

delicious.

Fresh START

TURN OVER A NEW
LEAF, WITH SUPER
SALADS & MORE!

+ SUMMER
PUNCH BOWLS

+ 5-MINUTE
BBQ DINNERS

+ A FOOD TOUR
OF TASMANIA

+ NO-CHURN
BERRY ICE CREAM

A sweet taste
of the season

Strawberry YOGHURT CHEESECAKE

+ TRAVEL TO THAILAND,
FIJI AND NOOSA!

\$9.99 (INC. GST) NZ \$9.99 (INC. GST)



Ferry MAI
Classic Vietnamese
recipes with a twist



**Yotam
OTTOLENGHI**
Pomegranate granita



**Colin
FASSNIDGE**
Charcoal choo

Travel

+ LUXURY



Take it slow
in Kokomo
(page 114)

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES VODICKA

Discover... PERFECT PARADISE IN FIJI | THE LATEST TRAVEL NEWS | 48 FOOD-FILLED HOURS IN NOOSA |
AN OUTBACK CULINARY ADVENTURE | SWITCH OFF AT CHIVA-SOM HUA HIN | SKI, STAY AND DINE IN PARK CITY, UTAH

GLOBAL

KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

SUNNY BY NATURE

There are tropical resorts and then there's Fiji's Kokomo Private Island, a paragon of sophistication, seclusion and sunshiny optimism in the South Pacific. A stream of thoughtful updates and culinary tweaks have made it dreamier than ever.

WORDS *Kerrie McCallum* PHOTOGRAPHY *James Vodicka*



Kokomo's Wine Cellar offers international wine tastings paired with fresh produce and local seafood.

GLOBAL.

The seaplane bobs in the air, weaving through wispy clouds, ascending over a tangle of jungle and drifting along the long coral shelf of the Great Astrolabe Reef. The 45-minute flight from Nadi to Kokomo Private Island Resort in Fiji is undeniably cinematic, but it's merely a hint of the beguiling beauty to come. Here, on a 57-hectare isle, is one of the jewels of the South Pacific. Kokomo marries ultra-luxe seclusion with rare immersion in the local culture.

This would be my second visit to the retreat. The first, in late 2018, left a lasting impression on me and my family. From its dapper design to the effusive service and blissful setting, everything felt intimate, earthy and meticulously curated. Back then, it was as though I'd been welcomed into owner Lang Walker's magnificent home and handed the keys. On this transfer flight, from a smart new private terminal, a question formed in my mind: can you improve on paradise?

It turns out you can. Walker and his team devoted the pandemic slowdown to tweaking, updating and reconfiguring the place before reopening to guests in December 2021. It may be the only Fijian property that retained its entire staff during that period, rotating team members through departments to support construction, maintenance and farming initiatives. While some resorts are gradually finding their feet again, Kokomo was running like a finely tuned machine on my stay over Easter. Repeat guests would notice

subtle upgrades: revitalised digs, new restaurants, advanced sustainability programs and enhanced experiences, including an ambitious food and wine offering. To elevate Kokomo even further, Walker tapped several talented collaborators, Sydney-based chef Ross Lusted and architect Rod Faucheux of Loopcreative among them, and made new appointments, including general manager Sean Flakelar. This is Kokomo: the sequel.

Lusted has known Walker for a decade. Few are aware the celebrated chef, who helms Woodcut restaurant at Crown Sydney with his wife, Sunny, moonlights as a hotel consultant. A former general manager for Aman Resorts who spent time overseeing 15 high-end properties around the globe, Lusted has vast experience in luxury hotel development, refined taste and an eagle eye.

"I didn't cook for 10 years," he says. Instead, he excelled at a different kind of recipe. Last year, Walker invited Lusted to Kokomo for a week.

"We flew up in Lang's plane, and talked about what we could improve," he says. "There was a lot they were doing right, but I felt there was an opportunity to capture a market or a demographic that wanted different experiences, or to deeply explore the destination and Fijian culture."

Lusted informed the changes to Kokomo's dining options, with three venues that take advantage of the exquisite surrounds: Beach Shack, Beach Grill and Beach Bar, each with its own menu and ambience. My kids love rolling off the beach for a burger at the grill, but the menu extends to more





“The chef *melds* Fijian, Japanese and subcontinental flavours to create light, *FRAGRANT* curries and fresh twists on favourites like tonkatsu.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Caroline Oakley, Head Chef of Walker D’Plank; Walker D’Plank restaurant and bar; Oakley tailors dishes based on guests’ preferences, and the best seasonal produce **OPPOSITE:** Kick back with a book on a beach pontoon

sophisticated fare, such as crab pasta. The bar, meanwhile, offers a breezy social hub.

“We thought about creating an environment where people could mingle,” Lusted says. “I told Lang, ‘I think you should cut a hole in the floor right here to make a sunken bar.’ The next morning I moved the furniture and mapped it out to see if it could fit. Lang was like, ‘Okay, let’s cut it out now.’ He had the builder ready then and there,” Lusted laughs. “Lang goes at a million miles an hour. He could visualise it very quickly.”

The pair engaged Fauchaux, the designer who worked on Woodcut and on Melbourne’s Collins Square with Walker, to execute the new additions. The sunken bar is a stroke of genius. It fits seamlessly, making canny use of the space, while comfortable couches create a beachfront chill-out zone that attracts guests at any time of day. A wine cellar has been uncorked, too. Formerly the reception desk, it’s now a handsomely designed space, complete with a cigar menu and tables and chairs for tastings. In front of the cellar is a “map room-cum-library” inspired by Lusted’s time at Amanvara in Turks and Caicos Islands. “We’ve hung some old Fijian maps so guests can get a sense of where they

GLOBAL.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The daily changing menus offer fresh, light dishes heavy on flavour; each of the resort's villas comes with its own infinity pool; villa decor combines contemporary design with traditional Fijian nuances **OPPOSITE:** The Beach Bar offers a selection of mocktails and cocktails

are, and where they may be going on a fishing or diving expedition," he says. There are books, games and deep leather seats to relax in, as well.

After realising Walker's plans, Lusted passed the baton to Flakelar over lunch at Woodcut. Flakelar had recently completed a 27-year tenure with Aman Resorts in Southeast Asia, with stints in Indonesia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka, but before that he was a chef in Sydney, too.

"I worked with Stefano Manfredi, and at Darley Street Thai in Newtown with David Thompson, and Blue Water Grill before Neil Perry arrived," Flakelar says. Given his dual experience, he's brimming with ideas on calibrating Kokomo's culinary ethos. "We have permission to farm mud crabs in the mangroves here, as lobsters are a bit scarce in Fiji," he explains. "Guests can participate in the process, learn about the mangroves and the farming aspect. Then they can eat the mud crabs or join a cooking class."

The resort has a sustainable fishing initiative called 'dock to dish' in which guests can eat their catch for dinner. "Everything is line-caught and we're rigorous about not overfishing," Flakelar says. Walker D'Plank, the island's enchanting treehouse restaurant run by Fijian chef Caroline Oakley, has been extended and now seats 100 diners (not that there would ever be that many in attendance). Oakley's zero-waste, no-menu approach has long been popular with guests. Now she has more room to experiment.

"We work with what's fresh and we use it all," she says. That means sushi, sashimi, ceviche and grilled skewers. The chef melds Fijian, Japanese and subcontinental flavours (her grandfather is Sri Lankan) to create light, fragrant curries and fresh twists on favourites like tonkatsu. In a sweet moment, she remembers us from our last visit.

Next on the agenda is a roster of high-profile chef takeovers. Flakelar is presently finalising dates for a slew of Australian chefs to headline at Kokomo in the year ahead.

"We'll invite leading talent to come over for a week, even top winemakers, and create a line-up of events for guests," he says.

He plans to host private tastings in the wood-panelled cellar, stocked with Bolivar cigars, bottles of Châteaux Margaux and a notable collection of Bordeaux whites. Private meals for up to 10 can be booked with head sommelier Kelly Schaefer (formerly of Tokyo American Club) and budding local Fijian sommelier Lily Pumae. Or the resort can stage



elaborate feasts in your suite. At Kokomo, there are five expansive residences and 21 spacious villas to choose from.

Elegantly decorated, each is decked out with tropical woods, woven matting and its own infinity pool. Walker has also green-lit a refresh of the island's farm, where guests can tour, pick, cook and dine together in the vanilla grove.

"The farm was stripped by a cyclone in 2020, and it's taken a long time to regenerate," says Flakelar. I'm interested to see how it has progressed since my last visit. We weave through planter boxes flourishing with every kind of herb and vegetable imaginable, from basil, dill and chives to brassicas and spring onions. Kokomo even makes its own salt, and four working beehives were rebuilt after the cyclone. The old nursery will soon be transformed with induction cooktops and a vast outdoor area for classes, lunches and all kinds of revelry. Pasta-making sessions are on the schedule, and Thai cooking lessons, too, given all the lemongrass, galangal, ginger, turmeric and chillies growing nearby. Papaya, pineapples and bananas are abundant, passionfruit vines are heaving and bougainvillea will be blooming within months.

We also visit the waste-processing facility, where every bottle, package and scrap from the island is recycled or repurposed. The team wastes as little as possible in its goal for a closed-loop system. The sustainability program at Kokomo extends to sea foraging, a clam nursery and marine conservation, including coral restoration and turtle preservation. Guests can participate in the Kokomo Manta Conservation Project, which involves tagging,



FROM TOP: Snorkel your way through the wonders of the Great Astrolabe Reef; the island's farm is once again flourishing after being wiped out by a cyclone in 2020

“The *appeal* of Kokomo is that there’s plenty to do, or you can do nothing at all. It’s *IMPOSSIBLE* not to relax.”



COMING SOON

Acclaimed Aussie chef David Moyle will be taking up residency at Kokomo in 2023, at a soon-to-be-announced date. Sign up to the Kokomo newsletter at kokomoislandfiji.com to stay up to date with this and other exciting culinary collaborations.

identifying and diving with these majestic creatures. The team also keeps a database of rays, turtles and reef sharks that they spot on diving excursions. The snorkelling here is world-class, with sherbet-coloured coral resembling towers of vivid pastel macarons, and the island’s marine biologists, Cliona O’Flaherty and Vivian Taubera, lead daily tours of the two coral nurseries. While diving and fishing are standout activities, Flakelar has extended the roster to cater to multi-generational groups – from private island picnics to the Kaji Club for kids. The latter has lemon and lime interiors and a menu including freshly made pizza, gelato, popcorn and fairy floss. On any given day you’ll stumble across a teen survivor challenge, regattas or volleyball competitions. Surfing is the biggest surprise. While faraway breaks such as Cloudbreak and Namotu are well known, Fiji’s outer reefs are also exceptional.

Swell conditions are ideal one morning, and our family heads out early to Naiqoro Passage with Luke Caldwell, the Walker’s long-term boat captain, and Fijian instructors Lesi and Mateo. It’s not for the faint-hearted, and my clan of hardy surfers is impressed. They ride for hours as large, glassy sets roll in.

“Things can get pretty gnarly, but November to April is good,” says Flakelar, a keen surfer himself. He’s enthusiastic about building the surfing profile of Kokomo – the resort offers surfing programs, as well as boats, boards and guides who can provide access to several lesser-known breaks. There are also plans to expand the resort’s wellness offering; this year will see new yoga classes and sleep, nutrition and fitness programs. Sodashi skincare products from Western Australia are a strong addition to the resort’s spa, and a new magnesium mineral bath is coming mid-year, for those seeking extra pampering.

The appeal of Kokomo is that there’s plenty to do, or you can do nothing at all. It’s impossible not to relax, and these new, enchanting updates have only enhanced something that already seemed perfect.

DELICIOUS.COM.AU/TRAVEL

For more dreamworthy international destination inspiration.



Bucket List —Ritz-Carlton Yachts

The Ritz-Carlton has launched the first of three lavish, custom-built yachts – *Evrima*. The luxurious 190m yacht can accommodate up to 298 guests. Each of the 149 spacious suites boasts its own private terrace, and there’s a sushi bar, spa, sauna and steam room, infinity pool and fitness studio on board. *Evrima* will visit the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Central and South America. ritzcarltonyachtcollection.com



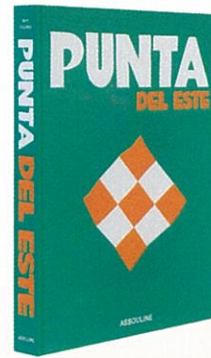
JUST OPENED – THE PENINSULA ISTANBUL

A new era of luxury comes to Türkiye. The Peninsula Istanbul boasts 177 rooms and suites across four waterfront buildings. There’s a myriad of dining options, but the highlight is the rooftop restaurant and bar that offers sweeping views of the Bosphorus. For those looking to unwind, the spa includes an opulent Turkish bath and 25m indoor swimming pool, or head outdoors to the infinity pool and private cabanas. peninsula.com



ISLAND TIME

Following the devastation of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019/2020, it’s nice to see some good news coming out of South Australia’s Kangaroo Island. Wander has unveiled a suite of four new solar-powered luxury eco pods on the ridge above Middle River. All offer unbeatable views of the Great Australian Bight. wander.com.au



MUST READ

Assouline has just released its latest lush travel book centred around the South American beach resort of Punta Del Este, off the coast of Uruguay. The guide covers towns that boast luxury resorts, unmatched surf spots, incredible cuisine and stunning beaches. Your coffee table will thank you for this one. assouline.com

DELICIOUS.COM.AU/TRAVEL
Go online for more travel news from Australia and around the world.