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Water beds

Susan Kurosawa checks into Fiji's newest island resort and finds a magical mix of homely and hip
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THERE is a certain alchemy at work at Likuliku Lagoon Resort. Factors that contribute to this unusual feeling of magic in the air include its neighbourly size and peerless location on a crescent of coral-strewn sand.



Then there's the undeniable cleverness of design -- here we have Fiji's first overwater bures, for starters -- and a swishness to the interior decor that clearly indicates this is a place ensured entree to lists of hot hotels and bibles of hip accommodation.

Fiji and hip are not expected bedmates. What Australians have always loved about Fiji -- and despite the surprising regularity of coups and states of emergency, we still flock there -- is its special variety of dagginess. Along with the concept of bula time (as tensile as a rubber band, but without the snappiness), we have got used to the island group's carefree homeliness. If Fiji has ultra-glam resorts set to attract lotus-eating A-listers, where will it all end?

For now, it stops very nicely at the Fijian-owned Likuliku Lagoon Resort, which opened in April. Ahura Resorts, in association with Rosie Holidays, Fiji's largest and best-known tour operator, is behind the development, which is the first of this scale in the Mamanuca islands, west of Nadi, since 1986.

Fijian-born managing director Tony Whitton talks about delivering "the quintessential Fijian holiday experience" and there has been a commitment to ensuring the resort doesn't have that stripped-down, global village feel of being, at once, everywhere and nowhere.

Rosie Holidays also owns the mid-market Malolo Resort, around Naroba Point from Likuliku on Malolo Island. On the western tip of the island is the village of Yarro, where the indigenous landowners and many of the resort staff live; guests can attend a Methodist church service there, all starched shirts and soaring voices, on Sunday mornings.

Likuliku means sheltered waters in local dialect; here was an ancient safe harbour for war canoes and it's a name that resonates with Fijian history and mythology.

Ironically, opening the resort has been a saga of battle-like proportions. General manager Steve Anstey -- formerly of Queensland resorts Lizard Island and Sea Temple Palm Cove, and Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree -- has somehow kept a grip on his sanity amid bureaucratic impediments, environmental

concerns (the cement poles sunk close to coral reefs to hold up the 10 overwater bures, a first for Fiji, were a sensitive engineering feat) and myriad delays. And don't get him started on the most recent coup.

Likuliku should have opened months earlier but sometimes crises can have silver linings. In this case, the resort is running with more efficiency than many newly launched ventures and the staff have all bonded in a family-like fashion. The bula welcomes are particularly heartfelt, says Anstey, as his staff are "so pleased to at last see real guests".

The resort has a choice of those spacious overwater bures -- with adjoining bathing pavilions; each is set well apart in the lagoon, with bamboo screens for additional privacy -- or 18 beachfront and 18 deluxe pool bures.

All the accommodation has sea views, is suite-sized, with roomy sitting areas, and brightly appointed.

Beachfront and deluxe pool bures, enclosed by glossy gardens and reached via crushed coral paths, although cheaper than the overwater bungalows, have real charm. They feature indoor and outdoor showers and, on a deck by the beach, each has a cushioned and bolstered lounging pavilion (Bali meets the Mamanucas in a successful collision).

But those overwater bures are the star turns; the architects have taken as their reference point the equivalent style of stilted accommodation in French Polynesia and the Maldives. Despite the generic tropical architecture, Likuliku's bures are identifiably Fijian in feel, with local textures and decor.

Dark timber floors are polished to a mirror gleam. The high thatched ceilings, lacquered for finish and sturdiness, are pitched in the style of a paramount chief's bure.

Walls are covered in a pale woven material, light fittings are of turned wood, wicker and tapa cloth, and the feel is organic, all in neutral tones with the occasional highlight of watery-pale celadon.

There's no stinting on the luxury touches, from duckdown pillows and quality bedding to Pure Fiji toiletries in sweet fragrances such as coconut and starfruit.

The overwater bures have flat-screen television sets but there's no reception; they are for DVD use only. There's a good selection on offer and one could do worse than watch Tom Hanks grow a beard and eat crabs and coconuts in *Castaway*, filmed a flipper's throw away at Monuriki Island.

Two plate-glass windows are inset in each overwater bure's bedroom floor so guests can look through to the coral gardens; it's like snorkelling in an armchair. The sun glinting on the water below shoots reflections into the room so it seems as if the air is liquefied. The coral is not brightly coloured, but vivid blue fish whoosh in formation and starfish are dotted about as prettily as if posed.

Body: A metal ladder leads from each bure's lower deck and complimentary snorkelling equipment is provided; when the tide is out, we bob about for hours in clear aquamarine water of a holiday-perfect temperature. There are snorkelling trips much farther afield on offer, too, including Sunflower Reef and nearby Honeymoon Island; divers have a choice of 44 sites around the Mamanuca group, from caves and pinnacles to a sunken B26 bomber from World War II.

The sea around Malolo Island has been declared a marine reserve, so this is aquatic heaven for lovers of water sports. Poles topped with palm fronds are dotted about the reef to signify an official ceremony has taken place to confirm the marine sanctuary status. The reef starts about 5m from shore, so this really is doorstep snorkelling.

What to do? Likuliku Lagoon's beachside accommodation is strung along the sand and the overwater bures lie at the end of a runway-like pier, so just walking to and from the main building (front desk, Fijiana restaurant, the Dua Tale bar, well-stocked boutique and TV lounge and library) provides incidental exercise, which is a good thing given the excellent standard of Australian chef Shane Watson's cuisine.

Between the beachfront bures we cross the sand, dodging scuttling crabs, and wander past abundant greenery -- mangoes and papayas, beach almonds and wild figs, and red-leafed coral and Chinese lantern trees -- circled by pesky mynah birds with those hard little eyes like barley sugars.

My bird-spotting checklist includes white-collared kingfishers, reef herons and Fijian parrot finches, but my partner's interest lies in the cocktail menu and Zack the barman is an enthusiastic purveyor of natty

martinis and infused vodkas. He makes sure every guest knows the name of the Dua Tale bar means "one more".

My partner is also taken with the musicians who play ukelele and sing at mealtimes in the restaurant, and do a lot of hoisting of their sulu skirts and running up and down the pier to the reception islet to welcome and farewell guests. "They are the highest paid members of staff as they have to be on duty almost around the clock. There's always a reason to sing," Anstey laughs.

Their repertoire is wide, including country-and-western crooning and Fijian melodies to which Florence and the dining staff hum along. But when we ask Terita, Kuli, Veta and Mesake what their group is called, there is some consternation and we are dismissed while they hold a summit. A while later, Terita comes over to our dining table. "We are, as a matter of fact, the Bula Serenaders," he announces. Anstey says he likes the sudden new name and is amused by this spurt of entrepreneurial endeavour.

I have a feeling one could loll about Likuliku listening more or less forever to the Bula Serenaders and do nothing more strenuous than lurch from bar to dining table to bed. But I am forgetting the possibility of climbing -- the island's tallest peak is 218m Uluisolo -- and the likelier prospect of massages, facials and paradise sugar body glows in the Tatadra Spa. The name means "house of dreams", which is appropriate given that therapist Lucy and her colleagues seem adept at sending guests straight off to the land of nod. It's a smallish spa, in a double-fronted bure with a sea view, and the menu includes modish treatments such as stone massages and reflexology; a 60-minute massage is \$F90 (\$67), which is reasonable by five-star resort standards. Anstey recruited the spa manager from Port Douglas and it's a professionally run facility, with Pure Fiji products featured in the treatments and not so much slickness that the therapists don't giggle when guests do drift off and snuffle like contented pigs.

There are afternoon showers during our late May visit and soft rain glazes the landscape. It is no hardship to stay indoors and stare across the sea to neighbouring islands shape-shifting in the mists. We decide, in this utterly lazy state, that only two small things jar about Likuliku Lagoon: there is no room service, and the beachfront and deluxe pool bures are all rather close together. Horrors, we have forgotten to drop the blinds and can see the next-door neighbours; much more startling for them, we are lolling in our underwear. Things will be more private when the plantings grow and flowering hedges will provide natural barriers.

While listening to the plip-plop of water on to paddle-like leaves, we can hear giggling as housemaids walk past -- we have left out our do not disturb sign, which is not a boring door-handle card but a coconut half-shell -- and the distant sound of the Bula Serenaders sending off guests with Isa Lei, the Fijian song of farewell.

The words of Isa Lei are in the guest compendium on our bure's desk but we have no intention of learning them. We certainly don't want to anticipate saying goodbye.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Likuliku Lagoon Resort.

Checklist

Likuliku Lagoon Resort is 10 minutes from Nadi by Island Hoppers helicopter or seaplane; 30 minutes by speedboat or one hour by direct catamaran service; no guests under age 17. If landing in Nadi from Australia at night, a package is available combining an overnight stay at the luxury Sofitel Fiji at Denarau.

Rooms from \$836 a person a night, but specials are available. A House of Dreams Spa Package, valid to March 31, starts at \$F2164 (\$1600) a person for three nights or \$F3465 for five nights, including spa treatments, welcome bottle of French champagne and standard Likuliku Lagoon extras such as all meals. www.likulikulagoon.com

More on Shane Watson's food at Likuliku Lagoon Resort in Travel&Indulgence's South Pacific special on July 7-8. Also to be featured: Loyalty Islands, Tonga, Hawaii, Samoa, Fiji for families and best South Pacific cruise itineraries.

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