

WHERE FIJI



I JOINED A CORAL SOCIETY

Feeling they are enhancing and not compromising nature creates a buzz that keeps guests returning to these island resorts, writes **Sue Williams**.

Getting back to nature on a remote island doesn't have to mean a Survivor-type struggle against the elements, hunting and gathering to scrape up rudimentary rations and enduring the agony of a digital detox.

Taking time out to be at one with nature, becoming in touch with all it has to offer and giving back to make the world a better place has never been more comfortable, easy or indeed pleasurable.

"Look at the coral reef, for instance," says Jase Kolenski, a marine enthusiast who runs the water sports program on Malolo Island, west of Nadi, one of the 333 islands that make up Fiji. "It can be so amazing for visitors here to see and then so rewarding for them to help bring coral that's been damaged by cyclones or global warming back to life."

"Sometimes you worry there's nothing you can do individually to counter the effects of climate change, but here there are opportunities to make a difference."

On a guided snorkelling tour of the reef, just a paddle into the warm South Pacific off the island's Six Senses Fiji resort, he gestures with pride towards the bright colourful patches of fresh coral glowing against a grey background.

The grey area contains corals battered by Cyclone Winston in 2016 and bleached by rising ocean temperatures; the pinks and blues are those fractured remnants that were taken to an underwater "nursery", nurtured, regrown and planted back, often with guests' help.

"It's a wonderful sight, isn't it?" he says, back on dry land. "And now there's more

hope for the future too with researchers from Melbourne University experimenting with breeding corals that are more resistant to warmer waters."

On the other side of Fiji, a long way south into the ocean, there's a similar program being run on Kokomo Private Island. There, marine biologist Cliona O'Flaherty takes me snorkelling to tie fragments of coral onto a matrix of lines strung out by the jetty so they can recover before being transplanted back into the house reef.

It feels a thrill to be doing something practical and proactive. In three months' time, I, like other guests before me, will receive an email from the program to let me know how well - hopefully - my little baby corals are progressing.

"We have an 86 per cent survival rate and we're seeing the reef where they're being transplanted attracting more of the bigger fish and turtles along to show how healthy the eco-system is now becoming," she says. "It can be so sensitive and fragile, but it's doing very well."

"We're now also talking about mangrove restoration and becoming part of the Manta Trust, conserving and protecting manta rays, which are an endangered and vulnerable species."

Land creatures such as the critically endangered Fijian crested iguana are the focus of other activities. Wandering through the darkened gardens of the Six Senses resort on a night-time walk to find them, I can't imagine there's a chance in hell we'll see a single one.

But our guides suddenly yell and train

their torches onto an emerald green creature balancing on tree branches, another curled up in a bed of leaves and one tiny baby caught mid-motion clambering between two spindly twigs.

My excitement is tempered only by the later sighting of a very big tree snake. But still, coming across three of those rare iguanas is an astonishing result. When the resort was being built, 17 were seen. Now, a year into its operation, there are at least 30 in its green belt preservation zone.

Naturally, keeping their environment pristine is a huge priority, and so resorts are increasingly doing everything they can to ensure their operations are as sustainable as possible.

It is something effortless for guests, but it doesn't fail to add a warm after-glow. After all, we've added to the carbon footprint by flying the four hours to Fiji, so it's great to feel that we're making up for it even if only via our custom.

Tapping into community knowledge and skills to make sure they're conserved is another important feature of sustainability. Basket-weavers, especially if they hail from Balmain, have become a political point in Australia today, but here they're practitioners in a traditional art who command huge respect.

I now know why, too. It took me nearly an hour of sitting on the floor with Mika, a big Fijian who's been weaving baskets from coconut palm fronds since he was four years old, to end up with anything resembling a basket. The fact that it did was all credit to his un-weaving skills, ill-disguised

The Six Senses resort pool, main, and snorkelling around the pristine waters of Malolo Island in Fiji.

