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Sustainable tourism on a little coral cay

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South Pacific Tourism Organisation

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In the deep blue Fijian waters of the Lomaiviti archipelago, there sits the coral cay that is Leleuvia Island Resort, a 68,000 square metre islet that is adopting and implementing sustainable tourism practices because they understand that acting locally impacts globally.

Leading this work on the island is Leleuvia Resort Manager, Colin Philp. Colin is a sail maker by trade who ran a successful manufacturing business as well as a chain of surf shops throughout Fiji for a number of years before deciding he needed a

change and opportunity came knocking when he was asked to run Leleuvia in 2011. Colin's affinity to the 'vanua' (land) and 'waitui' (ocean) especially the latter had him involved in the Fiji Islands Voyaging Society in 2009 (now named the Uto ni Yalo Trust). Colin, ever the entrepreneur still owns and runs a small canvas and distribution business, which sells biodegradable cleaning products.

"I've always had a love for the ocean, it seemed natural to involve myself in the Uto ni Yalo Trust and the conservation work they are doing, it was a sign of things to come" said Philp.



Connecting with the community and using traditional knowledge

When Colin first arrived at Leleuvia 7 years ago he studied how the resort was run and decided he wanted to connect with the surrounding villages and he saw an opportunity to include them as well as share and practise traditional knowledge, giving authenticity to the resort.

Colin approached the 10 villages of Moturiki Island and asked them to help build 20 traditional 'bures' (thatched huts) on Leleuvia. The resort provided the working skeleton of a cement base and poles and the elders came with their youth who watched and participated in this age-old tradition of thatching bures with locally sourced materials but most importantly what this particular project also created was a resurgence of 'bures' on Moturiki.

“If you went to Moturiki 7 years ago, there was not one thatched bure on Moturiki, today it's scattered across the villages, you can't put a price on the use of local traditional knowledge and the transfer of that knowledge as well as up skilling our youth, we're preserving culture” said Philp.

Common sense also means that the bures were built on the windward side of the island so it catches the Tradewinds so there's no need for air-conditioning, these bures also withstood the wrath of Cyclone Winston. Only one bure out of 20 had minor damages and the jetty bure collapsed due to the combination of wind and waves.

The villages that helped make the bures are Daku, Naicabecabe, Nasauvuki, Nasesara, Navuti, Niubasaga, Savuna, Uluibau, Yanuca and Wawa.

Another win for Leleuvia was when their neighbouring resort Caqalei Island also adopted the same initiative. Colin also added that all of the materials were sourced from Moturiki or Ovalau, and if they couldn't get it from there then they went to Suva. The process was a conscientious one aimed at being as 'green' as possible to give tourists an authentic sustainable Fijian experience.

“We had the option to use artificial thatches but we didn't because it was costly and the horror stories from other resorts that used it made the decision easy plus the biodegrading meant that smaller pieces of plastic would wash into the ocean” said Philp.



Destination Immersion for the Millennial Traveller

The millennial traveller when on vacation wants to experience a new culture they want to immerse themselves in the destination, becoming almost a part of the location they find themselves in and Colin understands this.

“We don’t do a hard sell, a lot of people come here for a reason and we’re in a digital era where people are a click away from information. Your millennial traveller, families and couples understand that we all have carbon footprints and they’re looking to immerse themselves in a culture where they can see the impact they have on activities such as coral planting and visiting heritage sites in Levuka” said Philp.

The resort boasts guests such as Australian Olympic swimmer, Lisa Curry Tabone who is a returning guest and appreciates Leleuvia because of the culture, the simplicity of the resort and the opportunity to visit nearby villages and experience the village life.



Quality vs. Quantity

Sustainable tourism in the Pacific is still a new concept, there are many facets to it but if we're going to advocate for this the Pacific tourism industry needs to be committed to making a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate future employment for local people.

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Leleuvia have been asked by regular group booking companies to put more bures on the island to accommodate the demand but Colin firmly believes at looking at the impact the natural environment can sustain from the resort.

“Our environment is still pristine compared to the rest of the world, that’s what our guests are coming to experience and I have strong feelings about our tourism office concentrating only on the numbers without worrying about the impact on the environment and our culture on the increasing numbers of visitors. Every property, island resort or tourism related business has an impact on the environment and we all need to fully understand this impact and do our part in conducting our businesses as “green” as possible” said Philp.



Walking the talk

There are over 400 registered accommodations in Fiji of that there are 191 island resorts. SPTO is working with stakeholders and private sector members to roll out their ‘Sustainable Monitoring Program’ which is first being implemented in Fiji and Samoa. In Fiji, 8 resorts have signed up and shown commitment to provide the sustainability data including Leleuvia. Their bures have no air conditioning; all of their toilets are flushed with saltwater; and they have a desalination plant on the island to make their own water — an expensive investment which was bought second hand.



They've also built a big roof over the staff quarters to harvest rain water, whilst the resort has a 160,000 litre water tank capacity on the island.

“The success of our efforts has been a combination of waste management, marine conservation, staff and guest awareness, monitoring and engaging stakeholders and communities. It's taken us 5 years to get everyone on board” added Philp.



Protecting the sea and valuing the people

Colin is sitting under a coconut tree and the gentle lapping of the sea can be heard in the background as he says “Number one thing to remember is to value the staff. They are from all over Fiji with quite a few from nearby Moturiki, and not a lot of them are trained to work in the tourism industry but when you invest in them, you’re investing in traditional knowledge and up skilling a generation”.

Leleuvia is steadfast in its commitment to conservation, equipped with a coral planting and a turtle tagging program with the Department of Fisheries, the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). They also have humpback whales coming across through July to October.

Colin firmly believes in involving the staff to make sure everyone is part of the whole initiative with staff meeting regularly to review what we are doing and if they’re doing it right.

“It’s about ownership from staff and convincing them that they all have a part to play in the Sustainability Plan and convincing them to start doing this in their own homes and villages, start their own projects” said Philp.



The Future

Colin is tapping into renewable energy funding to help build a solar ferry for the resort. Two thirds of Leleuvia's energy costs relate to powering their boats to carry guests and supplies to and from the island. This is why they are focusing on improving their carbon footprint in this area.

“Our first step was to switch all our outboards over to 4-stroke engines which saw a 37% increase in efficiency and fuel saving and the logical next step was to look for suitable electric technology to power our boats and we are now talking closely with a German manufacturer” said Colin.

Colin also added that over FJ \$100m was collected in 2017 from the Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) and over 2/3 was spent on infrastructure. While this was commendable, he says there needs to be incentives for businesses that want to do the right thing.

“We have formed the Duavata Sustainable Tourism Collective to lobby government for incentives whether it be tax, import subsidies and grants” he said. The Duavata Collective was formed by likeminded operators such as Rivers Fiji, Talanoa Treks, Uprising Beach Resort, Takalana Bay Resort and Namosi Eco Lodge.

Colin is one of the first Pacific Islanders in our tourism industry to take the bold step to include their communities and guests in advocating sustainable tourism. We

are inspired by their story and small changes in how they do business because acting locally impacts globally.

By Neisau Tuidraki

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