



ISLAND LIFE

Story • FIONA CARRUTHERS Portraits • NIC WALKER

Australian property developer Lang Walker has joined an exclusive club: billionaires who own a slice of Fiji. The luxury resort he's about to open on his island there is the most personal project in his five-decade career.

It's reassuring to hear even rich listers bargain when staying at luxury resorts. Curious about the endless buzz around Fiji's ultra-exclusive Laucala Island Resort, Lang Walker – Australia's 17th-richest man, with an estimated personal wealth of \$2.02 billion – dropped by in 2015 to see if the hype was justified. Laucala, opened in 2008 by Austrian billionaire and Red Bull co-founder Dietrich Mateschitz, had long been popular with the fashionable set, who like both its privacy and its private runway. Elle Macpherson even flew her entourage in to get married there.

Arriving by chopper with wife Sue, Walker paid the then asking rate of about \$4000 for night one. But when Sue wanted to stay on, the founder and executive chairman of Walker Corporation, Australia's largest privately owned, diversified property development company, put his hard hat on. "I bargained them down to \$2000 for another night." In fact he had an ulterior motive. He was checking out the competition.

Four years earlier, Walker had bought his own Fijian island, Yaukuve, and was in the process of building a luxury resort on it. In so doing he joins an informal club of billionaires with serious stakes in the South Pacific archipelago. Said club includes Dutch businessman and investor Alex van Heeren, who owns Dolphin Island, and David Gilmour, a Canadian gold mine owner who in the 1990s built Wakaya Club & Spa and its pin-up villa Vale O, or the "house in the clouds". Gilmour's guest book is a who's who of global rich listers, those signing in over the years

including Bill and Melinda Gates, the late Steve Jobs, Rupert Murdoch, George Lucas, Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise – then Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban. Gilmour still spends up to four months of the year in Fiji.

These billionaires might have put their mark on paradise before Walker. And he might have bigger fish to fry this year, in the form of projects such as finishing a \$2.5 billion multi-tower Collins Square development in Melbourne and starting a \$2 billion redevelopment of Parramatta's city centre. But Kokomo, the resort he's built in Fiji, is closer to the 71-year-old's heart than any of that. On April 1, he'll welcome his first paying guests to Kokomo, the first development into which he's injected not just his own money – \$100 million and counting – but much of himself. And the first hotel he's both built and managed.

Over the past six years, Walker has dragged his island from overgrown "mile a minute" jungle vines and creepers into a five-star, meticulously built and landscaped idyll with wending paths, lavish day spa complex and finishing touches such as a romantic aperitif bar built into rock next to a waterfall. His three children, their spouses and his eight grandchildren have all been regular visitors, watching the island transform villa by villa, wet-edge pool by wet-edge pool.

"I'm hoping our guests agree we've gone one better," Walker says with trademark bravado. "I've looked at the competition and I think we're streets ahead. Now we just have to make sure we deliver on what we've promised."

"I've always needed a holiday project. Just ask Sue."

Lang Walker



Kokomo Private Island Fiji is certainly the most luxurious Australian-owned resort in Fiji and among the most expensive in the South Pacific. Situated on the 57-hectare island of Yaukuve south of Suva, it comprises 21 beachfront villas of one to three bedrooms, five hilltop residences of up to six bedrooms and an owner's residence tucked away on the north end of the island with private beach and separate teenager's retreat. There are almost 30 pools and four beaches, a five-star PADI dive centre, tennis court, state-of-the-art airconditioned gym, a luxury day spa stocked with Sodashi products, nanny and butler services.

The resort will cater for up to 134 guests looked after by 178 staff. Suffice to say, Walker doesn't expect it to become a cash cow anytime soon. Such ventures are historically in the realm of grand folly, or at least grandstanding. But he is hoping it will shape up as some sort of business. Once the resort is bedded down, the hilltop residences will become available for purchase and lease. In terms of tourists, Fiji is on trend, having welcomed 792,320 international tourists in 2016, up from 660,590 in 2012. Half of them were Australian, followed by New Zealanders. The all-important Chinese tourists have increased tenfold over the past five years, to just over 40,100 last year.

And bridezillas take note: Walker is chasing the destination wedding set. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned asking for the discount at Laucala," he quips. "Might come back to bite me. I suppose all our guests will want one too."

If they do, it won't be hard to hunt him down. Walker has blocked out the entire month of April to be "at home" on the island, meeting and greeting his first batch of guests, some of whom are friends, virtually all of whom are paying the nightly rack rates of between \$US1995 (\$2640) for a one-bedroom beachfront villa and \$US12,950 for the top six-bedroom residences. Once he leaves, the owner's residence will also be available – at \$US18,000 a night.

"For the opening special, we've thrown a lot of things in, like your first scuba dive free, complimentary massages, stay seven nights but only pay five, that kind of thing," he says. "And of course if Dietrich [Mateschitz] wants to come visit, we'll look after him extremely well."

Walker's billionaire peers will be watching like hawks to see how he handles this new challenge. "Lang has a very good track record in development and when he takes on a project like this, I have no doubt he will cover all the bases and it will be a classy joint," says fellow developer and sometime dining companion, Frank Lowy. For the record, Lowy hasn't visited yet. But New Zealand jewellery entrepreneur Michael Hill has swung by on his superyacht, *VvS1*, for a sticky beak. Also watching with interest will be fellow Sydneysiders Andrew and Yvonne Turnbull, who have

owned Fiji's upmarket Tokoriki Island Resort for 20 years, and former Brisbane residents Jim Johnston and wife Tracey, who own Wadigi Island, visited by Pink and Paris Hilton, among other celebrities.

"It's a bit like 'welcome to the club'," jokes Tracey. "Everyone is thrilled a resort to the standard of Kokomo is set to open. Half the inbound tourists into Fiji are Australians, so it's good to have another Australian-backed operation."

When asked what's driven him to do it – other than because he can – Walker responds with a long, thoughtful silence. "I've always needed a holiday project, just ask Sue. I love being around water, out on the ocean," he eventually says. "When I bought this island, I told Sue: 'Come on, let's have a crack at this. It'll be fun; something for the grandkids to remember.'"

Sitting in the Beach Shack al fresco restaurant, goblet of red wine in hand, casual loafers on feet, Walker is talking about how it all began. Like most of Fiji's high-end offerings, Kokomo is a fair hike from Fiji's main isle of Viti Levu. To get there requires a 50-minute seaplane from Nadi airport or a 25-minute flight from Suva. The Walkers had been holidaying in Fiji for 45 years, yet didn't know this region very well.

"A mate stumbled across it," Walker explains. "I'd lent my boat to Ari at the start of 2011, while we were in Aspen. And he found this island." The luxury group Aman had begun building a resort there but abandoned the project after Fiji's 2006 military coup and the global financial crisis of the following years. The Fijian Development Bank slapped a \$7 million sale sticker on it and dispatched a sole security guard to protect the two half-finished buildings Aman left behind. Jungle was rapidly closing in.

"It was so rough, Ari's wife was too scared to even go ashore," chuckles Walker. "He gave me the location, saying: 'This place has got you written all over it: it's broken down and worn out but there's potential. You'll be able to fix it.' I'm still not sure that was a compliment."

Later that year, Walker sailed to Yaukuve and dropped anchor. He waded ashore and asked the security guard, who'd just about gone troppo, where he might get mobile phone coverage. He then wandered over to the highest boulder and phoned the Fijian bank. "From then on, they didn't let me out of their sight till I bought it," he says. But he cut the deal on his terms: \$3 million, not \$7 million. "It was still probably the most expensive phone call I've ever made," he quips. Sue's reaction: "Lang, why do we need an island in Fiji?"

It was a fair question given the family's sizeable collection of assets includes two homes in Sydney – historic sandstone Millthorpe at Hunters Hill and a chic contemporary apartment on Woolloomooloo Wharf – plus a four-bedroom



Above: The 59-metre superyacht *Senses*, owned by Google co-founder Larry Page, is a regular visitor to the Fijian islands.

Not so plain sailing

Between cyclones, the global financial crisis and long-running political instability, Fiji has had a rough trot. But tourists are on the rise and Fiji Airways is in expansion mode, adding direct flights to Adelaide from June to complement its existing direct flights to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Far more interesting than who flies in however is who sails around. According to yachtcharterfleet.com, about 40 superyachts visit Fiji each year, partly enticed by a huge drop in charter fees under the government's 2010 Super Yacht Charter Decree. A 2013 marine industry survey found superyachts stay an average 116 days in Fiji, hosting 1240 guests over that time.

Australian rich lister James Packer aboard his *Arctic P*, Google co-founder Larry Page on his *Senses*, and the Google yacht *Dragonfly* all visit. Mexican telecom baron Carlos Slim has sailed through, as has Russian oligarch Andrey Melnichenko, whose newest superyacht, *Sailing Yacht A*, was impounded in Gibraltar in February. "Celebrities love the fact most Fijians don't really care who you are and aren't interested in movie stars," says Wadigi Island owner Tracey Johnston. "A lot more Americans and Europeans are flying into Nadi to pick up their superyachts. Fiji is seen as a faraway, safe place in uncertain times." *FC*

Left: Lang "I can't relax and do nothing" Walker has a go at doing just that.

Right: Kokomo has 21 beachfront villas with wet-edge pools; alfresco dining at the Beach Shack is a short walk from the seaplane jetty.





"Lang, why do we need an island in Fiji?"

Sue Walker (above left with Lang) on the 2011 purchase of Yaukuve

brick Victorian-era home in Aspen. There are also two superyachts, a fleet of Farr 40 sailing yachts for Walker to race in his supposed spare time, and the private jet.

But he has a history of mixing business with pleasure. When Walker Corporation redeveloped Woolloomooloo Wharf in the late 1990s, he liked it so much he held onto the aforementioned apartment. Over the years Walker has built a few houses in Aspen on spec, then sold them. The most recent was bought by a New York hedge fund manager for \$US25 million in December.

"That's what I do when I'm not skiing – told you, I always need a holiday project," Walker says. "We've been going to Aspen for 20 years. I can't relax and do nothing."

Walker thrives on a full plate. It's fitting that his mobile phone ring tone is the James Bond theme music. And ring it does – non-stop, about every 15 minutes. But from the day he dumped the deposit on this island, it wasn't just another holiday project. The clue to how he feels about this resort is in the name. Everything precious to Walker bar his wife, children and grandkids is called Kokomo.

"People always guess it's after the Beach Boys song – but it's not," Walker says. Rather, he stumbled across the word during one of the few things he failed at in life: piano. As an only child growing up in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, his mother had high hopes that he'd take to the ivories. Walker hated it – he'd rather be outside in the dirt with his father, Alexander (known as Alec), who amassed a healthy pile through his plant equipment hire and earth-moving business.

On graduating from Jannali High School, Walker started studying accountancy by correspondence but soon quit to join his father's business. "The one thing I took away from my piano lessons was a Japanese or Asian serenade my mother made me play," he says. "Through that I came across the name Kokomo, which I think was a pseudonym used by the composer. I loved the word immediately; I thought it was the best word I'd ever heard of; so happy."

The Vauluse Junior sailing dinghy he raced as a boy in the late 1950s and early '60s was the first Kokomo, his two superyachts more recent owners of the moniker. "And so it was the obvious name for this island, too."

As he holds court by the water's edge, Walker is clearly

part of the furniture, the staff not batting an eyelid at his presence on the island. Joining him and Sue for this cosy dinner is daughter-in-law Camille, who is married to middle son Chad and, as a former public relations consultant with French cosmetics brand Lancôme, handling the media for Kokomo. Long-time artist to the family, Chris Kenyon, a former architect who designed the sets for the first two *Mad Max* films in the 1970s, completes the party. Like the many personal staff and helpers clustered around the Walkers, Kenyon has known them for decades. He's been the artist-in-residence at Kokomo for the past six months, painting more than 200 canvases, including a 6.9 x 2 metre work, for the villa walls and public areas.

It's a strange, almost eerie feeling, seeing a resort just before it opens. The builders are in overdrive towards the back of the resort, hammering and drilling around the clock. Front of house everything sparkles yet it somehow feels flat, as if we're the forward party and the excitement is yet to explode. As with the build-up to Christmas, you envy those

who will get to unwrap this place. That said, the overall impression is of a place breathtaking enough to rival Marlon Brando's Tahiti island Tetiaroa atoll, home to the no-expense-spared hotel, The Brando, and Richard Branson's Virgin Limited Edition portfolio, which includes the 30-hectare Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands, where Branson hosted Barack and Michelle Obama immediately post-presidency.

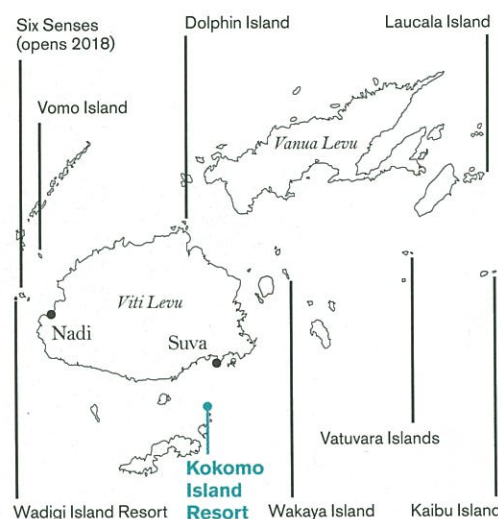
"With the white sand and crystal water, it's so pretty it's cartoonish, isn't it?" Kenyon whispers between bites of entrée, a just-caught tuna now swimming in a cordon bleu sauce. Indeed, one half expects to catch Pebbles and Bam Bam hiding behind a palm tree.

When pushed for who has booked, the Walkers are diplomatically tight-lipped. "If I told you that, it wouldn't be a private island," Walker chimes. Camille later lets slip that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's minders rang last year to inquire about booking out the resort at a cost of \$US120,000, plus taxes, for the whole family. Their messy split in September put an end to that. Nevertheless, the Walkers insist the resort is almost fully booked for the next few months.

The family are consummate hosts, friendly but not over the top, and the pricey wine flows liberally. As the tide ruffles the shelled shoreline a few metres away, the table talk skims across topics of interest: how crowded it gets on the private jet these days with four couples and eight grandkids; didn't the furniture at Kokomo, sourced from hardwood cinnamon trees on Mel Gibson's nearby Mago Island, turn out well; and finally, the brilliance of a 15-minute video that ABC comedians John Clarke and Bryan Dawe did for Walker's 70th last year.

That surprise was organised for the long-time Clarke/Dawe fan by his children. Given it was the first time the comedy duo had done a skit for private use, it took some convincing. But what else do you get the septuagenarian who has everything? Such privileged chit-chat seems otherworldly until the conversation shifts towards more grounded tales, including Lang and Sue's first date. It was 1967, the venue was the old Brighton pub in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, the night a Thursday because beers were half-price.

High-end Fiji





**"This place has
you written all over
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and worn out but
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You'll be able
to fix it."**

A friend's advice to Lang Walker

Personal staff approach the table throughout the evening to quietly ask Walker this and that, with a well-honed mix of relaxed familiarity and time-is-money precision. Does he want the private jet moved from Suva to Nadi tomorrow or the day after? It's 11pm now – will he do an 8am with the interior design team, who just arrived from Sydney? Walker has acquired many loyal staff who have stayed by his side for decades. One insider says he's a tough but fair boss, while noting: "You'll only want to see his temper the once."

Next morning, Walker is up early for his meetings. With the final big push on to finish Kokomo ahead of opening, there's a long queue forming to get his ear. Mainly it's the builders and specialised tradespeople. There are about 350 of them all up, with many of the Australian managers and supervisors flying in and out for more than 12 months. The architects and interior designers and the landscape designers who painstakingly brought in massive amounts of bougainvillea and exotic plants are also still coming and

going. They all need just a quick word – as does the guy who will oversee the 50 hens about to lay organic eggs in paradise.

By 11am, Walker ushers Camille and *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* into his golf buggy and we commence what turns out to be a three-hour inspection in searing heat and humidity. Walker is no stranger to big property plays and lengthy, draining site tours. My bedtime reading – which he'd handed me at 11.30 the night before – was a thick glossy booklet titled *The Walker Way*, listing a roll call of projects from a \$1 billion joint venture with Sydney liquor group Kemenys to the \$1 billion Festival Plaza project in the heart of Adelaide.

Walker has done business in the United States and Asia, and is part of a \$5 billion Singapore-led play, Senibong Cove, under way in Malaysia. But for all that, he says Kokomo is the toughest thing he's done – mainly thanks to Fiji's bureaucracy, tendency towards a snail's pace, remoteness and

cultural differences. "Fiji has rewritten history," he says. "There's a book in it and I'm keeping notes. I've always said we love a challenge at Walker Corp – but this has been the biggest yet." At least the foreign investment laws are enticing, with the first five years tax-free, followed by staggered tax over 20 years.

To get the project off the ground, Walker had to set up an offshore subsidiary of Walker Corporation, with offices in Nadi and Suva. He's employed four full-time staff just to ensure all the necessary paperwork is in order.

"The British left [in 1970] but their system stayed," he jokes. "There's a lot more red tape than Australia. No one over here tends to have the latest in technology or computers, and that makes things harder too."

A further challenge has been getting workers to turn up. "I think I employ that entire island over there," Walker says with a nonchalant wave towards a dot in the distance. "The second week or so after we started building a couple of years ago, I had all the local labourers here one day. The next day only half of them turned up. When I queried the foreman he just shrugged and said they must not have felt like coming to work." Walker switched from paying as he went to paying on completion of each villa. "They turned up for work again then," he smiles, gunning the golf buggy towards his tomato patch and vegetable garden. Like Laucala, the plan is to create a self-sustaining, health-focused, organic resort.

An early decision to invest in the local communities has at least eased the pain of conducting business in paradise. Most of the big resorts and private islands in Fiji are urged to pour funds into community schools, libraries and the like, and the Walkers have done just that.

Sue has observed her husband of almost 50 years grapple with new modes of working. "It's been a very different experience. He's never had to turn up to a primary school before and stand there while 50 school kids sing and thank him," she says, wide-eyed at the memory of the ceremony on neighbouring Dravuni island. "He was pretty uncomfortable, he hates a fuss, but we were both almost in tears."

Walker had to buy a 12-seater Twin Otter aeroplane to augment the five-seater chopper for ferrying guests and goods from Nadi. And he bought two barges, purchased in Tahiti for more than \$1 million apiece. "I thought, 'I need a couple of barges to bring stuff over from the mainland. Where do I find barges? I know – I'll read *Trade-a-Boat*.' Of course, that's not really work," he qualifies, surprised anyone would consider it such. "I enjoy that kind of thing."

After a solid inspection of every nook of the resort, from the size of the walk-in robes in the hilltop residences' secondary bedrooms to a full briefing on the production schedules of the timber yard, Walker is finally satisfied that we've got the picture. He drops us at the restaurant to meet up with Sue then disappears in his buggy at breakneck speed back to his

favourite spot on the island, the concrete plant, which belches smoke, dust and noise. Sue doubts he's sat in one of the pool loungers yet. The family, however, love that he enjoys man-facials at the day spa. He gets his hair cut at Kokomo, too; Rachel who works in the gardens does it for just \$5.

Preparing to leave, there seems little point in asking whether Kokomo is, at the end of the day, simply the ultimate retirement plan. Lang Walker, the Sutherland Shire boy made good, doesn't speak that language. And let's not forget, his father Alec lived to 101. If longevity is in the genes, he's going to need a decent holiday project for some time to come. ●

Fiona Carruthers travelled to Fiji courtesy of Fiji Airways, Nic Walker as a guest of Lang Walker, who hosted both at Kokomo.