



GREAT  
ESCAPES  
'11

*The 12th hole at Laucala stretches to the South Pacific.  
Opposite page: The Peninsula residence sits atop an ocean bluff.*

By **Martin Kaufmann**

**Laucala Island, Fiji**

**David McLay Kidd** first came to Laucala Island more than five years ago to build a golf course in a jungle so dense that King Kong could get lost in it. At the time, hundreds of workers had just arrived to carry out a fantastical mission: They were going to turn the north side of the 3,000-acre former coconut plantation into a private, seven-star resort.

Kidd recently recalled those days while sitting in Laucala's small Teppanyaki bar that hangs off a cliff above the South Pacific, eating fresh wahoo caught the day before by a friend whose biggest concern upon hooking the 50-pound fish was: Now what do I do with my champagne flute?

Such are the weighty decisions that confront Laucala's guests: Do I golf or strap on scuba gear and explore the region's famous coral reefs? Do I arrange a Thai massage in my private home or at the open-air spa overlooking the ocean? Do I circle the island on a Sea-Doo or a mountain bike? Do I relax by my private pool or the 16,400-square-foot, oceanside lagoon? There are no wrong answers.

As Kidd said, "There's no 'why?'; there's just 'why not?'"

For this, you can thank the millions of caffeine junkies worldwide who can't make it through a day without



Red Bull. Austrian billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz launched the energy-drink company in the mid-1980s. A reclusive sportsman of sorts, he has acquired the various trappings of wealth – auto-racing teams, soccer clubs and Laucala, which he bought from the Forbes family for approximately £7 million.

By some accounts, Mateschitz spent more than \$300 million building Laucala, proving Fitzgerald's axiom that "the very rich . . . are different from you and me." As a business proposition,

Laucala makes as much sense as slamming six Red Bulls before boarding the 10-hour flight from Los Angeles to Nadi International Airport.

"There's no way we'll make a return on investment," said Maja Kilgore, who, along with husband Thomas, runs Laucala. "But operationally, that's possible, perhaps soon."

When a guest on a sunset cruise noted that, from the sea, the trees in front of the Plantation House restaurant were perfectly aligned, Maja said, "Well, what did you expect? We're German."

For all of its unpretentious luxury, building and operating Laucala is an ongoing marvel. Witnessing it brought to mind the 1982 film "Fitzcarraldo," the story of a man who hatches the idea to pull a 320-ton steamship over a steep hill in the Peruvian jungle to access a remote Amazon tributary.

Laucala's sheer existence is a testament not just to Mateschitz's wealth and vision, but to the doggedness and logistical acumen of the Kilgores. What does it take to operate a private island resort in the middle of the South Pacific? Thomas Kilgore ticks off some of the key numbers: 110,000 liters of diesel, 22,000 liters of unleaded fuel, 166,000 cubic meters of water, 120 vehicles, 13 boat captains, 12 generators and three planes.

**Laucala, P58 >>>**

# 'why not?'

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE ON FIJI'S LAUCALA ISLAND



<< **Laucala, P57**

Kilgore was particularly excited about the pending acquisition of a barge, ensuring total control of the supply chain.

Laucala is almost entirely self-sufficient. That includes grass-fed Hereford and Limousin cattle, which are known for their lean beef, and a large hydroponics operation that makes possible such extraordinary delicacies as tomato ice cream. (Yes, tomato.) Toiletries such as soap and shampoo, as well as the spa's signature scents, are made from island-grown herbs.

Making all of this possible are 329 attentive employees – an extraordinary number, given that Laucala can accommodate only 80 guests – who discreetly keep paradise in order. When hiring staff, Thomas Kilgore says he looked for “the sparkling in the eye and friendliness. The rest we can teach.” Seemingly nothing is overlooked. If you rise early enough, you’ll even see work crews silhouetted in the pre-dawn light sweeping seaweed off the beach, lest the offending algae should in any way diminish the guests’ experience.

Needless to say, this isn’t for everyone. Laucala is all-inclusive, with homes starting at \$3,800 per night, unless you want to spring for Mateschitz’s residence, which starts at \$26,000. Given those rates, Kidd’s layout doesn’t figure to be heavily played. That’s a shame; regardless of whether you like his architectural work, it’s always interesting.

Laucala was Kidd’s most difficult assignment. Lacking a topographical map, he created the routing through trial-and-error. He would direct a crew



*No. 2 at Laucala was carved from the forest.*

*Opposite page: The Peninsula gives special meaning to the phrase ‘ocean-view room.’*

of workers to hack a path through the jungle using machetes. If they ran into a rock formation or another obstacle, he would send them off in another direction, then another, until he found a path that worked. Even more difficult was getting the grass to grow; heavy rains repeatedly washed away the turf.

The course would benefit from

**For more on Laucala:**  
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some judicious tree clearing to open more ocean views. For instance, the 13th green has the makings of a classic infinity green, but for an unnecessary stand of trees behind the green. Similarly, there’s the need for more frequent clearing of fast-growing underbrush to allow the coconut trees to provide greater definition of holes and create more opportunities



for recovery shots from the rough.

At its best, this style is exhibited at the fourth – dubbed Delana, or Hill Top – where the elevated tee showcases the jungle, while the trees neatly

frame the dogleg. The motif comes together nicely at the par-5 12th, which meanders down to an oceanfront green. And the 10th is a particularly entertaining short par 4 that plays

along Wai Vitala Bay.

Kidd, who sometimes has been criticized for designing unnecessarily penal layouts, describes Laucala as “my biggest attempt to make a playable course. There’s already enough going on here.”

He was talking about the terrain of the golf course. He just as easily could have been talking about Laucala itself.