


Paradise in the Pacific

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"I hate to overuse the word," Malcolm Forbes once wrote, "but Laucala is idyllic." And idyllic it is, in every sense of the word. The billionaire would know. He owned the 3000-acre landmass before Austrian businessman Dietrich Mateschitz (the co-founder of Red Bull) bought it over for \$7 million. Rumour has it Mateschitz put in another half a billion-dollars to give the former coconut plantation a makeover. And the results are well worth it.

From the moment you arrive at Nadi International Airport you get star treatment: an escort at security, a VIP check-in and your very own private jet. A short and scenic forty-five minutes later at Laucala Island, things get even more indulgent—the resort has its very own airport where diplomats can clear customs and a hangar for plane servicing (Mateschitz loves his jets—he owns a collection of vintage aircrafts). The staff greets you with a Fijian welcome song and the managers, a German couple, Maja and Thomas Kilgore come by to give you a tour of your new private playground.

Checking into Laucala is the closest you can get to renting out your own island. With 25 ultra-luxe residences sprawling over 12km, chances are you won't bump into anyone. Even the 350 staff members are so discreet that you begin wonder if they are hiding in the bushes. Hidden by coconut trees, Nawi Hill forest and tropical foliage, each villa camouflages into the landscape with its thatched roof. The hilltop property stands tall at the highest point on the island, while the peninsula estate is so secluded that you need to walk across a 180-meter long boardwalk to get to the front door. The last thing you have to worry about is a nosy neighbour.

There's no denying Tarzan and Jane would have picked Laucala for their honeymoon. The doorbell to each villa is a traditional Fijian Lale drum, the chandeliers are made from coconut threads and shells, the 'Do Not Disturb' sign is replaced with a red coconut while housekeeping is summoned with a green coconut. The custom-made furniture combines mahogany, local Vesi wood and pine. The bathrooms look like a slick version of Fred Flinstone's with volcanic rock walls, Indonesian stone and giant bathtubs carved out of a single block of stone or wood. Each villa merges seamlessly with nature, so there are plenty of sleeping, eating and bathing options indoors and outdoors. You also get your very own stretch of beach and a swimming pool or two.

Parked outside the villa you'll find a set of wheels for your stay in the form of a golf buggy. It's the perfect tool to discover the island's various activities including an 18-hole golf course designed by David McLay Kidd. Head to the jetty to scuba, snorkel, surf or jet ski. You'll also find a super-fast catamaran from the Beijing Olympics and stables with Fijian horse. The swimming pool is the longest in the Southern Hemisphere with turquoise lagoons that make quite a sight when tikki torches light up at night. Every activity comes with energy boosters of encouraging staff, trays of fresh fruit shots, scented cool towels, hot cassava chips, amuse bouches, and for those who ask, chilled Noma—Fiji's favourite beer.

The five restaurants on island stay open every day, whether there are any guests visiting or not, and the degustation menus change daily as per the guests' dietary habits. Whether you fancy seven-courses at the fine-dine Plantation House Restaurant, teppanyaki by the sea at the Seagrass Lounge, finger foods at Rock Lounge, barbecue at the Beach Bar or Mediterranean fare at the Pool Bar, you will quickly realise that you can request to eat anything, anywhere, anytime. At Laucala not only are you very spoilt, but nobody will say 'no' to you. Especially not head chef Torsten Voigt.

What's even more special about Laucala is that it's almost 80percent self-sustainable. Everything from cocoa to coffee, vanilla to chillies is grown on the 240 acres of farmland. Forget about drinking Fiji bottled water, Laucala produces its very own purified by volcanic mineral. If that's not enough, the honey and bread are made from scratch here too.

Although you feel a million miles away from home, you truly do feel like you're in the heart of uber-luxe Fiji. The Kilgore's manage to tastefully incorporate the local culture into the resort charmingly. For starters they've maintained the island's very own cultural village complete with a chief's hut, a spirit house and village hall where you'll find Laucala's full-time wood carver. The straw hats, yoga mats and other weaved accessories in the villas are made here by local artisans. All the bath and spa products are hand-concocted with native citrus trees, spices, tropical bloom and coconut. The recommended massage at the spa is Bombo, a traditional technique using the therapist's elbows, knees and feet to soothe muscles. For a sundowner guests can do as the Fijians do and participate in the Kava ceremony of drinking a heady potion made from the famous Pacific plant's roots. There'll be enough staff to join in and sing along.

If you want to visit Fiji, don't bother going anywhere else but Laucala Island. It's no wonder that there are rumours that paparazzi-shy celebrities like Oprah spent her Christmas break here, or that the Prince of Qatar touched down on the island's tarmac. Or that Lisa Kudrow was spotted tanning here, and the Schwarzenegger kids flew in for a water sports holiday. But if you quiz the Kilgore's about their famous clientele they will be sure to remain loyally tight-lipped. They've set a new standard for pampering, one that'll be hard to top for a long while yet.

Laucala Island Resort, Laucala Island, Fiji (www.laucala.com)

- Rishna Shah

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