

Singing the blues

Fiji's five-star Vomo Island offers exquisite visuals, outstanding cuisine, and a live soundtrack to match.

STORY Alice Aldridge



IT'S SAID THAT PEOPLE first visit Fiji for the breathtaking terrain of its aqua waters and ivory beaches, but they return for the warmth of the people. Fijians like to reach out and touch: big bear hugs that shatter the cold armour of citified tourists. If the hugs don't break the corporate holidaymakers down, then the singing will. Harmonised vocals in the native tongue stay with you long after your tan has faded.

The boutique Vomo Island Resort, part of the Sofitel group, even has its own choir. Maintenance men sing alongside the girls from the spa, the waiters and the housekeeping staff, all providing a constant soundtrack to your island holiday. If this were *Fijian Idol* you'd vote to keep them all on. Add in the X factor of Vomo's exquisite vanilla beaches, turquoise waters and lush greenery and, well, the experience can bring tears to your eyes.

Since the island's aural and visual delights provide such a spectacular feast, that means the bar is raised high for all other senses. Fortunately, taste is well covered: after each meal the guests are singing too, all the way back to their beachside bures. There are 29 bures on this private island, situated

about an hour's boat ride north from Fiji's Nadi airport. That's an average of some 50 people whose tastebuds need to be massaged three times a day.

The man charged with pleasing these palates is resident chef James Garden. He's an Australian import, a Ginger Meggs transplanted to the tropics. Red hair and fair skin keep out him of the sun, but that hasn't stopped him working in culinary hotspots like Italy, India and the Maldives. James cooked for musicians, movie stars and millionaires before settling down to the Fijian lifestyle. Quick with a laugh or an impish grin, he's otherwise a man of few words who usually lets his dishes speak for him.

James uses Indian and South-East Asian influences in his own menu, integrating local produce and regional flavour for the Beyond The Reef poolside restaurant. On his lunch menu, Fijian kokoda (local fresh fish marinated in coconut cream, peppers and lime) sits happily alongside tempura mori awase and pizza with scallops, quince and bocconcini.

Fijian cuisine is historically a mix of Polynesian and Melanesian. Early settlers, about 3500 years ago, brought root crops of taro and livestock of



LIFE'S A BEACH (clockwise from top left): sitting pretty on the sand; staff can organise a romantic dinner al fresco; chef James Garden; five-star food includes freshly caught salmon.



pigs and poultry to the islands. The underwater world provided plenty of seafood and traditional cooking methods included underground steaming. Food may have been plentiful but cannibalism was once on the menu, though thankfully no-one was sacrificed this particular week at Vomo.

Indian labourers were brought to the islands in the 1800s by the British to work on the sugar plantations. Spices became prevalent in cooking and a repertoire of Indo-Fijian curries developed. The British also introduced cattle, making beef a mainstay menu item.

Come dinnertime at Vomo and beef striploin accompanies shitake mushrooms as a main meal. Local reef fish is served up with Mediterranean vegetables, and salt and pepper prawns sit on a bed of green papaya salad. It's all very civilised and tastebuds give sincere thanks.

But it's the dessert menu that really sings. Think lime crème fraiche, vanilla couscous, basil ice-cream and sweet mascarpone with coconut and passionfruit... mmm. A pear crumble with butterscotch custard had our party raving. (After all, we rationalised, we needed that extra energy to climb Mount Vomo the next morning.)

James has his work cut out for him – the one kitchen services Beyond The Reef's breakfast, lunch and dinner menus as well as the weekly seafood grill at The Rocks restaurant on the island point. Supplies are ordered regularly but delivery is erratic.

"I don't know what's going to arrive each week on the boat!" exclaims James in a rare moment of conversation, fuelled by our second bottle of Wither Hills Marlborough 2003. "I have to make up the menu weekly. It's a challenge, but one I love."

"Tell me more," I say as I order a bottle of Henschke Cranes Chardonnay, determined to work my way to France via Margaret River, Clare Valley, Hawkes Bay and Central Otago.

James starts to answer me, but by now all I can hear are the dulcet tones of the Vomo choir still singing inside my head. We finally make it to Châteauneuf-du-Pape about midnight before making a detour to Havana, in the form of a Montecristo cigar.

I sleep soundly, not knowing what breakfast delights await me in the morning. Hope the pancake fixings made it onto the supply boat. ■

FACT FILE

LOCATION

The Fijian archipelago is in the heart of the South Pacific. Vomo Island is situated 25km north-west of Fiji's international airport at Nadi, on the main island of Viti Levu.

WHEN TO GO

Fiji offers blissful tropical temperatures and cooling trade winds all year round; the May-October period avoids most rainfall as well as cyclone season.

MORE INFO

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