

KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

TURN OVER A NEW REEF

Restore mind, body and coral on a barefoot luxury escape

JENNIFER ENNION

Kokomo Private Island is a 45-minute seaplane flight from Nadi; be soothed by a beachfront massage; snorkel with marine life.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED, KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

THERE ARE 1300-ODD PIECES OF CORAL IN KOKOMO NURSERY WITH 86 PER CENT SUCCESS RATE

the planting program has an 86 per cent success rate.

KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

Too elated to return to the milk-coloured beach, I set off to explore under Kokomo's jetty. There, I watch large remora dart about the bottom of boats like juvenile sharks. Orange and white anemone fish flutter in and out of their undulating homes, while giant clams sprout from bommies. Later, I spy a green sea turtle glide gracefully underneath me as I paddleboard along the shore's edge.

Stand-up paddleboarding becomes a daily ritual while I'm on the island, as does swimming and snorkelling. Turtles are residents here, coming into the bay daily to feed on the seagrass beds. If you're lucky, you'll spot their round carapaces from the window of the private seaplane or helicopter you'll arrive in from Nadi Airport – or perhaps you'll catch a fever of manta rays or pod of dolphins in the clear waters.

If you want to get up close, book a snorkel or scuba dive at Great Astrolabe Reef, which features a 65km-long continuous section and is a short boat ride from Kokomo.

There are more than 40 divesites, ranging in depth from eight to 30m (beginner to advanced), not far from the resort, plus a discover scuba program for novices.

When, inevitably, it's time to dry off, enjoy the creations of Australian chef Cory Campbell (of Vue De Monde and Noma fame) in the main, open-air restaurant, Beach Shack. Dine on dishes such as snapper with pickled banana blossom and yellow fin tuna with passionfruit flower.

Or you can sign up to a game-fishing charter to an outer reef and reel in a wahoo or mahi mahi and ask the chefs to cook it for you. Spear fishing is also available for guests with experience, while the resort has a "dock-to-dish" program that promotes sustainable fishing practices – that is, catching appropriate species of the legal size during the correct season.

Other green initiatives include a sprawling island farm from which, once established, a large portion of the restaurants' supplies will be sourced; desalinated sea water for

Aimed with a screwdriver, marine biologist Cliona O'Flaherty dives towards a reef that stretches within metres of Kokomo Private Island, Fiji. Holding her breath, she carefully chips off a pinky finger-length fragment from a healthy hard coral. She swims to another clump. Its spines reaching for the rays of light piercing the water. Again, she takes a piece, before moving onto yet another area, all while holding her breath.

I, on the other hand, bob on the surface a couple of metres above, staring through a mask in admiration. Occasionally, I join Cliona for a closer inspection of her work and the bommies (a column-shaped outcrop of coral reef) before my lack of free-diving skills forces me to return to the air.

Cliona joins me time and again to show me the "super coral" she's selected and to hand over her specimens, before she returns to the reef. Despite hailing from Ireland, she's a natural in the underwater world and I am one envious Aussie.

THE GARDEN

With a handful of coral, we tread water as we delicately weave the pieces tightly through a rope, ensuring none will become dislodged by wave swell. We also space them out so they have enough room to blossom during the six to eight months it takes for them to mature.

We've only removed healthy, hardy corals that have proven themselves able to withstand Fiji's hot summer

season (November–April), when water temperatures hover around 31°C and weaker coral species fall victim to bleaching.

Once our garland is complete, Cliona descends five metres to a nursery, where strands sway rhythmically in a gentle current near the ocean floor. It's beautiful in its simplicity; an art installation for ocean lovers.

She places our collection alongside coral that's in various stages of regeneration and later promises to update me on its progress, as if it were an orang-utan whose rehabilitation I was sponsoring in the jungles of Malaysia. It's a sweet touch, and something that excites children who

take part in the kids' club version of the program.

In all honesty, the house reef off Kokomo, in Fiji's remote southern reaches, is nothing special to look at. It's not particularly colourful and there are limited species in comparison to other reefs I've visited. But that's all the more reason the Kokomo Coral Restoration Project is important. Essentially, we're increasing the amount of coral on the house reef by taking small clippings of robust stock colonies, placing them somewhere safe to grow and then transplanting them back into the same environment. Each fragment regrows in a similar fashion to a

succulent cutting and is a basic solution to a worldwide problem.

"Mother Nature's already naturally selecting these corals saying, 'these are my strongest ones, please can we give this a push and helping hand by maximising these being on the reef,'" Cliona tells me later.

"We aim to restore our reefs, of course, but we also want to maximise the number of heat-resistant corals on the reef," she adds.

The project is an insurance policy against bleaching and also gives reefs a better chance at surviving cyclones and other threats, such as the ravenous crown of thorns starfish.

There are now 1300-odd pieces of coral in the Kokomo nursery and

UNDERWATER WORLD**RELAXING MASSAGE**

LUXURY ♦ FIJI

REEF REGENERATION



Kokomo's own kitchen salt; and the use of a Seabin that collects rubbish from the water off the end of the jetty. There is also a Christmas tree-shaped coral garden in the bay that Cliona and colleagues created out of leftover construction materials.

BAREFOOT LUXURY

During my stay, the term "barefoot luxury" is banded around a lot, and rightly so. Although a one-bedroom

beachfront villa will set you back about \$US200 a night, all inclusive, (about \$3610) there is not one hint of pretension here. The vibe is the opposite. Traipse around in a sarong, sans shoes, or your favourite pair of boardies and a much-loved tattered tee and you'll fit right in.

The idea is for guests to feel at home, as if they're on a beach holiday in Australia but with the melodic welcome of "bula" greeting them all



BEACH SHACK

Restoring coral:
open-air Beach
Shack restaurant
PICTURES: SUPPLIED,
NIKKI TO

day long and a mild breeze kissing the shoulders year-round.

To help guests relax into "Fiji time", Kokomo staff encourage you to regularly visit the day spa, a complex of white plantation-style buildings enveloped by verdant palms. There's also daily yoga on the balcony of one of the hilltop luxury residences and on the floating pontoon in front of my villa (upon request).

Although all of this screams six-star

(yes, that's a thing), it's refreshing that Kokomo owner, Australian property developer Lang Walker, has kept families front of mind.

The resort, which opened in 2017, has one- to three-bedroom villas, a shallow lagoon-style pool, a gourmet pizza and ice-cream parlour, a fabulous pirate-themed playground, a nanny service and kids' clubs.

Mini environmentalists can also help Cliona with the Coral

ESCAPE ROUTE

KOKOMO

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct from Sydney to Nadi International Airport, Fiji, four times a week (Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday). The new flights add to Jetstar's direct services, which also operate four times a week. Kokomo Private Island is a 45-minute seaplane or helicopter flight from Nadi, and 25 minutes from Suva.

STAYING THERE

There are 21 beachfront villas at Kokomo Private Island, all with large living areas, kitchenettes, private infinity pools. All meals, non-alcoholic beverages, one spa and dive voucher per villa and butler service included.

MORE

kokomoislandfiji.com, qantas.com

Restoration Project, during which they will visit the nursery via a glass-bottom boat, learn about climate change and take part in planting in shallow water.

It's a fantastic initiative that goes beyond ticking a hotel's sustainability box and is yet another reason to visit Fiji time and again.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND AND QANTAS

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