

A tender TOUCH

Fiji's Kokomo Private Island is the place Anna Mowbray and Ali Williams chose for their destination wedding.

Fiji's Kokomo Private Island is a billionaire's family getaway where everyone is invited to relax, writes **Stephanie Holmes**

It's fitting that multimillionaire Anna Mowbray chose Kokomo Private Island for her wedding to former All Black Ali Williams.

A strong, enterprising woman who worked hard to achieve her goals, she would have felt right at home at Kokomo. The exclusive luxury resort has a solid track record of women striving to achieve their goals.

Like Lily Puamau, the 27-year-old junior sommelier who is on track to become Fiji's first ever level-three qualified sommelier, with exams due in November. She started at Kokomo in the housekeeping team but has pursued her passion for hospitality, training under the supervision of South African head sommelier Stephen Swaneopoel.

Holly, a 30-year-old Taranaki expat, has recently become the island's resort manager, an unusual achievement based on both age and gender. She's arrived at Kokomo from her last post at Hayman Island in Australia's Whitsundays, and it's her first time in Fiji, but she's already feeling right at home.

And then there's Viviana and another Lily, the all-female, all-Fijian marine biology team, entrusted with the care, sustainability and regeneration of the vital coral reefs surrounding the 57ha private island.

Kokomo was established in 2017 by Australian billionaire property developer Lang Walker, who died in January 2024 aged 76. Although Walker Corporation, the business he founded with his father, Alec, in 1964, has been behind some of Australia's biggest redevelopment projects, he had never ventured into luxury tourism and hospitality.

But sailing through the Fijian islands on his yacht — also named Kokomo — he heard Yakuve was up for sale. A former resort project had been abandoned, presenting the perfect opportunity for Walker Corp to diversify.

Taking ownership of the island on a 99-year lease, Walker's aim was to establish a luxurious base where he and



Walker D'Plank restaurant offers barefoot dining over crystal waters.

his family could come to relax and enjoy quality time together. And that's just what he created with Kokomo.

The six-star resort is the perfect place for families to experience a break from the stresses and strains of everyday life. With space for just 120 guests, even when the resort is full it still feels like a private, personal paradise.

Accommodation comprises 21 one-, two- and three-bedroom beachfront villas, as well as five private hilltop residences with up to six bedrooms. It's the ideal spot for intergenerational groups to holiday together to celebrate milestone birthdays . . . or multimillionaire weddings.

Of course, it's relatively rare for a group to book out the whole island like Anna and Ali did in August 2024. But — as well as the accomplished women on staff — it's obvious why the couple chose Kokomo for their nuptials.

The grounds are immaculate, with lush palms, brightly coloured flowers, tropical

trees, and verdant lawns. Service is exceptional — from the traditional welcome songs on arrival to the personalised attention to details — and instils the confidence that nothing will be too much trouble.

This hospitality begins just a seven-minute drive from Nadi airport at Kokomo's air-conditioned transit lounge, where you'll await your helicopter or seaplane transfer to the island. Champagne, tropical fruit, cheese and charcuterie platters, freshly baked cookies and barista coffee are all on offer, as is complimentary Wi-Fi, so you can clear the decks of emails and work commitments before you arrive on the island and fully switch off.

And switch off you should, because there is more than enough to keep you entertained and active during your stay.

Choose from stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking, sailing, island hikes, fitness bootcamps, fishing and surfing trips. Play

a game of tennis, pickleball or basketball, or wind down at the yoga shala with a class guided by resident instructor Luke.

Perched halfway up the island's highest point, the shala is an open-sided pavilion with views out to the ocean and the neighbouring islands.

Those travelling with children can make use of the kids or teens clubs but, be warned, your offspring are going to be bereft when they have to say goodbye to their Fijian nannies. They'll dote on your kids, sometimes even more than you do.

Viviana and Lily started their Kokomo careers as nannies, although both had graduated as marine biologists from universities in Suva. When the resort's Irish former marine biologist left, Viviana and Lily stepped in.

It's rare to have locals working in these roles. In my many travels to Fiji over the past 20 years, I've only ever come across expat marine teams — English, Irish, Australian, French. And while I certainly couldn't fault their expertise, being guided by indigenous women adds another level of depth to Kokomo's water-based activities.

Lily and Viviana have a passion for preserving the natural beauty for future generations. They embody the Bula spirit — vibrant, warm, funny and passionate about showing guests the best of their country.

I head out with them on one of Kokomo's signature seasonal activities — snorkelling with manta rays.

There are about 500 mantas in Fiji. Viv tells me they have tracked 250 of them in the waters around Kokomo.

The island is situated in the Great Astrolabe Reef, one of the world's largest barrier reefs, where the waters are pristine and the snorkelling and diving exceptional.

Mantas swim through the channels here year-round but are most likely to be seen between May and November, when they pause at the reef's cleaning stations.

"If we don't see any, we have to leave Viv behind in the ocean," Lily jokes, as we



Kokomo's floating pontoon provides a perfect platform for family water adventures; left, the marine team monitor coral nurseries as part of sustainability initiatives; above, divers encounter graceful manta rays in Kokomo's pristine reef waters; below, the luxurious bathroom has a marble tub opening to tropical garden views; Asian-fusion cuisine at Walker D'Plank showcases fresh local ingredients daily.



wait on the dock for the resort's shiny new speedboat, Nautilus.

They're taking turns to get in the water this morning — for them, it's winter and they're feeling the cold . . . all 24C of it.

The water is incredibly choppy and I inhale sea through my snorkel every time a wave breaks over my head. The visibility isn't great, and I'm starting to think we won't see anything, when Viv points in front of us. Through the haze a shadow appears, getting clearer as it gets closer — a manta ray, soaring through the shallows.

Mantas can reach sizes of up to 5m wide and I'd expected to feel scared if one crossed my path. But the three we see glide gracefully past, their wings beating as if in slow motion, as elegant as if they're floating on air.

As we return to the island, Viv and I hop out of the boat again to view the coral garden nurseries, just off the jetty. One of Kokomo's key sustainability projects is regenerating the reef around the island, and they're already seeing excellent results.

I see them for myself when I go for a self-guided snorkel off the beach in front of my villa. The tide is low and I'm not expecting to see much in such shallow water, but to my delight, there's an abundant aquarium just metres from my bed.

I spend an age in the water, face down, bum up, transfixed by the diversity of fish and vivid coral, stopping only when my stomach starts to rumble.

I don't have to go far to sate my appetite. There are three restaurants on the island, with food and non-alcoholic drinks included in the cost of your holiday.

Fiji isn't always thought of as a gourmet getaway but at Kokomo, the dining is exceptional.

Executive chef Andy Bryant has worked in some of Australia's best kitchens, including Supernormal in Melbourne, Hinchcliff House in Sydney, and luxury winery resort Jackalope on the

Mornington Peninsula.

He's at the helm of The Beach Shack, the resort's main restaurant, serving three meals a day, and regular barbecue or curry theme nights.

Kokocabana is an Italian poolside bar and restaurant, where Naples-expat head chef Enzo Maione cooks wood-fired pizzas, pastas and indulgent small plates.

For a casual, Asian fusion feast accompanied by cocktails and relaxed, barefoot dining, Walker D'Plank — named in a nod to Lang Walker — sits on a wooden boardwalk over the ocean.



It's a charming and casual spot, with wooden chairs in distressed paint shades of duck egg blue and baby pink; buoys strung from the trees, a ramshackle tin roof, and no official menu — guests can choose from whatever head chef Caroline

Oakley and her team are making with the ingredients available on the day. I choose a dinner of sushi to start, followed by a prawn curry, and irresistible millefeuille for dessert. The sea laps under the boardwalk as I eat, while baby reef sharks patrol the waters.

Dinners can also be delivered to your villa or, for special occasions, under a canopy strewn with fairy lights on the beach.

Much of the fresh vegetable produce on the menus is grown on the island's terraced 2ha farm on the hill. I take a tour with Andy and check out the free-range chickens, hydroponically grown leafy greens, beehives, towering banana palms, and bushes of innocuous-looking chillies that will blow your taste buds away.

Getting anywhere on the island is easy — staff get around on golf buggies and are always more than happy to shuttle you back and forth between restaurants, activities and villas.

But on my last day, I opt to stay put in my villa for as long as possible. Why would I want to leave? It's a beautifully appointed sanctuary with a footprint bigger than your average Kiwi home.

My one-bedroom villa is perfectly set up with everything I could possibly want or need,

including comfortable living area, kitchenette with Nespresso machine and bar fridge, daily replenished snacks such as housemade cookies and chocolate-dipped honeycomb, and a luxuriant bedroom with views out to the private plunge pool, the beach, and neighbouring islands.



Soaring peaked ceilings are in the traditional Fijian style with wooden ballasts secured with coconut-husk twine.

An open-plan room to the left of the bed has a huge sunken marble bathtub with French doors at the head and foot. Open them fully and feel like you're bathing outside.

There's also a private outdoor courtyard shower, and a garden with large daybeds, sunloungers and a hammock.

Take a dip in your private plunge pool, or take a few steps to immerse yourself in the ocean.

Each villa also includes helpful touches such as mosquito repellent coils and spray, a wicker beach bag, and complimentary laundry service. Every thoughtful detail combines to become absolute heaven.

My stay is only three nights but it's long enough — and luxurious enough — for me to leave feeling well and truly wound down and ready to face a new week back at work.

As my helicopter transfer lifts gently off from the island's hilltop helipad, the pilot takes a fly-by over my beachfront villa before buzzing out to sea.

A humpback whale breaches just past the reef's drop-off — a magical salute to end a magnificent stay.

NEED TO KNOW

● A three-night stay in a one-bedroom villa at Kokomo Private Island costs from US\$2500 (\$4245) per night, up to US\$3800 per night during the festive season.

● The rate is fully inclusive, with nannying services, all dining and non-alcoholic beverage costs across the three restaurants and in-villa dining, and activities at Beach Shack, including non-motorised water sports.

● Alcoholic drinks are at an additional cost, and prices are in US dollars. Cocktails are priced between US\$14 and US\$25, and a humble bottle of Steinlager US\$11.

Stephanie Holmes was hosted by Kokomo Private Island.