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Pearl of the Pacific



The resort opens to white beaches.

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An oasis of calm, Fiji's Pearl resort specialises in luxury, Kate Cox writes.

IT'S UNUSUAL that a luxury hotel owner is honest about the slightly sketchy history of his establishment. Not with Eddie Phillips, proprietor of The Pearl South Pacific.

"How did the name come about?" the Australian property developer and surfboard collector repeats in his magnanimous style. "Well, things weren't going too well with my business partner [Vincent Rae from Rae's on Wategos at Byron Bay] so I bought him out and was looking for a new name ... and got to thinking about how a beautiful gem like a pearl is borne out of aggravation - and there you have it. It became The Pearl."

It's refreshing not to have the usual spin about biblical fables, or dream visions, or deathbed wishes: just an innovative but straightforward explanation about a hotel's name.

We'd arrived at the ultra-modern resort severely world-wearied after a day spent delayed at the airport when our flight was cancelled. (There was a trade-off: our replacement plane featured a stack of spunky surfies en route to their Fijian leg of the ASP tour.)

The Pearl South Pacific is a 45-minute drive from Sabi, or three hours from Nadi, where our plane was diverted. The dark drive is made more enjoyable by Anil, the driver from Focus on Fiji, who meets us at the airport brandishing a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. "They told me you'd be stressed and tired," he laughs.

Fijians are famous for their laid-back style. Anil tells us the disaster patrollers slept right through the recent tsunami alarms, and Kava and "Fiji time" remain an important part of their culture. The recent Fiji election and associated unrest reduced tourism as potential guests waited to see who got

in. "The right guy won but numbers are still down," Anil chuckles.

Indeed, the hotel is an oasis of calm when we arrive. There's a giant screen above reception showing the various beautiful coloured fish of the South Pacific. Fountains cascade down the back mirrored wall of the bar, with Chinese-style paper-covered globes hanging from the high ceilings, and huge hourglass lanterns, ancient chests, coffee-coloured couches and cream day beds around the foyer.

After a long bath (filled with frangipanis and the smell of coconut), we're drawn to the thumping bass of the beach bar. It seems the whole island is getting down to Bob Sinclair's Love Generation; honeymooners are doing shots at the bar, locals are showcasing their own special kind of Fijian foxtrot and a DJ "all the way from Australia" is combining old and new faves on the decks.

But we're tired and our beautiful French Provincial themed penthouse featuring Ralph Lauren everything, is instantly relaxing. (Other penthouse themes are Oriental, Surf and Sand, and Blue Room). We slip on the "Currently surrendering to sleep" door tag and, er, surrender.

It's been raining for a week but when we wake it's still warm, so our plans to snorkel and kayak off the palm-lined beach are intact. Most of the coral has been bleached by a hot water spell five years ago but it is slowly sneaking back and there are lots of small fish so we kick around for hours.

The food - not something that Fiji is famous for - is seriously good at The Pearl. In Mantarae, we devour smoked marlin and crab with ginger, coriander and chilli for dinner under an impressive modern chandelier. There are six bars and four restaurants at the resort, and at Mantarae, the signature diner, dinner entrees range from \$15 to \$17; mains are \$26 to \$34.

Lunch is poolside, with prawn pizzas, a substantial barbecue, perfect bloody Marys and a jazz band.

An activities board offers everything from watching the firewalking at the arts centre up the road to playing cricket on the beach. The whitewater rafting, which takes a day, is said to be amazing. But we race one another to the horizon on power-skis, squealing with delight.

Then we lounge on the cushioned beach chairs and sway in the hammocks, play backgammon on the day beds, dive in and out of the pool, and get a seaside massage in the quaint wooden beach hut. Staff stop us with "gravity defying coconuts" - as the signs warn - and crack them open.

Other guests go game fishing; the marlin, mahi mahi and wahu you catch at sea can be smoked as soon as you land, or delivered to the kitchen for a very special dinner. One honeymooning couple raves about the golf on the championship course.

Phillips has spent \$15 million on the hotel - and a big day spa and glass-bottomed boat are in the works. Now all he has to do is control the weather.

The writer was a guest of The Pearl South Pacific.

TRIP NOTES

* The Pearl South Pacific beachfront resort is located at Pacific Harbour, overlooking the South Pacific, a 45-minute drive south-west of Suva. Phone +67 9345 0022. Email info@thepearlsouthpacific.com.

* Penthouses are \$F640 (about \$480) a night; deluxe rooms are \$F300 (garden view) or \$F360 (ocean view).

* Play the picturesque 18-hole Pearl championship golf course, designed by Robert Trent Jones jnr, and around the corner from the resort, for \$F30. The Country Club is open daily for meals on the deck.

* Massages in the beach bure start at \$F35.

* Fiji is warmest between September and April. You should expect the occasional evening tropical downpour.

Source: The Sun-Herald

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