

Natadola Bay - Fiji

James Shrimpton

IT could be pretty handy: a little white-painted village church located between the third green and the fourth tee of the spectacular new Natadola Bay championship golf course on Fiji's Coral Coast.

After the first trio of challenging holes, some players could be tempted to make a quick diversion inside the church to pray for a little divine guidance on how to lose a minimum number of balls on this testing course, laid out over 6,566 metres (from the back tees) beside the Pacific Ocean and into the surrounding hills.

That, or maybe for help to cure a slice, a hook, the shanks or whatever.

Natadola Bay's developers decided to leave the Somosomo village church where it had stood for years on the 14-hectare course site; the villagers don't mind and it's a novelty for the golfers.

The village also supplies staff for the golf club and for the nearby five-star InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort and Spa, which opened shortly before the course.

Golf in Fiji advanced to a new level with the launching in mid-year of the world-class \$F30 million (\$A17.9 million) Natadola Bay layout — close by a 2km-long, white-sand beach that has been ranked seventh best in the world by an American travel magazine.

It is the fifth 18-hole course in the island nation, and a drive of about 45 minutes from Nadi International Airport.

How many new courses around the world can claim that their official opening was directly followed by their hosting their country's national Open? Natadola Bay can: it was opened in mid-year by Fiji's golf-loving Vice President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau the day before the start of the Fiji Open which was won by Australian rookie pro Matt Griffin.

Griffin later was full of praise for the course, which boasts ocean views on 15 holes. Now playing the Asian tour, the 26-year-old from Melbourne called it "fantastic, challenging and pretty tough with the wind blowing in from the sea."

Feedback from both pros and amateurs has been very positive, according to Australian PGA member James Cooper, head of the Brisbane-based Avid Sports

which is managing the course.

"Tough but fair" has been the most frequent comment, particularly from the mostly young Australian and New Zealand pros in the Open, the closest of whom finished an amazing 11 strokes behind Griffin's winning score of two-over-par.

They appreciated in particular how the inland holes followed the natural contours of the countryside, with seashore paspalum grass sown on all fairways, tees and greens.

The par-72 Natadola Bay course (pronounced Nat-an-dola) was originally designed by Fiji's former World No. One Vijay Singh, whom James Cooper recalls being seen striding through shoulders-high rough during an early visit to the site.

But Singh's management company IMG pulled out of the contract in 2007 after a dispute over financial issues and other matters, decreeing that his name could no longer be associated with the project.

However, the developers were able to use Singh's drafts as their basis for the final design.

Course general manager, Australian David Roche (formerly of Eynesbury Golf Course in Victoria), said a number of changes to the original plans made Natadola Bay rather more user-friendly for the average holidaying club golfer.

With up to five tees on each hole for players from scratch to 36, it's a stiff but reasonable test for everyone.

"A thinking man's course," David Roche calls it, advising: "Leave your ego in the car park."

Take each shot at a time, select the club to do the job, and keep clear of the sea, the ponds, the bunkers and the fierce long rough lining some fairways.

The first hole at Natadola Bay provides a taste of the trials to come: a 454m par-four that is rated the hardest, index No. 1.



(Main) The breathtaking Natadola's 4th hole and (inset) Natadola Bay's general manager, Australian David Roche, tees off at the par-three 132m 15th hole with the South Pacific Ocean on the left

Second on the index comes at the end, the 426m 18th

leading up a rise towards the fine clubhouse, with bar and all mod cons.

Both nines comprise five par-fours, and two holes each of par-three and par-five.

Of the par fives, the longest is the 11th at 518m (index 15) which often plays more than that into a strong wind which sees even single-figure handicappers often using a seven iron for their third shot, avoiding a pond in front of the green.

The par-five sixth (index 12) of 495m is the most memorable, involving a 210m carry from the hillside tee down to the fairway, which then winds uphill past bunkers to an elevated green; the most forward tees reduce the carry to about 75m.

Shortest of the par-threes is the 132m 15th (index 16) guarded by three front bunkers, while the longest is the 201m 13th (index six).

Apart from the church, James Cooper says that Natadola Bay is "very Fijian" in several ways.

The four main clubhouse buildings follow traditional Fijian architecture.

Native bala-bala trees, long ferns said to be the residence of ancient spirit gods, are used as distance markers.

And tee markers are in the shape of local "neck-breakers" - a device used to crack open coconuts.

Among the club's facilities are a driving range, short-game practice facility and pro shop.

If you're considering a golf holiday in Fiji, the other four 18-hole courses are The Greens (formerly Pacific Harbour) at Deuba 50km west of Suva, Denarau near Nadi, the Fiji Club in Suva and the Nadi Airport Club - where the honours board includes the name of Vijay Singh winning the C-grade championship nearly 30 years ago. ♣

A round of golf at Natadola Bay costs \$F135 (about \$A81) for 18 holes and \$F81 (\$A48) for nine.

Hire of premium clubs is \$F55 (\$A33) for 18 and \$F30 (\$A18) for nine, while standard clubs are \$F45 (\$A27) and \$F25 (\$A15).

All prices include hire of an electric cart, and government taxes.

More: www.natadolabay.com and www.intercontinental.com.

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