CASTAWAY

An island resort in Fiji where ultimate privacy is an understatement
On a pristine private island off the north coast of Fiji’s Viti Levu, Alexandra English discovers solitude really is bliss

It’s well into the afternoon of my first day on Dolphin Island when I realise I’m the only guest here. I’ve had sneaking suspicions all morning — I arrived early and haven’t seen anyone other than the staff, who seem particularly attentive. I figured there were lovebirds sleeping in their nests somewhere and when they emerged I would become the awkward third wheel on their romantic getaway, lingering uncomfortably, trying to take up as little space as possible in the infinity pool. To be honest, I’ve been dreading it. It’s when I am called to a late lunch at a table set for one that it hits me. “Am I your only guest?” I ask the island’s manager, Dawn Simpson, while her right-hand woman, La Robinson, places plate after plate in front of me. “You are, darling,” she replies. As it turns out, the island is never booked out with people who don’t know one another. Come in a group (maximum occupancy is eight), as a couple or on your own, and you won’t meet any strangers, apart from the staff, who quickly come to feel like family.

With more than 300 islands in its archipelago, Fiji is a private-resort-island wonderland. Dolphin Island, part of Alex van Heeren’s super-exclusive Huka Retreats portfolio, is just off the northernmost point of Viti Levu. Guests usually make a grand entrance via seaplane or helicopter from Nadi Airport, but when I arrive after an easy four-hour flight from Sydney, the weather has taken a turn for the worse. Instead, I’m bundled into a private car and driven the two and a half hours to Wananavu, where a boat is waiting to take me the last 20 minutes to my as-yet-unbeknownst-to-me personal paradise. There’s nothing disappointing about this drive. There’s just one highway that loops around Viti Levu, and a full
A circuit of the island can be done in about eight hours, which means you see more than a quarter of it on your way from the airport. The tropical foliage is dense and I'm surprised to see so many cows grazing on it by the roadside. Wild horses have come down from the mountains and a real-life Fijian cowboy (sixpacked and shirtless) is wrangling one. A mud crab scurries across the road and is somehow missed by the wheels of the huge truck in front of us, as well as our own. We pass sugarcane farms that have recently been closed for the next six months with the season's end. People are piled into the backs of trucks for the four-hour trek back to their mountain villages after buying and selling vegetables at the street stalls. My driver slows as we pass through Nailaga village to point out the home of the country’s only female chief. Her residents are sitting on coloured rugs for a kava ceremony. And then there's the green. It's as if whatever celestial body created this earth first created green highlighters to point out all the important bits, and was more than a little excited about the South Pacific.

From the water, the country is transformed into a playground of indulgence and opulence. Private resorts, yacht-fronted mansions and empty privately owned islands replace the traditional huts and barefoot towns. One island is home to six horses, which are swimming and chasing one another when we skim past, and a caretaker. Apparently, its owner hasn't been to Fiji in years.

The moment you set foot on Dolphin Island, it becomes your home. I’m welcomed with hugs, singing and a frangipani lei before being ushered off to my bure, one of just four luxurious suites on the island. Coconut palms, Pacific Christmas bush and hibiscus surround the three elevated thatch-roofed bures, which all face the sea. The middle of these is the open-fronted communal main bure where all manner of eating, relaxing and lounging by the infinity pool takes place; the other two are separated into two two-person suites. There's also the insanely romantic Hilltop Sleep-out Bure (unofficially aka “the shag shack”), just a five-minute walk away. Manager Dawn lives on the island — and has for the past 14 years. Her neighbours — the staff quarters, a desalination plant and the generator — are all hidden behind a wooden fence that you won't see unless you're looking for it. Total privacy? An understatement.

Luxury hotel designer Virginia Fisher (renowned for her work on Huka Lodge) has decorated the ocean-fronted bures in creams and greens, with traditional palm mats on dark wood floors, and seashell adornments and traditional Fijian crafts on the walls. Fisher was born and raised in New Zealand, but spent much of her childhood in Fiji — and it shows. The extravagant indoor-outdoor bathroom is separated by a glass wall that can be slid back to reveal a private courtyard with outdoor shower, the twin dressing areas are a study in the beauty of natural wood and the free-standing bathtub is perfectly positioned under a seashell chandelier. Then there are the little touches: the woven bags, the sea urchin bedside lamps, the dolphins embroidered onto your pillows. Everything smells like coconut.

Star-gazing from the shag shack — I mean, Hilltop Bure — is next-level. Sitting at the highest point on the island, the bure is open-fronted, meaning you’ll wake to stunning views of the sea in the morning and fall asleep under the gentle light of the many, many stars. The natural interiors are gorgeously rustic and a fabulous showcase of relaxed Fijian luxury: lighting is all lanterns and candles; the bed is surrounded by white netting.

The jetty and entry point to Dolphin Island. Above: the main bure’s infinity pool at dusk.
The guests call the shots here. What you eat, where and when is entirely up to you. Feel like devouring a fruit platter on your deck? Go for it. Want to take a plate of garlic prawns down to the beach? Excellent. Prefer to savour grilled lobster in the bathtub? There's no judgement here. What's more, Dawn and her team seem to have supernatural intuitive powers. Every time I have an empty glass, someone appears as if from nowhere to top it up (eventually someone decides to just leave the bottle). There's Whittaker's and Lindt chocolate ready for snacking, endless fruit platters (mango, pineapple, dragon fruit, grapes, more pineapple, more mango) and fresh passionfruit juice made from the overloaded vine around the corner.

Life here is easygoing. Swim, snorkel, sail, float in the pool, call for a spa treatment in your room or do nothing at all. The island is yours and how you use it is up to you. Part of the beauty of staying on Dolphin Island is the feeling that you're totally remote — a modern-day Robinson Crusoe — yet close enough to the mainland that you can make day trips to nearby villages to explore their markets or experience world-class diving with an organised expedition. The six-hectare retreat looks out over the Bligh Water between Fiji's two main islands, named for Lieutenant William Bligh, who, in 1789, was cast adrift on the first European voyage through the Fiji islands, and this particular part of the sea is famous for having some of the richest coral reefs in the South Pacific. Those in the know head to the dive site dubbed the Amazing Maze — a labyrinth of caves and swim-throughs with magnificently coloured coral. You can also use the island's kayaks and paddleboards to explore the little islands nearby: Nananu-i-Ra and Nanau-i-Cake.

Open as it is to the elements, Dolphin Island can have extreme changes of weather. 2016's Cyclone Winston (the most intense tropical cyclone in the southern hemisphere on record) passed right over Dolphin Island as Dawn and some of her team hid in the laundry. Hundred-year-old rain trees were ripped out of the ground, but the guest bures were unharmed. A fluke of nature, perhaps, but enough reassurance to worry not. The main bure is perfect
for some respite from the elements (whether that be beating sun or wet weather, if the island isn’t at its postcard-perfect best), and
tere’s a library of history and art books as well as a huge collection
of orange Penguin Classics. The plush lounges are perfect for flopping into and zoning out while staring at the high ceiling that is
lined with traditional handpainted tapa (bark cloth).

And, of course, there are the spa treatments. After a lunch of
Spanish mackerel in lime juice and coconut cream, I indulge in the
one-hour Deep Cleanse Facial (the results of which become truly
apparent when I am mistaken — twice — for an 18-year-old on my
schoolies-reveller-packed flight home). All manner of exfoliants,
cleansers, serums and tonics infused with seaweed, algae and other
marine extracts are slathered on my face before the finishing touch
of a cool eye mask with the powers of instant sleep. Long after
I’ve forgotten where I am or what I’m doing, I’m nudged back into
reality with a foot massage. Reality being an afternoon spent in the
infinity pool while garlic prawns and grilled lobster are prepared for dinner.

The feeling upon leaving (read: being dragged kicking and screaming from) Dolphin Island when it’s time to go home is like being jolted awake from a brilliant dream by your Monday
morning alarm. Being back in the real world is upsetting and confusing, and
you can’t get back to where you were.

Until next time, that is. There will always be a next time. Dawn insists.
dolphinislandfiji.com.

GETTING THERE
Alexandra English flew as a
guest of Fiji’s national airline,
Fiji Airways, which flies direct
to Nadi International Airport
daily from Sydney, Melbourne,
Brisbane, and twice-weekly
from Adelaide. Their new B737
MAX 8 boasts leather seats
and onboard wi-fi (though we’d suggest it’s never too soon to
adopt an island mentality).

WHAT TO PACK
Miu Miu dress, $2640, matchesfashion.com.
Matteau swimsuit, $300, matteau-
store.com.
Rhode Resort dress, $393,
matcheshashion.com.