



gone fishing

In search of cocktails and sand between the toes, **Pat Ingram** found her Pacific island idyll had a lot more to offer.

I am being gently rocked on navy-blue waters, ringed in the distance by the turquoise band of the Great Astrolabe Reef in Fiji. I am day-tripping from the luxurious Kokomo Private Island resort. And not on just any old vessel, but the resort's exquisitely maintained Riviera 4000 fishing boat, named Kahala. But try as I might, I can't quite relax. I'm doing something out of my comfort zone and not exactly on my bucket list.

I'm deep-sea fishing and I'm anxiously watching the long rods attached to the boat's transom in case I actually catch something. Yes! The rod bends straight to the water and with help from captain and record-holding fisherman Jaga Crossingham I'm helping to reel in a 30-kilogram dogtooth tuna. Not much later, I'm taking the not entirely deserved

credit for reeling in a large Spanish mackerel. And I am thrilled to bits with myself – even more so when, a few hours later, both fish appear perfectly prepared on our dinner plates.

That's the thing about Kokomo. It's the epitome of understated luxury, with 21 stunning villas complete with private swimming pools located just steps away from the palm-fringed white sandy beach and backed by 57 hectares of landscaped gardens tended by 50 staff.

Discreetly hidden among all this greenery is the Yaukuve Spa Sanctuary, where choosing from their many treatments is a must-do indulgence. For guests who need a little extra space and privacy, there are also five residences with up to six bedrooms; all have private

infinity pools and stunning views from their elevated settings over the sea.

The day after my fishing excursion I lunch with resident marine biologist Cliona O'Flaherty and another first-time adventure presents itself – swimming with reef manta rays. Smaller than their ocean cousins but still with wingspans of up to four metres, these giants of the sea are super friendly and there's news that a school of them has just returned on one of their biannual migratory visits.

Not a lot is known about reef manta rays and Kokomo has become a partner in the South Pacific Acoustic Manta Tagging Project, designed to study their behaviour. As well as the opportunity to swim with these majestic creatures, resort guests can adopt their own manta ray by contributing to the research efforts.

They can name their ray and receive bimonthly updates on its progress. Sadly, there is not another sighting during my time on the island, so I don't get my play date, but I do get to talk to Cliona about her other great passion – reef regeneration.

She has set up a coral nursery to propagate species that are suited to warmer water. The coral is attached to ropes on a frame and allowed to grow for up to six months before being transplanted to the reef.

This is an activity in which guests are invited to participate, with the hope that 2000 corals will be transplanted this year. Cliona's commitment to the marine ecosystem has just been recognised with a Sustainable Practices Champion going at the prestigious Women in Travel Awards.



Clockwise from opposite page: every villa has its own swimming pool; snorkelling the turquoise waters around Kokomo; rod master Jaga Crossingham hoists the catch of the day; on a clear day, you can see ... another pristine tropical island; clean eating at the Beach Shack.



But finding coral in its natural state and fish to swim with are no great challenge – the waters around the island are teeming with brightly coloured specimens of both, and snorkelling among these marine wonders is as easy as walking across the sand with your snorkel and goggles and falling into the crystal-clear waters outside your villa.

Part of the charm of island life is the sheer indulgence of whiling away time – forgetting plans and simply going with the flow. And Kokomo has perfected that “do what you want, whenever you want” atmosphere. So, after game fishing and coral gardening, the next morning I repair to the spa, an ultra-serene haven where I succumb to my latest treatment addiction, a warmed seashell body massage followed by a “radiance” facial.

Then it's a lazy afternoon cocooned in my beach hammock with a book, lulled by the gentle lapping of the sea.

Until, oops, it's time to think about dinner. There are three restaurants. The main dining pavilion, the Beach Shack, sits on the western beachfront and offers an à la carte daily menu but is just as happy to suggest bespoke options inspired by the produce of the day and then whip them up for you.

Farther along the beach is Walker D' Plank (a cute play on the island owner's name – more on him later), a rather raffishly themed seafaring bar and restaurant with a spectacular ocean view. Here, Fijian chef Caroline Oakley eschews anything as formal as a menu and instead comes up with delicious choices created from whatever is fresh and special on the day. This cheeky little spot

quickly becomes a favourite for the obligatory sunset drink and some pretty special wines from their well-curated list.

Kokomo is also child-friendly, or rather, child-indulgent. The Kids Club boasts a games room and is close to the family-friendly resort pool and family restaurant, Kokocabana, which has a bar serving smoothies, juices and desserts that's open all

day and a wood-fired oven with a build-your-own pizza selection.

As you might expect, all this barefoot luxury and culinary excellence comes at a price – a little over \$3500 a night, though this includes on-island activities such as waterskiing, wakeboarding and kayaking. And the act of getting there is done in style thanks to Kokomo's fleet of seaplanes and helicopters, which depart from Nadi airport for the 45-minute scenic flight.

If the name Kokomo seems familiar, it may be because the resort's owner is Australian property developer Lang Walker, whose long list of boats have all been named Kokomo. He opened the island to the public a couple of years ago, having lavished tens of millions of dollars on perfecting what was already close to perfection. And the result is, well – perfect. •

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