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# Awakening the Giant

Long thought to be a white elephant, three dynamic developers are now trying to bring Fiji's Pacific Harbour resort and golf course back from the edge, reports Robert Keith-Reid.

A slumbering giant is awakening after a 30-year slumber. It's called Pacific Harbour, a 445-hectare (1,100-acre) resort, residential and golf course development 50 kilometres west of Suva, Fiji's capital. It was reclaimed, mostly from mangrove swamp, in the early 1970s. A pretty little hotel was built on the beach, a shopping and cultural centre created on the main road, and golf links laid out around waterways, a lake and more than 1,000 villa sites.

There were great hopes for Pacific Harbour—it was to be Fiji's first integrated resort project. But it soon sunk into stupor, with the developers blaming its near moribund status on the 1970s oil-price shock.

The property changed hands several times. The magnificent golf course faded, as did the hotel and cultural centre. Indonesian



Entrepreneur Eddie Phillips (*above right*) is justly proud of his new venture, the Pearl Hotel at Pacific Harbour. Following a radical revamp and upgrade, the Pearl (*above*) re-opened last November.

investors built a second hotel beside the course and hoped in vain for a casino licence, but anti-gambling pressure from the stern Methodist Church of Fiji throttled that idea. This property also changed hands.

Over the years Pacific Harbour, with only 150 or so residences built, emerged as a dormitory and weekend place for commuters from Suva and as home to a small fraternity expatriate resident faithfuls. By mid-2004, the golf course was in desperate need of a heavy-duty motor mower to cut a way between tees. The holiday resort for international visitors Pacific Harbour had been designed for seemed a lost dream.

Enter breezy, cashed-up Australians Eddie Phillips and Eric Roberts, both from Byron

Bay, New South Wales, and American developer Mitch Hagerman. Each of them working independently, these three have set themselves the challenge of awakening the comatose development.

When the Japanese owners wanted to sell their bits of the resort—the hotel and golf course—Eddie Phillips, in Fiji holidaying with a friend, heard of the property, inspected it and liked what he saw. The new owner since last year, he has restored much of what had become a pig's ear to silk-purse status. Radically upgraded and revamped, the hotel reopened last November as The Pearl.

Eddie trained as a physical education instructor, and went to Asia with a couple of pairs of jeans, a few shirts and degrees in

physical education and physiology. After a stint in Bangkok managing a spa, he saw an opportunity in Hong Kong, and opened a spa there with a friend, Barry Wain. From there, he's never looked back. "It was just the right place at the right time," he says of the phenomenally successful Philip Wain International chain. "We mushroomed all over Asia—in Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Taiwan, and in Sydney, Australia, as the Temple of the Body and Soul. I was the first person to introduce aerobics into Asia. We had to train everyone from scratch, but it was fun. It's like that in Fiji. It's a challenge and an adventure."

A few years ago he sold the spa business and, back in Australia, wasn't content simply to rest on his laurels. "I started going into real estate and hotels, pubs with accommodation in Sydney. I have the largest hotel in Coolangatta, on the east coast of Australia, and have just been approved for a A\$30 million [US\$23 million] development."

His pearl in Fiji has three restaurants, a lobby bar with a cascading waterfall, and Giselle's—an Arabian-style nightclub with dim lighting, all the latest and greatest music, sunken bar, padded walls and big daybeds. "This is what's happening in the nightclub industry now," Philips explains. "People like to sit around, chat, get up and have a bit of a dance if they like. Today, people like to lounge around, rather than just sitting at tables and chairs."

The hotel's west wing has been converted to accommodate six penthouse suites with "all-

marble" bathrooms, sunken baths, king-sized beds, plasma TV, high-speed Internet.

"Phase two," says Philips, "will be a marina down the side with the number of berths to be decided." Also to be decided are the number of condominium apartments to be built alongside the marina. But the first order of business for Philips is the golf course: "We're working on getting the greens up to PGA standard. I would like to invite the Fiji Open back and, once we get to PGA standard, work on an international tournament. Greg Norman still holds the course

**"I would like to invite the Fiji Open back and, once we get to PGA standard, work on an international tournament."**

record." Located on the golf course, says Philips, will be "the spa of spas". And Philips knows his spas.

Across the road, Eric Roberts, who made his mark as a television producer, is investing US\$15 million over the next three years to rebuild, enlarge and partly convert the Pacific Harbour shopping and cultural centre to house up to 500 backpackers. He's putting in 25 to 30 more retail shops, tennis courts and swimming



pools and, on a separate 2-hectare (5-acre) beach lot next to the Pearl resort, a "garden apartment" development.

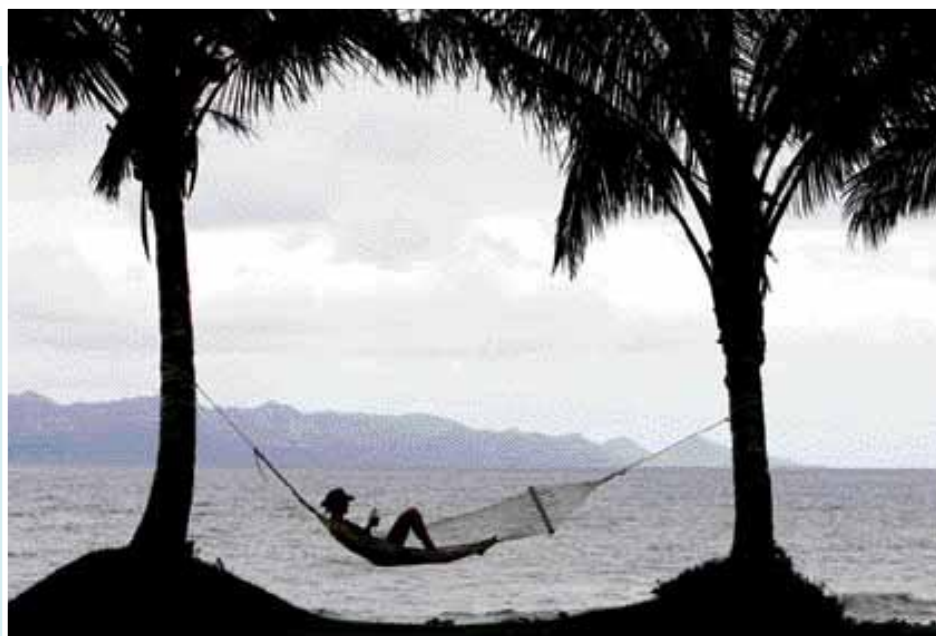
Then, just a kilometre or two west of the Pearl, American developer Mitch Hagerman has completed two and a half kilometres of roads for his Taunovo Bay residential and resort development. He has also begun work on six villas for the Exclusive Resorts international residential management group. Taunovo Bay is slated for 55 villas, each on 1,200 to 1,500sqm lots with 30-metre ocean frontages. They are

being marketed from \$1.7 million. Construction of an over-the-water hotel for management by the US

Rosewood chain is slated to begin in the first quarter of 2006.

Pacific Harbour is indeed waking up. Many of 900 or so purchased, but still vacant, plots are changing hands. Some of the original buyers had long since given up hope of Pacific Harbour ever being more than a suburb for commuters from Suva. Now they're happily reporting appreciating offers for their properties.

With plans also afoot to re-open the resort's airstrip, Eddie Philips says his Australian society pals are all ready to fly in and make Pacific Harbour the new in place to be seen. "Pacific Harbour was in the dog box for 20 years," he says. "Now Fiji's the flavour of the month."



Philips also likes to show off the hotel's famous jazz band (**above**). Tom Mawi, to Philips right, is considered one of the best jazz guitarists in the world. Chill at the Pearl's audacious new disco or just relax beside the beach (**left**).