

# DOWN IN KOKOMO

HE DIDN'T NEED AN ISLAND, BUT HE COULDN'T VERY WELL RESIST. A BRAND-NEW LUXURY RESORT BY AN UNSPOILED FIJIAN REEF IS THE LATEST PROJECT FROM DEVELOPER LANG WALKER.

STORY PENNY DURHAM

I

t doesn't take long to get to heaven, or at least a good earthly approximation. Yaukuve Levu is a small island in Fiji, south of Suva in the Kadavu group, framed by the Great Astrolabe Reef. Here you'll find Kokomo Island, the first resort built by Australian developer Lang Walker (see our fashion shoot from page 92). It's about 45 minutes from Nadi in the resort's helicopter or seaplane; leave, say, Sydney at a civilised 8.30am and you

can be in your private infinity pool on the deck of your villa by mid-afternoon.

Opening in March after four years in development, the resort consists of 21 thatched beachfront villas on the east and west shores of the island, as well as several opulent residences on the peak, with a spa complex, restaurants and bars. There are plans for a completely private honeymoon island a short hop away.

Walker hadn't exactly been planning to buy an island, says Luke Caldwell, captain of Walker's motor yacht Kokomo II and acting dive centre host; it "sort of fell in his lap". Friends called him one day to let him know they'd found the best beach in Fiji and that the island attached to it was for sale. It had no village, just an old caretaker living there, and the roofless remains of the

previous attempt to build a resort, which was stymied by the GFC; an earlier enterprise had been foiled by one of Fiji's numerous *coups d'état*.

"We don't need an island," Walker's wife Sue allegedly told Lang. "I know, but I'll just go and have a look," he replied. And one thing led to another ...

The name, incidentally, is nothing to do with the disappointing Beach Boys comeback, but has a Rosebud-style significance. Kokomo was the name of young Lang's first sailing dinghy, and has gone on to grace every one of his fleet of sailing and motor yachts.

But as a name that evokes an imaginary, dreamy tropical paradise, it's perfect for this place. The island is surrounded by reefs, the sea so full of coral that the waves tinkle as they come in and out. In the gardens around each villa, butterflies bob from hibiscus to bougainvillea and dragonflies cruise by, while huge frigate birds circle over the sea.

The unpolluted waters are a snorkeller's delight, with healthy coral and a profusion of coloured fish everywhere you look, and no boat trip is needed – your intrepid reporter found Nemo and friends within minutes of slipping off the jetty. Take a boat trip, however, and the possibilities open up dramatically: manta rays, sea turtles, dolphins, even humpback whales that have been known to come right inside the lagoon for an afternoon frolic.

For the active, there is world-class diving, fishing, surfing, kite-surfing, sailing, kayaking, paddle-boarding wake-boarding, aquablading and other ever-more obscure watersports – "but we've stayed away from noisy things like jetskis", Caldwell says. "People come here for peace and quiet." There are also walking trails with waterfalls on surrounding islands. It all feels untouched, unmessed-with.

The villas have traditional thatched roofs, but everything underneath them is cool and modern. Sydney designer Philip Garner took his inspiration from local culture and says the design principle was "to let nature be the hero. The villas and residences are all surrounded by white sand, tropical vegetation and the



PENNY DURHAM '13





Yaukuve Levu island from the window of the resort's seaplane, which lands and departs at the main jetty on the beach; clownfish abound in the coral just a short swim from the jetty.



TED O'DONNELL X2



The implausible turquoise blues and reds are actually the precise colours of the ocean topped by a deep sunset.

intense aqua of the reef and surrounding waters – it's madness to try and compete," he says. The colours echo the sand and dark rock of the island, and textures are natural, with cane, matting and exposed roof beams wrapped in coconut fibre. Kitchen and sitting room flow into spacious bedrooms and bathrooms with pool-sized tub and an indoor and outdoor shower. The walls are sparingly hung with a mix of traditional objects and new paintings by Sydney artist Christopher Kenyon, whose work Walker has collected for years.

Kenyon has been living on the island painting canvases for the accommodation and common areas. "I've done 105, I've got 86 to go," he says, looking not at all crushed by the prospect, when we meet in his studio on the windswept west of the island. The paintings are all abstract landscapes based on the surroundings, made with multiple layers of paint dragged across the canvas. Oddly, the longer you stay on the island, the less abstract and more literal the paintings look: the implausible turquoise blues and reds are actually the precise colours of the ocean topped by a deep sunset, with a white line where the surf breaks on the reef at the horizon.

"Lang loves his artwork and knows it well," Kenyon says. "I trust his judgment. It didn't take me long to say yes [to the nine-month commission] because I like a big, giant challenge – it purifies my mind and makes me work faster." Kenyon, a designer by trade who returned to fine art 25 years ago, is also designing a beach restaurant, to be filled with maritime relics collected from ship-stripping yards in Suva and elsewhere.

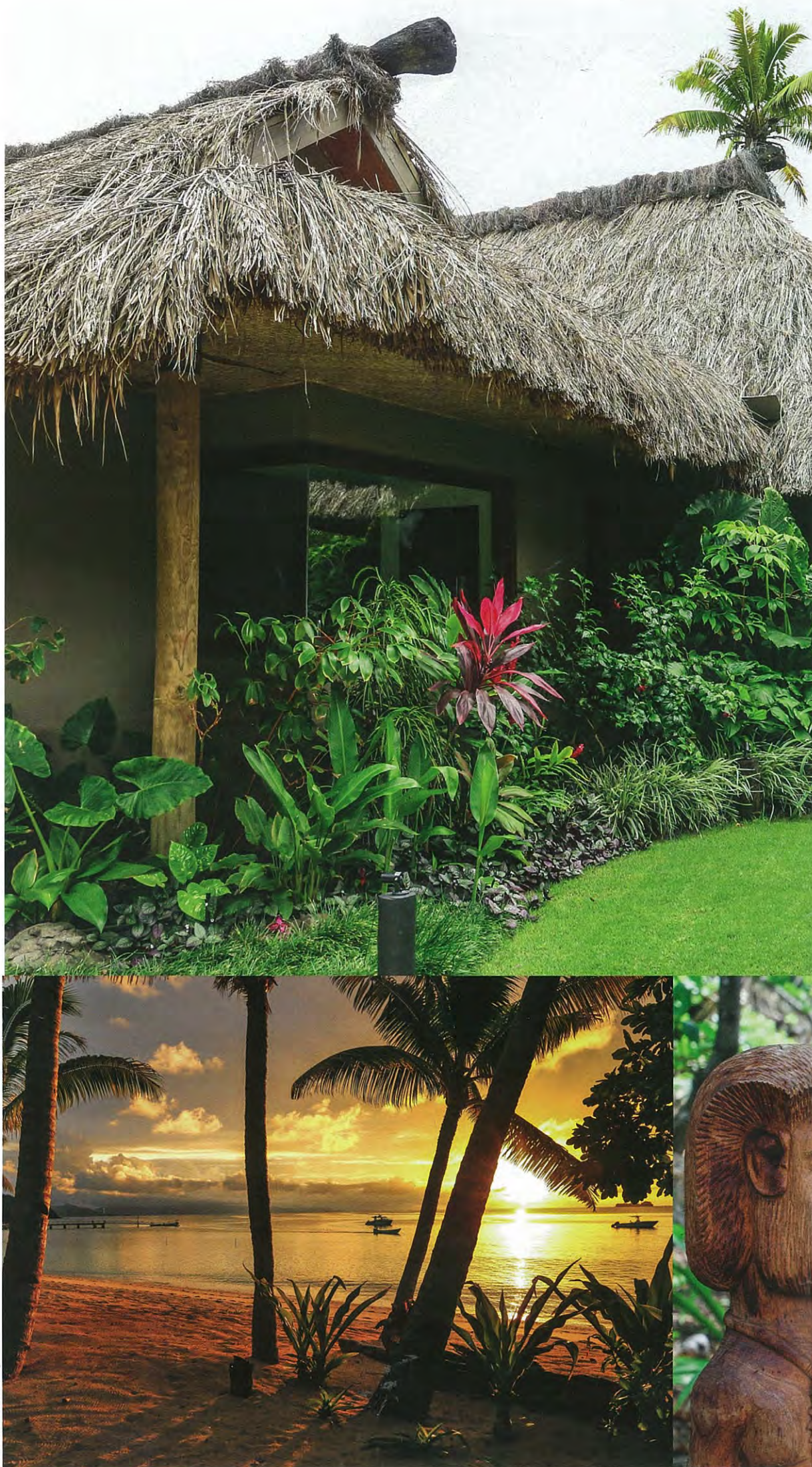
Walker has collected loyal staff – Caldwell, originally from north Queensland, and assistant manager Margy Swainson, from New Zealand, have been with him for years. "Most people find they're working for him before they've even said yes," Caldwell muses.

Australian executive chef Daniel Johnson was another of these whirlwind hires, finding himself on the island within a month of first meeting the boss. "He's an amazing entity, Mr Walker," Johnson says – "what he knows, and his personality and drive."

Trained in Western Australia, Johnson has 22 years' experience, much of it working in resorts in The Maldives, the Middle East and Asia. He says the fare for Kokomo guests will be fresh and simple, using as much produce as possible from the newly planted market garden and caught from the sea. With a mix of Asian and European cuisine, the menu will change daily.

"That's for creativity and also for the guests – we'll be finding out what they like and catering to their needs," he says. "In a restaurant, you're putting yourself across – 'this is my food, this is what I want to give you' – while in resorts you've got a captive audience and you've got to look after them."

Most other employees are locals, with 320 construction workers and an expected full-time staff of 150, in what has been a boon for the economy – Walker committed to spending \$10 million locally as a condition of purchase, manager Mark Dakin says, but has spent more than 10 times that. The friendly staff, always ready with a grin and a "Bula!", will top and tail your visit with a song. *Vinaka vaka levu.* **W**  
[kokomoislandfiji.com](http://kokomoislandfiji.com)



PENNY DURHAM X3





The beachfront villas each have a private garden and a deck with infinity pool for a perfect view of sunrise or sunset, depending on the side of the island.

TED O'DONNELL X3



# CUT LOOSE

PHOTOGRAPHER **TED O'DONNELL**  
STYLIST **KEN THOMPSON**  
HAIR & MAKEUP **ANNETTE MCKENZIE**

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This page:  
Chanel nylon/elastase car print boy-leg  
bikini; Tiffany & Co. Paloma Picasso Villa  
Paloma palm earrings and necklace in  
18k gold

Opposite page:  
Paul Smith cockatoo print cotton shirt,  
cockatoo print board shorts and mirror  
sunglasses; Salvatore Ferragamo logo  
rubber slides







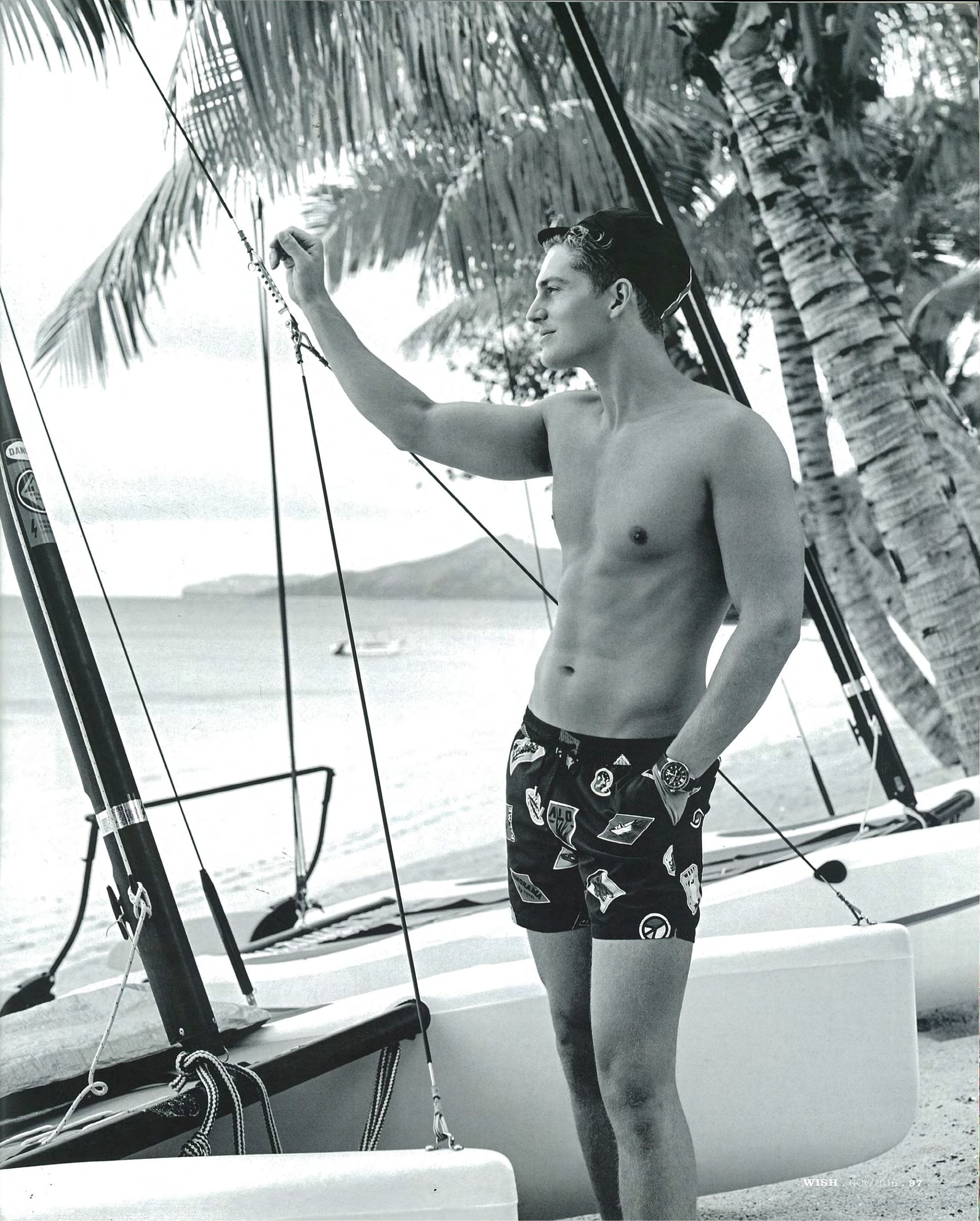
This page:  
Milea nylon/elastase tropical pineapple  
print lacefront maillot; Prada embellished  
sunglasses from Sunglass Hut;  
Tiffany & Co. Paloma Picasso Villa Paloma  
palm necklace in 18k gold

Opposite page:  
Paul Smith postcard print nylon board shorts  
and nylon/cotton baseball cap; Bremont  
Supermarine S2000 watch

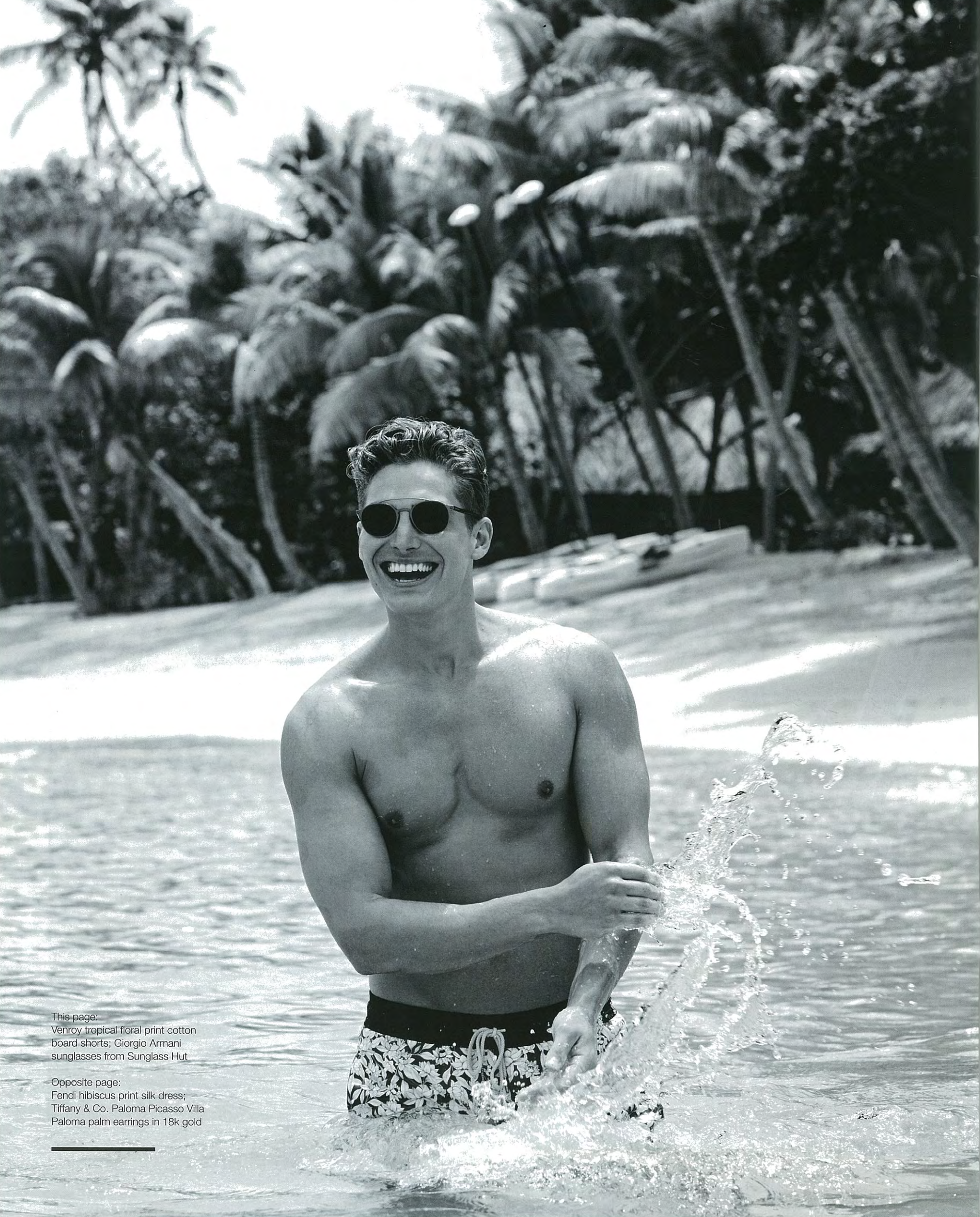
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This page:  
Venroy tropical floral print cotton  
board shorts; Giorgio Armani  
sunglasses from Sunglass Hut

Opposite page:  
Fendi hibiscus print silk dress;  
Tiffany & Co. Paloma Picasso Villa  
Paloma palm earrings in 18k gold

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This page:  
Gucci tiger print nylon bomber, tiger  
print GG logo canvas duffle bag;  
Emporio Armani nylon/elastane  
swimming trunks

Opposite page:  
Chanel Coco Cuba cotton T-shirt, car  
print pleat silk skirt and floral enamel  
necklace

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This page:  
Giorgio Armani Art Deco tropical print  
polyamide jacket and trousers and woven  
straw fedora, Giorgio Armani sunglasses  
from Sunglass Hut

Opposite page:  
Gucci silk tropical wildlife shirt and trousers;  
Tiffany & Co. Paloma Picasso Villa Paloma  
palm earrings in 18k gold

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This page  
Prada tropical print cotton hooded  
bomber, tropical print cotton shirt, check  
cotton zip-detail shorts, technical nylon  
appliqué backpack and rubber ankle-  
strap sandals

Opposite page  
Giorgio Armani woven cotton jacket;  
Hugo Boss cotton T-shirt; Louis Vuitton  
cotton denim jeans, Predilection  
sunglasses, Voyager GMT watch,  
Horizon 50 leather suitcase

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Shot on location at Kokomo Island Resort Fiji (see story page 88) and on Virgin Australia aircraft

The WISH fashion team flew Virgin Australia to Fiji. Virgin Australia's award-winning business-class experience, The Business, is available on its widebody Airbus A330 and Boeing 777 aircraft. Travellers visiting Fiji from Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney during peak travel periods can experience The Business on the airline's A330 aircraft.

The Business features private suites in a 1-2-1 configuration that convert into the length of a queen-size bed; a hand-delivered fine-dining experience with Luke Mangan-designed menus and premium Australian wines; and a world-first collaboration with Nespresso that aims to deliver the finest coffee in the sky.

