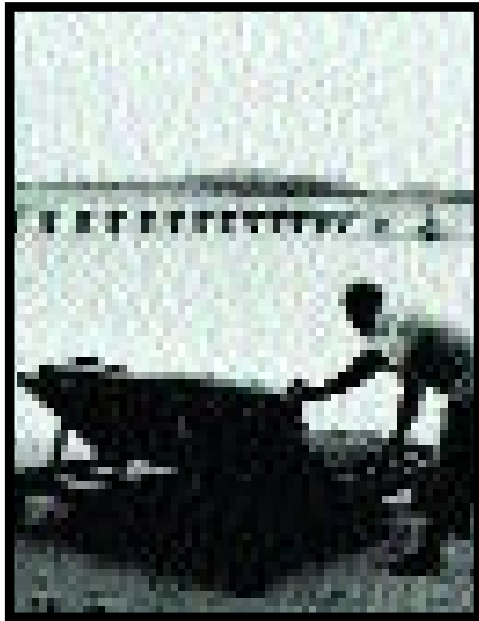


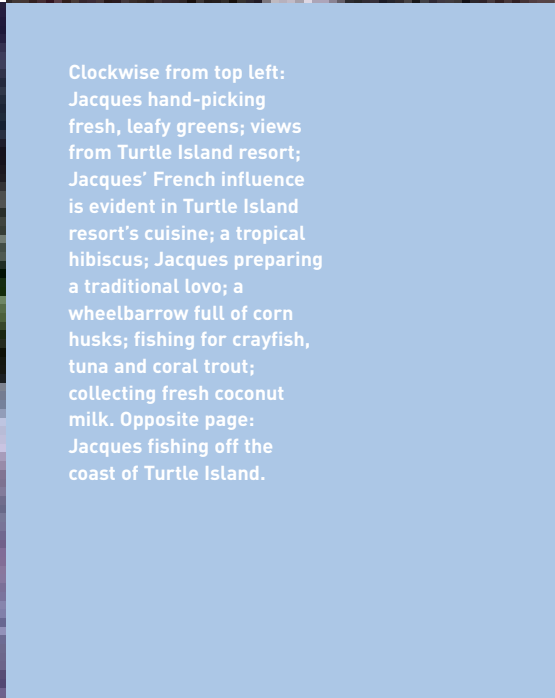
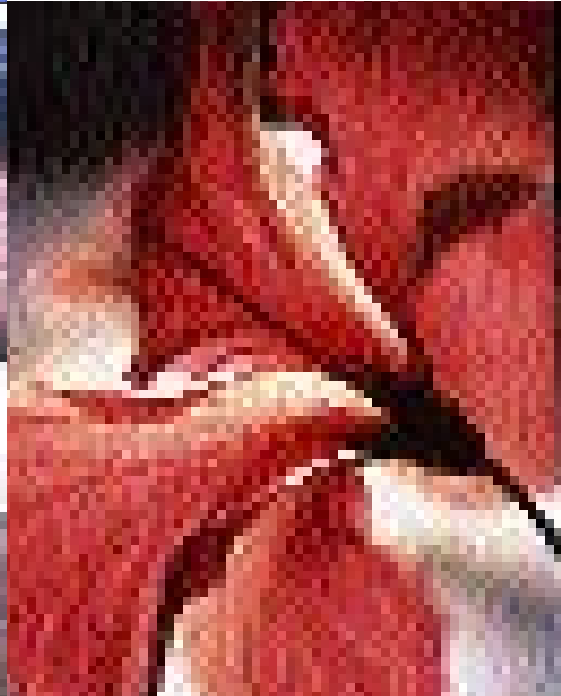
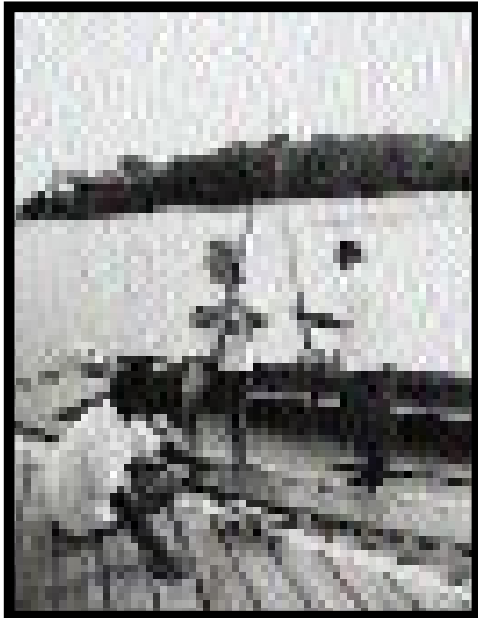
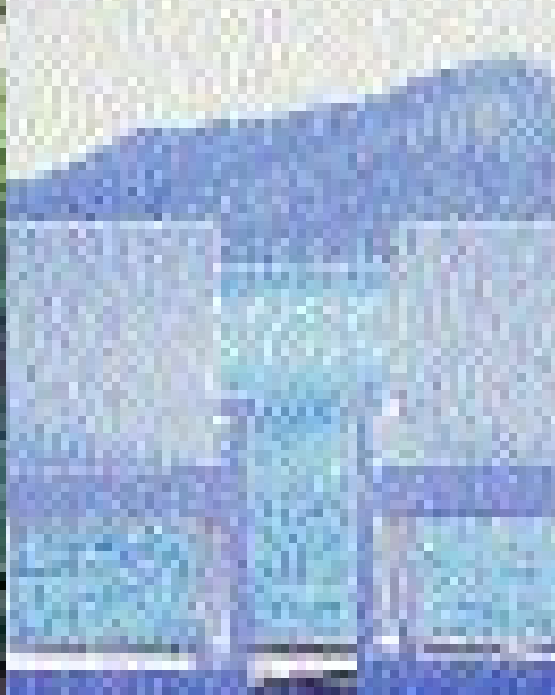
# PACIFIC HEIGHTS

The menu on Turtle Island fuses traditional Fijian ways with the best in modern cuisine and an abundance of fresh, local seafood. But, for consultant chef Jacques Reymond, designing the five-star resort fare is just another idyll day at the office.

PHOTOGRAPHY **PETRINA TINSLAY** WORDS **MATT PRESTON**

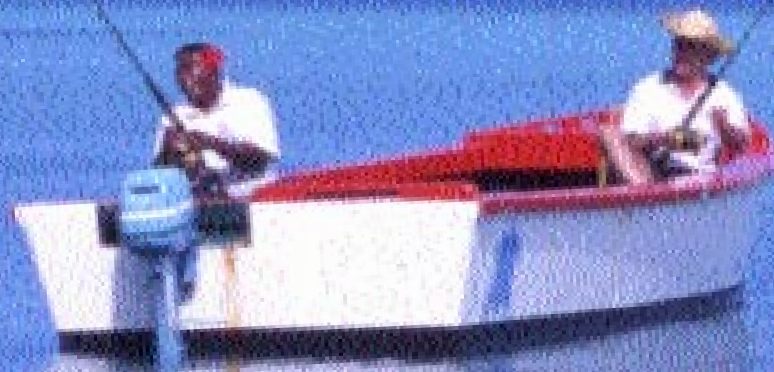
This page: Turtle Island's jetty illuminated with lanterns. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: supplies arrive from a neighbouring island; Jacques prepares some fresh seafood; a sunny beach outlook; Jacques oversees the five-star resort kitchen; Jacques takes time out for a boat ride; the perfect spot for sunbathing; an easy mooring; Fiji's hydroponic and organic kitchen garden; the locals waving farewell.

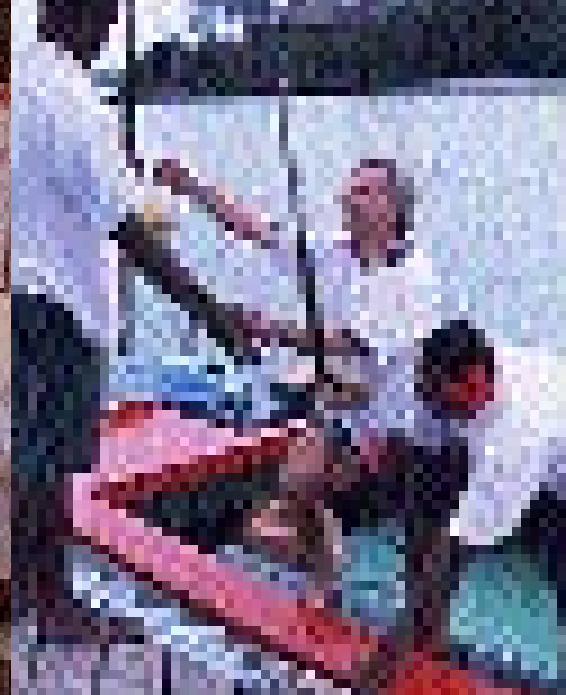
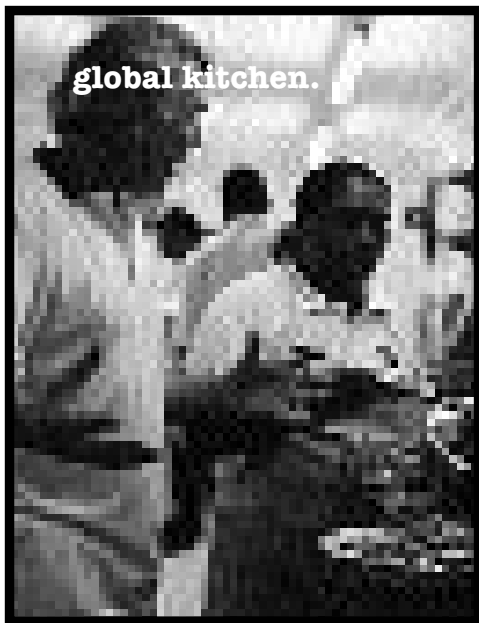




Clockwise from top left: Jacques hand-picking fresh, leafy greens; views from Turtle Island resort; Jacques' French influence is evident in Turtle Island resort's cuisine; a tropical hibiscus; Jacques preparing a traditional lovo; a wheelbarrow full of corn husks; fishing for crayfish, tuna and coral trout; collecting fresh coconut milk. Opposite page: Jacques fishing off the coast of Turtle Island.

Regular seaplane visits and boats from Fiji's main island of Viti Levu bring in additional supplies that the local environment doesn't provide. One product islanders never need to order is honey – the island has 50 hives.





Clockwise, from top left: Jacques describes his islander kitchen staff as “the biggest asset” he has on the island; one of Turtle Island resort’s beautiful bedrooms; Jacques sets out to catch seafood for the evening meal; Turtle Island boasts 14 white sandy beaches, with eight available for private picnics.

is an impossible blue, the island is lush with palm trees and the bays and coves along the coast are crescents of soft, white sand. Every three months, these

idyllic surroundings become ‘the office’ for top Melbourne chef and regular *delicious.* contributor Jacques Reymond.

For 12 years, Jacques has been the consultant chef for Turtle Island, 200ha of paradise nestled in the Fijian island chain of the Yasawas. Working with Turtle Island’s owner, Richard Evanson, Jacques has, over the years, created a five-star resort kitchen built strongly around local produce and the talent of the islanders who make up his kitchen brigade.

“I do it because I love the people. They are the biggest asset that we have over here,” says the urbane 49-year-old Frenchman.

Jacques speaks warmly about the relaxed, friendly village atmosphere compared to the highly charged surroundings of his own eponymous restaurant’s kitchen in Melbourne. In both places he is as much a teacher as a

leader, but out here he is usually training up people who have little culinary experience outside their traditional ways. In Yasawan society, women handle the cooking chores, with fish and root vegetables such as *taro* and *cassava* as the staples.

“When Laite, our pastry chef, joined us 12 years ago she had never touched a bag of flour. Now she makes all the croissants, brioche, pastries, ice-creams and three types of bread a day,” Jacques says.

It is an achievement of which both seem shyly proud. Just as Jacques has given to these smiling islanders, so they have given to him. The resort’s menu is peppered with dishes that hint at inspiration that Jacques and his team have taken from the traditional ways. Fijian curries marrying coconut milk with a simple masala of fennel seed, cumin and other Indian spices or *kokoda* are both regulars on the menu. *Kokoda* (pronounced ko-konda) is like a Fijian ceviche, where raw fish is ‘cooked’ by the acid in lemon or lime juice.

Every Thursday night, the resort also hosts a *lovo* – a feast cooked in a covered pit lined with hot rocks and palm fronds. For five hours, a menu of pumpkins, sweet potatoes, cassava, *taro*, whole fish wrapped in banana leaves and even a suckling pig are slowly, slowly cooked to a succulent conclusion. Just as it has been for generations, this spread is followed by the dancing and singing of the *meke*, which celebrates the Fijians’ warrior past. “It’s a chance for us to celebrate and respect the culture of the people who surround us,” Jacques explains.

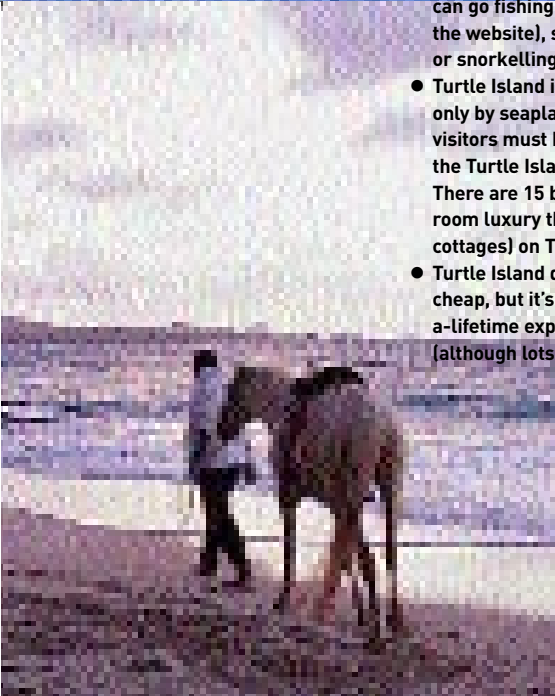
One thing that underpins all the meals here is the magnificent organic and hydroponic garden that stretches up the hillside behind the resort. “The island is about 70 per cent self-sufficient in terms of fruit and vegetables,” Jacques explains, as he snaps a finger of baby corn that is so juicy it oozes white milk. Five full-time gardeners tend the 1.6ha garden. They don’t just

global kitchen.



## FIJIAN FERVOUR

- Turtle Island is part of the Yasawa group of islands in the Republic of Fiji. It's a remote, romantic destination for people eager for a bit of rest and relaxation.
- Guests can reserve a beach for the day and Turtle Island resort will prepare a special picnic, or, if you want to be more active, you can go fishing (check out the website), scuba diving or snorkelling.
- Turtle Island is accessible only by seaplane and visitors must be guests of the Turtle Island resort. There are 15 bure (two-room luxury thatched cottages) on Turtle Island.
- Turtle Island doesn't come cheap, but it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience (although lots of well-heeled guests become addicted to this little piece of paradise).
- Turtle Island holiday packages are available starting from \$6,000 per person for 6 nights, including return economy flights with Air Pacific from Australia to Nadi, seaplane transfers between Nadi and Turtle Island, accommodation in a private bure, all gourmet meals and alcoholic beverages, water- and land-based activities. Depending on flight times, you may need to stay overnight on the mainland at Nadi. delicious. stayed at the Tanoa International hotel.
- For more information tel: 1300 887 287, visit [www.turtlefiji.com](http://www.turtlefiji.com) or email [info@turtlefiji.com.au](mailto:info@turtlefiji.com.au)



Clockwise from top left: a handful of locally grown okra; Turtle Island's gentle surf; a local walks a horse along a beach at dusk; Jacques adds some spice to freshly caught crayfish.

grow for the 30 guests but also the 180 locals who work on the island. The garden resembles somewhere from the book of Genesis. There are huge bananas, three types of melon, papaya, limes, mangoes, soursop, pandanus, pineapple, lemon grass, *taro*, okra, eggplant, carrots, capsicums, tomatoes, four types of lettuce, five types of beans from little native Fijian beans to French, basil, coriander, chives, mint, baby fennel. The list is almost endless – there's even a little row of asparagus. Jacques reckons it's easier to cook here as he just goes to the garden to "pick when I want, and what is ripe".

There are also less familiar names: *bele* – a local spinach; and a large cooking banana called *wondi* that the kitchen bakes stuffed with crayfish and *rourou* (*taro* leaves). It was these leaves that almost ended Jacques' time here before it had even begun. "I was walking through the garden

and tore off a handful of these big green leaves and starting munching on them," he recalls. "I choked, fainted and nearly suffocated. Raw, the leaves are poisonous, but cooked they are fine. They are wonderful wrapped around fish you are baking or chopped, cooked and blended with bug meat and coconut milk."

Now if Jacques wants to know anything about the local flora he consults a venerable local known as 'Bill-man' who has been on the island for 22 years. It is he who introduced Jacques to a rare Fijian tree whose leaves have a strong citrus flavour not unlike kaffir lime leaves, but stronger. "It makes a wonderful, refreshing tea," Jacques explains.

The sea and local fishermen provide much of the rest of the supplies for the resort. "We regularly get local *walu* (Spanish mackerel), crayfish, tuna, white snapper,



Left to right: Turtle Island's jetty where supplies from Fiji's main island Viti Levu dock; Jacques and the Turtle Island's team relax after a long day.

Every Thursday night the resort hosts a traditional *lovo* – a feast slowly cooked in a pit lined with hot rocks and palm fronds. Just as it has been for generations, this spread is followed by dancing and singing.

trevally, coral trout and octopus," he says. Ordering mud crabs is just a matter of sending a message to a village on a nearby island – Jacques has now learnt how to drum this out for himself!

The kitchen smokes their own fish, too, using a red hardwood sawdust from the local *noconoco* tree. This gives a delicate flavour and red lustre to the fish. "That's another skill that the kitchen team have brought from their villages," Jacques explains.

Regular seaplane visits and boats from Fiji's main island of Viti Levu bring those other supplies that the local environment can't provide. Most of the meat is brought in from Australia or New Zealand. One thing they never need to order is honey – the island has 50 hives of its own.

Turtle Island is also unique for a world-class resort in that, other than Jacques' quarterly visits, the locals run the kitchen. Day to day, there's no European-trained chef telling them what to do. "Three years ago we decided to dispense with an Australian head chef as I felt the kitchen team had built up the necessary skills to do the job. I also felt that this would make them stronger as a team. Now, Benny, who comes from a neighbouring island, runs the kitchen and it's working wonderfully, although a little differently. A Fijian would never order another Fijian to do something, but they still manage to sort out what has to be done," Jacques says.

And it's a pretty hectic schedule for the kitchen team of 14. It starts with a sumptuous breakfast. Then there's

a vast buffet to prepare for lunch and a weekly revolving selection of different communal dinners in dramatic island locations. There's also the challenge of meeting the demands of guests who have their own idea of what comprises the ideal picnic to take for a day frolicking at their own secluded cove. Crayfish, a roast chicken or just a simple club sandwich – Benny and his team are there to make it happen. The resort also offers guests the chance to dine out under the stars *a deux*, another variation in the routine that the kitchen has to take in their stride. Then there are the locally inspired little appetisers to be made to accompany cocktails every night – perhaps *rourou* balls or freshly steamed baby clams served on the shell. It seems never-ending.

But there are some perks. A couple of times a year one of the team gets to visit Melbourne as a guest to see for themselves how things happen in Jacques' 'other restaurant'.

"They are pretty shy and don't ask many questions, but they love it. They see an efficiency and discipline that they've probably never seen before."

The positive benefits for the local islanders are even more than the occasional trip to Oz and the employment the resort provides. Every year, Turtle Island brings in eye specialists from Australia and the US who take over the resort and operate a free eye clinic for all Fijians. The resort also hopes to build a hospital and high school on the far side of the island.

A month later, we are sitting in Jacques' Melbourne office. There's a thin mist of drizzle outside and the only humming is coming not from cicadas but a fax machine. While Jacques is in Melbourne this is his main contact with his team in the kitchen at Turtle Island. He tears the page from its jaws. It's Benny. He's after a good recipe for a flourless chocolate cake for one of the guests. Jacques gazes out of the window and then starts writing: "In a double boiler first melt 400g of plain chocolate ..."**d.**