

Robert Reynolds Golf Course Superintendent of Denarau Golf Course on Fiji was on the island when a coup occurred two years ago. He talks about this and working life.

WHAT A COUP!



Above: Rob Reynolds (left) with two time Australian Open Champion, Aaron Baddeley who played a tournament at the course

It was a tough job but someone had to take it ... Tropical Island Paradise ... jewel of the South Pacific ... The beautiful Denarau Island course was beckoning. Little did I realise what was around the corner on May 19, 2000 and what impact the political upheaval would have and the challenges it would create.

First, let's set the picture ... the Denarau Island golf course is a 6570m-resort course. It was designed by Ichi Motohashi, who is the President of one of Japan's largest golf design and construction companies.

The development of the course took place on a low lying mangrove swamp in 1990. Over two million cubic metres of fill was used to elevate the site and 8500 fully grown trees and shrubs were transplanted. The course has T328 greens and T419 fairways and some pretty astounding bunkers designed in the shape of sea animals, so when viewed while flying into Fiji you see octopus, sea shells, sea weed, a giant foot and other greenkeeper's delights!

Denarau Island Resort is a fully integrated resort complex with three five star Sheraton resorts, an American resort Worldmark by Trendwest giving a total of over 900 rooms on the complex. In addition there is a marina complex, residential developments and future resort development sites. Two major resorts are also planned for Denarau island, a 300 room Novotel and a 454 room Hilton resort. With these additional resorts and other planned expansion, the total number of rooms should approach 2000 with-

in three years. To cope with this increase, an additional golf course is already being planned.

Our operation has a staff of 43. This is largely an unskilled workforce of labourers, with limited knowledge of English, complimented with plumbers, mechanics, operators and electricians. The equipment is Toro based and is a combination of both old and new machines, which is adequate to achieve good standards.

What follows is a brief synopsis of the trials and tribulations I've experienced as result of the upheaval on 19 May on management and practice issues.

During the political crisis, the whole of Fiji experienced power cuts for three months. Denarau negotiated a deal with the Fiji Electricity Authority offering to use the resort's generators regularly and in return the FEA would attempt to supply uninterrupted power to the island. Of course power is essential to greenkeeping operations. We irrigate our course with the assistance of a site pro 8000 Satellite system - a computerised system - No power ... No computers ... No pumps! Irrigation failures became the norm. My team had a full time job in this tropical climate keeping water on the course. Pumps constantly dropped out; there were communication breakdowns and mainline breaks due to water hammer. Power became so erratic one of our plumbers slept each evening in the pump house!

The trade sanctions from Australia and New Zealand also impacted on our operations. All spares and chemicals are purchased overseas. Telephone communications were difficult as international lines were not reliable. Internet services were slow and unreliable and you need power to run the computer and the fax!

During this period, overseas suppliers were wary of supplying products to Fiji. This resulted in difficulties in obtaining products which were supplied from overseas and when supplies were successfully ordered, invariably long delays occurred. We purchase products such as fertiliser by the container load. We normally ship 21 tonnes at a time from Australia. As a



result of supply difficulties and budget reviews, we were forced to overhaul our fertiliser and spray programmes in terms of quantity

At times, it is even difficult obtaining supplies from local suppliers in Fiji. This was exacerbated during the crisis when on occasion we even experienced difficulty getting products from the local hardware store.

This time of year with its mild tropical climate dry period, Fiji is normally at its peak tourist season where we can expect over 150 golfers a day on the course. With the down turn in business and favourable weather conditions, it provided the perfect opportunity to initiate maintenance that would never normally be considered at this time of year. I've created a focus on labour intensive jobs rather than money intensive work. This ensured full employment within our staff and allowed us to stay within budget restrictions. Impeccable hand grooming has become my middle name! We are hand weeding bunkers greens tees and profiles. Leaves and bunkers are hand raked and cart paths and roads are swept with large palm fronds. Diseases and pests are for the most part being tolerated. Swarms of minor birds feast regularly on lawn grubs.

We are finding the diseases and pests during this dry season are rarely severe enough to impact on course "playability". We are monitoring them and where appropriate letting them and run their course.

Staff moral has been a major issue throughout the crisis. We have a staff of both indigenous Fijians and Indo Fijians. Normally, there is minimum if any racial tensions in the work place but the political ramifications of the coup had the potential to cause tensions. This has to be constantly monitored. With large layoffs in other parts of the tourism industry, staff



Above: Climbing a palm tree the easy way

Below: The Demarau greenkeeping Team of 43





A jewel of the South Pacific

immediately became concerned about their jobs. We had to constantly re-assure staff that their jobs would be secure.

To this date with plenty of budget juggling all permanent staff are still employed.

As a result of the downturn, we were asked to reduce the maintenance costs for the golf course. There was a large number of meetings where our budgets were scrutinised on a regular basis. The challenge was to affect savings without impacting on the quality of the course. Much hype has been made about "smart sanctions", I refer to our cost cutting as "smart savings".

On a more personal note there was the safety of my wife, Erica, and our two young children (four and one) to consider. On May 19, after collecting my son from the International School which had just been closed, Erica and the kids were evacuated from our home which was approximately 20 minutes from Denarau Island called VotEAU Levu. In a time frame of approximately an hour and a half, Erica with our house-girl Neli and some members of my staff sent out in trucks to assist, packed the entire contents of our house into whatever they could lay our hands on and moved it to Denarau. Evening curfews became the norm, supermarket shelves were fast emptying, and airport closures were imminent, restricting our movement in and out of the country. We faced some hard decisions and on the evening military control of the country was announced my family left the country enabling me to focus on the job at hand without concern for their safety.



Above: The high profile airport security
Below: "Impeccable handgrooming has become my middle name"



Normal life in Fiji apart from political upheaval is full of challenges. Prior to May, we built a new house on Denarau Island to live in. If you have ever had any experience haggling over the price of a bula shirt in Suva or Nadi then you will know the wonderful challenge of having to haggle over the price of every nut, bolt and washer on the whole project. This is similar to the daily occurrence when purchasing locally for the golf course maintenance supplies.

One thing I've learnt through the past four months is the importance of working with a team I can trust. This position has presented some absolutely unique experiences. You could call this a bonding experience I'd go so far as to call it a hell of an experience.

And it's not over... The Fijian people together with the ex-patriot community are working hard to restore normality in this beautiful country and I'm proud to be a part of the team.

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