



Redefining paradise

A perennial family favourite, Plantation Island Resort is on a journey of continual evolution, redefining paradise with every visit, discovers Aleney de Winter.

The world is still wrapped in the inky embrace of night, save for a single overhead floodlight casting a soft glow on the gin-clear water. Beneath its beam, my daughter and I spy silvery, sleek fish darting in and out of the shadows and dancing around our toes, as if inviting us to celebrate the approaching dawn with them. As the clock strikes 5.45am, swathes of deep red and fiery orange begin to bleed into the sky, chasing away the darkness. We are entirely alone, save for the fish.

Slowly, we are joined by a handful of other early risers, their presence subtle and serene as they, too, gather to witness the day's first light.

With a gentle push, our kayaks break free from the shore, our soft paddle strokes barely breaking the morning stillness as we glide towards an island where, perched on the beach, we watch our resort island of Malolo Lailai emerge from the shadows, its outline softened by the peachy glow of dawn – a fleeting moment of magic as Fiji awakens around us. We paddle back at a leisurely pace, to be greeted by the tantalising aroma of sizzling bacon. Despite the early hour, it stirs our appetites. By 7.30am, our bellies full, the sky and water have transformed into a brilliant mosaic of blues, and we're ready to embrace a full day of soaking up every bit of it.

Plantation Island Resort, an old friend, has welcomed us back with open arms. While we're thrilled to return to its seven kilometres of soft, white sand, four swimming pools, and sparkling lagoon, we're astonished by how much the resort has evolved since our last visit. Don't get me wrong – everything that made this place so special remains perfectly intact. But now, there's even more to see, do, and enjoy on the island. The challenge lies in balancing doing it all with doing nothing at all. But we're determined to give it our best shot. Happily, our spacious one-bedroom beachfront bure, complete with sun loungers and hammock, and just steps from the water, makes the latter easy to achieve. But first, there's fun to be had.

Water works

The kids bolt for the inflatable water park (for guests aged five to 16). Hours

slip away as they clamber across the slippery obstacle course. I watch from the shore, green with envy, as they shimmy over it like pros. But their sights are set elsewhere – the resort's shiny new Jungle Water Park, Fiji's first. I book them in for an hour on the floating fun park (ages six and up, adrenaline junkies only!). They're soon catapulting off trampolines and swinging Tarzan-style over the deep water. By the end, they're soaked, breathless, and wearing grins as wide as the island.

Before the kids can even catch their breath, they're clinging to a doughnut-shaped inflatable like their lives depend on it, as a speedboat tears across the water, towing them at breakneck speed. Bouncing, screaming, and laughing all at once, their faces flushed, they hang tight as they skid chaotically over the waves.

A sustainable stay

The resort's coral gardening program is a revelation – a perfect blend of marine biology and holiday fun, we jump at the chance to get hands on, helping to nurture the coral reefs in Malolo Lailai Bay alongside a real-life marine biologist. We enjoy the incredible privilege of visiting the newly unveiled BULA Reef, the world's largest coral rescue nursery, launched on June 8, 2024 to coincide with World Oceans Day. This ground-breaking milestone in coral conservation is the only coral-



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focused adaptation program in the world to get a prestigious gold star from UNESCO as part of their Ocean Decade of Action. While snorkelling here is off-limits – baby coral colonies are, after all, the delicate divas of the sea – Plantation's day tour operator offers tours once a week, allowing guests to see this precious marine nursery up close, without disturbing its fragile ecosystem.

Land lubbers

Of course, the action isn't only on or in the water. For little ones, the Coconut Kids' Club is a hive of activities with its expansive tropical-themed climbing gym, dedicated toddler area, and zones for activities such as reading, arts and crafts, and cooking. Children can dine for free each night, and the club's activities, including baking, crafts, and nature explorations, keep them engaged and entertained.

Teens have plenty of options too, with teen-only tours and activities like coconut husking, hikes, beach cricket, soccer, and pool. But for my two, it's the freedom to explore safely without hovering parents cramping their style, that sparks their joy. So I'm told (I'm one of the aforementioned parents) as they drop me off at the resort's day spa for some pampering and grab Bula Bikes to wheel off into the horizon for some parent-free fun. I make the best use of my time too, with a leisurely massage, before hitting the resort's boutiques, where I end up spending up on my renegade offspring anyway.

The Resort also offers an introduction to Fijian culture, showcasing the traditions that define the heart and soul of the island. The Cultural Centre, another new addition since our last visit, is a hub for many of these experiences. Here we watch artisans carve intricate designs from

local wood, join in traditional cooking lessons, and get hands on weaving fans from palm fronds. Then, as night falls, a torch-lighting ceremony adds a touch of magic for the little ones, along with captivating Fijian dance performances and kava ceremonies.

A tropical feast

In addition to Plantation Island Resort's established dining options – Black Coral Grill, where we sizzled steak over volcanic rock; poolside Tavola Restaurant & Bar; buffet-style Copra; and Cocohut and Coco Lailai coffee shops – the resort has some exciting new additions. The Snack Bar serves up pizza, burgers, and hot dogs, while Bata Bata Milk Bar's ice cream and doughnut have a magnetic pull on my daughter. But the standout is the just opened Poke Bowl Bar. Its fresh, healthy offerings are so good we'd happily eat here three times a day.

Plantation Island Resort has added a bottle shop for those who prefer a tittle in the privacy of their bure. Me? I'd rather kick back with a happy hour cocktail at one of the two splendid bars, watching the kids splashing as the sun sets to the mellifluous sounds of Fijian musicians. It's the perfect way to savour the charms, both old and new, of a place that makes every moment unforgettable. ●

01 Tween time out on Malolo Lailai
02 The Jungle Water Park 03 Beachfront bure 04 The ocean pool 05 Bula Bikes are ideal for navigating the island. Image 01, 02, 03 & 05 © Aleney de Winter.

Fiji Report Card

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