

*What
Dreams
are*
**MADE
OF**

Laucala Island sets the bar impossibly high

Writer Stephanie Shiu



Paradise. Heaven. Bliss. All clichéd, but the only way to describe Laucala Island. This place will have you at ‘Bula’ (the only greeting you’ll need to know in Fiji), just like a scene from *Blue Lagoon* – cerulean waters, untouched shores, towering palm trees and lush rainforest. Add to that luxury and top-notch service that has the potential to make everywhere pale in comparison. Set over 1,400 hectares, this South Pacific sanctuary features 25 traditional villas dotted around coconut plantations, pristine beaches and volcanic mountains. While some resort websites heighten expectations through clever imagery, here photos fail to do it justice.

The exclusive private island covers 12 square kilometres of dramatic landscapes overlooking coral reefs and endless unspoilt wilderness which is also home to the archipelago’s rare birds, toads, coconut crabs and even the odd goat. A 50-minute seaplane ride away from Nadi Airport, the seclusion and flawless hospitality makes this hideaway a favourite with the A-list, moguls and international sport stars.

Purchased by Austrian billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz, co-founder of Red Bull energy drinks from the estate of Malcolm Forbes in 2003 (whose remains are buried on a hill on the property), the amenities and activities are as good as it gets. Villas are comprised

of sago palm leaves and coconut husk weaves, but the features are all luxury, with impeccable living spaces spilling on to manicured gardens and full size infinity pools, with personal buggies to traverse the enclave.

SUSTAINABLE STYLE

Get your bearings with a guided tour in one of the four-wheel drives that will take you on an hour-long island excursion to showcase the workings of this well-oiled machine. Drive past organic gardens, a dedicated wild orchid house and a farm with pigs, and Sulmtaler chickens from Austria, a cross breed of cattle Limousin and Hereford (in addition to a Wagyu herd), a hydroponic green house and a field of herbs which chefs pluck from daily to use in their dishes.

The attention to detail is not wasted – the food is delectable. One of the most breathtaking spots is at the Seagrass Restaurant serving pad Thai, pineapple lobster curry and tapioca coconut pudding. Try to snag the private deck for a romantic al fresco dinner as you watch the skies transition from gold-flecked clouds to Crayola streaks of bright pink.

For fine dining, look no further than Plantation House Restaurant, an elegant reconstruction of the original copra plantation. You’ll be transported to a quieter, simpler time as the lush breeze casts a

serene spell over the coconut plantation. Wine lovers can visit the walk-in cellars during cocktail hour, boasting an ample collection of old and new world wines.

Executive Chef Anthony Healy creates his degustation menu around what is ripe for the picking on the day. A medley of cuisines, the feast began with yellow fin tuna tartare, avocado and radish, and a tomato consommé (picked just hours ago no doubt) with ricotta and asparagus. The *walu* or Spanish mackerel with wild pumpkin and dashi to follow was freshly line caught from the water around the islands, while the pork with cauliflower and cumin was also Laucala raised. The pre-dessert, coconut textures, make the most of what grows abundantly, followed by single-origin chocolate in sorbet, biscuit and mousse form.

BLISS REDEFINED

The herbs, spices, flowers and fruit from the property also find their way into the Laucala Spa, and are combined to create its four signature scents from citrus trees, tropical blooms and indigenous spices used in the organic lotions and massage oils. The resort encourages guests to experience the back end of operations by offering classes at the Spa Kitchen so they can learn how to make the soap, shampoo, lotions and bath bombs in each villa.

A pond of lotus flowers leads the way to four spa suites, each with Vichy and bucket showers and private steam rooms. Treatments begin with a footbath using hibiscus, honey and a sugar-based scrub to gently massage. The Titobu deep tissue massage serves as a good introduction to cloud nine, maintaining balance in the body using techniques to loosen knots and blockages, focusing on tense areas.

Should you wish to remain in the cocoon of the spa longer, the Secret of the Wind package begins with a rich coconut milk bath to nourish the skin and ease you into the island pace of life. Take your time with a glass of bubbly while savouring vistas of the azure ocean below. This is followed by a Swedish massage to soothe muscles with tapping and rolling movements to stimulate the nervous system. Finally, the Truly Natural Facial comprising fresh



herbs, fruit and vegetables from the island re-energises and freshens tired complexions, concluded with refreshing ginger lemongrass honey herbal tea.

SOUTH PACIFIC PURSUITS

The ways to wile away your time are endless, but among the most unique is taking a spin in the resort’s futuristic deep-flight submarine, the DeepFlight Super Falcon. The micro-winged submersible seats two and can plunge to depths of 1,500 feet, boasting 360-degree views through acrylic domes. Designed by Graham Hawkes, who



THIS PAGE: Few can say they have ridden in a DeepFlight Super Falcon; the tranquil Plantation Restaurant. OPPOSITE PAGE: Mesmerising villa views

was the mastermind behind the crafts featured in James Bond films, Richard Branson is among the privileged owners of his groundbreaking creations.

Your pilot will take you to depths of 40 to 60 feet in a 90-minute trip around Laucala to the Black Rock part of the inner reef, where you can expect to see a variety of marine life from turtles to starfish and black tip reef sharks if visibility allows. Even if it doesn't, how many can say they have taken a joyride in an actual submarine? Every water sport imaginable is accessible, from snorkelling to glass-bottom kayaking and wakeboarding.

Land lovers have their fill of activities too. Horse riding is a must, guided by 'horse whisperer' Amy who is an expert in all things outdoorsy and adventurous, and also happens to be a seaplane pilot. Suitable for riders of all abilities, she provides lessons in the paddock, and leisurely hacks on a sheltered beach on one of the island's eight Fijian horses, which are a crossbreed of Australian Thoroughbreds and British Clydesdales. Long Beach on the farm side of the island is the perfect spot to have picnic arranged – and the chef will happily discuss the preferred contents of your basket at breakfast beforehand.

ISLAND OF SMILES

There are plenty lunch spots to choose from. Even casual eateries like Beach Bar serve excellent fare like Fijian *kokokda* (the local take on ceviche with fish marinated in a refreshing mix of coconut milk and lime) or the moreish chicken tacos. The Pool Bar offers healthy delights including seared cod and the divine house salad with avocado. For a fantastic view, the exclusive Teppanyaki grill at the bottom of Seagrass Restaurant is a treat, with a chef cooking prawns, chicken, beef, fish and fried rice before you while the waves ebb and flow melodically.

Save the best culinary experience for last with an in-villa barbecue dinner on your private beach. Plan a sunset cruise or pop into the cosy Rock Lounge for its refreshing mojito while you wait for the team to work their magic. What awaits is nothing short of spectacular – a group of four burly Fijians strumming guitars and a ukulele with the most angelic voices you've heard, singing traditional Sigidri songs about their villages, and love of course, to set the scene.



With a suave host and private chef at the helm to ensure the meal is orchestrated flawlessly, there's nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the lull of the island music as you tuck into sashimi, lobster, prawns, grilled vegetables, chicken and steak. To end, a trio of soursop ice cream, brownie and Japanese cheesecake is almost as sweet as being serenaded by these gentle giants.

What makes the journey once in a lifetime is not only the opulent touches and alluring surroundings, but the warmth and kindness of the Fijians. They invite you wholeheartedly to be part of their culture sitting around a bowl of kava, a root prepared as a tea with a calming effect, listening to stories and songs and getting to know one another. Sitting under the stars with new friends over this age-old ritual creates a bond that's difficult to put into words. What can be said is that this island is one you would be lucky to be stranded on. www.laucala.com

THIS PAGE: Villas offer stunning ocean vistas; easy beach living.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy horse riding on a secluded beach

