

FUTURE ENDEAVOURS: MEET THE CHALLENGES OF TOMORROW'S WORK TODAY

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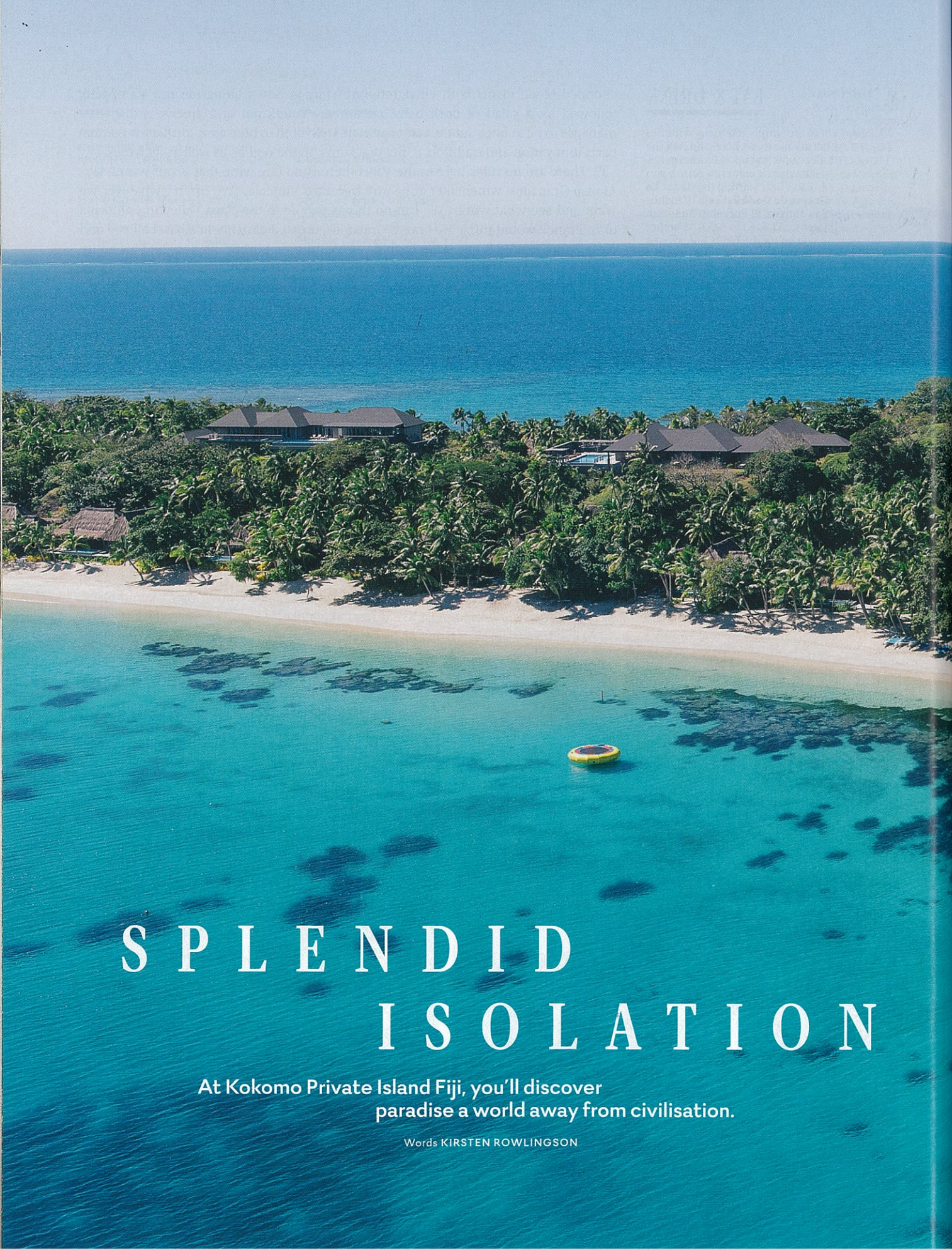
A TASTE OF THE FLAWLESS BEAUTY OF FIJI'S KOKOMO ISLAND PARADISE

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S P L E N D I D I S O L A T I O N

At Kokomo Private Island Fiji, you'll discover
paradise a world away from civilisation.

Words KIRSTEN ROWLINGSON



hen Australian property developer Lang Walker embarked on building his passion project, Kokomo Private Island Fiji, it was to be just three villas on Yakuve Island, south of Suva in the Kadavu group of islands, encircled by the Great Astrolabe Reef.

That was seven years ago. Now, the island encompasses 21 beachfront villas, ranging from one to three bedrooms, as well as five private residences, meaning it can host up to 140 people at a time. And Walker isn't finished. Ideas to expand restaurants are thrown around. Unannounced pieces of furniture turn up and constant chat about what else can be done on the island is relayed by staff with excitement. This drive to continually tweak, tinker and find better ways to do things is a theme that's often repeated during a stay at the island. Whether through the evolving menus at its restaurants, the massaging of experiences offered or plans for new facilities, you get a sense nothing is fixed; everything is malleable, always evolving towards a better experience. Turn your schedule over to staff, and the whims of the weather, and you're sure to have a memorable experience.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand this way of working is eating at Walker D'Plank (see what they did there?), the island's more casual dining experience. Initially planned to be just a beach umbrella and esky, the restaurant has been expanded three times already. Designed to look as if it was cobbled together from driftwood and other materials found washed up on the beach, it's the very definition of island chic. The pink and blue tables and chairs are set to create romantic dining nooks, or a place to bring together a large family to share mealtimes. For many diners, though, the best thing about the restaurant is the enthusiastic chef Caroline Oakley, a Fijian native who is turning resort dining on its head.

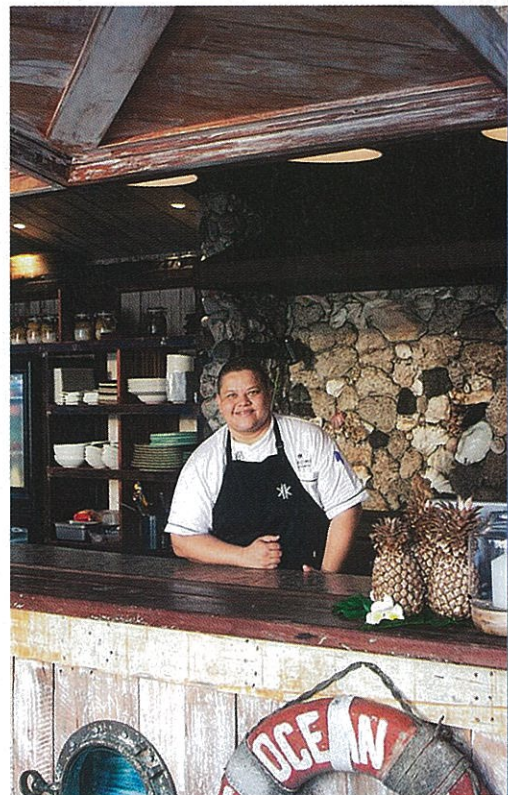


Oakley has been cooking on the island before the resort opened, feeding the 400-strong construction team with three other women from a nearby village. While that might sound stressful, now she's cooking individual meals for up to 70 people a night – without a fixed menu. That's how meals run here. No set menu, just have a chat with the chef and delicious food starts to appear. “When the resort opened, we had to hit the ground running,” recalls Oakley. “Anthony [Healy, the resort's executive chef] and I put together a street food-inspired menu. And guests really liked it. So we decided to just go with whatever we have available. We talk to the guests, have a conversation with them, and just suggest things that they may like.”

The focus is rightly on seafood and sustainability. If the fishermen bring in 80 kilograms of lobster, the kitchens find many different ways to cook it, so as not to waste food and allowing them to make the most of the very freshest



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Relax with views of the sand, sea and palm trees; chef Caroline Oakley; stunning Fijian sunset. **OPENER** Aerial view of the resort.



ingredients. The meat could as easily end up in a Fijian curry at Walker D'Plank as it could being cooked five ways and served with matching wines at Beach Shack, the resort's signature dining experience. Here, Australian-born Healy directs a team of more than 50 to deliver a menu that wouldn't be out of place in Michelin-starred restaurants — think tropical island gastronomy. Indigenous ingredients are presented in dishes such as sea bream sashimi with ponzu, rockmelon and sesame, or handmade fettuccine with crab, chilli, garlic and dill. Finish with a coconut textures dessert and all will be right in the world.

Healy's kitchens are not just a nod to the paddock-to-plate movement, they live and breathe the philosophy, and naturally, an eco conscience narrative runs through them. Kokomo is the first resort in the South Pacific to sign up to the Dock to Dish movement, a growing global initiative that aims to make the seafood supply chain more transparent and traceable. "Instead of going out and killing 50 yellowfin tuna, we go to the local

village. There, we've discovered this old technique where the local women in the village catch these tiny fish and sell it to us in baskets. It's like garfish, and for us, using this garfish is as good as getting a tuna. That fish in a dish is just as tasty, is sustainable and looks after the villagers," says Healy.

The restaurant is stocked by a 2.2-hectare farm that grows most of the produce used at Kokomo. It also has, quite proudly, an apiary. "The bees are a passion project," says Healy. "Like Lang has Kokomo as his passion project, the bees are mine. When I started here, Flow Hive in Australia shipped me 12 hives and I bought 12 live colonies on the barge. Then, between myself, Google and YouTube, we became beekeepers."

The food is more than matched by the wine offering. Food and beverage director Gabrielle Clark visits each table at the beginning of a meal to suggest wine matchings. Arriving to Kokomo from the famed The Little Nell resort in Aspen, Clark brings a passion and knowledge of wine that lifts the ➤



dining experience, which can be further elevated by choosing one of the more adventurous eating destinations. Don't feel like going out? Ask for a private dining experience in-room. Looking for a meal with an even better view? Try dining on the helipad with 360-degree views across the surrounding lagoon. Want to have fun with your food? The Chef's Kitchen has group experiences in a room under the helipad. Here, you can join in a cooking demonstration before tucking into the meals you've created. Again, any experience can be tailored to suit and is done so with a smile and a can-do attitude by the resort staff.

Your introduction to Fiji's famed hospitality starts when you enter the lobby and are greeted by an assembled cast singing a welcome song. Staff are constantly attuned to what guests are doing. Everyone knows who is on the island, and where they are at most times, and also try to anticipate their next wish. Snorkelling after lunch? Sure. Time with the island's personal trainer before breakfast? No problem. Manta rays suddenly turn up, dancing through the water during breakfast? Boats are readied to ferry guests out to see the graceful choreography.

This adaptive experience is also reflected in the available accommodation, with configurations to suit any type of group travelling together. The beachfront villas, which offer one, two or three bedrooms, are perched practically on the sand. The rooms are coloured in a palette of natural nudes, echoing the beauty of the surrounding nature. The villas blend modern luxury and traditional architecture. Soaring roofs made of woven pandanus, cane chairs and traditional art sit alongside rainhead showers, air con and modern kitchens. The residences, with four through to six bedrooms, further up the hill, offer absolute privacy. In all the rooms, Australian artist Chris Kenyon's paintings offer a burst of colour, taking inspiration from the vivid sunsets, lush greenery and pure blue waters, which are impossible to leave undiscovered.

Take a boat ride out to the Great Astrolab reef, where the waters are pristine, the coral plentiful and the sea life spotting exciting. Curious reef sharks take a few passes as we snorkel the coral bommies, dolphins can often be found, along with turtles and, of course, there's the manta rays.

But there's no need to get in a boat to see amazing coral. Simply slip off the jetty or the beach into the clear waters to spot clownfish, sergeant major fish and coral formations from wide fans to brain coral. There's even a coral garden being tended by resident marine biologist Cliona O'Flaherty.

Ways to explore this playground don't stop there. There's an introduction-to-diving course offered for each villa, while those already experienced can just head out. Other drawcards include deep-sea fishing, stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking and hobie cat sailing. The activity list is endless and exhausting just to read. So don't bother. Just ask, and you shall receive. 🍹



FROM TOP
Seafood is a huge part of Fiji's cuisine; a dish from Beach Shack; executive chef on Kokomo Private Island Fiji, Anthony Healy.



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