

TRAVEL

Fiji: Relative luxe at Vomo

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The Rocks Bar, Vomo Island Resort.

AAP

By: Caroline Berdon

Vomo embraces 'raw luxury' and will embrace your kids, writes Caroline Berdon.

I swing gently in my hammock, my big toe rippling up powdery white sand. But after a few weeks' wait for my tropical break, this isn't quite how I pictured my slice of Fijian paradise.

There's no doubt it's divinely beautiful and relaxing here. Fiji's pristine, turquoise ocean never disappoints. I can see the reef hovering in the shallow water. The beaches are strewn with driftwood and seaweed. I feel like I'm on a wild, unkempt and remote desert island.

In fact, I'm at one of Fiji's best-loved island resorts.

Vomo is an all-inclusive luxury resort of 103ha, 28 villas and four holiday residences. But luxury resorts aren't what they used to be.

As food trends towards raw and honest, travel, it seems, is doing the same.

In this case, it's a good thing. Vomo isn't messy; it's wild and pretty, and real.

After all, why change something so naturally beautiful?

Tradewinds blow gently through the Mamanuca Islands, to the west of the country's archipelago, and Vomo's management is happy for them to shake up the beach. It's how nature intended.

"Vomo's a playground to play in and we want to keep it as raw and as natural as possible," says the resort's general manager, Mark Leslie, who was born in the UK, brought up in Africa and calls Australia home.

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"So we don't manicure the gardens. They were very manicured when I got here; I've tried to put the native plants back in. The hedgerows are not trimmed properly because that's what you have at home and we want the island to be what it would naturally be like if you arrived here."

"We call it raw luxury, and it's about trying to keep that raw element as much as possible."

Leslie came to Vomo from island resorts in the Maldives and Seychelles, where he learned that an environment is better left alone instead of being changed and moulded. How did it take so long to realise this, I wonder.

Who on earth would want to fiddle with Fiji? A walk across Vomo is a colourful voyage through frangipani, yellow, white and pink bougainvillea and red hibiscus. "You don't have to mess with the colours you've got and the backdrop you've got here," says Leslie. "It's perfect."

The native feel flows through Vomo's accommodation, which is all natural wood with lots of raw teak. But nature is a double-edged sword and the force of Cyclone Winston means this beauty has come at a price for the resort — twice over.

The island underwent a US\$14 million (NZ\$19.5m) refurbishment in 2015 but Winston destroyed it in March 2016. After another renovation — this time costing US\$20m — Vomo reopened in September 2016.

Guests have been flocking back, and an astonishing number — 84 per cent — are repeat visitors.

"Vomo is an extension of people's homes," says Leslie. "It took me a year to understand why. It's not about infrastructure, it's about people — the Fijians are so genuine. It's about the love and affection they show, particularly towards families. They remember your names, they remember the children's names and that's the main element why people come back."

Vomo was the first five-star resort in Fiji to welcome children, and not many have since joined this exclusive club.

Giving parents the chance to holiday in luxury in a place that welcomes and helps care for their children, is at the core of Vomo's philosophy.

The children's facilities are top notch. The toys, all wooden, are changed every year; the daily activities for them are extensive. When I visit the kids' club, perpetually smiling carers are busy with kids making Fijian jewellery and grass skirts, and weaving fish from reeds.



Food is a focus at Vomo Island Resort.

Vomo has also invested heavily in food. Leslie admits it isn't the greenest resort in that it doesn't focus on Fijian produce, but he believes quality is paramount. "We spend a lot of money on the importation of food because the produce just isn't there locally. And once the sun goes down, that's all you've got."

The best place to be at sunset is down at the Rocks Bar, an adults-only oasis of day beds and cocktails that looks out to the tiny, neighbouring island of Vomo Lailai.

During the day, guests wander about lazily between kayaking, snorkelling and swimming.

They can also learn how to cook the Fijian way in an earth oven, or lovo.

There are also hammocks, lots of hammocks, willing to hold you for hours on end.

But if you yearn for activity, you can take a walk or run up Mt Vomo on the eastern side of the island. It's only 500m but it's steep. And the view from the top is worth every arduous step.

I hike up at dawn and as I reach the top, the sun is just peeking over the ocean. There's no breeze at this hour, just the still heat and calm sea.

I look down over green, grassy slopes and bushes of bright flowers to the long, white beaches that fringe both sides of the island, the tide having left a fresh layer of ocean debris. From up here the hammocks are hidden beneath the palms.



The beach at Vomo Resort in Fiji's Mamanuca Islands. Photo / AAP

The beachside villas dot the right-hand side of the island but mostly it's untouched, fertile and stunning. The way it's looked for centuries.

FACT BOX

GETTING THERE

Fiji Airways flies from Auckland to Nadi. To access Vomo you'll need to transfer from Nadi to Port Denarau (45 mins drive), from which a boat transfer will take you around 45 mins.

STAYING THERE

Beachfront villas are **Vomo's** most popular accommodation option for couple or families up to four. Hillside villas offer more seclusion. There are four luxury resort villas for larger

groups, and two-bedroom villas for three-child families are on the way.

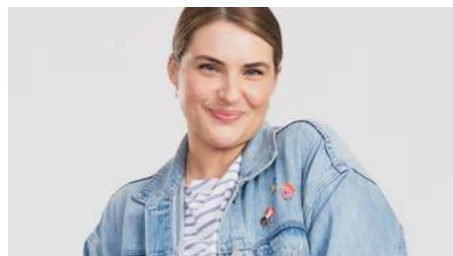
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