

Laucala Island: Rest of the world is another place

By Anna King Shahab – 1326 Words

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/travel/news/article.cfm?c_id=7&objectid=11769713

10:00 AM Monday Dec 19, 2016

What's it like to stay at the private island hideaway of one of the world's wealthiest entrepreneurs? Anna King Shahab finds out.



Laucala Island offers dramatic extremes in landscape.

At Laucala Island, in the northern islands of Fiji, there's no gold taps; instead -a true wealth of more understated, ultimate luxury.

One arrives at Laucala by private plane, of course. From the international airport at Nadi on Viti Levu, it's a breezy 50-minute journey on Laucala's own six-seater aircraft to the 1400ha paradise owned by Red Bull founder, Austrian Dietrich Mateschitz. As we descend towards the island's impressively long tarmac, the postcard beauty of Laucala comes into focus. Swaying palms, thatched bures, pristine golden sand, coral reef, turquoise water, blue skies - Mateschitz's desire to protect the pristine beauty of the place is already evident.



A big Fijian welcome party has gathered to serenade our first steps on the island, placing flowers behind our ears and greeting us with harmonies as we refresh by sipping from young coconuts and dabbing our faces with scented damp towels. The pampering has begun.

We're shown round our huge two-bedroom villa by Isei, who points out the traditional building techniques and materials used (including beautiful magi magi - coconut thread patterned binding on the big tree trunks that form the roof structure) and the way the details mirror the natural treasures of the island. "Two bedroom villa" doesn't really paint the picture. This is a series of pavilions: two ginormous bedroom wings each with an outdoor bathroom, and a dressing room the size of my house, and four poster super-king bed, joined by a central living pavilion complete with fully stocked bar - with no irksome price list in sight.

Because that's another feature of a holiday on Laucala; the rates are truly all-inclusive, so not only can you sup champagne or Red Bull to your heart's desire, you can wine and dine at any of the island's five restaurants and bars whenever the whim takes you, and book in for as few or as many of the island's activities, all included in your room rate.



A private island covering 12km in Laucala.

And it's the calibre of the cuisine and activities, and the strong sustainability ethos that put Laucala streaks ahead of other luxury resorts.

A tour of the large organic garden, hydroponics houses, herb garden, orchards and farm is a great way to see where the food on your plate is coming from. About 85 per cent of the produce used is grown or raised on the island; it's a mammoth operation but one of which the staff are clearly very proud.

Sous Chef Patrick and Head Landscaper Vili take us on a tour. We walk through an indoor forest of heirloom tomatoes and row upon row of delicate hydroponic lettuces shaded from the fierce Fijian sun, past lush trees dripping with soursop, through stalls where tiny piglets snuggle up to their huge mamas, and past pretty wagyu calves sheltering from the midday sun.

Head Chef Jean-Luc Amman has recently arrived on the island, and when we bring a few baskets of goodies back from the garden to his kitchen at Plantation House Restaurant, a huge smile spreads across his face. "These tomatoes," he says, slicing into ruby red and bright orange examples, "they're perfect just as they are. They have

so much flavour, I don't need to give them the pinch of sugar we're trained to give tomatoes. All the things that grow here are full of flavour, the way things used to be."

Amman shares fond memories of being a child in France, enjoying his grandmother's cooking using seasonal produce, and it's apparent that after several decades cooking in top restaurants and resorts, this classically trained chef feels as if he has come home, in a way, arriving at something real.



Head Chef Jean-Luc Amman at Laucala Island, Fiji.

At Plantation House, dinner each night is degustation style, and can be tailored to suit all sorts of tastes and dietary needs. I can and will eat everything under the sun, so I just let the chefs do their thing and I am treated to delicate preparations of local delights like island lobster, succulent local tuna, rich-yolked eggs from the farm, juicy pineapple tart tartin. Other meals include a knock-out Thai lunch at Seagrass Restaurant (I can't resist opting for lobster, again, this time with loads of Thai herbs picked that day, bound together with a perfect chilli jam ... in fact, I think that day I had lobster at breakfast, lunch and dinner) teppanyaki cooked at the table literally out over the lapping ocean and refreshing sashimi and kokoda at the Beach Bar.

Our favourite spot for a sunset cocktail is Rock Bar, perched on the cliff looking out across the glassy evening water to the stunning Peninsula Villa. We relax on beanbags and watch the sun sink gratefully into bed as the bar staff light the tiki lamps and bring us another round.

Another special experience is the cultural night, to which all guests are invited. It is no mean feat considering practically a whole village of neighbouring Taveuni islanders come over for the night to lay down the lovo (like a hangi) and perform the kava ceremony, singing and dancing. As we go in for third helpings of dinner - the tender meat and vegetables come with superb sides such as octopus salad and the best palusami I'll ever taste - our conversation with fellow guests and Laucala staff enjoys a background of soft guitar and sweet harmony as the villagers continue to sing late into the night.

With activities, guests are spoiled for choice and although we try to fit in as much as we can in four days, we barely make a dent in the offering, which includes every water sport imaginable, horse-riding, tennis, private yoga classes, hiking, cycling and world-class golfing - the 18-hole course here is designed by David McLay-Kidd and is a thing of beauty, with a backdrop of volcanic mountains and inky ocean - tempting even a non-golfer like me.



Snorkelling at Laucala Island, Fiji.

The trump card, however, is the DeepFlight Super Falcon submarine in which Mateschitz has invested a few cool mill, and your room rate entitles you to a ride. It's just you and the pilot under the sea and up close with the teeming life in the coral reef that skirts the island. A surreal experience and surely one of the most braggable hotel perks worldwide. I see Hawksbill turtles and plenty of Nemos and Dorys, but some guests are lucky enough to spot leopard sharks.

Of course, it wouldn't be a pampered paradise without a massage and my therapist Aloisi exacts my medium-pressure-please request to a tee (I may have nodded off a bit) and afterwards gives me a tour of the spa kitchen, where staff make by hand all the amenities used in the villas and the spa, using ingredients straight from the spa's own garden. And so, feeling de-stressed, energised, captivated and extremely well fed and watered, I take my last drive in my own golf cart back to the villa to pack my bags.

Our delightful Fijian welcome party is back in farewell capacity, placing engraved shell necklaces over our heads and whispering words of encouragement to counter the heartache I feel about departing. We take off and look back at paradise, lounging as it is in the midday sun, until it disappears from view and we fly into the grey, rainy rest of the world.



Laucala Island's deepflight submarine.

Fact box

- Laucala Island has 25 villas, including the owner's sprawling Hilltop Villa.
- Rates start from \$6700 a night for two adults in a one-bedroom villa to \$62,400 a night for six adults in the Hilltop Villa.
- Would-be guests need to apply to visit Laucala.
- **laucala.com**