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FIJI FANTASTIC

THIS SOUTH PACIFIC NATION NOW HAS ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP PRIVATE-ISLAND RESORTS, **LAUCALA ISLAND.**

BY GARY WALTHER

I have a hangover.

Unlike hangovers past, I don't regret this one at all. I don't feel guilty, I have no memories that make me wince, and I recall exactly what I did and with whom.

I've just come back from Laucala, a year-old private-island resort on the northern fringe of the Fijian archipelago. Over three days I grew intoxicated with the effortlessness of life there—the resort is a zero-g environment of worldly pleasures and now, back on Earth, I am feeling the weight of daily life. Where is my nitrous-oxide glide?

I've been to scores of luxury resorts in the course of my travel-writing career, and I can assure you that few manage to produce this sensation. That's because as good as these properties are, they are also their own kind of work, with menus to be scanned, choices to be made, and reservations to be booked.

Laucala (the *c* is pronounced *th*, by the way) starts from a different premise: Make a wish, we'll make it happen. Even just express an inkling. One morning on the way to breakfast I asked the concierge, out of curiosity really, whether one could bike around the island. When I returned to my villa, there was a brand new Trek mountain bike standing in the golf-cart port with a note appended saying a guide was at my disposal, just say when. Your wish in one restaurant somehow gets jungle-telegraphed to the others—the New Zealand sauvignon blanc, again, sir? And there's always a Jeeves tying up loose ends without your

having to ask. I left a pair of loafers at the golf club one morning and later that day, while toodling down the road in my golf cart (every guest gets one), suddenly saw the assistant pro materialize on foot at a junction. I left your shoes with the concierge, sir. This is the land of yes.

Laucala can double-, even triple-team guests because it employs 329 staff. That's 4.11 of them for every one of you when the resort is full (80 people). The number shoots up to 13:1 when expressed as staff-to-room ratio, the industry standard. To put that number in perspective, I contacted Sean Hennessey, CEO of Lodging Investment Advisors, in New York. A Marriott typically has .70s staff per room, Hennessey told me. Once you get to the luxury level—by which he meant a Four Seasons or Peninsula—the ratio climbs to 1 to 1.5 employees per room. Laucala even exceeds Swiss five-star hotels, which are a benchmark of service in the world of hotelkeeping. Which is probably why Thomas Kilgore, who with his wife, Maja, run Laucala, confidently offered this on-a-matchbook-cover characterization of the resort: Middle European standards of hotel-keeping in the middle of nowhere.

Laucala is the vision of Dietrich Mateschitz, the inventor of Red Bull and the occupant of rung 208 on Forbes 2010 Billionaires List (estimated net worth: \$4.1 billion). Mateschitz purchased Laucala in 2003 from the Forbes family for \$10 million. Malcolm Forbes had bought the island in 1972, when it was an overgrown

copra plantation, put up some modest accommodations, but pretty much kept the island as it was. Transforming the property into the ultra-luxe resort it is now was a pharaonic undertaking, the sort of extreme effort (Formula 1 racing, parachute skiing) celebrated in the Red Bull magazine, *Red Bulletin*.

What makes Laucala interesting is the two sides of its personality. There is, of course, the extremely high luxe quotient. I had a one-bedroom Plantation Villa, which at 4,305 square feet of living space under the roof is one of the smallest. Factor in the gardens, outdoor living spaces, and beachfront and the total jumps to 26,909 square feet. Within the villa was a 322-square-foot bathroom. But just outside the door was a large palapa sheltering a tub and washbasin, and around the corner was an outdoor shower. (On the third day, I discovered that the villa had a second outdoor shower around the other side; turns out they all do.) The living area down a flight of steps from my bedroom was more than enough elbow room for two people, but then there was a full living room across the breezeway. There were two lounging palapas beside the pool, which is a proper one, not a postage-stamp plunge model. And there were two al fresco-dining options: a sala near the pool and a deck just back from the ocean, which the staff would turn into a restaurant for two on short notice. (We're always ready for you, says Maya Kilgore.) Nothing succeeds like worldly excess.

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Fiji

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The special suites, of which there are three, have a Goldfinger-gone-native feel. Peninsula is a four-storey aerie of love nooks and nests—"the hotel version of *Viagra*," quipped one person upon seeing it—some 60 feet above the sea. It's the kind of room that turns clothing optional into nudity mandatory. Overwater has a pool carved into a massive rock above the sea and an infield of decking. Hilltop, Mateschitz's abode when he is on island, gives the occupant an eye-of-God perspective on the world for \$25,000 per night.

That same spare-no-expense mentality drove the design of the public spaces. The huge free-form pool (nearly 60,000 square feet) contains within it three lap pools with transparent sides—aquaria for people. There are five restaurants—what 89-guest resort has five restaurants? The resort hired a star, David McLay Kidd, the designer of Bandon Dunes in Oregon and the Castle Course at St. Andrews, to create the golf course. "If this were any other place, this, this, and this," said Kidd, stabbing his index finger into a map of the golf course, "would be real estate." Instead, he said, the mandate was to create a course that would give the player the feel of exploring the island, which you certainly get from McLay Kidd's frequent and deft use of elevated tees. (This is a course for the golfer who likes forced carries.) His biggest challenge, said McLay Kidd, was carving fairways out of the jungle while minimizing the number of trees removed, a requirement imposed by

Mateschitz and the Kilgores. (At any other resort, that grove at the back of the 13th green would have been cut down to open up the ocean view.)

That gives you a clue to the other side to Laucala: sustainability and green thinking. You don't expect a resort GM to say this: "Pasture management is one of the most important things we do." That's Maya Kilgore happily observing some of the 36 head of cattle (a Hereford-Limousin mix) chewing their cud in the shade on a humid morning. The herd supplies meat for the restaurants and staff—ham, sausages, and aged beef. There's a flock of 900 quail ("You need a breeding stock of 600 before you can slaughter 10 a week," says Maja), a condominium full of chickens, a hydroponic garden for vegetables, an orchid nursery with 4,000 blooms, a pig farm, and a breed of sheep called Fiji Fantastics that don't have to be shorn. They shed their own fleece. The spa makes its own lotions and potions. "The goal is to be 90% self-sufficient," says Maya.

For all the luxury on offer, my most vivid memory is the challenge of mountain biking the road around the island's perimeter, a 12-mile oxblood red ribbon of rock, cinder, and often mud. I labored up the enormous hill that doglegs past the Rock Lounge, then labored down it, delicately braking and steering for the hard-pack. There was dampness everywhere—three and four inches of rain in an hour is not uncommon here. The vines were as thick as a thigh, ficus and figs grasped on to boulders with

roots like octopus tentacles, and in one or two places, I just plowed through branches overhanging the track. Frogs surface-dived into puddles and with a wriggle or two, dissolved into the muddy bottom, and land crabs ran en-pointe along the tide line. Round a curve we scared the hell out of a flock of feral goats. At one point I came over a rise and the road just dropped away, a slalom down to a mangrove-studded beach. The resort record for the ride is 59 minutes, set by a professional mountain biker. In the ordinary-guest category, I think my 73 minutes is going to stand for a while as the time to beat.

Laucala is an all-inclusive resort. The villas start at \$3,800 (for a one-bedroom) and for that you get unlimited rounds of golf, a day of deep-sea fishing, and one spa session. The only extras are the flight over on the resort's six-seater King Air 200 (\$600 a person each way) and bottles from the reserve wine list. You can rent the entire island for \$150,000 a night. (There's a four-night minimum, by the way.) That's \$1,875 per person per night, assuming you round up 79 friends.

At the end of the day, this is admittedly a damn-the-expense destination, but one that is adept at repaying you with experiences that you'll dine out on for a long time. "When I hooked that big wahoo," said a friend of mine who spent mornings out on the 41-foot Riviera fishing boat, "my first thought was, now what do I do with my flute of Champagne?"