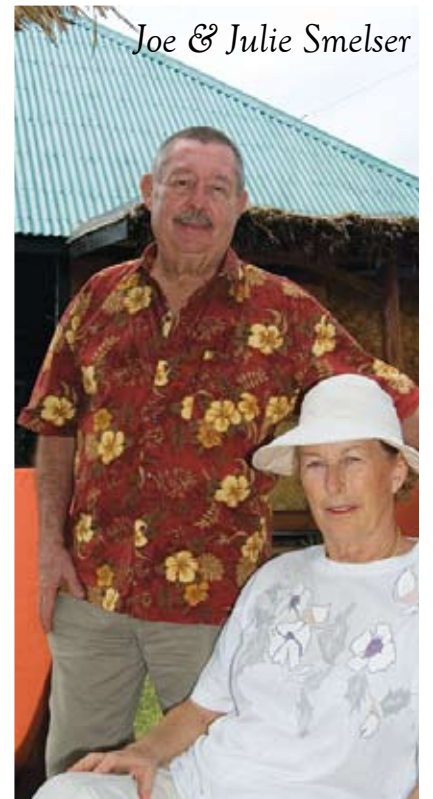


The Palmlea Presentation



Joe & Julie Smelser

A meeting of eco and agri tourism

ON the leeward side of Vanua Levu, between the islands of Vorovoro and Kia, lies a beautiful lagoon with scattered islands and islets, overlooked by rolling hills that meander into the valleys of Seaqaqa.

by *Solomoni Biumaiono*

Nestled amongst these hills overlooking the lagoon is the Palmlea Farms Lodge and Bures, Fiji's first eco agri-tourism resort. Situated less than 15 km from Labasa Town and a 20 minute car ride from Labasa airport, Palmlea's location is almost perfect, with the ability to leave you in peace and isolation, but get you in touch with the rest of the world.

Palmlea's eco agri-tourism theme also offers an alternative to tourists and locals, something different from the sun, surf and sand offered by most resorts in the country. There is more to Palmlea than the normal rest and relaxation, and the goat and vegetable farms provide the perfect alternative activity. The resort will appeal to those who love travelling to destinations

that combine flora, fauna and cultural heritages.

You will find yourself drifting towards an intimacy with your environment as resort owners Joe and Julie Smelser reveal the eco and agricultural side of the resort.

"We spent eight months driving around the whole Vanua Levu before we found this place. When I say the whole of Vanua Levu I mean practically every road and I think Joe now knows all the roads on this island," says Julie Smelser.

"Then we were shown this place, knocked on some doors and decided this was the place that we were searching for." If you're the adventurous type, Palmlea offers guided hikes to virgin rainforests and pine plantations, and through the Cakaudrove

mountain ranges that can take you all the way to Fiji's hidden paradise, Savusavu. For the water babies there is lagoon or river kayaking, diving, fishing and kite boarding. Diving and snorkelling in particular is recommended as the Great Sea Reef, the world's third largest barrier reef system, offers a plethora of marine life just waiting to be discovered.

The richness of the sea life is enhanced as the reef system is a protected marine reserve. On shore a wide variety of seabirds call the red mangrove forests home. This mangrove forest has been virtually untouched by humans and has provided a habitat and refuge for the sea birds who fish the reefs nearby.

If you want to sample the local culture then



Photography: Savenaca Viriviri

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village or temple visits, as well as craft and weaving demonstrations can be arranged. Or you could take it easy with a novel, enjoy the nature walks and just take in the view. Palmlea's strength is its flexibility. If hungry or parched from your explorations or from your lazing, you could always rustle up a snack, brunch, lunch, afternoon tea or coffee from the professionally staffed but homely kitchen.

Mexican, Mediterranean and Asian cuisines are Palmlea specialities with the resort cooks using local produce to innovatively whip up these dishes.

"Taravosa and Malti have been trained by us to be able to prepare and cook all the overseas specialities required by our menus and specialities," says Joe Smelser. "Fortunately many of the local spices, herbs and chilis are very similar to those used

in Mexican and Mediterranean dishes. By mixing the local spices we can achieve tastes that one would expect in Central America or the Mediterranean."

"Both regions have similar climates to Fiji. Our home made chilli sauces have the same taste of those regions."

Palmlea organically grows most of the vegetables, fruits and herbs for resort use on the 20 acre property. What they don't have is bought from the subsistence farmers around the countryside.

Fijian and Indian dishes are not the everyday slap-up meal but a delight to savour, complemented by a fully serviced bar. Joe and Julie have actually not done much landscaping or manicuring of the lawn preferring to preserve the natural beauty of the place.

"We are not here for two, three or four years

and move on, we are here for good. This is home for us," Joe says.

Palmlea's uniqueness lies in the versatility of its services which is personalised for everyone who come, with a pinch more of a family atmosphere thrown in for good measure.

It offers something for all and a great getaway for weary urbanites and those who appreciate the environmental and organic themes.

With wind swept hills behind you and the enticing oceanfront fringed by the third largest barrier reef system in the world, Palmlea is a beautiful compromise for any holiday maker who wants to combine the cool mountain air and the attractions of the sea.

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