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How Cliona O’Flaherty gave up her home life for a hidden island paradise

Surrounded by emerald-green waters, tropical fish and white sandy beaches, a snap decision turned this island into Cliona’s home.

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Cliona says she has the best job in the world. Source: Supplied

Surrounded by emerald-green waters, tropical fish and White Sands, Cliona O’Flaherty’s new life on a hidden Fijian island is a far cry from her hometown of Dublin in Ireland.

Growing up in a family of scientists, the 28-year-old always thought her studies in wildlife conservation would have her living in the African wilderness.

But after a short project in Fiji living with inside a small village on ‘Banga Island’, Ms O’Flaherty discovered diving and the untouched world of coral and marine life surrounding her temporary home.

‘I stayed on this island in Fiji for four months, before going home to Dublin again,’ she told news.com.au.

‘But by the time I returned home, I realised I wanted to get more diving experience and commit to being an instructor to teach people about the marine environment while learning to dive at the same time.’



I gave up my home for life on a hidden island. Picture: Instagram Source: Instagram

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After taking up another short contract in shark conservation, Ms O'Flaherty was given the opportunity of a lifetime.

"After working in the shark dive conservation, I wanted to stay but knew this was another short contract," she explained.

"Then, an opportunity for a female dive instructor came up, but I didn't have the three years of experience they were asking for.



Cliona working on the coral farms in Fiji off Kokomo Island. Source: Supplied

"So when I applied for the job on Kokomo Private Island, I told them of my inexperience, but that being entry-level meant they could mould me into their ideal instructor. In exchange, they would let me create conservation initiatives at the resort. They jumped at the idea, and the island is still my home today."

After starting her new role, titled the "Kokomo Coral Restoration Project", Ms O'Flaherty's focus was to create a range of methods that would help to protect the reefs around the island, as well as grow "super coral" which will withstand the increasing water temperatures in the ocean.



Cliona O'Flaherty will often go swimming in the morning with Manta Rays. Source: Instagram

"This lifestyle is very hard to describe, but I am very fortunate," she explained of her role as the island's resident marine biologist.

"All meals are here for us ... we don't live in the villas but the accommodation is very beautiful for us. The quality of life, compared to what I have experienced in other projects ... all I can say is I am very fortunate."

Living what feels like a permanent holiday, Ms O'Flaherty is part of a team of five instructors and one dive master, but the marine department is made up of 22 experts who call the private island home.

"Usually I will start around 8am to go and look for the Manta Rays in the area, as it's their breeding season here at the moment," she explained of a typical day.

"If the rays aren't around, I will hop in the water and check out our 'coral garden' which is part of our restoration project.

"This project focuses on developing coral that can survive an increase in water temperature.

"We are simply giving mother nature a helping hand, because it's a very long process on their own, and we would lose half the reef without the restoration."



She works as part of a marine department on a hidden tropical island in Fiji. Picture: Instagram Source:Instagram

Ciona helps to develop coral that can survive changes in water temperatures. Picture: Instagram Source:Instagram

Last month, the 28-year-old's conservation efforts were recognised when she was awarded the Sustainable Practices Champion award at the prestigious Women in Travel Awards for her contribution to groundbreaking advancements in sustainable practices.

The category recognised her contribution to sustainability in the travel industry, her future ambitions and commitment to sustainable practices.

"It's such an honour to win this award and to be recognised at The Women in Travel Awards for delivering and innovating in an area that I'm so passionate about," she said.



Ciona working on the coral farms in Fiji. Picture: Instagram Source:Instagram

Ms O'Flaherty said the other side of her job was to teach guests at the resort about marine life while taking them on diving expeditions around the island.

"I work every day for six weeks, then I get one week off," she said of her roster.

"Days off I will go to the main land with my partner, go to the beach, do more snorkelling and drink kava.

"People on social media often think I live a giant holiday and don't do any work, but we do a lot. But I often need to take a step back and appreciate where I am and what I am doing.

"Because you never know how long opportunities like this will last."

Source: <https://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-advice/travellers-stories/how-cliona-oflaherty-gave-up-her-home-life-for-a-hidden-island-paradise/>