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heaven on earth of perfection

Editor Paul Myers is blown away – if only metaphorically – by Red Bull owner Dietrich Mateschitz's private Fijian island retreat, where golf is just one of many activities on the menu.

There may be more luxurious and idyllic destinations on Planet Earth than Laucala Island off the north-east coast of Fiji, but if they exist please point me in the right direction – now. Because, quite simply, I know of nowhere that rivals the exquisite, sumptuous development undertaken on the tropical paradise that was previously owned by US publishing magnate, Malcolm Forbes, and is now the private retreat of Red Bull energy drink and Scuderia Toro Rosso/Red Bull formula one racing owner, Dietrich Mateschitz.

People in the know say the Austrian billionaire's island retreat is so far ahead of those owned by Richard Branson, Johnny Depp, David Copperfield, Eddie Murphy and Nicolas Cage in the Caribbean, or by Mel Gibson and Teihotu Brando, son of the late Marlon Brando, in the South Pacific, that it's like a 50-lap race between an F1 and a VW Kombi.

I believe them, because for anyone with an indulgent bent and an appreciation of the highest levels of design, furnishing, ambience, food and service, Laucala (pronounced lo-thar-la) is possibly as close to heaven on earth as you can get. For Malcolm Forbes it certainly is: his ashes are interred here.



Despite an estimated \$US300 million spent rebuilding the infrastructure from the ground up, nothing on the island can be described as "over the top". Certainly not when you hire a top London architect and interior designer to piece together the intricate jigsaw of accommodation, restaurants and other



facilities to ensure separation, space and privacy. Indeed, you wouldn't know how many visitors were staying at any particular time. Which is intentional.

Officially, you have to "apply" to visit Laucala, and so seriously is every visitor's privacy preserved and respected that nobody will say who has stayed there since it opened at the end of 2008: presumably, a good representation of the rich and famous. The island's managers, German hotel executives, Thomas and Maja Kilgore, are tight-lipped about past and future guests and will even arrange for Fiji customs and immigration officers to clear guests into the country in situ if they arrive directly by sea or air and/or wish to bypass prying eyes at Nadi International Airport.

Even for those arriving at Nadi, Laucala's discreet private hangar with bar and lounge, adjacent to the main terminal, is a welcome pit-stop before the 50-minute flight on the private Beechcraft King Air twin turboprop across Viti Levu to the most north-easterly of Fiji's 322-island chain.



Laucala's 25 "residences" (they're far too sumptuous to be referred to as "bures") range from one to three bedrooms in three locations: eleven Plantation residences built on the old copra plantation, seven Seagrass residences on a serene bay surrounded by jungle, and four Plateau residences on a hilltop with views across the sea to neighbouring islands and over the island's lagoon.

Three other unique single residences complete the accommodation options: the owner's huge secluded Hilltop residence, an Overwater residence with private jetty, and a Peninsula residence offering extraordinary views along the coast and across the aquamarine sea.

To describe the residences as luxurious is an understatement. Designed by London-based architect Stephen Albert with interior furnishings by another Briton, Lynne Hunt, no expense or touch has been spared. Every piece of furniture, painting, rug, cushion, bathtub and ornament are unique – apparently unable to be sourced elsewhere.

With five world-class restaurants, numerous boats and watercraft, horses, a hidden-away spa, an organic farm producing most of the island's food, and of course the golf course, Laucala has so much to offer – in a restrained, tasteful, peaceful way – that you hardly know where to start. You would never go there just to play golf, or for any other single reason, except perhaps to relax and not be noticed. The cost (yes, it's very expensive) and quality is such that you either want to do as much as you can or sit back and take it all in, occasionally pinching yourself as a reminder that this is, in fact, for real.

Options include relaxing around the huge 5000 square-metre main pool and pool bar with its soaring triple thatched roof that seems like a Fijian interpretation of Sydney's Opera House, fishing on the Riviera 41 flybridge cruiser, sailing on the newly-arrived and restored Woolacott 36 yacht or one of numerous Hobie cats, diving or snorkelling on the horseshoe-shaped reef surrounding the island, horseriding on the beach, enjoying one of numerous treatments in the secluded hilltop spa, walking or riding a golf buggy around the island, or playing golf.

And then there's the food, prepared by gourmet chefs and presented with the style and panache of a Michelin-rated restaurant. Fresh local seafood, organic meats, island-grown vegetables and salads, teppanyaki and Asian delicacies, accompanied by new and old world wines and served by the most attentive, friendly staff you'll ever find make eating at Laucala a truly incredible experience.

German managers

Laucala's German husband and wife managers, Thomas and Maja Kilgore, (below) were convinced to abandon an imminent posting with luxury hotel group Relais & Chateaux in Hungary to take up the management opportunity on Laucala for owner, Dietrich Mateschitz.

Thomas, a chef by training, and Maja had just completed a posting at Burg Schlitz in northern Germany and were travelling to Hungary when they were approached. It didn't take them long to accept what they consider one of the best jobs in hotel and resort management.



Previously the couple had managed the Matahari Beach Resort & Spa in Bali and a property in the Philippines. Both keen horseriders and lovers of the outdoors, Thomas and Maja have successfully blended delightful, natural Fijian charm with European efficiency among the resort's 350 mostly Fijian staff.

David's Goliath

So far, few golfers have had the opportunity to play the David McLay Kidd-designed 6245 metres, par-72 layout that was completed on Laucala Island late last year. But as you would expect from one of the world's top golf course architects, who was engaged by the world's 151st richest billionaire in 2009 (according, appropriately, to Forbes magazine), the course leaves nothing to be desired. A bit like David creating Goliath.

Most of the first nine holes meander through thick jungle, reminiscent of courses in Malaysia and Indonesia, before arriving at the ocean on the eighth green, a short par-5 named Devil's Drop with a precarious cliff rising from the ocean and very limited room behind the green.



Laucala's golf pro, former New Zealand touring player Tony Christie, says the course is unique, with

few holes visible from one another. Large undulating greens with many deceptive breaks add to the difficulty. "It's a fun course that's quite fair and won't beat you up," Tony says. "Once you've played it a couple of times, you'll undoubtedly want to come back. With a bit of local knowledge you'll work out how to make par and undoubtedly score better."

So true, because hefty carries from the tee over a lake, several watercourses and dead areas need to be negotiated before even thinking about an approach to the green on numerous holes. David McLay Kidd's designs, which include Bandon Dunes, Oregon, the first genuine Scottish links-style course in the US, the Castle Course at St Andrews (featured in GV Issue 1) and the remodel of Gleneagles' PGA Centenary course (this issue), always have a sting in the tail and this is no exception.

The opening three holes are especially challenging. The first, an attractive dogleg right to a narrow green, is a tricky 391-metre par-4 that requires two precise shots. The second, a whopping 483-metre par 4, Index 1 on the card, needs a 216-metre tee shot to reach the fairway and a precise uphill approach for the second or (more likely) third shot. And the 521-metre, par-5 third hole calls for yet another long tee shot over a watercourse to be in position for par.

There are many beautiful holes on the course, demonstrating great character and thoughtful design, and no gimmies. Among the standouts are the 451-metre par-5 eighth where a decision has to be made to either lay up with the second shot or take a risk and go for the green. As Tony Christie observes, it's a real risk and reward situation. Even the shortest par-4, the 272-metre 10th demands an almost 200-metre tee shot to get in play, followed by a shot to a particularly narrow green.

And the 12th – wow! It may be only 472 metres, short for a par-5, but the greenside bunker which is an extension of the beach, is both distracting and potentially diabolical.

Laucala is a real thinking course, a constant test, but moreover a wonderful, uplifting experience. Tony Christie hopes to be able to host a skins game featuring keynote players on Laucala – perhaps after the Presidents Cup in November 2011. Until then, it's likely to be a well-kept secret.

Time out for Tony

Laucala golf pro, Tony Christie (below) is taking time away from touring to manage the island's golf facility.

Raised in Christchurch, NZ, he took up golf at 11 and played as an amateur until he was 22, representing New Zealand three times in the Eisenhower Cup. He turned pro in 1993, playing on the Asian and Australasian tours. Victory in the 1994 Malaysian Masters set up a string of successes, including runner-up in the 1995 Pakistan Masters, victory in the 1997 Fiji Open and 1998 Tahiti and New Caledonia Opens. He won the Fiji Open three more times – in 2000, 2003 and 2007 – as well as taking two more Tahiti and one other New Caledonia Open titles.

In 2005, Tony won the Cairns Classic with an 11-under par 61 in the final round.

Now aged 40, Tony has by no means given touring away and has plans to again pit his skills against others in the region.

Judging by his past successes, he'll do well. "I always seem to play well in the islands," says this likeable, unassuming golf professional whose other interest, rugby, reflects his kiwi upbringing.

at a glance

Getting there: Laucala Island is off the north-east coast of Taveuni, Fiji's third largest island.

With approval of the managers, it can be reached by private yacht or aircraft (up to 40t max takeoff weight), or guests will be met at Nadi by Laucala's Beechcraft King Air.

Accommodation: Choice of private residences from \$US3800/night (one bedroom), \$US5500/night (two bedroom), \$US8200/night (three bedroom). Peninsula residence (1br) \$US5500/night, Overwater residence (2br) \$US6500/night, Hilltop (two residences) \$US26,000-35,000/night).

Inclusions: Meals, wines, bar, housekeeping, golf, tennis, horseriding, diving, water skiing, windsurfing, catamarans, 2-hour spa package.

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