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# THE ISLAND THAT RUINED ME

A private Fijian island that redefines paradise, spoils other resorts, and makes you wonder if real life should feel this good.

Words **JACK SLADE** Photos **ELISE HASSEY**





Clockwise, from below: Kokomo's private seaplane; vibrant sea life; beachfront villas; fresh seafood; and the resort's casual restaurant and bar, Walker D'Plank.



**THREE DAYS AT KOKOMO** and I finally understand why people become obsessed with places. Not just fond of them, or nostalgic about them, but properly obsessed in the way that makes you bore dinner party guests with endless stories about “this incredible place in Fiji”. The kind of obsession that has you calculating how often you can afford to come back before you’ve even left.

The seaplane descent into Kokomo is pure theatre. Forty-five minutes from Nadi, skimming over water that looks like someone has been experimenting with Photoshop’s saturation settings, the pilot banks towards what appears to be a postcard that’s escaped into reality. Below, a private island sits in the middle of the Pacific like it’s been waiting specifically for your arrival.

The island’s backstory reads like a mid-life crisis in an eccentric billionaire’s autobiography. The late Australian property developer Lang Walker passed by the island on his superyacht (also called Kokomo, because when you’re worth a couple of billion, you get to name multiple things after the same Beach Boys song). He found the world’s fourth-largest barrier reef, some of the planet’s best diving, and the shell of a luxury resort abandoned by a previous developer after Fiji’s 2006 coup.

Most sensible people would have sailed away. Walker bought the island.

What followed was an eight-year passion project that involved Walker and his wife Sue sailing around Europe each year, returning with “500 photos of ideas” they wanted to incorporate into their Fijian fever dream. The resort, which opened in 2017, is the product of unlimited resources and a relentless pursuit of perfection.

Three days after my arrival, I understood why Walker had been so smitten. Kokomo hadn’t just ruined me for other resorts; it had fundamentally altered my understanding of what money could create when applied with genuine care rather than mere ostentation.

The education began the moment we stepped off the seaplane. One of the resort staff appeared on the jetty as if she’d been waiting her entire life for us to arrive. She knew our daughter’s name before introductions, casually mentioned our villa upgrade because “the sunrise views from Villa 12 are just perfect this time of year”, and somehow made the entire welcome process feel like a reunion with friends you didn’t know you had.

Our two-bedroom villa turned out to be architectural therapy. The kind of space that makes you realise your own home is basically a series of compromises you’ve learned to live with. Floor-to-ceiling windows that made the distinction between inside and outside seem like a bureaucratic inconvenience and a private pool that appeared to be arguing with the Pacific about territorial boundaries.

I’d arrived on the island with the standard parental anxiety that accompanies any holiday with a one-year-old: mental calculations involving stroller logistics, nap schedules, and the ever-present threat of public meltdowns. Our nanny for the stay took one look at our daughter and smiled. Within an hour, she had our daughter giggling in ways that made my wife and me exchange those looks parents share when they realise someone actually knows what they’re doing.

This liberation allowed us to discover Kokomo’s true talent: making extraordinary experiences feel completely ordinary.

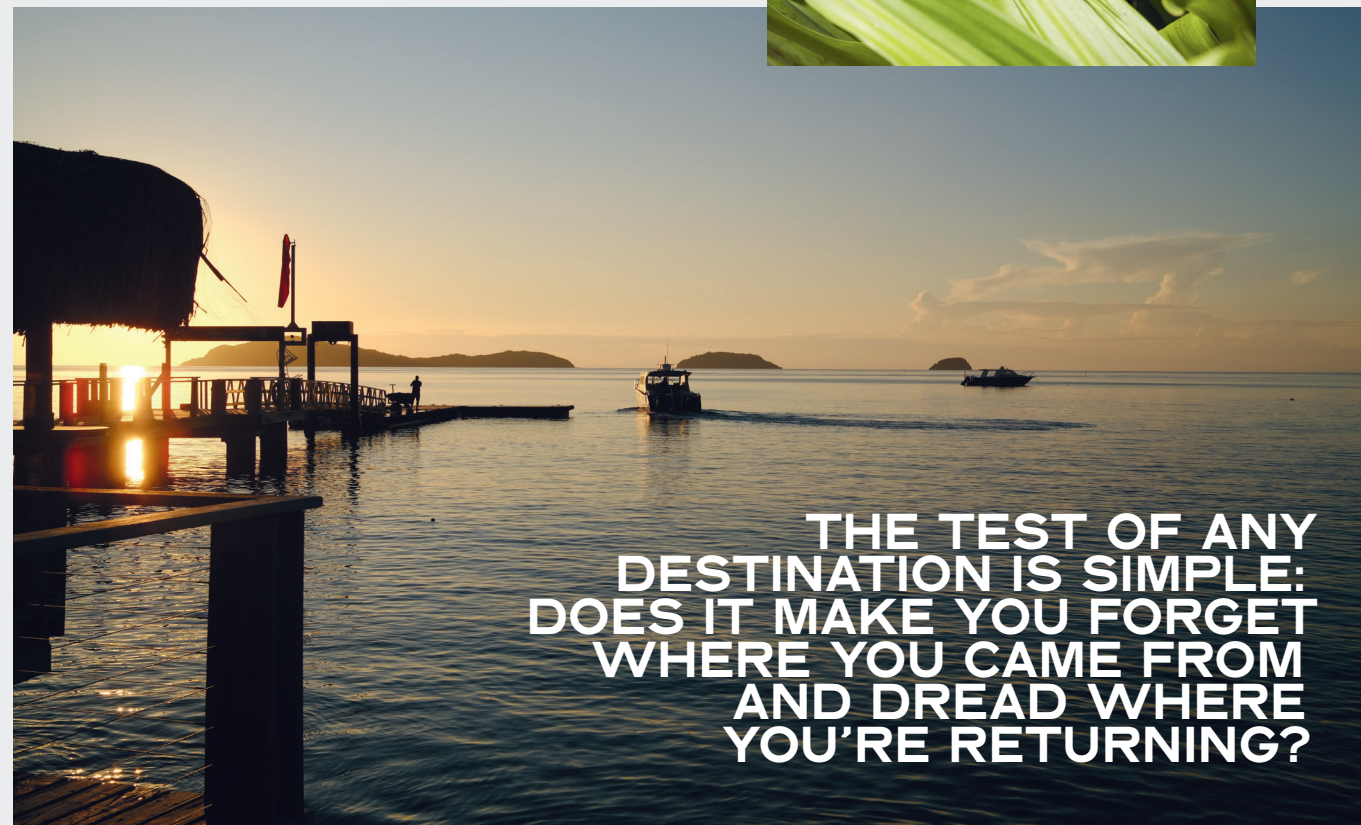
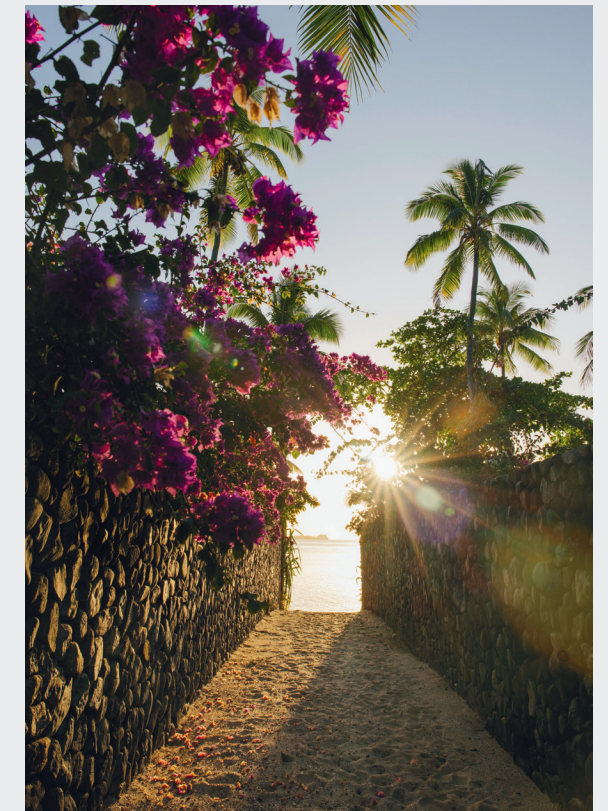
**FORTY-FIVE MINUTES FROM NADI, THE PILOT BANKS TOWARDS WHAT APPEARS TO BE A POSTCARD THAT’S ESCAPED INTO REALITY.**







Clockwise, from left:  
The villa's neutral  
interiors; a wooden  
sculpture; the perfect  
spot for sundowners;  
and the island's jetty.



**THE TEST OF ANY  
DESTINATION IS SIMPLE:  
DOES IT MAKE YOU FORGET  
WHERE YOU CAME FROM  
AND DREAD WHERE  
YOU'RE RETURNING?**

Want to swim with manta rays the size of small aircraft? The marine team treats this like a reasonable Tuesday-morning activity. Never sailed before but curious about those Hobie Cats lounging on the beach? Someone appears to teach you the basics. By sunset, you're tacking across the lagoon wondering why you've wasted so much of your life not sailing.

Then there's the food. The island's Head Chef Andy Bryant – ex-Hinchcliff House, Supernormal, and Jackalope – delivers a level of cooking that you just don't expect in Fiji (or at any resort for that matter). Not just good-for-an-island good, but world-class in its restraint and clarity. The fact that it happens in the middle of the Pacific feels slightly outrageous.

One night, after a passing comment from my wife to our buggy driver (you get around in golf-carts on Kokomo) about ice cream, someone knocked on our villa door. Not harried room service, but a smiling staffer delivering gelato with the kind of Fijian hospitality you know and love. At Kokomo, they've perfected the art of moving before you even know you want them to. It's hospitality as mind reading, and it's almost unsettling how good they are at it.

This pattern repeated throughout our stay. The resort had somehow cultivated a culture where “yes” was the reflexive response to any request, regardless of complexity. Want to tour the on-site farm where they grow much of the kitchen's produce? “Come this way”. Fancy trying deep-sea fishing despite having no relevant experience? A boat appears at the dock.

The activity menu reads like a catalogue of everything humans have ever wanted to do on a beach holiday. World-class diving and snorkelling sites minutes from shore. Tennis or pickleball courts for those who like a hit. Spa treatments for the professionally relaxed and surf breaks for the aquatically adventurous. The genius of Kokomo's approach is making all these options feel like natural extensions of island life rather than resort amenities approved by accountants.

What separates Kokomo from its competitors is its ability to simultaneously cater to different types of traveller with no fuss. Couples find romance in sunset boat trips and private beach dinners. Families discover that children are genuinely welcomed rather than tolerated. Groups of friends can commandeer the larger residences (up to six bedrooms) and create their own private kingdom.

For someone who's been to a few fancy resorts, the test of any destination is simple: does it make you forget where you came from and dread where you're returning? Kokomo passed this test so thoroughly that by night two I found myself calculating how long we could afford to stay before our credit card got rejected.

The financial reality begins at around US\$2,500 per night for villa accommodation with a three-night minimum. The all-inclusive rate covers meals, non-alcoholic beverages, and plenty of – but not all – activities, with alcohol and motorised experiences incurring additional charges. It's not cheap, nor is the US\$1,450 per-person air transfer, but it's a cost that I'd have no problem rationalising against the alternative: spending equivalent amounts across multiple destinations trying to replicate what Kokomo delivers in one place.

This is the peculiar curse of perfection: once experienced, everything else feels like a compromise. Kokomo didn't just exceed my expectations; it revealed expectations I didn't know I possessed and then surpassed them all.

In a world increasingly short on genuine surprises, Kokomo manages the radical achievement of being exactly as extraordinary as it appears. Sometimes more so. Lang Walker died last year, aged 78, but his vision lives on in every perfect sunset, every impossible request fulfilled, every moment you catch yourself wondering if this is actually real life.

The answer, incidentally, is yes. Though you might never be quite the same afterwards.