

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

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TRAVEL & INDULGENCE


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The refurbished Malolo Island resort offers a fun retreat while providing first-class service and amenities



The bula effect

Malolo Island weaves a special blend of Fijian magic

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I AM on my knees in the sand on the edge of a roughly drawn ring. It is crab-racing night at Fiji's Malolo Island and I am murmuring words of encouragement to hermit crab No.8, which has cost me a lively \$220 (\$11) at auction.

I have named him (if indeed it is a him) Lote Tuqiri in honour of his homeland and in the hope he will be able to move at a cracking pace and scoop tonight's prize.

Somewhere in the treetops, on a perched dining deck, my partner has another kind of cracking in mind. He's tackling a big dish of executive chef Darren Hope's carried mud crabs with an armoury of starchy implements and is airily unconcerned with the heated antics on the race track.

Little Lote Tuqiri and I sniff in his direction, finding his behaviour rather cannibalistic.

Pipped at the post by bullying crabs with names such as Lightning, Phar Lap and, intriguingly, Mr Suzuki, Lote Tuqiri retires to the bench while Speedy and its over-pleased owner take the prize of a snorkelling safari for two. "I think Lote pulled a hamstring," resort general manager

Marian Khan chuckles. There's an alchemy about Fiji that does weird things to me.

I arrive as a city-fied grown-up and within minutes seem to transform to a younger and much more carefree version of myself. Maybe it's the Bula effect: not just the island nation's famous disregard for time-keeping but the unspoken imperative that even the most curmudgeonly of tourists should greet everyone with a big "Bula!" and feel enfolded into a new family.

This is especially so on small island resorts, which operate with seemingly unlimited smiles and hugs and always on a first-name basis. Before landing at Malolo, (coolly handsome) boatman Freddy makes us shout "Bula! Bula!" in response to the song of welcome (we can see the bodies of singing staff, not their heads; the jetty here's thatch needs a haircut) before he will let us off the boat.

Within hours, I seem to be related to Lil at the watersports hire, Kai the crab-race wrangler, Niko from the front office, waitress Cevu, housekeeper Kesa and spa therapist Elta. Next day, they

all know Lote Tuqiri lost his race and are dismissive of the hamstring theory. "No, just too much kava for Lote," they chortle at me.

I took my two sons to Mana Island, which is above Malolo in the Mamanuca group, many years ago when they were about eight and nine and they had a whale of a time. They were welcomed into the staff rugby team, popped up one morning helping to serve guests their breakfast (a hitherto

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unknown skill) and howled like cross cats when it was time to go.

My partner and I are childless on this long weekend at Malolo and I wish I had borrowed some youngsters. The resort is well set up for couples: one of its pools is adults-only, fine-dining Treetops

restaurant (dinner only) is just for adults and teenagers, and there's a perfect pair of Tadra Beach Bures at its northern point beside a lovely scoop of near-private beach. (But its neighbour around the point, Likuliku Lagoon Resort, is the ultimate preserve of honeymooners and well-heeled couples. Both are owned by Ahua Resorts, an offshoot of Rosie Holidays, Fiji's best-known inbound tourism operator.)

In keeping with this Fijian flavour, the two properties have local managers, and both are Mother Earth-style figures — Khan on Malolo and Sava Rasari on Likuliku — who report to the ebullient resident group general manager Steve Anstey but run their day-to-day operations with great personal care and charm.

It's important to note this level of efficiency as the bula factor can make things a bit too random, as teenagers would put it, at lesser properties in Fiji.

Malolo has emerged from a \$2.2 million makeover that has seen its 47 bures turned from brashly coloured little bowers into chic cottages that look freshly lift-

ed from a plantation. With pale green pitched roofs, white timber-clad exteriors, pastel interiors and cute covered porches, they are as picturesque as toy houses but with bags of space. Some come with four-poster swathed in sheers, all with contemporary bathrooms and lots of lounging space.

There are three big family bures and I would imagine there will be a demand for more when word gets out about the refurb; these sleep seven and get booked very quickly. The Oceanview and Deluxe Oceanview bures can easily sleep two adults and two children.

All the Malolo Island bures are spread in an arc along a beach framed by red-flowering flamboyants and snorkelling is as simple as grabbing gear from Lil's counter.

Tip: take reef shoes or buy a pair for about \$355 in the resort boutique.

Cool Freddy takes us out on a dolphin-watching safari one morning and we see no bottlenose dolphins, which could be a cantankerous issue elsewhere but we are just too relaxed to care.

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The bula effect

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It's a brilliant day and we speed about under a polished blue sky, waving at fishermen and a gaggle of surfers waiting for waves offshore from Namotu Island.

If you do take the family to Malolo, I warrant you will find Tia's Treehouse and the Yanu Yanu children's club to be first class. They are graded for four to seven-year-olds and eight to 10s; under-fours can attend with an older "buddy". Instead of merely covering, say, making sandcastles and watching videos, the program here is diverse and engaged. I take a look at pre-teen Jade's thick activities folder, which is almost readymade for a school project when she gets home.

She has been learning to identify tropical fish, coral and mangrove-dwellers and has had snorkelling lessons in the crystal-clear marine reserve in front of the resort. She knows that a pole poking out of the water with a palm frond on top means the area is a restricted marine park zone and has had a tabu ceremony, which means a ban on fishing and shellfish collecting. Jade has taken part in a beach clean-up and knows that the dastardly Crown-of-thorns starfish can eat up to 180 times its body area of live coral in a year.

"Gross," is her succinct verdict.

The Yanu Yanu club puts an emphasis on Fijian culture, with activities such as painting on traditional tapa cloth, learning about herbal medicine and husking coconuts, and a visit to the local Yaro village primary school. One morning a group of juniors is on the beach being taught about *lovo* cooking. One of the club supervisors has dug a pit in the sand and is explaining the below-ground method of cooking.

Our food is definitely not DIY but deftly handled at lunchtime at



Refurbished bure at Malolo

the casual Beach Bar by a group of short-order cooks who also rustle up giddy cocktails with names such as Island Affair and Malolo Brass Monkey (half-price during the sunset happy hour when torches are lit along the beach). There are good pizzas, sandwiches, Indo-Fijian curry wraps, salads, pasta and old-fashioned fish and chips. Kids have plenty of choice on their own menus for \$F16 a head (infants' meal plan is \$F11 a day); there's even a Vegemite and cheese roll and mini-pizzas among the minnow-sized offerings.

At the main Terrace restaurant, there are pasta, barbecue and seafood nights and breakfast is a buffet, but there's also an emphasis on gourmet food that one doesn't always expect, or indeed get, at a family resort. Hope's menus run from Japanese noodle salads, spicy laksas and Thai-spiced watermelon soup to goat sauteed in peri peri sauce, blackened mahi mahi fish and seafood cooked paella-style in fragrant coconut rice.

On the must-try list, put Kashmiri wagyu beef with pineapple, green papaya, mango and udon noodles and a vegetarian risotto of goat's cheese, rocket, tomatoes, olives and loads of lemon.

Considering the very favourable exchange rate since the devaluation of Fiji's dollar, even indulgent slipper lobster and crab dishes work out at the equivalent of about \$30, and wines by the

glass are almost all less than \$10. Fiji Bitter is the mainstay for beer-fanciers but we try the newish Vonu Pure Lager with a turtle painted on the bottle; it's a local handcrafted draught that looks set to be a hit with Australian visitors.

At the resort's garden-set Leilani's Spa — named for one of Ahura Resorts' owner Tony Whitton's daughters — there's a menu of mini-pamperings for little princesses but, quite frankly, they can join the queue behind me.

All guests are offered a 15-minute complimentary foot massage "with invigorating coconut exfoliation" and it's a brilliant way to get guests to try the spa, even boofy blokes who would ordinarily find even a massage to be too pansy-like but might like the idea of invigoration.

The spa has a trio of treatment rooms open on one side to face a hillside smothered in ficus trees, palms and flowering vines.

It's delightfully simple and organic, with expert therapists Etta and Siteri administering treatments with names such as Bliss and Sugar Body Glow while tiny orange-breasted honeyeaters and collared lory parrots dart about the old trees.

There are plenty of activities on offer here, or you could just spread out in a hammock hoisted between helpfully positioned palms and read the *Malolo Sun* journal for details of fishing for trevally or tuna and walking hilly trails. One afternoon, I notice a nanny holding two babies in a double hammock, gently rocking them to sleep, presumably while their parents nap indoors.

Who wouldn't be into this arrangement, with childcare at a low \$F8 an hour?

It has to be acknowledged that Fiji has cycles of political unrest and is prone to cyclones.

Commodore Frank Bainimarama's stringent military censorship

of the media and newly drafted decree on foreign ownership of press has not helped Fiji's move towards democracy. Last year, in a controversial move, the executive committee of the Australian Society of Travel Writers declined to take up an expression of interest from the Fijian government to hold its 2010 annual general meeting in Nadi. Many society members continue to accept hosted trips there, however, and visitor arrivals from our market are up 25.5 per cent over 2009 figures for the first three months of this year.

Despite what is thrown at this island nation, Australians love its people and its down-home hospitality. Please count me among its biggest fans.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of V Australia and Ahura Resorts.

Checklist

V Australia offers direct, daily (excluding Wednesdays) full-service flights from Sydney to Nadi on its new Boeing 777-300ER aircraft; the three-class cabin incorporates International Business, International Premium Economy and International Economy. Direct flights to Nadi are also available from Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide on Pacific Blue. More: vaustralia.com.au, flypacificblue.com.

Malolo is 25km west of Nadi airport and accessible by seaplane, private speedboat charter or thrice-daily scheduled catamaran services from Port Denarau (20 minutes by taxi or transfer from Nadi airport). The resort has regular specials that include free meals for kids and resort dollars for families to exchange for activities and/or meals. There are also deals combining Malolo with its luxury sibling Likuliku Lagoon Resort. More: malolololand.com, ahuraresorts.com.