



FIJI

SUNNY BY NATURE

There are tropical resorts and then there's Fiji's Kokomo Private Island, a paragon of sophistication, seclusion and sunny optimism in the South Pacific. A stream of thoughtful updates and culinary tweaks have made it dreamier than ever.

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WALK THE PLANK
Pull up a chair at Walker d'Plank for a drink or pan-Asian fare. Opposite: Step out of your villa directly onto the untouched beach.



SEA CHANGE
 Clockwise: Each villa has a private pool; this five-bedroom residence is ideal for families; stellar snorkelling and diving opportunities abound; pan-seared fish, pumpkin salad and a Bloody Mary at the newly opened Beach Grill.



The seaplane bobs in the air, weaving through wispy clouds, ascending over a tangle of jungle and drifting over the long coral shelf of the Great Astrolabe Reef. The 45-minute flight from Nadi to Kokomo Private Island in Fiji is undeniably cinematic, but it's merely a hint of the beguiling beauty to come. Here, on a

57-hectare isle, is one of the jewels of the South Pacific. Kokomo marries ultra-luxe seclusion with rare immersion in the local culture. This would be my second visit to the retreat. The first, in late 2018, left a lasting impression on me and my family. From its dapper design to the effusive service and blissful setting, everything felt intimate and earthy and meticulously curated. Back then, it was as though I'd been welcomed into owner Lang Walker's magnificent home and handed the keys. On this transfer flight, from a smart new private terminal, a question formed in my mind: how do you improve on paradise?

It turns out you can. Walker and his team devoted the pandemic slowdown to tweaking, updating and reconfiguring the place before reopening to guests last December. It may be the only Fijian property that retained its entire staff during that dormant period, rotating team members through departments to support construction, maintenance and farming initiatives. While some resorts are gradually finding their feet again, Kokomo was running like a finely tuned machine on my stay over Easter. Repeat guests would notice subtle upgrades: revitalised digs, new

restaurants, advanced sustainability programs, and enhanced experiences, including an ambitious food and wine offering. To elevate Kokomo even further, Walker tapped several talented collaborators, Sydney-based chef Ross Lusted and architect Rod Fauchoux of Loopcreative among them, and made new appointments, including general manager Sean Flakelar. This is Kokomo – the sequel.

Lusted has known Walker for a decade. Few people are aware the celebrated chef, who helms Woodcut restaurant at Crown Sydney with his wife, Sunny, moonlights as a hotel consultant. A former general manager for Aman Resorts, who spent time overseeing 15 high-end properties around the globe, Lusted has extensive experience in luxury hotel development as well as refined taste and an eagle eye. "I didn't cook for 10 years," he says, though he excelled at a different kind of recipe. Last year, Walker invited Lusted to Kokomo for a week. "We flew up in Lang's plane, and talked about what we could improve," he says. "There was a lot they were doing right, but I felt there was an opportunity to capture a market or a demographic who wanted different experiences, or to deeply explore the destination and Fijian culture."

BREAK POINT
 Surfing instructor Mateo Vereivalu Vuniyalo pauses from catching Fiji's world-class waves.





Lusted informed the changes to Kokomo's dining options, with three venues that take better advantage of the exquisite surrounds: Beach Shack, Beach Grill and Beach Bar, each with its own menu and ambience. My kids especially love rolling off the beach for a burger at the grill, but the menu extends to more sophisticated fare such as crab pasta. The bar, meanwhile, offers a breezy social hub. "We thought about creating an environment where people could mingle," Lusted says. "I told Lang, 'I think you should cut a hole in the floor right here to make a sunken bar.' The next morning I moved the furniture and started mapping it out to see whether it could fit. Lang was like, 'Okay, let's cut it out now.' He had the builder ready then and there," Lusted laughs. "Lang goes at a million miles an hour. He could visualise it very quickly."

The pair engaged Fauchaux, the designer who worked on Woodcut and on Melbourne's Collins Square with Walker, to execute the new additions. The sunken bar is a stroke of genius. It fits seamlessly, makes canny use of the space, while comfortable couches create a beachfront chill-out zone that attracts guests at any time of day. A wine cellar has been uncorked, too. Formerly the reception desk, it is now a handsomely designed space, complete with cigar menu, and high tables and chairs for tastings. In front of the cellar is a "map room-cum-library" inspired by Lusted's time at Amanyara in Turks and Caicos Islands. "We've hung some old Fijian maps so guests can get a sense of where they are, and where they may be going on a fishing trip or diving expedition," he says. There are books, games and deep leather seats to relax in as well.

After realising Walker's plans, Lusted passed the baton to Flakelar over lunch at Woodcut. Flakelar had recently completed a 27-year tenure with Aman

Resorts in South-East Asia, with stints in Indonesia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka, but before that he was a chef in Sydney, too. "I worked with Stefano Manfredi, and at Darley Street Thai in Newtown with David Thompson, and Blue Water Grill before Neil Perry arrived," he says. Given his dual experience, Flakelar is naturally brimming with ideas on calibrating Kokomo's culinary ethos. "We have permission to farm mud crabs in the mangroves here, as lobsters are a bit scarce in Fiji," he explains. "Guests can participate in the process, learn about the mangroves and the farming aspect. Then they can eat the mud crabs or participate in a cooking class."

The resort has a sustainable fishing initiative called "dock to dish" in which guests can eat their catch for dinner. "Everything is line-caught and we're rigorous about not overfishing," Flakelar says. Walker d'Plank, the island's enchanting treehouse restaurant run by Fijian chef Caroline Oakley, has been extended and now seats a hundred diners (not that there would ever be that many in attendance). Oakley's zero-waste, no-menu approach has long been popular with guests, and now she has more room to experiment. "We work with what's fresh and we use it all," she says. That means sushi, sashimi, ceviche and grilled skewers. The chef melds Fijian, Japanese and subcontinental flavours (her grandfather is Sri Lankan) to create light, fragrant curries and fresh twists on favourites such as tonkatsu. In a sweet moment, she remembers us from our last visit.

Next on the agenda is a roster of high-profile chef takeovers. Flakelar is presently finalising dates for a slew of Australian chefs to headline at Kokomo in the year ahead. "We'll invite leading talent to come over for a week, even top winemakers, and create a line-up of events for guests," he says. He plans to host private tastings in the wood-panelled cellar, stocked with Bolivar cigars, bottles of Châteaux Margaux and a notable collection of Bordeaux whites. Private meals for up to 10 can be booked with head sommelier Kelly Schaefer (formerly of Tokyo American Club) and budding local Fijian sommelier Lily Pumae. Or the resort can stage elaborate feasts in your suite. At Kokomo, there are five expansive residences and 21 spacious villas to choose from.



FARE CALL

At Walker d'Plank chef Caroline Oakley melds Fijian, Japanese and subcontinental flavours. Opposite: A pontoon makes for the ultimate sundowner spot.



as little as possible in their goal for a closed-loop system. The sustainability program at Kokomo extends to sea foraging and a clam nursery, and marine conservation, including coral restoration and turtle preservation. Guests can participate in the Manta Conservation Project, which involves tagging, identifying and diving with these majestic creatures. The team also keeps a database of rays, turtles and reef sharks that they spot on diving excursions. The snorkelling here is world-class, with sherbet-coloured coral resembling towers of vivid pastel macarons, and the island's marine biologists, Cliona O'Flaherty and Vivian Taubera, lead daily tours of the two coral nurseries.

While diving and fishing are standout activities, Flakelar has extended the roster to cater to multi-generational groups – from private island picnics to the Kaji Club for kids. The latter has lemon and lime interiors and a menu including freshly made pizza and gelato as well as popcorn and fairy floss. On any given day you'll stumble across a teens' survivor challenge, sailing regattas, or volleyball competitions. Surfing is the biggest surprise. While faraway breaks such as Cloudbreak and Namotu are well known, Fiji's outer reefs are also exceptional. Swell conditions are ideal one morning, and our family heads out early to Naiqoro Passage with Luke Caldwell, the Walker's long-term boat captain, and Fijian instructors Lesi and

Mateo. It's not for the faint-hearted, and my clan of hardy surfers is impressed. They ride for hours as large, glassy sets roll in. Caldwell even snaps his board, a badge of honour for any passionate surfer.

"Things can get pretty gnarly, but November to April is good," says Flakelar, a keen surfer himself. He's enthusiastic about building the surfing profile of Kokomo – the resort has boats, instructors and access to several lesser-known breaks. There are also plans to expand the resort's wellness offering, including introducing a yoga teacher and a naturopath. "We're not going to turn into a health farm," Flakelar says. "But a lot of guests are interested in improving their immune system, and we take wellness seriously." Sodashi skincare products from Western Australia are a strong addition to the spa, and a new magnesium mineral bath is coming for those seeking extra pampering. The appeal of Kokomo is that there's plenty to do, or you can do nothing at all. It's impossible not to relax and the stream of updates have enhanced something that already seemed perfect. ▀

DEEP DIVE
Extending for more than 100 kilometres, the Great Astrolabe Reef is a pristine playground for dive enthusiasts.

Elegantly decorated, each is decked out with tropical woods, woven matting and its own infinity pool.

Walker has also green-lit a refresh of the island's farm, where guests can tour, pick, cook and dine together in the vanilla grove. "The farm was stripped by a cyclone in 2020, and it's taken a long time to regenerate," says Flakelar. I'm interested to see how it has progressed since my last visit. We weave through planter boxes flourishing with every kind of herb and vegetable imaginable, from basil, dill and chives to brassicas and spring onions. Kokomo even makes its own salt, and four working beehives were rebuilt after the cyclone. The old nursery will be transformed with induction cooktops, and a vast outdoor area for classes, lunches and all kinds of revelry. The team point out spots earmarked for a fire pit, barbecue and drinks station. Pasta-making sessions are also on the schedule. Thai dishes and curries, too, given all the lemongrass, galangal, ginger, turmeric and chillies growing nearby. Papaya, pineapples and bananas are abundant, passionfruit vines are heaving, and bougainvillea will be blooming within months.

We also visit the waste-processing facility, where every bottle, package and scrap from the island is recycled or repurposed as compost. The team wastes



GARDEN VARIETY
Clockwise from left: The kitchen garden brims with herbs and vegetables; the new wine cellar is ideal for tastings; chef Caroline Oakley at work; the Beach Shack bar with its eye-catching cane light fixtures.

