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# A WORLD OF YOUR OWN

Timothy Marrell visits an exclusive South Seas island resort where Fijian hospitality meets contemporary style, comfort and sustainability.

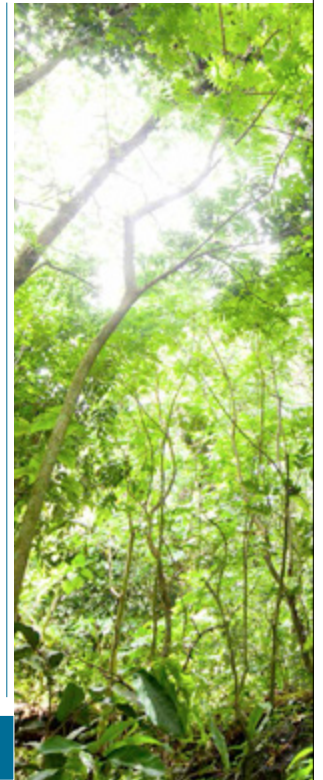
**Y**es, Laucala Island can only be described as a tropical fantasy, but the island's greatest luxury is the feeling that it's all just for you. The all-inclusive resort provides everything you could wish for in a lush, emerald setting: all leisure activities, fine dining, premium wines and spirits, health and wellness offerings, and state-of-the-art entertainment and technology. Energetic guests can choose from tennis, sailing, diving, waterskiing, horse riding or playing the spectacular golf course designed by David McLay Kidd. You're free to discover a wealth of indulgent and exciting experiences. Or you can simply withdraw into a magical hidden realm.

A private beach at Laucala Island doesn't mean exclusive to the resort, it means exclusive to your villa. Clever landscaping with rocks and vegetation gives you a small private bay, which you can stroll around or simply contemplate from your pool. Each of the 25 villas is set in its own shady tropical garden, where, beyond the patches of manicured lawn, the trees are dense enough to hide the enclosing stone wall.

No two villas are the same, and meandering through their large, organically shaped spaces instils a remarkable sense of tranquility. Each room and each outdoor living area has a separate thatched conical roof, so when viewed from the beach this cluster of pavilions resembles your own personal village.

The island is owned by Dietrich Mateschitz, the Austrian co-founder of the Red Bull energy drink company. His vision has shaped its striking design and eco credentials. When he isn't in residence you can move into Delana, his sprawling hilltop estate, for US\$40,000 (around NZ\$48,000) a night. Other villas cost from US\$4,200 a night for two adults in a one-bedroom residence to US\$8,800 for a three-bedroom residence sleeping six adults. Depending on the villa you choose, Laucala has allure for a romantic break for two, or a holiday with the family, or a group of friends.

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Laucala Island and its surrounding sapphirine and turquoise lagoons; Beach Bar on one of the island's sugar-white beaches; guest villa with Melanesian thatched pavilion for lounging, and its own pool.



Clockwise from above: Hilltop Estate bedroom; Seagrass Restaurant; the living room of the spectacular Peninsula Villa; Plantation Villa and beachside pool.

For residents of the US and Europe, too far away to be familiar with Fiji as an easy option for a family holiday, Fiji has almost mythical status as the chosen hideaway retreat for celebrities seeking secluded luxury at any cost. To Australians and New Zealanders, however, Laucala Island – a member of Leading Hotels of the World – offers the most conveniently accessible experience of sublime luxury that exists in our part of the world.

Being almost completely self-sufficient, it seems like a separate country. The main thing that reminds you of where you are is the irresistible charm of the locals who work there. They're warm and perfectly attentive, if slightly shy. This makes an overwhelmingly refreshing change from the kind of hotel staff who seem as though they might be trying out for Broadway.

Maintaining a relaxed atmosphere while strenuously pursuing the highest standards presents the management with some challenges.

There is, for example, nowhere to wipe your feet when you enter a villa – a suburban doormat would disrupt the natural ambience – so you track sand through all your rooms. (It vanishes of course, as soon as you vacate the premises.) The nighttime lighting level in the bathrooms is very low, matching the mood created by the rock walls and massive bathtubs carved from wood or hollowed out of boulders. This makes for a thoroughly sexy cave-like environment, but turns applying make-up into a high-risk activity. You have to bear in mind that the resort is largely designed for people who live with impeccable looks and surroundings on a daily basis, so they're probably quite relieved to let a few details slip. It takes a lot of thought and planning to create an experience that feels this simple and spontaneous. General manager David Stjepetic and his wife Risako give guests the freedom to recreate paradise to their individual specifications.

Only the weather is beyond your control. The rainy season (November

to April) lives up to its name, hence the dazzling green of the island, but you'd be unlikely not to get daily periods of intermittent sunshine. In August it rains hardly at all.

The scattered distribution of the guest villas and their imaginative variations on a basic design not only prevents them from looking like part of a resort, it allows them to cater to an unexpectedly broad range of personal preferences and budgets – from the romantic extravagance of the one-bedroom, cliff-hugging Peninsula Villa to three-bedroom residences where a group of friends can enjoy what amounts to a private resort, with each of them paying about the same as they would for a hotel suite.

London designer Lynne Hunt describes how she collaborated with the architectural firm WATG (who designed the buildings) and a local architect "to create an authentic island experience and design, whilst maintaining complete luxury". There are sinuously convoluted strangler fig columns and elaborate joinery finely bound with traditional coconut fibre cord. The various interior stone-wall finishes she devised are splendid displays of craftsmanship.

Her bespoke furniture for Laucala Island tends to be super-scaled and resembles softly seductive abstract sculptures. "Laucala," she explains, "is all about lifestyle; the whole experience from arrival to accommodations, to bars and restaurants, is to feel totally relaxed and invigorated. However, it is also to offer an uncompromising sense of style and comfort." Each villa has a distinctive personality, and may be full of ocean light or submerged in lady shade.

The freshness of the food is guaranteed by the fact that most of it is produced on the resort. Guests can inspect the farm and commune with the animals. There are Wagyu cattle and Herr Mateschitz's favourite breed of chickens, introduced from Austria. I felt much better about failing to get through the cake stand of freshly baked pastries served





Top: The Pool Bar, Above: The spa sits in a hillside hollow like a glamorous little village. Below: Most of the resorts food is grown on the island, including fresh herbs.



with my breakfast when I met the pigs that conscientiously recycle leftovers. The hydroponically grown vegetables are, of course, flawless and exquisitely beautiful on the plate, but staff at the farm admitted to me that nothing tastes as good as produce grown in the ground. That's where all ingredients used primarily as flavourings come from.

The island's volcanic soil and dependable rainfall makes it one huge garden. It's possible to pick handfuls of aromatic plants from the farm and get them pounded into a personalised body scrub at the excellent spa, located in a nearby hillside hollow like a sepeste and glamorous little village. Guests are also welcome in the kitchen, to discuss menus with the chef or pick up cooking tips. The sense of enjoying a family estate is further enhanced by the option to pick and arrange your own flowers. (There's an immense orchid house.) A buggy for scooting about the resort is parked outside your villa.

There are three bars and two restaurants where the food ranges from innovative tastes to complement cocktails, to sophisticated dishes based on the freshest local produce. The seafood is especially appealing, because wherever it's served you can see the waters it came from.

The culinary style is generally light and delicate, but it can get heavy if that's what you want. The coffee-vanilla pork belly with squid spaghetti is presented in a respectably small serving, but it's still pretty decadent. Coffee for this is grown on the island and now they're waiting for the vanilla orchids to flower.

The Plantation Restaurant is an open, airy bungalow that makes you think of Somerset Maugham. The Seagrass Restaurant is essentially a broad platform straddling the neck of a densely forested peninsula like a big tree house. The Thai food served there is delicious but may be overly subtle for anyone accustomed to giving their tastebuds a workout at the local cheap and cheerful. Stronger flavours can easily be arranged – the Thai chef escorted me to the edge of the restaurant deck to point out the various herbs and spices he grows in the jungle. It seems that everything you might want on Laucala Island is only an arm's reach away.

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