic produce, energy efficiency and sustainability that you wouldn't expect from such a lavish retreat.

As the sun grows tired in the sky, my partner Maggie and I make our way down manicured paths to the Rock Bar, one of the island's five dining venues.

It's a long (by golf cart standards), steep climb up to the solitary cliff-face watering hole, but one that's well worth the effort. We're greeted by flaming torches and ice cold martinis – where ever you go on Laucala, the staff seem to be able to anticipate your arrival with perfection – and settle in for a stunning Fijian sunset of peach and violet plumes.

Rock Bar is a popular spot, and even if they never discover the fine dining and walk-in wine cellar of the Plantation House, the Mediterranean tapas of the Pool Bar, the seafood grill at the Beach Bar or the Asian delicacies of Seagrass Restaurant, guests always discover the Rock Bar.

We wake early the next morning to a breakfast laid out on a beachfront dining table and the pounding of the waves nearby. I don't know if it's the sunshine and smog-free air, or if I've just been living in a gray-toned existence, but every colour seems intensified in Fiji; I've never seen a fruit salad so bright, sand so sparkling or an ocean so inviting.

Within an hour we're on Laucala's custom-built dive boat heading out to one of the nearby reefs with a whole team of cheery dive instructors all to ourselves.

As Maggie snorkels off with her aquatic minders, my instructor and I dive deep, following a mesmerisingly colourful coral wall towards the seabed, where we find shoals of trevally, goatfish and a handful of inquisitive



Trade winds
Laucala's north Fijian location is blessed with crystal clear air, creating the perfect atmosphere for stunning sunsets over the South Pacific and a pleasant environment for year-round golfing.

white-tipped reef sharks, who glide effortlessly through the current.

Unlike those coral reefs located near populated areas, Laucala's is vivid and intense in its hues, and I follow my instructor as he floats with the current, silently pointing out coral plumes, shy silvery fish and flower-like blossoms which, with a finger's touch, quickly retreat into the rock. It's an exhilarating way to start the day.

I spend my afternoon playing golf with fellow Kiwi Tony Christie. The resort's 18-hole championship course was designed by Scotsman David McLay Kidd and is (refreshingly) more challenging than your average resort course.

Of course, playing golf with a pro is like going to the beach with the All Blacks; either way you're going to come in last, but it's a great experience none the less and my game benefited from his one-on-one tutelage.

The course winds beautifully through the island's natural valleys, and is dotted with ancient trees (Mateschitz loves his trees and Laucala is blissfully bathed in green). Lunch is

served at a cliff-top half way house, complete with butler service and a few cold Vonu Pure, a new beer made from Fijian rain water.

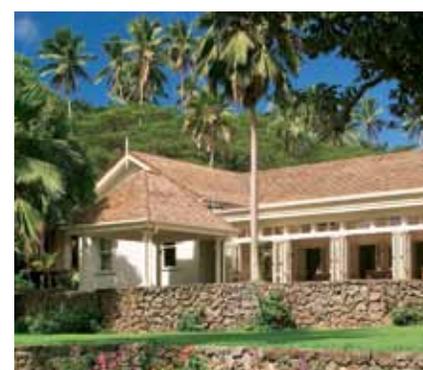
Maggie and I circumnavigate the island by jetski in the late afternoon, passing cliffs pounded by the surf and preserved mangrove forests which help reduce erosion, before setting out for a sunset cruise on the resort's luxurious day cruiser.

As the sun sets behind Taveuni, another island in the northern chain, we're plied with champagne and sashimi before a ridiculously romantic vista from the vessel's foredeck.

The day, and our Laucala stay, finishes with dinner and glasses of rose champagne at the Seagrass restaurant. Located at the southeastern tip of the resort, the timber-clad eatery epitomising the best of Fijian al fresco dining, with dishes like kokonda – fresh fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk – offset by fiery Asian curries. There is cliff-side dining, welcoming deck chairs for post-dinner star gazing and a wine list as long as your arm.

On the drive 'home', down moonlit paths

between coconut palm silhouettes, we contemplate setting an alarm for our early morning flight back to Nadi, but decide that with the 'airport' only two minutes from our villa, the pilot will forgive us for lingering just that little bit longer.



The Essentials

- Villas start from US\$3,800 per night up to US\$35,000 for Hilltop.