



FLIGHT OF FANCY  
*Kokomo Private Island is  
a playground for high-flyers*





## Out of the blue

*The great and good, from the Stones to the Sussexes, go wild for Fiji's exotic castaway cool. Island-hopping is all part of the fun, so get ready, jet set and go...*

By CLARE CONWAY

**FIJI IS A SIREN'S CALL** TO the world's most powerful pleasure-seekers, luring them to this string of 333 islands bathing in the South Pacific Ocean. Google's sleek silver superyacht *Dragonfly* cuts through the azure waters. Oprah soars in on a private jet. And the Duke and Duchess of Sussex decamp to the islands for downtime (they took a minibreak there during a royal tour last year, when Meghan beguiled the world's press, wearing local frangipani flowers in her hair). On one island, Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood grew competitive and scrambled up the same coconut tree, before Richards slipped,

ricocheted down the trunk and knocked himself out.

Reaching such a remote paradise from the UK, however, takes some effort. Unlike the well-heeled Antipodeans who waft in from Sydney in a mere three hours, British travellers face a bleary-eyed 22-hour trek from London – with a change at L.A. But it's worth it. Fijians embrace a happily hazy pace of life, with their own take on Spain's *mañana* mentality – the languid 'Fiji time'. And you're on Fiji time the minute you land in Nadi and are greeted by a flurry of *bulas* (hellos).

At the Pullman Nadi Bay, a gorgeous new beachfront oasis a short drive from the airport, a restorative, tension-busting massage revives soul and body. A cocktail, a dip in the pool and a nap in the sun banish any lingering jetlag. Once the senses are acclimatised, the islands beckon.

The Yasawas – where Brooke Shields dazzled in the 1980s survival romance *The Blue Lagoon* – are the first stop, a chain of six main islands and a cluster of islets 30 minutes from Nadi by light aircraft. We're heading to Yasawa Island, a 22km-long tropical oasis with 11 beaches and just one tiny resort. Soaring over the water, the plane steadies for landing on a lumpy field carved from the mountain that doubles as a runway.

Yasawa is all about wilderness and simple, laid-back luxury. There's no wi-fi in the rooms, only in the main *bure* (the Fijian word for a thatched hut). The idea is that guests should thoroughly switch off. The 12-hour time difference between Fiji and Britain means you've little option but to smugly turn on your Out of Office anyway.

The pretty wooden *bures* have palm-leaf roofs thatched by island villagers, and are artfully rustic: an old-school fan whirs above the bed and double doors open onto a wooden veranda, leading to a private patch of beach dotted with a couple of sunloungers and a hammock. An outdoor shower, tethered to a coconut tree, adds to >



< the Robinson Crusoe aesthetic. So does the sense of solitude: in this expanse of space there are never more than 40 guests. There's a freshwater swimming pool, a tennis court and a spa on the beach offering couples' massages to the sound of lapping waves. It is so remote that at night the total lack of light pollution means the Milky Way glitters brightly overhead and you can see shooting stars darting across the sky.

The resort's presence on the island is purposefully low-key, the result of years of negotiation with the villagers, and everything has been done to preserve the local way of life. Many of the villagers are involved in some way – they're the chefs, waiters and waitresses, and the boys who bring the day's catch of Spanish mackerel and lobster to sell to the kitchen. On Tuesdays there's a traditional barbecue (*lovo*), at which staff, swaying in grass skirts under trees laden with lanterns, sing so melodiously you can't help but be stirred.

Nor can you fail to feel a thrill as you're whisked by speedboat to a private shore (Honeymooners or Lovers Beach, perhaps) to find a parasol has already been erected, a rug rolled out and pillows plumped, ready for your arrival. Clutching a picnic hamper replete with chilled white wine, sandwiches and pastries, you wade knee-deep through crystal-clear waters to the shore as the boat motors away into the distance. It is the perfect castaway experience: there's not a soul in sight, save a heron, as waves lap the soft white sands. Perfect, blissful solitude.

Island-hopping is all part of the charm of a Fijian adventure, and for many travellers the next stop is the Mamanuca Islands, a volcanic archipelago south of the Yasawas. It's glitzier and buzzier than the Yasawas, with a series of megawatt resorts, like citadels. There's the Six Senses and Castaway Island – and Likuliku Lagoon Resort, where we're staying. Drawing up by speedboat is a bit like entering a luxe version of *Waterworld*. At

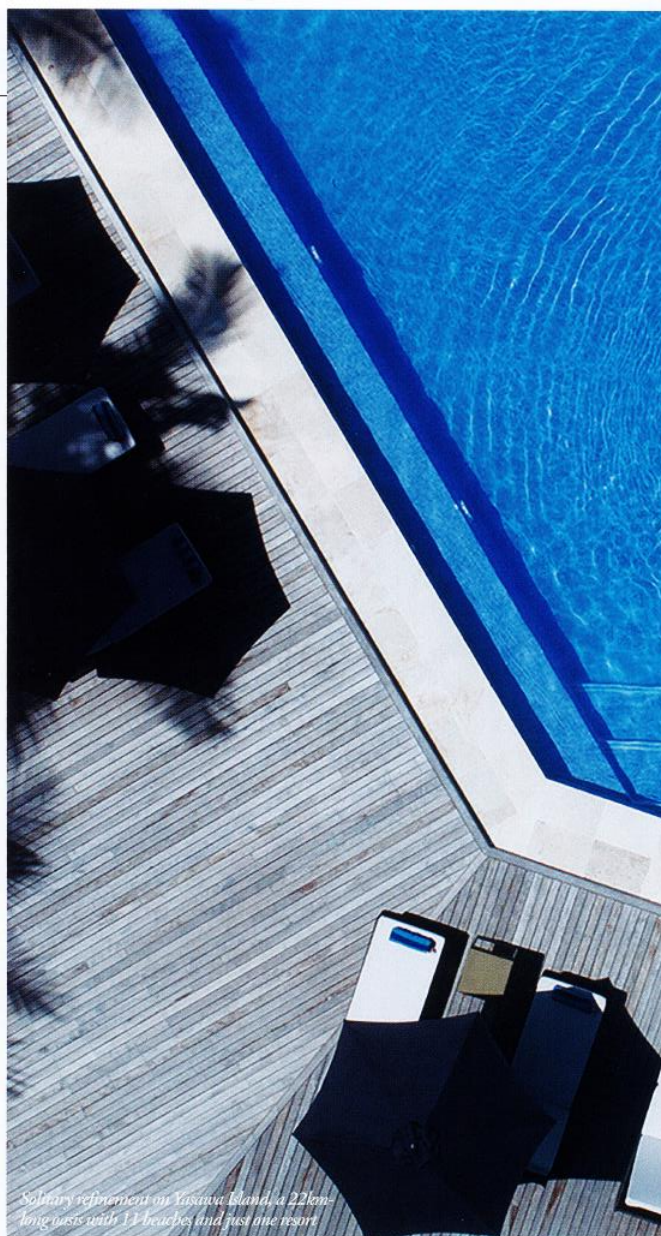
first glance it looks as if the entire resort is on stilts.

A string of overwater *bures* rises out of the sea, curving around the bay. A planked gangway and thatched pagoda form the reception, where the dulcet tones of a guitar waft through the air, accompanied by a chorus of singing staff. (Everywhere you go, you're greeted by music.) Friendly staff extend handshakes. 'Welcome home,' they say, as guests snorkel past below, happily kicking their flippers.

Likuliku is a grown-up paradise. The overwater *bures* are the only ones of their kind in Fiji, all pimped Hollywood glamour and hotly in demand. The decor is sleek – lots of marble, wood and neutrals, so the eye is drawn to the glass panels in the floor, where all manner of sea life passes beneath your feet; ladders lead down into the water for a closer look at the shoals of colourful fish that weave through the reef. There are huts on the land, too, which have private plunge pools and gardens that lead straight to the beach.

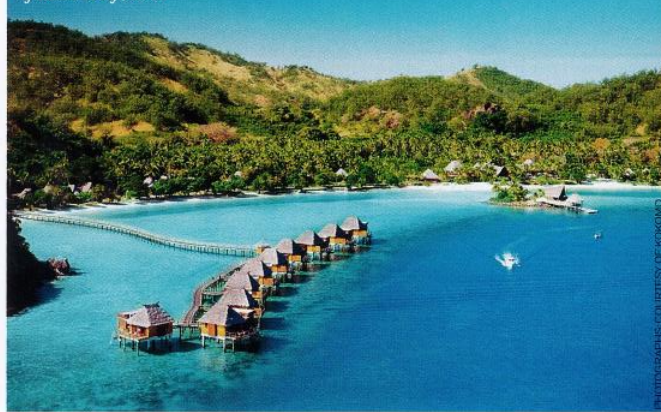
Unlike Yasawa, which caters for families during a few select weeks of the year, Likuliku is completely child-free. All is serene: on Fridays there are cocktail nights, where locals sing and dance and the most delicious canapés are served, from deep-fried chicken to seafood ceviche. The main restaurant, Fijiana, stretches over candlelit decking, and serves an array of steaks, seafood and seasonal vegetables. For breakfast, the Gruyère souffle with truffle is utterly delicious.

Guests are given snorkelling kits to explore the reef. There are also paddleboards, a mini catamaran and scores of day trips, such as a sunrise hike to the top of an island for a breakfast of champagne and fresh fruit. Or you can head to the nearby islet where Tom Hanks filmed *Cast Away*. 'Yes, he was here,' laughs our guide, Sia Rasalato, pointing to the huge message in the sand that reads: 'Help Me'. It has been reconstructed time and again in coconut shells, in tribute to Hanks.

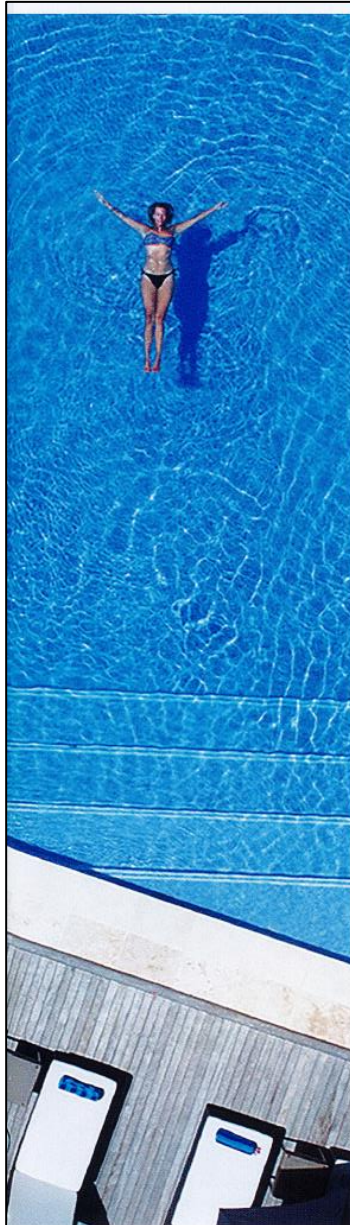


Solitary refinement on Yasawa Island, a 22km-long oasis with 11 beaches and just one resort

Likuliku, a 'grown-up paradise' in the Mamanuca islands. Right, the Duchess of Sussex in Fiji, 2018







Sia, though, is more than the tour guide – he's the resort group's environment manager, a flora and fauna authority devoted to protecting these islands. Because, for all the luxury of Likuliku and the wild beauty of its starfish-strewn white beaches, the magic of the resort lies in its conservation bid.

The Likuliku resort has been bestowed with the official status of a National Geographic Unique Lodge – 'where sustainability meets splendour' – one of only three in the South Pacific (the other two are in Australia). That's because staff here are replanting swathes of dryforest (Fiji's equivalent of rainforest) and nursing an endangered species of iguana back from the brink of extinction.

In fact, the vivid turquoise iguana was thought to be extinct – its last official sighting was in the Eighties. Then, in 2011, a groundskeeper discovered one wounded. Like Keith Richards, it had fallen out of a tree. International scientists, excited by the discovery, high-tailed it to the Mamanucas. From one iguana in 2011, there are now 82 – the culmination of further discoveries and a careful breeding programme that takes place at the resort. A portion of the cost of every guest's stay goes towards the upkeep of the iguana nursery.

The final stop on our island tour is Kokomo Private Island, perhaps the most exclusive spot of all. It is the kind of place where you'll receive an email ahead of your stay asking how firm you like your pillows, your optimum room temperature and which brand of vodka you'd like in your minibar.

Bought in 2011 by the Australian billionaire Lang Walker, who first set eyes on it when he was sailing by in his superyacht, Kokomo is a playground for the jet set, surrounded by the world's fourth-largest reef: the Great Astrolabe. From the beach, in five strokes of front crawl, you can swim up to an underwater jewellery box of vivid coral, to watch sea turtles grazing on the seabed and manta rays gathering en masse.

It's hardly surprising that the resort attracts hedge funders and Hollywood actors alongside scores of doe-eyed honeymooners. You might find Russell Crowe on the beach or Facebook's founding president Sean Parker bobbing in the water. David Gray was flown in for one guest's birthday, performing barefoot on sunlit sands.

Access to the resort is via helicopter or seaplane from Nadi airport. Naturally, Kokomo has its own fleet, in smart navy blue and white, as well as its own mini airport lounge – an oasis of calm in the rough-and-ready departures block of Nadi.

It is a family-friendly place, with clubs for both kids and teenagers on site, so parents can check their children in and unwind comforted by the knowledge that, along with the activities, there's a pool, an ice-cream stand and a wood-fired pizza oven to distract their brood.

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The 21 *bures* all face the ocean and each has its own infinity pool, deckchairs, hammocks and private garden. The aesthetic is sleekly modern. Inside, they feel like luxury apartments, courtesy of polished marble kitchens, lots of light wood furniture and modernist artwork. All this is cleverly blended with traditional island chic: palm-leaf-thatched roofs and vintage ceiling fans.

Five VIP mega 'residences' dotted around the island have their own butler and buggy. But every stay at Kokomo comes with perks, including an introductory scuba dive. Kokomo's ethos is to embody your idea of luxury, with the help of its 300-strong team of staff. Even when the resort is at full capacity, you'll be one of just 130 guests – which makes for unparalleled pampered attention. The team includes Kim, a naturopath who plucks herbs from the island's

five-and-a-half-acre farm and concocts remedies and ointments to help with mood and wellness. Guests can book appointments with her at the spa, set in serene tropical gardens, or find her fruit juices laid out at breakfast, promising vitality and detoxification. (Some contain noni, a pungent native fruit referred to as the blue cheese of the fruit world.)

Much of the food served at Kokomo's restaurants comes from the resort's land – the aim is to be as self-sufficient as possible. The kitchen is overseen by executive chef Cory Campbell (who previously worked at the world-famous Noma in Copenhagen) and full of herbs and vegetables, while hens range freely in the grounds. There's the formal Kokocabana restaurant and the relaxed beach chic of Walker d'Plank, which serves up Asian fusion dishes and plenty of seafood.

On sunny days the world is your oyster. There's a beach hut where you can borrow watersports kit, snorkels, kayaks and paddleboards, and even a pontoon in the sea where yoga classes are held on perfectly calm days. But out of nowhere, struck by a torrent of rain, we found ourselves having to take cover indoors, kicking back with rosé and watching the world go by. Outside on a flooded path I spotted a Valentino insole being carried forlornly downstream. Then the rain stopped, the skies brightened, and we emerged into the sun. As the Fijians will tell you, all in good time. □

*Turquoise Holidays can organise an eight-day Fijian adventure, staying at Yasawa Island Resort & Spa, the Likuliku Lagoon Resort and Kokomo Private Island, from £8,800pp, room only, including international flights and all transfers (turquoiseholidays.co.uk).*