JAMAICA'S CROWN JEWEL | MARDI GRAS MENU | CLASSIC BAHAMIAN COCKTAIL

COASTAL LIVING®

Escape to the Islands

FIJI • TURKS & CAICOS • BAHAMAS • AZORES • SANTORINI

Sail Away!
THE BEST CRUISES FOR 2027

Tropical Style
COOL INTERIORS INSPIRED BY HOT HUES

WINTER 2026
VOLUME 30, ISSUE 4

FALLING INTO FIJI

Before this island nation welcomes you, it tests you—hat off, bag carried low, proof you mean no harm. That ritual, though, is a doorway to everything that follows: private-island luxury, beaches made famous by *Cast Away* and *Survivor,* a village hall where kava passes shell to shell. Not a story of paradise found, but of what Fiji asks, and what it offers in return

BY TRACEY MINKIN

Kokomo Private Island Fiji

COURTESY KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND



Nanuku Resort (left) sits inside a 500-acre estate on the south shore of Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island. A boat excursion up the nearby Navua River leads to a waterfall (opposite) and a plunge.

ON OUR OPEN SKIFF under a brazen tropical sun, I'm grateful for the mild breeze that offsets the gripping humidity of the rising Fijian morning. I'm also grateful for my sunglasses and straw hat.

As we near our destination—a narrow, tree-lined beach of the village of Vabea on Ono Island—my guide, William Domantani, pivots to eye me from the prow. He smiles. "You need to remove your hat and glasses," he says.

"Now?"

"Before we land. And don't carry your bag on your shoulders."

"But I can carry it?"

"Yes, but low in your hand."

"Why?"

"To show you're not carrying a weapon."

No time for more questions. The shore nears, a knot of village members clapping hands and singing in welcome. We clamber out and wade in the warm shallows to meet them.

Welcomes are important in Fiji, I learn over a 10-day visit. Every one I receive is warm, attached to song, and sometimes marked by a ritual called *sevusevu*. It begins with the visitor offering the root (or powdered version) of *Piper methysticum*, a pepper plant. What follows is a ceremonial sharing of kava, the grassy, bitter drink made from it and served in shallow cups. But after millennia of incursions from neighboring chiefs followed by waves of incursions of Europeans (including British control for nearly 100 years), that warm welcome does come with caveats. Like what you're carrying.

Fiji is a nation of islands, after all—places particularly prone to invasion—in this case, some 300 islands and 540 islets scattered over about a million square miles (an area roughly the size of Argentina) in the South Pacific Ocean. Picture it by twisting a globe to the biggest patch of blue with Australia on the lower left. To Australia's southeast sits the slender island nation of New Zealand. About a thousand miles north of that: Fiji. Everywhere else: the sea, small islands, and archipelagos, each more than 2,000 miles distant. The sea, as any islander knows, brings faraway strangers, and here there are many shorelines to guard.

But once welcomed showing respect and no malice, I also learn, a visitor to Fiji may have the chance to step into a place full of thrilling beauty and depth. To drink, as it were, the kava.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS a week prior on Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island and home to its international airport, capital, and about three-quarters of the country's nearly 940,000 people. It's also home to Nanuku Resort, which sits elegantly within a 500-acre private estate of dense palms on the south shore. It's the ideal place to open one's eyes to this world. Yes, an arrival drink and song of welcome, but more vitally, an afternoon massage with oils blended from wild-harvested cold-pressed virgin coconut, sikeci, and macadamia nuts, infused with local leaves and herbs collected by hand and distilled on site in small batches. It sounds like something described by a server at dinner back home in the city, but here at Nanuku, the blend acts like the lotus leaves of Greek myth. I forget all that came before, soak in what lives on Viti Levu. This may be why I feel like I'm drifting down the narrow road that leads to my villa with its sweetly private plunge pool, then back to Nanuku's open-air locus of bar, restaurant, lawns, pool, and slender beach.

One could drift like this every day, frankly, but Nanuku has laid a robust table of experiences to try. I can snorkel its coral nursery (Fiji is known for its abundant and diverse reef systems) or plant mangroves

COURTESY NANUKU RESORT; OPPOSITE PAGE: TRACEY MINKIN







with its resident marine scientist. I can trek past kava farms in the highland rain forest or tour Suva, the capital city, with a private guide. Or—my choice—I can hop a traditional wooden longboat, its length painted inside and out in broad stripes of bright red, yellow, and turquoise, for a cruise with a resort guide up the nearby Navua River in search of a waterfall. The boat's too narrow for a chat, which means the slowly spooling landscape—tangles of green, narrow passages of rock, dots of farm—is my quiet, informing companion.

After a 15-minute hike through the humid grip of rain forest, the falls emerge like an oasis. The cold, clear water pours over a high rock face into a deep, aquamarine pool. I wade in, the antidote to all things sticky in both skin and mind. The river, rain forest, and falls have done all this teaching. Fiji informs.

"WHEN'S THE LAST TIME you saw *Cast Away*?"

Aporosa Rakatoni has a reason for asking, and I love his belief that we've all seen the Tom Hanks survival classic more than once. It turns out I have watched it in the past five years, so I'm able to say that with some pride.

"How about *Survivor*?"

"Um, I don't watch *Survivor*."

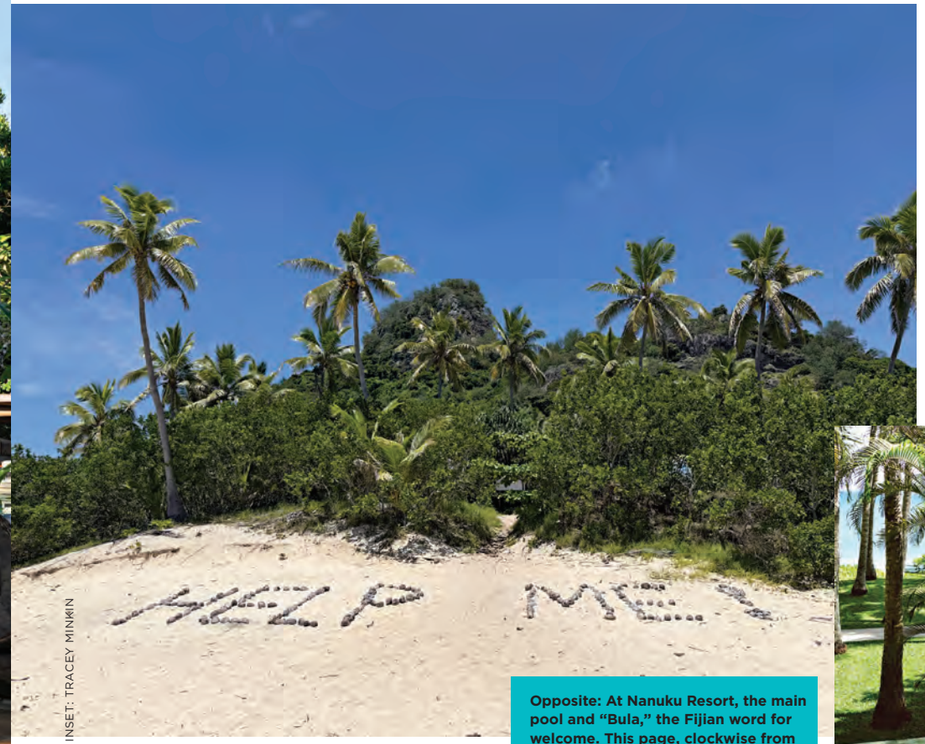
"But you know they get voted off the island?"

I nod, and his broad smile indicates that's good enough for him. Why will become clear as we zip away from the slender dock of Tokoriki Island Resort.

This is the first official activity I've engaged in since arriving two days ago, but that's the intent of this adults-only enclave 24 miles off Viti Levu's west coast. I've come by high-speed catamaran from the main island, and that's the most I've moved in 48 hours. Here at the resort, the vibe is 100 percent clubhouse hang, but what a clubhouse. Tokoriki's massive, open-air great room is shaded by a steeply vaulted, pandanus-wrapped ceiling. Huge masi cloths from the Fijian island of Vatulele hang from the high ceiling and shift in the breeze; their heritage motifs have inspired the delicate carvings of three soaring teak panels commissioned for the space.

From there, the world of Tokoriki unfurls in plein air beauty: a serene infinity pool with the beach and sea beyond, verdant near-wild landscapes with spikes of red ginger and dangles of orchids, and 36 villas and bures (traditional Fiji-style dwellings).

From my bure, I stroll to breakfast past the resort's most overt nod to sport—a lovely older tennis court backed by jungle—and a quartet of high-achievers whacking a ball before the morning's warmth gives way to the high, humid 80s. Good for them, I think, grateful that Tokoriki's heart generally beats at a more relaxed tempo: fresh fruit breakfast, reading by the







Opposite: At Nanuku Resort, the main pool and "Bula," the Fijian word for welcome. This page, clockwise from above: *Cast Away* vibes on Monuriki Island; guide Aporosa Rakatoni; Tokoriki Island Resort

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TRACEY MINKIN (2); COURTESY TOKORIKI ISLAND RESORT; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY NANUKU RESORT; INSET: TRACEY MINKIN

pool, maybe backgammon, maybe some beach time, maybe a lazy kayak paddle, and a stunning lunch. (Every plate coming out of Tokoriki's kitchen is superb.) Naps tucked away in bures and villas. Then a reverse migration to the great room for cocktails, dinner, and conversations with fellow guests. If you're lucky, Andrew Turnbull, the ebullient Australian who's owned the resort with his wife, Yvonne, since 1995, might wave you over to his usual spot in a cool corner for a chat. He's full of palaver, the Australian version of the Fijian welcome songs I'm now relaxing into as less performance and more practice. Fijians sing everywhere, it turns out—together in harmonies learned over years in church, singly while walking or working. Men and women, guitars, sometimes a drum. But mostly just voices that reach out in aural embrace.

No songs, though, on the steamy morning that Rakatoni and I set out. With *Cast Away* and *Survivor* on our minds, we make landfall on the white sands of tiny, uninhabited Monuriki. We hotfoot it up the beach to scant mangrove shade and a reveal just beyond: a beach around the corner with small stones spelling out HELP ME! He grins again. "That's the beach!" he says.

And indeed, this exact spot is where Tom Hanks put on his iconic performance for director Robert Zemeckis more than a quarter century ago. The landmarks of the filming remain, and Rakatoni guides me to them all, including the rock face where Hanks's character hurled a coconut in frustration. He points out that another island on the horizon had to be removed in post-production, but that's the only thing that's altered. Our walk touches on Monuriki's other remarkable claim to pop culture fame: Some of *Survivor*'s tribal camp scenes are filmed here. (The show has been shooting in Fiji for 18 consecutive seasons.)

He threads our walk with natural history and tales of his island, nearby Yanuya. The island's peoples are custodians of Monuriki, he says, which means that everything done there must pass muster with their chief. You want to anchor your yacht off this pretty beach? Make a visit to the chief for *sevusevu* and bring a 20-Fijian-dollar donation to the school in addition to your kava root offering. In similar fashion, conservation organizations secured approval from Yanuya to reintroduce the critically endangered Fijian crested iguana to its homeland on Monuriki. Forty-eight of the neon green lizards came home in 2017, while Fijians continue to restore their habitat and ensure their survival. HELP ME!, it seems, signals more than one story.

IN A FAR CRY FROM Tom Hanks's rags-to-survival story, I'm polishing off a glass of Veuve Clicquot in a private seaplane touching down just off the island of Yaukuve Levu. I spy Fiji's traditional "Bula!" greeting of welcome decorating a

sign at the pier's edge. Behind that: Kokomo Private Island Fiji.

I've made a near circle from my first day on Viti Levu, and in fact I'm about 27 miles southeast of Nanuku Resort, where it all began. "It's right over there," jokes one of the Fijian staff members who greets me. Closer, though, is the Great Astrolabe Reef, one of the largest barrier reefs in the world (named for a 19th-century French exploration ship) renowned for pristine soft corals, cruising manta rays, and deep ocean passages where sharks and pelagic fish make way. It's a marvelous oceanic garden; meanwhile, I settle into another garden—of architecture and landscape—coaxed into harmony with its setting by the late Australian billionaire Lang Walker.

Walker, a developer, had first spied the relics of an unfinished resort from the deck of his superyacht *Kokomo*. Soon after, in 2011, he bought the 140-acre island and built homes for himself and family, later expanding the vision to include a high-luxury boutique resort (and hospitality namesake). Now, Kokomo Private Island is a stunning cultivation of Walker's vision: five expansive residences and 21 capacious beachfront villas, plus Kokomo's gracious communal spaces, open-air restaurants with their bars (including a dedicated tiki bar). But even dearer to Walker's heart: a mission to offset climate change. The island hews to rigorous waste and sustainability processes, supports a large and productive organic farm, and is home to a marine biology team that manages coral reef restoration, manta ray and sea turtle monitoring, mangrove reforestation, and sustainable fishing.

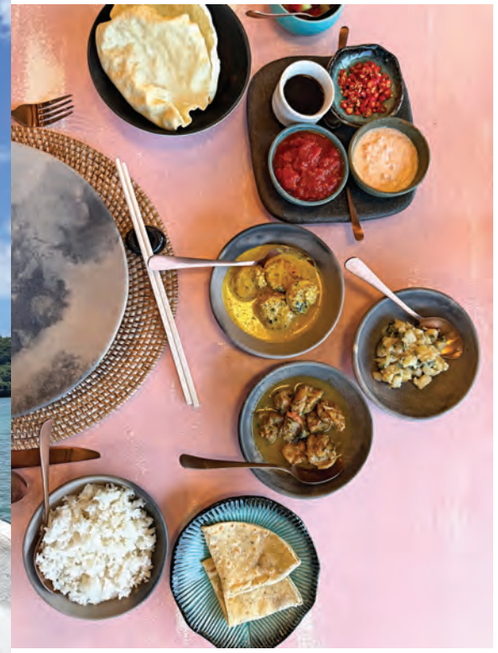
It's a hell of a legacy. On my first night, I watch sommelier Stephen Swanepoel, who loves cocktail chemistry so much he works the bar, mix me up a drink. I savor Swanepoel's handiwork, chat about Walker, and agree that great chiefs live on in the places they leave behind.

But it's to another chief's domain—Ono Island—that Domantani and I venture that morning, when I expose my head to the sun and my humility to his culture, bag held low. The village greeters walk us up past their brightly painted homes, past their octagonal, red-roofed Methodist church, past a carved stone memorial to the 22 people who were "called to rest," as it says, during murderous Hurricane Meli in 1979.

We enter the community hall and take seats on a large woven mat: me at one end and them a bit away, encircling their *dari*, the ceremonial bowl. Now begins the sevusevu. The chief is off site, so my business is with these village elders. A matriarch stirs and scoops the milky liquid with a coconut shell, blending. She pours some into a coconut shell cup and signals to a village interpreter to ferry it to me. He whispers my instructions: Clap once with cupped hands, accept the shell and drink its contents in a single gulp, and clap three times afterward. I do as I'm told. Then begins the *talanoa*—a ritual where I'm asked to introduce myself. I look to my interpreter for help. "Just tell them your name, your country, if you are married, and how many children you have," he counsels. I do, saying that I'm no longer married. The women laugh and look around mischievously, eyes on one of the elder men sitting near the wall. "Perhaps I'll marry you!" I say, which, when translated, cracks up the village. We're in party mode now, and after the talk is done, the music begins. Clapping, singing, and dancing, we weave around the dari. At one point they coax my potential next husband up to join us. Then we all sit again and they ask me if I'd like one more.

I've heard other Westerners say they don't like kava, but maybe it's after nearly 10 days in Fiji, inhaling its stories, tastes, history, and visions, that this tastes as beautiful as this place. Yes, a little bitter, but it feels right where welcome arrives to those who might come in war but instead come in peace. I accept with gratitude, and cup my hands to clap.







This page, clockwise from below, right: Statuary on Kokomo Private Island Fiji; fresh water meets sea water at the resort; a night of tastes at Kokomo's Walker D'Plank restaurant; villagers on Ono Island encircling their ceremonial kava bowl and singing as part of sevusevu. Opposite: Young villagers help boost visitors to Ono Island.





TRACEY MINKIN: OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TRACEY MINKIN (3); COURTESY KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

FINDING FIJI



GET THERE

Fiji Airways flies directly to Nadi International Airport (NAN) on the main island of Viti Levu from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Honolulu; fijiairways.com.





Clockwise from top: Kokomo's organic farm; pink cone ginger on Tokoriki Island Resort; Kokomo's Tiki Bar; singing welcome at Tokoriki. Opposite: Kokomo's private seaplane



STAY THERE

Sitting on a private 500-acre beachfront estate on Viti Levu, **Nanuku Resort** offers suites, villas, and multi-bedroom residences (some with private pools) alongside dining at **Kanavata Restaurant.** An ample activities and excursions menu ranges from cooking and weaving workshops to hiking to waterfalls; nanukuresort.com. The adults-only **Tokoriki Island Resort** is a boutique retreat of 36 freestanding, Fiji-inspired villas and bures with private pools in Fiji's Mamanuca Islands and reached by boat or helicopter from Nadi. The restaurant's stunning menus pair perfectly with the breezy view; tokoriki.com. Reachable via private seaplane or helicopter from Nadi, **Kokomo Private Island Fiji** is a secluded private island in the Kadavu Island Group, cradled by the Great Astrolabe Reef, offering 21 beachfront villas with infinity pools and five hilltop residences with panoramic ocean views. Between superb meals at **Beach Shack, Walker D'Plank,** and **Kokocabana,** guests can dive and snorkel the reef, fish, and visit remote villages, among other excursions; kokomoislandfiji.com.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND; TRACEY MINKIN; KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND; TOKORIKI ISLAND RESORT; OPPOSITE PAGE: KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND