

# “I’d like to be under the sea”

Luxury and sustainability intersect at Kokomo Private Island Resort in Fiji

WORDS SUZANNE MORPHET

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND FIJI

SNORKELLING OFF SUNSET BEACH AT KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND FIJI

I wasn’t expecting to find scientists hard at work at a high-end resort like Kokomo, but oddly enough, over-the-top luxury and under-the-radar conservation go hand in hand here.

**Floating face down on Fiji’s Great Astrolabe Reef,** I watch my snorkelling guide dive down, gently pick up a clam from the ocean floor, and bring it up for a better look.

Giant clams, I learn, are the largest bivalve mollusks on the planet, growing more than a metre across and weighing 200 kilograms. This one is a small fraction of that—about the size of a soccer ball—and unremarkable-looking, except for one thing: its large, luscious lips. Sensuously curved and slightly parted, they shine an iridescent blue.

Here at Kokomo Private Island Resort, a clam “nursery” has been created to protect baby giant clams like this one, so the population, threatened from overfishing worldwide, can rebound. The resort’s team of four marine biologists also tag and identify manta rays, monitor sea turtle nests, plant mangroves and grow coral.

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The resort’s Twin Otter float plane picks us up in Nadi, on Fiji’s main island of Viti Levu, on a hot February afternoon, and an hour later we splash down in the turquoise water off Kokomo, where we’re greeted by a couple dozen staff. They sing, clap and play guitars and ukuleles. Their welcome is so enthusiastic that I look around to see if some VIP has joined us, but no, it’s just me, my husband and a couple of Aussies who were also on the plane.

No doubt that passion was imbued in staff by Kokomo’s founder, the late Lang Walker, an Australian property developer. He first saw the island when he was on a scuba diving and fishing trip on the Great Astrolabe Reef a decade ago. The bare frame of a luxury resort was in foreclosure.

*Saint James*



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A THREE-BEDROOM SUNSET VILLA AT KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND FIJI



ASIAN-STYLE STREET FOOD AT LAID-BACK WALKER D'PLANK RESTAURANT.

“[Walker] was famously quoted as saying, ‘Well, we’ll invest \$10 million,’” recalls resort manager Grant Anderson. “And \$10 became \$20, and \$20 became \$50 and \$50 became \$100!”

Gracing the 140-acre island now are 21 beachside villas, five family-size residences (from three to six bedrooms), several open-air restaurants, a sumptuous spa and a fitness centre, where I find fresh coconuts in the fridge, holes carved in the tops for drinking.

Wanting to combine cutting-edge design with traditional know-how and leading environmental standards, Walker’s team of designers recycled cinnamon wood, sourced local mahogany and lashed building beams together using magimagi, a fibrous rope-like product made from the husks of coconuts.

Our expansive indoor/outdoor villa includes a private swimming pool and a hammock, where, glass of wine in hand, we enjoy a pinch-me-so-I-know-this-is-real sunset every evening.

For such a small resort, Kokomo boasts a huge collection of watercraft—another of Walker’s passions.

“Three deep-sea fishing boats, three big dive boats, several glass-bottomed boats, plus speed boats,” chuckles Grant, showing me around the island on a golf cart (there are no cars) one afternoon. “And every conceivable little canoe, kayak, Hobie Cat, racing kayak—we’ve got it.”

My husband and I plan to get back into scuba diving after a 32-year hiatus, so on our first morning we meet senior marine biologist Viviana Taubera and two crew in one of the dive boats. Before leaving home, we took a refresher course with Frank Whites Dive Store in Victoria so we could dive as soon as we got here.

“I was five and they just threw me in,” laughs Viviana, when asked how she learned to swim.

The Great Astrolabe Reef is the fourth largest in the world, extending more than 100 kilometres around Fiji’s relatively remote Kadavu Group of islands, which includes Kokomo.

In late February, early March, the water temperature has reached its annual high, on par with the air. Jumping into the near-bathtub-warm water, we slowly



GUESTS CAN SNORKEL DIRECTLY OFF THE BEACH AT KOKOMO ISLAND OR GO OFFSHORE BY BOAT TO THE NEARBY GREAT ASTROLABE REEF.

descend 12 metres, and then drift horizontally along a wall of coral. It could be a mural. Or a garden landscaped with layers of colour and texture. The famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau called Fiji the “soft coral capital of the world” for its profusion of coral species that resemble plants.

Pink and purple sea fans wave in the current. Orange-tipped feather stars extend their hairy tentacles to catch microscopic food. Something black and spidery looks a little menacing. But nothing captures my eye like Christmas tree worms. When Viviana hovers over the psychedelically colourful worms and snaps her fingers, they retract their blue, red and yellow crowns in unison.

I don’t need to see a whitetip reef shark, a green sea turtle or a reef manta ray to fall in love with Fiji and back in love with diving. But we see all those on our first day too.

Back at the resort, I snorkel to one of Kokomo’s underwater coral nurseries. Earlier, marine biologist Lily Taoi, who grew up on the neighbouring island of Kadavu, told me the reefs were suffering from climate change.

“The last two years we had a really bad heat wave,” she says, adding that the team of biologists were beginning to use artificial intelligence to figure out which species to grow. “Before, we were just planting every type of species, but AI helps us to be more accurate.”

Peering through my mask, I see pieces of coral strung like clothes on a clothesline. Another structure resembles an old-fashioned TV antenna with chunks of coral hanging from it. And for coral that can’t grow on rope or rod, cement disks provide a platform.

On our last morning, I get up early and climb a verdant hill at one end of the resort, walking past the helipad to an open-air structure overlooking the calm bay below. It’s time for a private yoga session.

Before beginning, my instructor tells me to take a minute and “set your intentions for what you want to take away from this island.” “That’s easy,” I think.

My intention is to return. **10**

*“A great day starts with a good night’s sleep”*

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