

THE GREEN



COURTESY OF LAICALA, OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND FIJI



As Fiji lands new hotels, international flights and cruises, the South Pacific paradise is trying to preserve its own Eden. **Adam H. Graham** heads to the lush, increasingly luxe island nation to track rare birds and swim with the shark gods.

Diving with manta rays, one of the activities at Kokomo Private Island Fiji. OPPOSITE: The verdant, dreamy wonderland of Laucala.

& THE BLUE

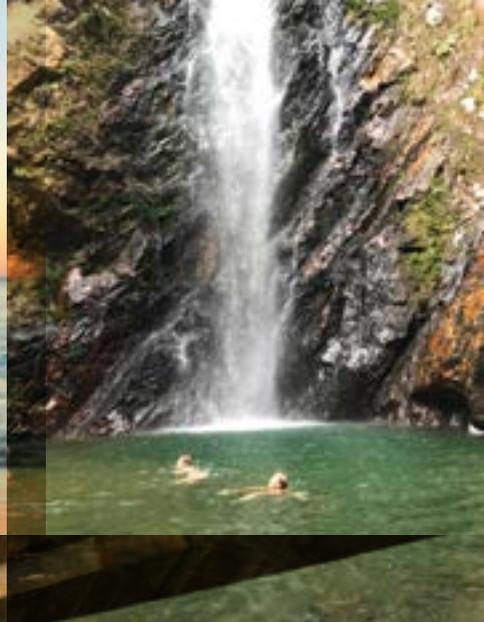
T

The pilot of my twin-prop seaplane is barefoot. No sandals, no flip-flops—only the skin of his feet between the plane’s rudder pedal and our lives for the duration of the 45-minute flight from Fiji’s Nadi International Airport on the main island of Viti Levu. To my right, the awesome expanse of the azure Pacific, to my left a ridge of mist-crowned emerald mountains, no less jaw-dropping.

I’m en route to Kokomo Private Island Fiji, the country’s newest private-island resort. As the mountains’ earthy greens fade out of sight, I enter a world defined by blues. From my seat, I gaze down at several small crumbs of islands splattered across a mosaic of dreamy marine hues, from deep midnight cobalt to Tiffany box blue. The plane drops from the sky into the sea and, at once, the rush of elemental change from air to water overwhelms all the senses.

It’s my first time to the Melanesian nation of Fiji, a scattering of some 330 islands and 522 islets (only 110 of them permanently inhabited), located about 3,200 kilometers northeast of Sydney. In 2016, Cyclone Winston, the costliest tropical cyclone on record in the Southern Hemisphere, ravaged the country. But a recent spate of redevelopment and new hotels has put the islands at the forefront of travel news. I’m here for eight days to explore some of its best resorts, get to know the food and culture—and experience ecosystems both underwater and above.

In the last few decades, Fiji mistakenly earned a reputation for being a budget destination for Aussies, but it’s increasingly known for its endemism, drawing science geeks and bird nerds like me to its 20 indigenous fish and 36 native birds, not to mention moody mangroves, pristine coral reef lagoons, untouched waterfalls and, of course, romantic and secluded sandy white beaches. And so, in line with global trends and local treasures, hotels across Fiji are moving



towards a more sustainable form of tourism and attempting to balance luxury with austerity, not the easiest of tasks.

The seaplane chugs through the sobering morning sunlight towards the dock. There, a group of smiling staff—many also barefoot—shout “Bula!” The traditional Fijian greeting is said enthusiastically everywhere across the archipelago, but it’s spoken with a musical oompf here. A porter whisks my bags away as I walk the dock towards the property over water so clear I could see bright blue damselfish and elegant suckerfish circling on the surface. Suddenly, I start to hear music—real music. Many of Kokomo’s staff are from the neighboring island of Kadavu and members of a Pacific Gospel choir. About 25 staffers, including maids, cooks and upper management, greet me with a traditional

Fijian welcome song, each of them swaying gently while they sing. Kokomo has already outdone itself, and I haven’t even checked in.

Opened in March last year, the 25-villa resort is located on a 60-hectare private island planted on the Great Astrolabe Reef. After a brief pit stop at my villa, I jump into the famous gin-clear water and immediately begin gliding over humps of purple brain coral the size of Volkswagen Beetles, and chasing parrot, angel and puffer fish. The water directly in front of my villa teems with so many wild and colorful Pacific reef fish that I add 20 new species to my life list... then give up counting. After a half-hour snorkel, I toss my gear on the beach and hop on a paddleboard to steer towards the dock. Having buzzed through the thermals less than an hour ago, the Twin Otter seaplane now bobs serenely in the water, as if it

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The arrival jetty at Kokomo Private Island; lanterns prepped for nightfall at the resort; the reward at the end of a waterfall hike; the master bedroom of a beachfront villa at Kokomo; path to the blue beyond; a private pool deck at the resort.

has been floating there untouched for decades. I look back at this magnificent and private little paradise, in awe of its existence.

On an island that was not inhabited by humans before the resort was built, Kokomo feels particularly soulful, even free-spirited. There are towering palm trees, wind-bent from storms past, thick floral growth spilling out from beachfront gardens, and ornate stone walls giving each villa privacy.

One of Kokomo’s three restaurants (all are inclusive of the price, as at most resorts in Fiji) is called Walker D’ Plank, named for owner Lang Walker. The ramshackle fish shack made from weathered wood sits under pine trees, ferns and hanging hurricane lanterns on a dock overlooking the water. While sipping rosé dockside one day, I spot pilot whales offshore. The next day I spy a turtle floating towards me

COURTESY OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND FIJI (6)



BIRDSONG ECHOES DOWN THE FERN- FLOORED MOUNTAIN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF NANUKU AUBERGE RESORT FIJI; COURTESY OF LAUCALA (2); COURTESY OF NANUKU AUBERGE RESORT FIJI (2); COURTESY OF MARRIOTT RESORT MOMI BAY



while I spoon into lobster *kokoda*—fresh citrus-marinated lobster bathing in coconut milk, chilies and tomatoes. I snap a pic of the turtle from my seat and then wash down my meal with a Fiji Bitter beer. Nature encounters were never so easy.

Indeed, even on a choppy-water day, visibility on the Great Astrolabe Reef remains amazing, and Kokomo's marine biologist and I snorkel up-close-and-personal with black-tip and white-tip reef sharks, and several peacock,

angel and trigger fish. There's also a glass-bottom boat offering informative lagoon tours.

Fiji has a reputation for mediocre food, but Kokomo's is outstanding—everything is prepared perfectly, from the morning croissants and tropical fruit—bejeweled Viennoiseries to Tomahawk steaks, roasted duck in lettuce leaves, and coral trout sashimi. Sure, it is slightly jarring to be swimming with dazzling reef fish, and then eating them minutes later. But perhaps this connection to

and immersion in nature is one of the things that a visit to this island nation invites you to reflect on. To raise awareness of sustainable fishing practices, Kokomo is partnering with the U.N.-approved Dock to Dish program and launched the first Fiji chapter this spring, bringing together small-scale fishermen and marine biologists to manage resources. The program here will enlist the help of local spearfisherman Jaga Crossingham to work closely with the resort's chefs to monitor local

fish stocks, thus preserving the longevity and integrity of the Great Astrolabe Reef.

JUST AS I START GETTING USED TO ONE PRIVATE island, I am headed off to another. After a soulful Kokomo goodbye with stirring farewell songs from more than 60 staffers, I'm en route to the über-exclusive private island resort of Laucala (pronounced Lah-thala). The former Malcom Forbes-owned island, now the property of Red Bull founder Dietrich Mateschitz, is legendary for its Bond-like amenities including its own submarine, Wagyu cattle breeds, 18-hole golf course and opulent beachfront villas, tricked out with private infinity pools, teak tubs, and chilled Bollinger, à *discretion*.

The common areas on the 10-square-kilometer island are situated around a massive coconut palm plantation, sprawled across an almost-fluorescent green lawn. At its center is a rectangular glass-walled infinity pool, one of several communal pools onsite, in the event you feel like slumming it with the other guests. George Clooney is rumored to be on property during my visit, though I don't bother asking management to confirm because at resorts like this, you don't ask such questions. In any event, I am more interested in spotting collared lorries and orange doves, two of the island's most colorful bird species.

At my villa, I'm briefed about the all-you-can-drink bubbly, and shown the open bar of whisky, vodka, rum, rosé and Rioja. Instead of having to wait around for golf buggy shuttles to come fetch me, I'm given my very own golf cart and free rein to drive myself around the island. (A potential liability with all that free flowing alcohol.)

All services at Laucala are 24/7 including a private teppanyaki restaurant for two, perched in a treehouse-like ledge overlooking the ocean. When I arrive at 9 p.m., staff appear to be packing up, but without making a fuss, they fire up the grill just for me, and within minutes, I am feasting on Wagyu, teriyaki shrimp, and freshly caught fish while watching the waves splash against the rocky cliff below.

I drive my buggy through the sandalwood tree- and cinnamon-scented night air back to my villa, named Rurrugu, which means *shade* after the century-old monumental trees in this, the island's beachier-styled Sea Grass section. The interiors were inspired by traditional Fijian building methods and the designs of the late Florence Broadhurst, known for her pacific bent, including lamps made from driftwood, coffee tables made with tree

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Kokoda* at Nanuku Auberge Resort; at Laucala, the beach bar, and a Peninsula villa; a tangerine sunset at Nanuku, and the warrior welcome; a lagoon *bure* at Marriott Resort Momi Bay; riding at Laucala.

roots, and jellyfish chandeliers made with *magi magi* coconut threads. Sago Palm leaf roof thatching, a wood structure made from Doga timber, and coral sand plaster walls: this all comprises my new home. So ensconced, I crack open a frosty bottle of Gris Blanc and fall into my private pool watching the moonlight reflect off the surrounding bromeliads. Moments later, I dive into my giant bed.

Dawn on Laucala is an intoxicating time, with the sun shooting through the gauzy canopy of palms and ferns. It's also the most melodic time of day, with birdsong echoing down the fern-floored Vatsusavai Mountain. I only have two nights in Laucala, and want to maximize my time there, so at 7 a.m., wearing my bathing suit, a Hawaiian shirt, binoculars, and as much SPF as I can slather on, I set out in my golf cart to conquer the island.

On my way to the Plantation, the main restaurant, I encounter mynas, spotted doves, and dazzling blue white-collared kingfishers diving into a stream. Once at breakfast, I lay my binocs on a terrace table laid with white linen and silverware and stare out to the sea of lanky palms shooting skyward. Just as I'm about to bite into a pineapple mango cake, a collared lorry—painted in the wildest purple, green and red—flutters past me and lands in a frond in the canopy of a nearby palm. I spring up from my table, bringing the binocs to my eyes. The other guests, most of them honeymooners, shoot me glances.

"Who's the weird single guy with the binoculars?" I could see them saying. "Left at the altar?" "Paparazzo?" Any travel writer who flies solo knows these looks, but I don't care. Birdwatching from Laucala's terrace is mightily rewarding. So I sip my watermelon juice, order a chicken congee, and wait for more to come.

Laucala's submarine is a wonderful extravagance that also furthers guests' understanding of the vulnerable ecosystems. Alas, it's under repair, so instead I stay ashore and visit the 100-hectare farm. A tour takes a few hours by SUV, with stops at the massive hydroponic facility, an orchid house, horse stable and Wagyu cattle ranch. The island is surprisingly sustainable, and they source their own meat, seafood, honey and dairy, and grow everything from zucchini to vanilla. Suddenly, the SUV stops mid-road and the driver points skyward. There, atop a breadfruit tree on Nawi Hill, is an orange fruit dove munching away. The shy, lava-hued bird is only found on six of Fiji's islands—and seems fully aware of its rarity, flying away the second I ready my zoom. We finish the tour at the Rock Lounge



FROM TOP LEFT: A soft coral reef at Nanuku; a mangrove expedition by bilibili (a traditional lashed-bamboo raft) and paddleboard; a night-lit row of Marriott's overwater bungalows.



around sunset, where I sip some bubbly rosé and spot a leatherback turtle working her way across the bay, occasionally surfacing for air. Even without submerging in Laucala's waters myself, I cannot avoid encounters with its native residents. While every experience here might be designed by the resort executives as an over-the-top luxury for human visitors, they are underwritten by the greatest designer of all—Mother Nature—and headlined by a veritable encyclopedia of wildlife.

That evening, I have a relaxing Titobo massage, a Fijian deep-tissue technique, administered by Abraham, who loosens knots and blockages I wasn't even aware I had. Humid and dusk when I enter the spa, it's cool and dark when I exit. Flickering tiki torches reflect off the still, lily pad-topped pond as I walk back to my buggy. Often on Laucala, it feels like you're the only guest on the island.

MUCH AS I LOVED MY PRIVATE ISLAND sojourns, my favorite Fijian property is Nanuku Auberge Resort, a tranquil 26-villa property that's a two-hour drive along the spectacular coral coast from Nadi International Airport on Fiji's main island. While Kokomo and Laucala wow with amenities, Nanuku offers an authentic cultural connection that de-privatizes my experience.

From here, for example, it's actually possible to make a trip into town. So I do, stopping in a grocery store to buy a bottle of rum and some chocolate speckled with noni fruit, and grab lunch at a roadside Indo-Fijian curry shack called M3 where my table overlooking the wetlands is filled with dishes

like spicy goat curry, simmered okra, fragrant dhal and warm naan.

At the resort, I learn to make *kokoda* in a cooking class and experience Lomo Lomo, in which root vegetables, fish and meat are wrapped in leaves and buried in a firepit. In the afternoon, I tour the coastal mangroves looking for mud crab and learning about Fijian medicinal plants and botanicals along the way. In the evening, I am made the guest of honor at the kava ceremony, in which I drink copious amounts of a woodsy brew made with kava root. It's said to give a meditative effect, but it mostly makes me buzzy and twitchy.

Nanuku has also made the most substantial nods to conservation by banning single-use plastics, like straws and shampoo bottles. Its Fijian-born conservationist, Kelly Dawn Bentley, is establishing some incredible programs like coral nurseries and mangrove restoration projects using plastic water bottles to grow seedlings. "This is my home," she says. "Visitors love Fiji for the same reasons we do, so it's important that we all work together to preserve what's beautiful about it." Kelly takes me out to the coral nursery on the paddleboard to show me her work. While I fumble with my mask, goggles and sunscreen, slithering atop my board like a fish out of water, Kelly dips in and out of the ocean with the ease of an amphibian, at home in both elements.

She beckons me underwater to see the coral beds that she is rebuilding with the help of guests. "Aren't you scared of sharks?" I ask. "In Fiji mythology, Dakuwaqa was our shark god and we believed he protected us from the evils of the sea," she shrugs. "The sharks in Fiji do not typically attack humans. It's safe here."

I'd heard the same explanation from a few others. Skeptical as I am, she's right. Just offshore from Nanuku is one of the only places in the world where it's safe to dive with bull and tiger sharks. Nobody knows for sure why the sharks don't attack humans here. Perhaps there's such an abundance of fish on the reefs that sharks needn't bother with humans. Or maybe the water is so clear, that they can see better here. Or maybe Dakuwaqa's ancient deeds are still paying dividends, and his continued protection of Fiji carries on unnoticed, like so much of life on these most blessed and magnificent islands. 🌴

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Fly to Nadi International. There are nonstop flights from Asia on **Fiji Airways** (fijiairways.com) from Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo, with occasional charter flights from Taipei.

HOTELS

Nanuku Auberge Resort Fiji is a small, soulful property that has made substantial conservation strides in 2017 by banning single-use plastics and introducing coral nurseries and mangrove restoration projects. nanuku.aubergeresorts.com; doubles from US\$400.

Kokomo Private Island Fiji is a brand-new, spirited, 60-hectare private island on the Great Astrolabe Reef. kokomoislandfiji.com; doubles from US\$2,500, all-inclusive. Uber-exclusive **Laucala** is a private island home to spacious

thatched villas tricked out with teak tubs, a golf course, and a working farm. laucala.com; doubles from US\$4,800, all-inclusive. **Marriott Resort Momi Bay** opened in 2017, with overwater bure (bungalows), just 45 minutes from Nadi International Airport. marriott.com; doubles from \$250. Another conservation-minded property is the 25-room **Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort**, a romantic and family-friendly retreat founded by the son of legendary scuba-pioneer Jacques Cousteau. fjiresort.com; doubles from US\$1,085, all-inclusive.

CRUISES

Lindblad Expeditions/National Geographic have just this spring launched a series of cruises to the South Pacific including stops in Fiji's lesser-visited islands like Taveuni and Beqa. expeditions.com; from US\$15,680.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF NANUKU AUBERGE RESORT FIJI (2); COURTESY OF MARRIOTT RESORT MOMI BAY