

FANTASY ISLAND

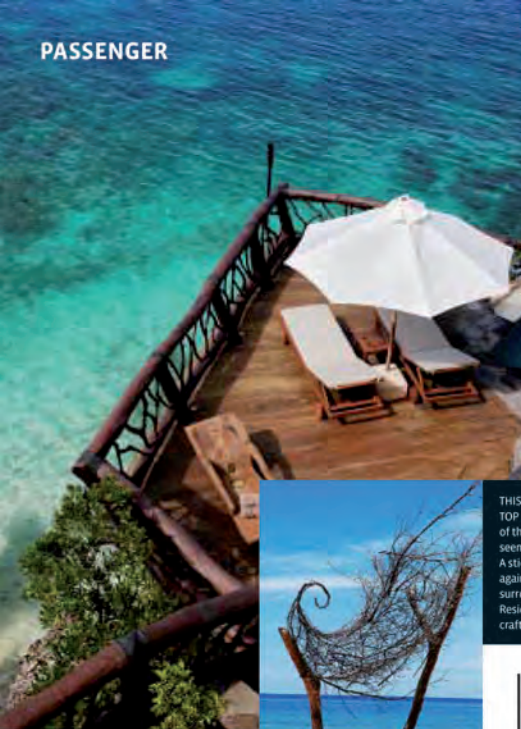
Every wish and whim – and then some – can be indulged on Laucala Island, a very private, luxe resort off the coast of Fiji.

PHOTOGRAPHS JEREMY SIMONS WORDS PAUL MYERS

PASSENGER

THIS PAGE The secluded Peninsula Residence is perched on the edge of a cliff and enjoys spectacular ocean views. OPPOSITE PAGE Looking over the turquoise waters of the South Pacific towards the Peninsula Residence.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The entertaining deck of the Peninsula Residence seems to hang over the water. A sick sculpture stands out against the horizon. Lush gardens surround the pool at the Hilltop Residence. A variety of marine craft are at guests' disposal.



owning a tropical island and controlling the air space and ocean around it is the ultimate statement of wealth, power and style, welcoming one of the world's most influential people as a paying guest must be the definitive endorsement. Not that Red Bull maestro Dietrich Mateschitz, the owner of Laucala Island (pronounced lo-thar-la) off Fiji's north-east coast, or Oprah Winfrey wanted it known that the queen of daytime television had ventured to the idyllic South Seas hideaway after her Australian extravaganza last December. Nor does the 67 year-old Austrian billionaire bachelor urgently need the \$30,000 a night that it costs to stay in his private hilltop villa.

Such was the hoopla surrounding Oprah's antipodean odyssey that, unlike Laucala's other guests whose identities aren't revealed, there was no escaping her post-Oz R&R destination.

The publicity can't have damaged Laucala's zen-like reputation. Described by some as heaven on earth – which it is for former owner, publishing magnate Malcolm Forbes, whose ashes are interred there – Laucala provides all the trappings expected by guests for whom time and privacy, not money, are obstacles. Officially, you have to “apply” to stay there. If you venture close-by uninvited, the island's super-efficient German managers, Thomas and Maja Kilgore, can exercise Laucala's control over its air space and waters and require you to move on.

The guarantee of secrecy – unless, it seems, you're Oprah – means that if you wish to enter Fiji anonymously, Laucala will arrange for customs and immigration to clear you into the country in situ. Alternatively, a sleek, private (of course) Beechcraft King Air will meet you at Nadi Airport for the 45-minute flight to paradise.

On arrival, you're welcomed by an island choir, chauffeured in a black Land Rover through a former copra plantation to one of 25 villas (costing from \$3800 to \$8500 a night, if you eschew the owner's private pad), then fed, pampered and treated like royalty. You could say it's Robinson Crusoe on Krug.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Handmade wooden walkways connect the various pavilions of each residence. The pool bar has an indoor/outdoor ambience. Manager's Thomas and Maja Kilgore and dog Troy. The interior design of the residences reflects the tropical location.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Textile materials are used to great effect in the Hilltop Residence. The sun sets on Laucala's main beach. Any time is the right time for a drink at the thatched-roof Beach Bar.



There's a choice of five restaurants, each with a distinctive style of cuisine, and serving organic food mostly grown on the island. The resident sommelier's wine list is as enticing as the 14 square-kilometre hideaway itself, and 350 (yes, that many) staff are available – but always in the background – to meet guests' every wish. At your disposal is a yacht, numerous other marine craft, a world-class 18-hole golf course, a day spa for which all the products are made on the island, horses to ride along the beach and, naturally, your own private villa pool.

At an estimated total cost of \$300 million, London-based architect Stephen Albert and hotel interior designer Lynne Hunt created what may be the world's most exclusive island facilities. The infrastructure took two years to build before Laucala opened in early 2009. Last year, it closed for six months after a cyclone, but is now fully functioning again.

Lynne Hunt, whose recent projects include Mar Menor in Spain and London's Hilton Park Lane refurbishment, has created an eclectic mix of contemporary design meets Oceania chic. Using local, European and Australian suppliers, bright handmade rugs, pastel-patterned cushions, artistic lights, rustic carved wooden tables, bowl-shaped rattan chairs, sweeping sitting areas and deep wood bathtubs of various shapes and sizes are among her exquisite touches.

The villa interiors, marked by dramatic soaring beams joined with dyed *magimagi* coconut husk twine, flow seamlessly from inside to out. Elements of nature appear in jellyfish lamps, coral shapes in the rugs, and through the use of local colour – the turquoise of the water, the cream of the sand, the tropical green of the foliage and the azure blue of the sky.

Sir Richard Branson, Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio, Mel Gibson and David Copperfield are among other celebrity island owners, but you have to be fully connected to stay at their retreats. On Laucala, if you have the whim and the wherewithal, you can have it all. **15**

For more information, go to laucala.com.

PASSENGER



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Guests can watch the sun set from the end of the jetty. As the name implies, the Overwater Residence opens directly to the ocean. A semi-alfresco bathroom. Inviting pool at the Plantation Residence.

