

MASTERING THE PERFECT FESTIVE TURKEY

GOURMET

TRAVELLER

The Christmas issue

Seafood feasts, marvellous meringues
and Champagne worth popping



The ultimate
LUXURY GIFT GUIDE



are media

A full-page photograph of a person diving from a pier into the ocean at sunset. The pier has lounge chairs and an umbrella. A small boat is in the water, and a hill is visible in the distance. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, with bright light reflecting on the water's surface.

PARADISE FOUND

An escape to the idyllic Kokomo Private Island resort is everything you'd expect from an ultra-prime property with an alluring mix of luxury and insouciance, writes **MICHAEL HARDEN**.

PHOTOGRAPHY ELISE HASSEY



Above: Kokomo Private Island Fiji resort. Opposite: Kokomo's seaplane.

IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I'VE BEEN wrong. This time, it was suspecting that the arrival experience at Kokomo Private Island Fiji resort might be a case of going in too hard, too early.

In my defence, it was a hard act to follow: a glorious 45-minute seaplane flight from the Fiji mainland over forested mountains and island-flecked ocean that lands on a glassy turquoise lagoon. Greeted on a long timber jetty by the charmingly casual management team, the water below a kaleidoscope of fish, we were beautifully serenaded by the staff while being handed cold towels and chilled coconut water, so it's fair to assume it might not get better than this. Turns out, this was the shape of things to come, something made abundantly clear later the same day by a spine-tinglingly close encounter with a very large manta ray.

Kokomo is situated on the 57-hectare sand-fringed Yaukuve Levu Island, part of the Kadavu archipelago that's sheltered by the world's fourth largest barrier reef, the Great Astrolabe. The resort was established by the late Australian property developer Lang Walker, who first spotted the island in 2010 from the deck of his yacht. He bought the island and opened it to guests seven years later. Given the billionaire money behind it and the

sizeable price tag of a stay at Kokomo, there's the expectation that certain boxes – villas with private pools, elevated dining and drinking, high-end day spa, butler service – will be ticked. And they are, thoroughly.

The real, and somewhat bewitching allure of this private island resort, though, is less about met expectations than the way it seamlessly mixes flash-and-dazzle experiences with an entirely relaxed, unpretentious and personalised sense of hospitality. Being greeted by name wherever you go, having a laugh with the talented bar guy while he mixes drinks with syrups he's made himself using island botanicals, or the way multiple staff remember your precise coffee order from day one brings more of a private house party vibe than that of a stitched-up, high-end hotel.

With a fleet of 15 colour-coordinated boats, the close proximity of some of the world's great diving and snorkelling opportunities, excellent fishing and surfing, cooking classes, kava-drinking ceremonies and a cellar to make wine geeks weak at the knees, there's plenty of action for those who don't like to simply sprawl on a sun lounger. But when, after a buggy ride through lush gardens packed with palm trees and riotous colour, you arrive at one of the 21 beachfront villas or the five larger multi-bedroom



PHOTOGRAPHY ELISE HASSEY (THIS PAGE).



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Clockwise from left: fresh ingredients from the kitchen garden is used in Kokomo's restaurants; the gardens are dotted with sculptures carved from cinnamon tree wood; the view from the Sunset Bar. Opposite: Baywatch is the gateway to the resort's watersport activities.

residences that capture gob-smacking views from the island's high points, the temptation to just stay put is compelling.

Modelled on traditional Fijian bures, the open-plan, thatch-roofed villas have high, pitched ceilings supported by rope-wrapped beams and walls hung with framed tapa cloth. Expansive windows flood the generous living, sleeping and bathroom spaces with light and lagoon views while the alfresco areas include a private infinity pool, outdoor shower and multiple lounging opportunities, including a remarkably comfortable hammock strung between palm trees. You can feel your shoulders relaxing in real time. Even better, the close proximity of the beach means each day can begin with a quick dip in the lagoon before heading to breakfast, emphatically setting the clock to island time.

The snorkelling calls though, not least because Kokomo has a team of marine biologists to act as guides. Guest-wrangling aside, they also do scientific work and research that includes coral preservation and regeneration (a visit to the coral nurseries is a must), mangrove reforestation, conservation of sea turtles and clams and keeping a close eye on the health of the manta ray colony at Stick Bomby Reef, a short boat ride from the resort.

I'm certainly grateful for my guide Lily's detailed information about manta behaviour, especially the





Clockwise from above: the beachfront villa interiors; and bathroom.



GETTING THERE

Daily flights to Nadi International Airport operate from most Australian capitals. Kokomo Private Island Fiji is reached in 45 minutes by seaplane or helicopter from Kokomo's terminal near Nadi airport.

fact that they're gentle giants. This becomes useful intelligence just moments later, when we round a substantial rock formation and come face-to-face with one of these overwhelming creatures, vast and black, with the slightly sinister shape of a stealth bomber. It's great camouflage for a shy creature, and undeniably thrilling to encounter.

Thrills of a more flavoursome kind come with exploring the menus at Kokomo's three restaurants, and more than two hectares of kitchen gardens supplying herbs, vegetables, fruit, honey, vanilla and eggs. I take a tour of the garden with Italian-born chef Enzo Maione, selecting the produce I might like for lunch before going back to the Kokocabana Pool Club, where Maione throws together one of the best and freshest salads I've eaten (shredded English cabbage, cucumber, capsicum, mint, rocket and chilli dressed with white balsamic) accompanied by a whole reef fish, line caught by locals that morning, simply cooked in olive oil in the wood-fired pizza oven. Typical of Kokomo's general approach, all the food here, overseen by Australian executive chef Andy Bryant, is elevated but unpretentious with the superb ingredients doing a lot of the heavy lifting.

Not surprisingly, seafood is a highlight across all the menus, whether its precision-sliced sashimi at the Asian and South Pacific-themed Walker D'Plank or marinated seafood skewers cooked over coals at the central Beach Shack diner. There's no problem ordering off-menu either, which is especially useful for those travelling with children and teenagers, who are also well catered for with their own designated clubhouses.

This is another of Kokomo's strengths. The island caters beautifully for families but is big and well-designed enough for couples on romantic getaways to be blissfully unaware of the presence of other people's rugrats. Combined with a staff of folk who live up to Fiji's storied kid-friendly reputation but who can also recommend an excellent glass of French Chablis or New Zealand pinot noir and it's hard to resist Kokomo's you-do-you allure.

Probably the best indicator of a few days here is the mournful walk back along the long jetty to be picked up by the navy-and-white-liveried seaplane, ready to whisk you back to Nadi airport. Leaving Kokomo is a wrench, but at least this time I was right (and just a little resentful) that it might not get better than this. ●

BOOKING INFO

Villas from \$3850 per night, Residences from \$13,742 with a minimum three-night stay, meals included.
kokomoislandfiji.com