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SECTION T

Globe Travel

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FIJI



Fantasy island

Cross the cerulean seas of Fiji and escape to Laucala Island: a resort devoted to barefoot luxury. Loll about in interlocking pools, dine on sumptuous food or sip Champagne on silky white beaches – by invitation only, darling

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Once a retreat for legendary publisher Malcolm Forbes, Laucala Island has been redeveloped by Red Bull magnate Dietrich Mateschitz. All-inclusive rates start at \$3,800 (U.S.) a night. **KLAUS LORKE**



INSIDE

I've got five days to party in Rio, where do I go?

Travel concierge Karan Smith gets the goods from locals who know where to go boho, where to samba and where to find a good street scene **PAGE 2**



For the billionaire on a break, \$35,000 a night gets you the Hilltop Residence at Laucala Island, 10 metres above sea level, with three linked villas, two swimming pools, a kitchen and a library.

SOUTH PACIFIC

Like staying at your rich uncle's hideaway

SI SI PENALOZA
LAUCA LA ISLAND, FIJI

Far-flung escapes that once seemed alluringly remote – the Maldives, say, or Madagascar – are now just a layover away, with a quick touchdown in Paris or Dubai. I am convinced that since the jet set gave way to WestJet, one needs at least three connecting flights (and a bumpy jeep ride) to discover a place truly off the map. So I was thrilled when I learned that a trip to Laucala Island, off the northeastern coast of Taveuni, the third-largest island in Fiji, would require the island owner's jet to fetch me.

I flew from Toronto to Nadi, Fiji, then hopped into that luxury private jet for a 50-minute flight to Laucala (pronounced Lothala). A trip here is like visiting your rich uncle's over-the-top tropical getaway.

Hard to reach and even harder to get permission to visit (guests must apply for the chance to stay), Laucala Island might as well lie at the end of the Earth. The island, only five kilometres long and three kilometres wide, sits in the cerulean waters of northern Fiji, and if you don't fly in, your boat must navigate a tricky 29-kilometre horseshoe-shaped coral reef.

Guests on Laucala soon discover that the resort is all about personal space. It's not that I don't enjoy other people; it's just that I increasingly choose to retreat to places where not talking for days is always an option. No encounters with strangers at breakfast, no idle talk waiting for a table, no late-night dancing, thank you very much.

On this island, there is nothing so formal as a reception desk. When I stepped off the jet, I was presented with a chilled juice and a cool towel, and greeted with a traditional Fijian welcome – a native song that embraces strangers like family returning home. (Fijians are known for their warmth, and Laucala's staff will down gardening tools with an enthusiastic exclamation of *bula*, Fijian for hello, to escort you to one of the dozen beaches.)

Then, I was whisked from the grassy airstrip through lush foliage to one of 25 cathedral-like villas dotting the platinum-white coastline.

In 1972, publisher Malcolm Forbes, legendary for his lavish lifestyle that boasted private yachts and over-the-top birthday parties attended by an indebted A-list, bought this lush green isle as his private refuge. Its latest



Laucala Island is all about me time, alongside warm clear waters.

owner, Red Bull magnate Dietrich Mateschitz, has spared no expense (\$30-million U.S.) to create one of the world's top tropical private islands, opened in 2010.

It boasts some of the most stunning architecture in the Pacific, not to mention an organic farm, hydroponic greenhouses, a village of friendly staff, mechanics to service private jets, a working jetty and a James Bond-worthy collection of posh marine vessels to visit the reef.

Laucala certainly changed my perception of the luxury category in Fiji, or anywhere else for that matter. It is one of a handful of hotels I have visited that defies categorization. The island operates at a staggeringly high level but still feels completely natural.

The real attraction is the pristine island that surrounds you: a

forest of mangroves on one side, and the ocean – clear, still and bath-water warm – on the other.

Everything is included in a fixed fee – starting at \$3,800 a night for a one-bedroom villa – whether you are planning on a day of sailing, Champagne barbecues on your own private beach, or horseback riding through tropical terrain. Here, barefoot luxury means never having to carry a wallet.

For the billionaire on a break, \$35,000 a night gets you the sprawling Hilltop Residence, which sits 110 metres above sea level, with three interlinked villas, two swimming pools, a kitchen and a library.

My one-bedroom residence, styled by British interior designer Lynne Hunt, offers two bathtubs: basically hollowed-out boulders with discreet hot and cold taps. Oversized swimming pools come

complete with in-water loungers perfect for canoodling couples, poolside daybeds made for impromptu massages and dining pavilions in lush gardens.

All this makes for a rather peaceful place to do absolutely nothing. On an average day, I did little beyond loll about in the interlocking pools beneath the palm trees. I took a kayak across the sea to a golden nook of beach. I swam, slept, read some Alain de Botton, and felt my mind gently unwind. I admired dramatic cliffs, clothed in more shades of jade than I thought existed, while lower down, fragrant frangipani and flame trees bloomed against leafy hardwoods.

Most evenings, I meditated as the jungle grew inky black, echoing the chirps of birds and ribbits of frogs.

But eventually you get hungry and Laucala takes eating seriously. There are five dining venues that are always open, no matter if there are two or 12 guests in residence. Plantation, set in a reconstructed colonial-style house, is the flagship restaurant and by far the most formal. Executive chef Martin Klein is at the helm, after a successful wunderkind stint at Austria's famous Hangar 7.

Klein's presence is game-changing – you won't eat food like this anywhere else in Fiji. Think yellowtail carpaccio with Parmesan mousse. Or grilled octopus with smoked paprika and aubergines. The chef's pork is melt-in-the-mouth tender, the crackling is copious. Only near the end of the meal did I realize the pillowy, translucent spoonfuls I had been devouring along with the white

meat were pure fat.

"It's a hand-reared and hand-made food experience," Klein tells me. "Finely crafted meals are the best way to spoil yourself."

Other diversions are available. The island's par-72 golf course gives players one jaw-dropping vista after another. It was designed by David McLay Kidd, the bright young architect who wowed aficionados with The Castle Course in St. Andrews, Scotland. Carved from a jungle that could dwarf King Kong, the course is ripe with drama and stunning elevations.

There is also a sublime spa. Treatments here mean unwinding in secluded pavilions tucked into a lagoon, each one opening up to a garden worthy of a Paul Gauguin painting.

On my last night, the staff set up a special cultural night with a traditional kava ceremony (a drink made from the kava root with sedative and anesthetic properties). Our meal was cooked in a lovo, an earth oven where food is wrapped in banana leaves and buried in the ground with hot coals.

Children from neighbouring islands sailed over to perform Fijian songs and dances and, as I stepped up to dance and start cooing and cawing to the live music, I realized that it was the first sound I had made all day. I was deep in the Laucala zone, that perfect vibrational pull into extravagant pleasures made simple.

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The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Fiji and Air Pacific.

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