

Republic *Of Laucala*

NICK WALTON FINDS SOLACE AND
INSPIRATION IN FIJI'S HIDDEN PARADISE.

Facing page: The view from Seagrass restaurant.

Below: The Hilltop presidential suite isolated at the island's highest point.

OWNED AND CONCEPTUALIZED BY DIETRICH MATESCHITZ, BILLIONAIRE OWNER OF RED BULL, LAUCALA IS ONE OF THE NORTHERN MOST OF FIJI'S 332 ISLANDS.

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 conceptualized by Dietrich Mateschitz, billionaire owner of Red Bull, Laucala (pronounced lo-thar-la) is one of the northern most of Fiji's 332 islands. While once these picturesque but distant isles offered little but crops of copra and respite for local fishermen, 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 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 beer-goggled 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 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 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 outdoor showers (emphasis on the plural), a deep outdoor bath tub fashioned from volcanic granite, and the natural 'on holiday' urges of the sun deck, there is little in the way of strategically placed shrubbery and lockable gates, simply because there's no need. The space between villas is ample and the space between



Above: Laucala even has its own road signs while the Plantation House offers fine dining, fine wines and spectacular ocean views.



Facing page: Seagrass restaurant offers modern Asian cuisine in colonial styling.

Laucala comes with its own fleet of luxury vessels.

occupied hideaways always considerable, thanks to a little pre-planning by the house keeping department and plenty of thought given by London architect Stephen Albert. 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 and beef, through to chicken and quails eggs, bath bombs and 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 arrive 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 and 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 dive instructors all to ourselves. It seems every Fijian I come across has one thing on his mind – the Hong Kong 7s – and Air Pacific's new direct flights have them all saving up their Fijian dollars for a future visit.

As Maggie snorkels off with her aquatic minders my instructor and I dive deep, following a mesmerizingly colourful coral wall towards the sea bed, where we find shoals of trevally, goat fish and a handful of inquisitive 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 its 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 – off set 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. **FRV**

The Essentials

Villas start from US\$3,800 per night up to US\$35,000 for Hilltop. For more details go to www.laucala.com.

