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A WALK IN THE CLOUDS

BY CORRY COOK

Comfortably situated in first class, I stared out the window, pondering my Aunt Lisa's final days battling cancer. Like a treasured older sister, I looked up to that lovely woman in many ways—she was stunning, sophisticated, intelligent, worldly; the list is endless. Lisa's final moment provided neither relief nor comfort; I couldn't make sense of her death.

"How does our family get over this?" I asked my mom by phone as I waited for the plane to take off. "It's tough," she said. "But we learn to live with it." "How?" I wondered. Just minutes away from embarking on another exotic adventure, feelings of guilt at my health, youth, and freedom weighed heavily.

I have traveled to lose and find myself. I've done it hoping to become brave, young again, and even foolish. Some trips have been great firsts, like leaving the country for the first time, taking a cruise, or hiking up a mountain. My passport is full of as many stamps as times I've fallen in (or out of) love. Yet by far my most important journeys stand out vividly in my mind because of their timing: driving off to college or going on my honeymoon were both life changing. Similarly, my trip to Laucala Island will be with me forever.

Hidden deep amongst the more than 300 islands that form the paradise known as Fiji, Laucala Island is perhaps God's most

perfect masterpiece. Movie stars, billionaires, and nobility the world over have flocked to Laucala for decades. Formerly owned by Malcolm Forbes and his family, Laucala has recently been purchased and transformed by Austrian billionaire and cofounder of Red Bull energy drinks Dietrich Mateschitz. The result? A refuge of extravagance and comforts, with no expense spared. Today it stands as one of the most expensive and elite all-inclusive resorts. Tales of unparalleled luxury, sustainability, and grandeur are legendary. Despite my heavy heart at the recent loss of my aunt, nothing in the universe could keep me from honoring a personal invitation to experience this private sanctuary on behalf of Gentry.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUCALA



PHOTOS THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE COURTESY OF LAUCALA

Arriving by private plane at Laucala is a must, and every individual fortunate enough to do so is met at the jet by a most exquisite welcoming committee. The warmth and purity of the Fijian people is as certain as the epic natural beauty in every direction. There was singing and dancing and expert attention to my every whim as wide smiles and huge hearts enveloped me in warmth. All the while a dramatic tropical jungle of electric colors and exotic sounds seemed to beckon me, like some secret door to a parallel universe. As an air-conditioned motorcade whisked me away, I mused, “If heaven exists, arriving at its pearly gates must look, and feel, this sublime.” For the first time in weeks, thoughts of Lisa brought a smile instead of tears.

Situated on 3,200 unspoiled acres, Laucala (pronounced “lo-THA-la”) Island is made up of 25 unique Fijian villas, with your choice of overwater or beachfront, as well as hilltop residences carved into the volcanic cliffs. Widely spread on the northern tip of the island, the one-, two-, and three-bedroom designs offer private pools, outdoor showers, lush tropical gardens, and intimate beaches with plenty of private spaces in which to disappear. Each of the villas comes with food, beverages, and included activities, as well as a chauffeur, nanny, butler, housekeeping, dry cleaning, and gifts throughout your stay. The accommodations reflect an obvious love and commitment to the natural environment and Fijian traditions.

As my own personal “team” attended to every detail, including serving my favorite chardonnay and unpacking my bags with loving care, I wandered out to my isolated pool and the vast stretch of beach beyond. It seemed like a joyful dream, one filled with endless space, azure water, and powdery white sand—all for me and with absolutely no other guest in sight. The island has a mystical feel, like some kind of cosmic nourishment for the soul. I felt a sense of peace, as though a sort of healing had begun. My intuitive butler, Nazil, approached silently and half whispered into my ear, “Might I suggest a visit to your concierge to see what else is in store for you?” With a new resolve not to let a moment of joy pass me by in this enchanted place, I hopped into my shiny new golf cart and took off with renewed energy.

For the sporty and active, Laucala is a playground that only exists in your most vivid dreams. Anything is possible on land or at sea—playing a challenging round of golf, hiking, cycling the island, game fishing, diving, snorkeling, kite surfing, sailing, or being pampered in the spa. The Water Sports Center has its own fleet of vessels, along with 13 other sport boats and toys, including a DeepFlight Super Falcon extreme submarine (valued at \$1.7 million).

Reveling in every moment with newfound enthusiasm, I did it all that extraordinary week: perfected my golf swing, dove into my first scuba experience, and sailed into the sunset. I hiked deep



A private island resort, Laucala Island is set amidst coconut plantations, sandy beaches, turquoise lagoons, rich green mountains, and breathtaking natural beauty. The resort's 25 villas are comprised of one-, two- and three-bedroom configurations, all stunning yet embracing a relaxed, casual and contemporary island style. The private pools and concealed beaches guarantee undisturbed privacy, the marker of the genuine luxury of Laucala Island.





PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUCALA



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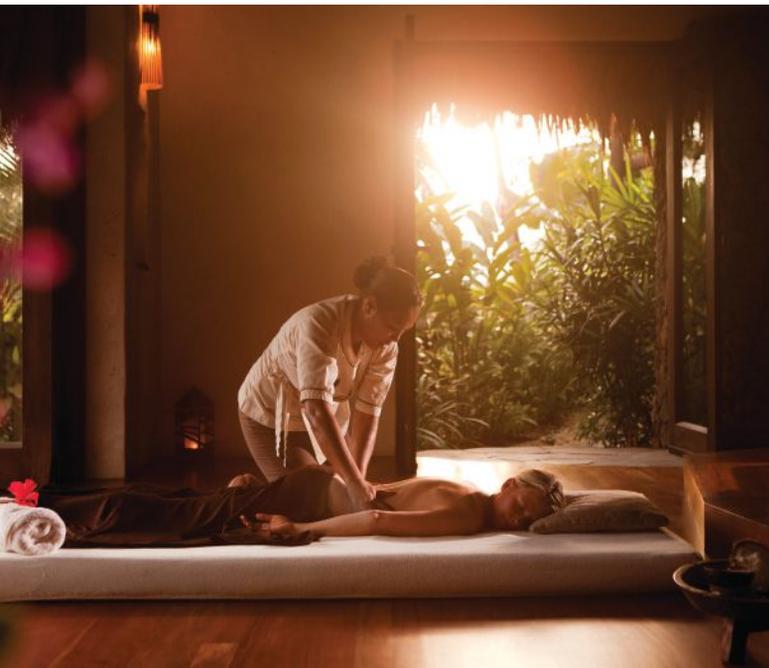


PHOTO: CORRY COOK

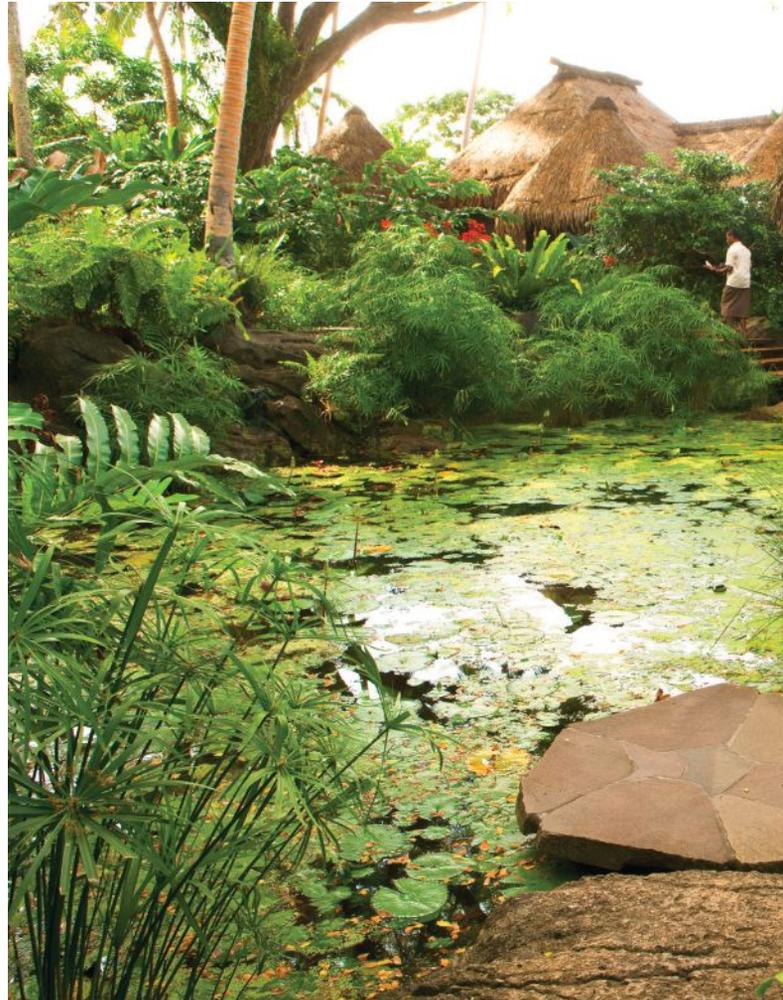


PHOTO: CORRY COOK

Laucala Island is a paradise for the active and young at heart: soak up the sun surrounded by coconut palms and tropical flowers at the 2,000-square-meter lagoon-style swimming pool; sail off into the sunset in your choice of more than fifteen boats, yachts, and sailboats; dive deep into the wonders of the ocean; hike up high to stunning views and waterfalls; or take a dip into the dramatic 80-foot-long glass cube, ideal for lap swimming and breathtaking photo opportunities.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF LAUCALA



Enjoy the freedom to relax and restore in a variety of magical settings on Laucala Island: Melt under expert hands during a Fijian Bombo, Swedish, or Deep Tissue treatment in the privacy of your villa; Visit the spa's hidden garden oasis of giant lily pads, tropical flowers, herbs, spices and fruits; ride horse-back along the fine, sandy beaches; and revel in the brilliant libations and sunsets.





into the jungle, basking in its infinite shades of green and exotic creatures big and small. I swam underneath a waterfall and survived my first cliff dive. I flew around the island on my jet ski far too fast. And I rode a gorgeous Fijian horse to a pristine beach for a solo swim and a cold Fiji Gold beer.

One night under the stars on my private beach, I melted under expert hands and my first Fijian Bombo massage. Unique to Fiji, the Bombo is designed to be experienced in the privacy of your massage pavilion at your villa. My therapist, Milly, massaged me with oil and pure Fijian tenderness using her whole body—hands, knees, elbows, and feet. The purpose is to unblock stagnation and restore a positive rhythm flowing in your body. Believe me, it works.

With more than 400 staff attending to a maximum of 75 guests, the level of service and the opportunity to connect with the Fijian people is extraordinary. Everywhere I went I was met with “Bula!” and another shining Fijian face grinning from ear to ear. This special word is the traditional Fijian greeting. Much like the Hawaiian “aloha,” bula has a variety of meanings, each of which depends on the situation. Pronounced “boolah,” it literally means “life.” When used as a greeting, “Bula!” expresses wishes for good health, peace, and happiness.

Even the food at Laucala seemed to be heaven-sent—diverse and decadent cuisine made with ingredients harvested on the island. Executive Chef and Laucala Island fanatic Jean Luc Amann has made sure this 85% self-sustaining paradise produces its own livestock and vegetables. He values taking a holistic approach of self-sustainability and his dedication includes paying utmost respect to the traditions of the Fijian people and safeguarding the island’s natural integrity and history. Only 15% of the island is inhabited, the rest untouched as nature intended.

Chef Amann’s private tour of

his herb garden is not to be missed. Neither is his elaborate hydroponics facility where expert local hands cultivate over 90 different types of fruits, vegetables, citrus trees, and orchids daily. With a little luck, Amann may share a glass with you in the superbly stocked wine cellar that is a treasure trove for even the most discerning of oenophiles.

All five restaurants really do stay open every night, even when only one couple is in residence. Guests can sample delightful dinners in the colonial Plantation House Restaurant, Asian-influenced dining in the tree tops of the Seagrass Lounge & Restaurant, spectacular sundown cocktails in the Rock Lounge, *avant-garde* finger food at the Pool Bar, and delightful barbeque at the Beach Bar. The Seagrass Restaurant’s quasi-secret, six-seat teppanyaki barbeque table hugs a breathtaking cliffside. Utterly isolated and incredibly romantic, this special hideaway deserves at least two visits during a proper stay.

It came as no surprise to me when I learned that Malcom Forbes chose to have his ashes buried on Laucala Island under a marker that bears the epitaph, “WHILE ALIVE, HE LIVED.”

Life and its most meaningful journeys are about timing; Laucala Island was a magical gift received at precisely the right moment. It reminded me that those loved and lost are never far or forgotten. Beauty can always be found; all you have to do is keep looking for it. ♦



PHOTO: CORRY COOK

Please visit www.laucala.com or contact reservations@laucala.com for more information. A Laucala Island Buyout (minimum 5 nights) includes 24 Villas and a maximum of 75 guests at \$175,000 per evening. The Hilltop Villa is not included but can be requested.