

The Jean-Michel Cousteau resort in Fiji doubles as marine protector and promoter

By Jonathan Lobban



View of the Jean-Michel Cousteau resort from the pier.

THE group of Chinese tourists has barely dropped a fishing line overboard at the small coral reef on the southwest peninsula of Savusavu Bay when the diminutive but potent Johnny Singh leaps to his feet.

“Hey ... Heeeeeeey,” he yells, flapping his hat to get their attention, the small aluminium boat we’re in wildly rocking side to side. “Go! Get out of here! Go away!” Puzzled and clearly affronted, the tourists pull anchor and speed off. The beer-swilling boat driver, a local, throws Johnny a guilty smile. “Oh, man, that guy should know better,” Johnny sighs. “This area is tabua [sacred]. Everybody knows that.”

Johnny Singh is no recreational killjoy. He’s Savusavu’s resident ecowarrior and the full-time marine biologist for five-star Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort, a luxury eco-hotel located on a former coconut plantation on Fiji’s Vanua Levu island. Jean-Michel Cousteau, the son of oceanographer Jacques-Yves Cousteau, opened the resort in 1995. Like anything associated with the surname Cousteau, the resort takes seriously its mandate to protect and preserve local seacology, especially in relation to overfishing. That includes making the immediate area surrounding the resort — Nukubalavu — a permanent marine reserve, meaning it is tabua for fishing and anchoring. Whenever an important villager, such as a chief, passes away, local lore demands that a certain section of a reef be declared tabua, meaning fishing is forbidden there for a mourning period of three months. As a result, fish return and the villagers are able to tap the reef for fish to put on an end-of-mourning feast to end all feasts. “Local villagers told me, ‘Oh, we’re not catching much big fish any more ... the fish numbers are going down,’” Johnny explains as we

put-put back to dry land. “I said, ‘Well, why don’t you just make it a tabua area, and make it for a longer period — years — until fish life comes back?’”

A full-time employee of the Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort since 2006, Johnny Singh is the Fijian face of an evolving global trend towards alternative, sustainable luxury travel, a premise that matches the formerly exclusive concept of ethics and tourism.

“He (Jean-Michel Cousteau) wanted to show people that you can live a very fabulous, luxury lifestyle, but you can do that in balance with nature,” says Johnny. “It is possible. That’s what this place stands for — that through environmental sustainability you can achieve both social and economic sustainability.”

This is not just a marketing hard-sell; the hotel heads up several local ocean-rebuilding projects in concert with the chief of Savusavu, including rebuilding reefs from broken coral, giant clam farms at the end of the resort pier and the restoration of previously cut-down mangroves to boost water and fish quality and diversity. The results of the eco-programs have boosted local marine life exponentially, as witnessed in the hotel’s exceptional dive spots such as Alice in Wonderland. Docile, white-tipped reef sharks have returned to the colourful, thousand-year-old local Porites coral, as well as schools of banner fish, puffer fish, butterfly fish and Christmas tree worms.

Much like some of the great ethical-luxury firms, such as Ermenegildo Zegna, which in the 1930s built schools, houses and hospitals for their workers in northern Italy, the Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort is the backbone of the US-registered non-profit Savusavu Community Foundation. Each year the SCF provides local Savusavu villagers with orthopedic surgery, dental, eye and pulmonary clinics. The hotel provides accommodation for doctors and workers who build and paint local schools, build hospitals and communal toilet blocks and lobby for free medicine and medical supplies from US pharmaceutical companies. The previous general manager of the resort, Greg Taylor, started the program with some of the resort’s surgeon clients. Donations from multinationals and generous hotel guests account for about \$US2 million a year.

The resort is the biggest employer in Savusavu and takes more than 50 per cent of its 185 staff — outnumbering guests by a ratio of four to one — from the local Nukubalavu village, the traditional landowners. (As folklore has it, Yorkshire-to-Australia emigrant John Harman rescued the shipwrecked son of the local Nukubalavu chief in the mid-1800s and was granted about 80ha of land in this part of Vanua Levu to harvest sandalwood and copra.) The staff at JMCR receive the same free medical and dental clinics, and have food and transport subsidised. The effect of having more than 90 visibly happy staff at the hotel from the same nearby village makes for a holistic, communal feel. The smiles and gentle ribbing from the staff are genuine. The standard Fijian greeting “bulk” is more “BULA!” here. It’s as though the staff are barking at you to cheer up and get a smile on your face.

“It’s definitely a family atmosphere,” says JMCR managing director Mark Slimmer, an Australian raised in Fijian resorts as a boy by a father in hospitality. “The soul of the hotel is the staff. JMCR was designed around the Fijian village and the staff are all family. They work well together and instinctively understand each other in a way you couldn’t get elsewhere. The welcome comes naturally; the desire to

actually see that you're having a good time comes naturally ... the guests feel it and they become part of it."

To obtain insights into the lives of their staff, and to learn about indigenous culture, the hotel takes guests to Nukubalavu village for visits and to experience rural home life. Watching the Nukubalavu villagers sitting together en masse preparing food and singing songs, a sprint from some of the most clear and pristine ocean in the South Pacific, does make one wonder whether they might have the more civilised society than us Westerners with our sometimes overly formal, sterile and emotionless dining etiquette.

The hotel itself — a compendium of about 25 bungalow-style bures thatched with river reeds, plus a James Packer-worthy oceanfront villa — has a mortgage on the epicurean front. One of the main complaints of holidaying in Fiji is the blandness or sameness of the cuisine. JMCR has a policy that no meal is served again within 14 days, and it operates two different seven-day menus. The hotel's Chinese-Fijian chef, Raymond Lee, does some deft work in the kitchen. The hotel sources New Zealand lamb and salmon from overseas, but otherwise tries to use local food, including 25 per cent of all vegetables and fruit from JMCR's organic garden. The only thing tabua on the menu is local reef fish. "The reef is the base of all other things in the ocean," says Slimmer. "It's part of what we're protecting. If we don't look after it, it won't be there to look after us. So, in addition to the marine reserve we supervise, we protect reef fish by not putting them on our menus."

Families make up about 85 per cent of JMCR guests with couples the remaining 15 per cent. Warning: this is not a place for singles looking to hook up, unless it's with a dive program. For parents looking for a holiday that can stimulate the kids all day and give you enough free time to rekindle your romance, know this: the unofficial term guests use to reference JMCR is "where children are seen but not heard". From the moment you step foot in reception, an army of nannies arrives to whisk the kids away. Not just homely, mothering-type nannies, either. For the boys — and girls, if they are tomboy types — there are "mannies": big, strong rugby players in their early 20s from the village who have muscles popping out of their ears. If you're a kid and love sport, it's heaven.

JMCR has earned a reputation for being the best kids' club in Fiji. Children spend the entire day at the Disneyland-like Bula Club, swimming, cooking and learning about the Savusavu environment. The children are taken on mangrove and medicine walks to devour local knowledge about plant life and herbal remedies, while Johnny Singh puts on environmental programs and nightly video presentations on sharks and other marine life. There are stringent written tests each day for the children to reinforce the learnt knowledge. (I peeked at a test and could barely answer any of the questions.)

"The focus with our Bula Club is not just about activities for the kids and having fun," says Slimmer. "It's actually a combination of keeping the kids having fun and occupied but most importantly learning. The philosophy of the whole resort and Jean-Michel himself is to learn about the environment around you and how you live with it and what you can do to ensure it's there for future generations. Any opportunity we see for kids to learn about the culture of the Fijians or their environment around them and how they can interact and understand it, we'll take it."

The key indicator of a hotel's guest experience is measured in the level of emotion on departure. On occasion I lingered by the hotel exit where the transport bus takes guests to the local airport. Many tears were shed, both by adults and children. Strong bonds and connections are clearly made; promises to return next year are made. "It's wonderful to see it," says Slimmer. "We hope that they leave here better people. Hopefully that spreads on and on into their practices in life. We all need to be better at preserving the environment so that the planet is not going to be a wasteland in the future for our kids, and the more guests can understand how their little actions can change and still have an enjoyable life ... it's quite simple."



The resort consists of about 25 thatched-roof bungalows and an extra luxurious oceanside villa.