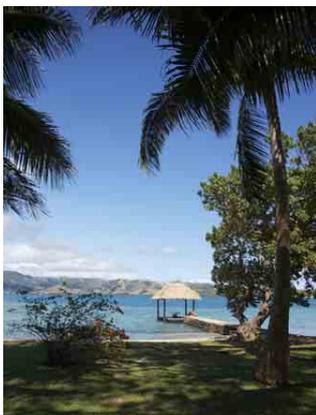


HOT SPOTS Penny Watson



Dolphin Island, Fiji

What is it? A private five-hectare island surrounded by white sand and basking in ridiculously turquoise waters off the northernmost point of Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island. Don't let the slightly tacky name put you off; this is as exclusive as it gets, with just three decadently attired thatched *bures* (cottages) accommodating a maximum of eight guests in total.

Who's responsible for such extravagance? Funnily enough, not Richard Branson. Until June, Dolphin Island had been the private family (and friends who are lucky enough) retreat of entrepreneur Alex van Heeren, whose hotel pedigree includes New Zealand's Huka Lodge and South Africa's Grande Provence. With the children having flown the coop, van Heeren has been able to focus on renovating and extending the resort. His reputation may have discerning guests wanting to sample his triumvirate of hotel experiences.

So, what else is special about it? The interior. Luxury hotel designer Virginia Fisher has proved herself a master at combining contemporary furnishings, natural materials and traditional artefacts. The modern beach house styling of the four double suites (the main *bure* has two), each with an open-fronted king-sized bedroom, double dressing room and huge rear bathroom, with courtyard and outdoor shower, is offset with woven pandanus mats, shell-mounted mirrors and Fijian ornaments. In the main *bure*, Kartell-esque stools stand beside plantation chairs, and bark cloth ceilings with orange motifs complement textured cushions and a row of Penguin classics.

Great, but what is there to do? Have you read *War and Peace*? Here, beneath a palm, you could lose yourself for hours in an epic

novel. Or you could turn your attention to the big blue. Fiji's best snorkelling and dive sites are a short boat ride away – the dive company picks up guests from the resort's pier. Flippers, snorkels, kayaks and a Hobie catamaran are set up beachside for guests to use at their whim. There's a walking track around the island and guests can plan a day tour to Navala, Fiji's last *bure* village.

What about the food? Moveable feasts are all part of the experience – the weather, time of day and mood will all determine whether staff set places on the deck by the infinity pool, on the floating pavilion or under the shade of a frangipani tree. Wherever you sit, the fare is exceptional. Resort manager Dawn Simpson is a gracious host and a guru of local cuisine. Her speciality is seafood straight off the boat. Demand her fish curry!

Anything else worth mentioning? Come nightfall, 100 lanterns are placed at tree bases around the *bures*, a sight particularly spectacular when arriving by boat. The hilltop sleepout (bottom left) is a romantic touch – this rustic open-air *bure*, set in the trees on the far side of the island, is as Robinson Crusoe as it gets in such a luxurious hideaway.

What's the bottom line? One room is A\$7,500 (HK\$57,000) a night, but the resort encourages guests to take over the entire island for A\$12,000 a night. (Until December 12, the resort is running a four for the price of three package.) The tariff includes all meals, standard drinks, activities, plus the two-hour car and boat transfer from Nadi airport. Helicopter transfers cost a tad extra.

Dolphin Island is on Raki Raki, Fiji, tel: 64 7 378 5791; www.dolphinislandfiji.com.

Pictures: Penny Watson