

THE AUSTRALIAN

• ISSUE 7 •

Travel + LUXURY

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Egadi Islands bliss

GREEK CHIC
Soulful side of Crete

REEF ENCOUNTER
Ultimate luxe hideaway

FIJIAN REVERIE
Kokomo pops

FANTASY ISLANDS

From the South Pacific to the Mediterranean



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COVER
ITALY'S EGADI ISLANDS

Jack Johns
PHOTOGRAPHY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES VODICKA

EDITOR'S LETTER

My idea of a luxury getaway is an island in the middle of nowhere (Wi-Fi optional). Like many of us, I strategise about heading to warmer climes when the mercury drops, particularly during an interminably drizzly winter. Feeling soft, powdery sand between my toes, and floating in crystalline water are sure to elevate my mood. Peace is increasingly hard to come by, and a few sun-filled days on languid island time help keep the winter blues and the wider world at bay.

For mental escapism during lockdowns past, I would often return to my bank of island memories. Be it cocktail hour on sizzling Koh Samui, the dramatic sunsets on Vietnam's Phú Quốc, or the serene vistas of Hamilton Island's Qualia, these beachy escapades sustained me. Though technically part of New South Wales, Lord Howe Island has an otherworldly beauty and nostalgic charm that reminds me of family holidays in the '80s, of applying coconut-scented Reef Oil and sipping fruity West Coast Coolers.

In this issue of *Travel + Luxury*, we've canvassed the latest, hottest and dreamiest island retreats. There are, of course, degrees of island luxury, and Kokomo Private Island in Fiji is the epitome. I visited recently and was delighted to learn about all the new additions to this already special place. You can read about my stay and also hear from Kokomo's discerning owner, property magnate Lang Walker, on his own island ideals.

It's impossible to think of awe-inspiring archipelagos and not consider Greece. Crete is the largest Greek island and also perhaps its most diverse. Our focus is the port city of Chania, which is luring travellers with its creative energy, sensational coastline and sublime beaches. We also stop by Milos, where a trio of Greek-Australian entrepreneurs has opened an impressive hotel that mirrors the island's rocky topography. Equally enticing are Italy's Egadi Islands, just off the western edge of Sicily, gaining global acclaim for their raw, bohemian beauty.

The Maldives, that jewel-like cluster of 1200 tiny coral islands and 26 atolls, has had a spate of openings of late, including Joali Being, the region's first resort to focus entirely on wellness. But if you crave a rarefied island escape on local shores, you might be taken by a stunning private estate that materialised recently on Lizard Island. *Travel + Luxury* got the scoop on this incredibly unique property on the Great Barrier Reef that is now available to rent.

When it comes to seafaring adventures, cruising has returned with a vengeance, and we spotlight two new ships in this issue, Silversea's *Silver Dawn*, and the ultra-modern *Celebrity Beyond* both of which made splashy debuts in Europe recently.

Whether it's a diving adventure you crave, immersing yourself in a wellness retreat, or unwinding in a hammock with the latest page-turner, islands prove a tonic for every kind of traveller. Time to take the plunge. **T**

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HANG LOOSE
A hammock awaits
at Kokomo Private
Island in Fiji.

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Look out for *Travel + Luxury Weekend* every Saturday in *The Weekend Australian*

14 JUNE 2022

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES VODICKA



**CAPTAIN OF
INDUSTRY**

Lang Walker enjoying
his own private Kokomo
in the South Pacific.

I imagine you have a favourite island.

“Well, obviously I’m biased, but Kokomo Private Island Fiji is my choice for its sublime beauty, sensational snorkelling just steps from your villa as well as the incredible diving on the Great Astrolabe Reef, a 10-minute boat ride away. I’ve travelled around the world and I’ve not encountered anything as beautiful or as unique as this place. And I love to share it with people. Kokomo is also about family for me, and we’ve had some wonderful times holidaying here with the kids and the grand kids.”

What was it about Kokomo that inspired you to launch the resort?

“First, I had to convince my wife as to why we needed to buy an island, but I eventually won her over with

my vision. I fell in love with its sandy white beaches and rolling hills covered in lush vegetation. I was inspired by the opportunity to create a tropical getaway with sustainability and conservation at its core. I wanted to take all the best things I’ve learned in my own travels and build them into the island.”

Which islands do you always return to in Europe?

“We spend European summers aboard the *Kokomo* superyacht and the list of beautiful spots to visit is long. But I have to say the top end of Sardinia has some of the most picturesque scenery in the world. The wonderful Maddalena Archipelago, a group of islands scattered between Sardinia and Corsica, is exceptional, too. And the south-west of Corsica is very special, with crystal-clear bays and pink sandy beaches.”



TRAVEL TITAN

Walker on water

Even a property tycoon needs a passion project. For Lang Walker, it's a private island resort in Fiji and a superyacht for sailing around the globe.

What do you look for while you're island-hopping?

"Memorable scenery, seclusion, amazing dive spots, mixed in with stellar restaurants and welcoming people. Sailing from the north-west to the south-east of Fiji to the Lau Group ticks all those boxes. They are some of the most remote destinations, with raw beauty and diverse species of marine life and corals. Another route I rate is St Barths to Antigua in the Caribbean Islands. We've had a lot of fun there and the people are so friendly."

Where was the last place you visited?

"Before the pandemic we sailed around the Balearics and in particular the island of Ibiza. We dropped anchor there and explored its stunning beaches, natural assets and exceptional food. I remember

enjoying excellent local tapas, lobster and fresh fish at its restaurants. You could easily spend a week sailing around those islands."

What's a destination that surprised you?

"The diving around the Solomon Islands. We sailed the *Kokomo* yacht from Europe and had a local dive expert on board to take us to the best sights. There are multiple World War II wrecks of ships, aircraft and submarines to explore. The underwater offerings are remarkable."

What journey do you most often take?

"I travel a lot domestically for work and internationally to Fiji and Singapore for our big master-planned communities we are creating at Johor Bahru, just

across the strait in Malaysia. Then come June to September we always jump on board *Kokomo* for the European summer. We also enjoy heading to Aspen for the ski season."

What items do you always pack?

"My phone to keep in touch with my teams in Australia and Malaysia and provide them with any assistance needed. I also pack lots of Speedos, shorts and T-shirts."

What do you regard as the most vibrant arts city?

"Venice for its incredible museums, galleries and fascinating history. Start in the Piazza San Marco to take in the Basilica di San Marco, whose domes are covered in gold mosaics, and nearby museums devoted to archaeological wonders. Then head along the Grand Canal for galleries such as the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Plus there's all the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture to marvel over."

"I sometimes call Kokomo my 'non-for-profit', as I spend way too much money on making it the best island."

Name a restaurant or dining experience seared in your mind.

"La Fontelina in Capri is one we always visit when in Italy. It's an open-air restaurant with an enviable location opposite the Faraglioni rocks and top-notch seafood dishes, such as spaghetti with bottarga."

Can you share a fascinating individual you've met in your travels?

"Jimmy Buffett when he came on board and crewed our boat in the St Barths Bucket Regatta. It happens every March and his presence made it especially noteworthy. He arrived with a case of his LandShark beer. There was no singing but lots of great sailing and he got on well very well with our crew and guests. There were definitely lots of laughs."

How has travel boosted your professional growth?

"You can never stop learning and travelling is one of the best ways to pick up ideas. Travel recharges the batteries and it also gave me that opportunity to stumble upon Kokomo, which I sometimes call my 'non-for-profit', as I spend way too much money on making it the best island."

What destination is next on your list?

"Cruising the Greek Islands with my family in July."

What is your idea of a staycation?

"Never done it!"

Read more about Kokomo's new look on page 80.



FIJI

SUNNY BY NATURE

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

WORDS BY KERRIE McCALLUM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES VODICKA

A photograph of a wooden deck with a table and chairs. The ceiling is covered in a green net, and there is a large fish sculpture on the wall. The deck is surrounded by lush tropical vegetation and a view of the ocean.

EXPLORE

WALK THE PLANK
Pull up a chair at Walker
d'Plank for a drink or
pan-Asian fare. Opposite:
Step out of your villa directly
onto the untouched beach.



SEA CHANGE

Clockwise: Each villa has a private pool; this five-bedroom residence is ideal for families; stellar snorkelling and diving opportunities abound; pan-seared fish, pumpkin salad and a Bloody Mary at the newly opened Beach Grill.



EXPLORE

The seaplane bobs in the air, weaving through wispy clouds, ascending over a tangle of jungle and drifting over the long coral shelf of the Great Astrolabe Reef. The 45-minute flight from Nadi to Kokomo Private Island 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 and 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: how do 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 last December. It may be the only Fijian property that retained its entire staff during that dormant 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 people 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 extensive experience in luxury hotel development as well as refined taste and an eagle eye. "I didn't cook for 10 years," he says, though 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 who wanted different experiences, or to deeply explore the destination and Fijian culture."

BREAK POINT
Surfing instructor Mateo Vereivalu Vuniyalo pauses from catching Fiji's world-class waves.





Resorts in South-East 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,” he says. Given his dual experience, Flakelar is naturally 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 participate in 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 a hundred diners (not that there would ever be that many in attendance). Oakley’s zero-waste, no-menu approach has long been popular with guests, and 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 such as tonkatsu. In a sweet moment, she remembers us from our last visit.

Lusted informed the changes to Kokomo’s dining options, with three venues that take better advantage of the exquisite surrounds: Beach Shack, Beach Grill and Beach Bar, each with its own menu and ambience. My kids especially love rolling off the beach for a burger at the grill, but the menu extends to more 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 started mapping it out to see whether 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, makes 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 is now a handsomely designed space, complete with cigar menu, and high 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 are, and where they may be going on a fishing trip 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

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.

FARE CALL

At Walker d’Plank chef Caroline Oakley melds Fijian, Japanese and subcontinental flavours. Opposite: A pontoon makes for the ultimate sundowner spot.





DEEP DIVE

Extending for more than 100 kilometres, the Great Astrolabe Reef is a pristine playground for dive enthusiasts.

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 be transformed with induction cooktops, and a vast outdoor area for classes, lunches and all kinds of revelry. The team point out spots earmarked for a fire pit, barbecue and drinks station. Pasta-making sessions are also on the schedule. Thai dishes and curries, 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 as compost. The team wastes

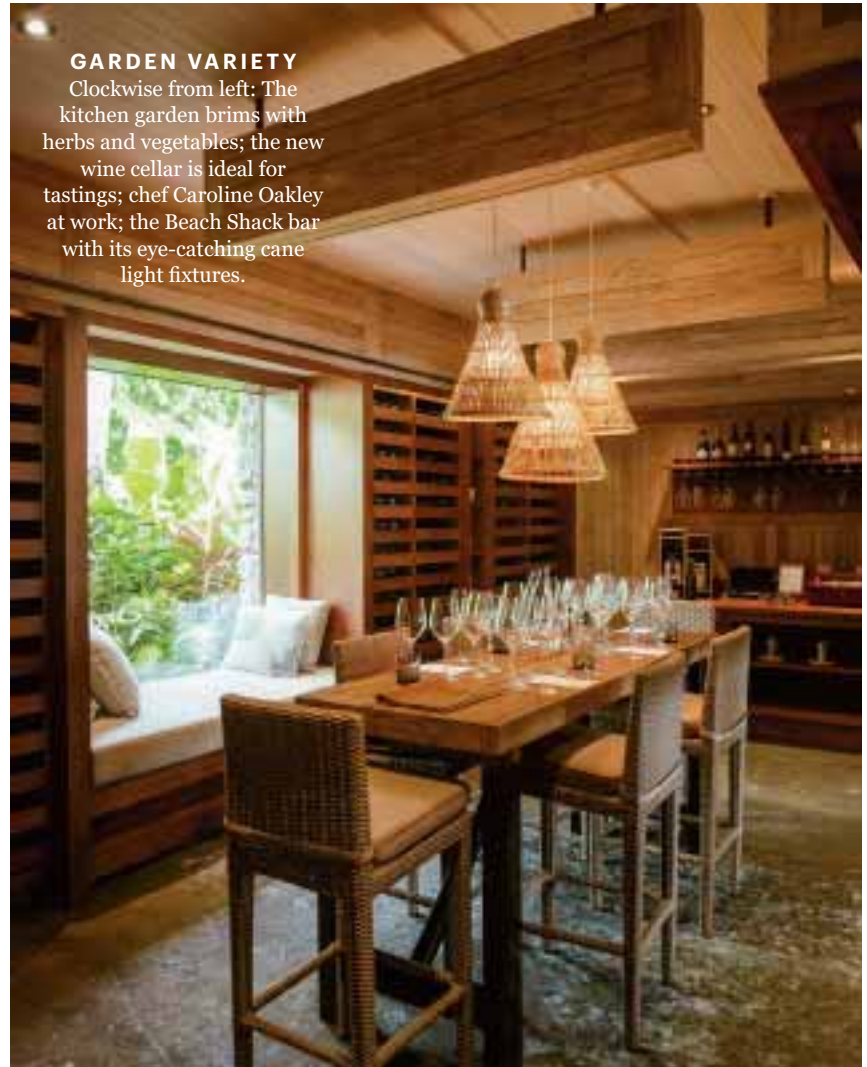
as little as possible in their goal for a closed-loop system. The sustainability program at Kokomo extends to sea foraging and a clam nursery, and marine conservation, including coral restoration and turtle preservation. Guests can participate in the Manta Conservation Project, which involves tagging, 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 and gelato as well as popcorn and fairy floss. On any given day you'll stumble across a teens' survivor challenge, sailing 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. Caldwell even snaps his board, a badge of honour for any passionate surfer.

"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 has boats, instructors and access to several lesser-known breaks. There are also plans to expand the resort's wellness offering, including introducing a yoga teacher and a naturopath. "We're not going to turn into a health farm," Flakelar says. "But a lot of guests are interested in improving their immune system, and we take wellness seriously." Sodashi skincare products from Western Australia are a strong addition to the spa, and a new magnesium mineral bath is coming 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 the stream of updates have enhanced something that already seemed perfect. **T**

EXPLORE



GARDEN VARIETY

Clockwise from left: The kitchen garden brims with herbs and vegetables; the new wine cellar is ideal for tastings; chef Caroline Oakley at work; the Beach Shack bar with its eye-catching cane light fixtures.

