

— FEBRUARY —

# TRAVEL

## Change of scene

Exploring south-west Cambodia, Fiji's Kokomo Private Island, wineries in the NSW Riverina, and the Faroe Islands' capital.

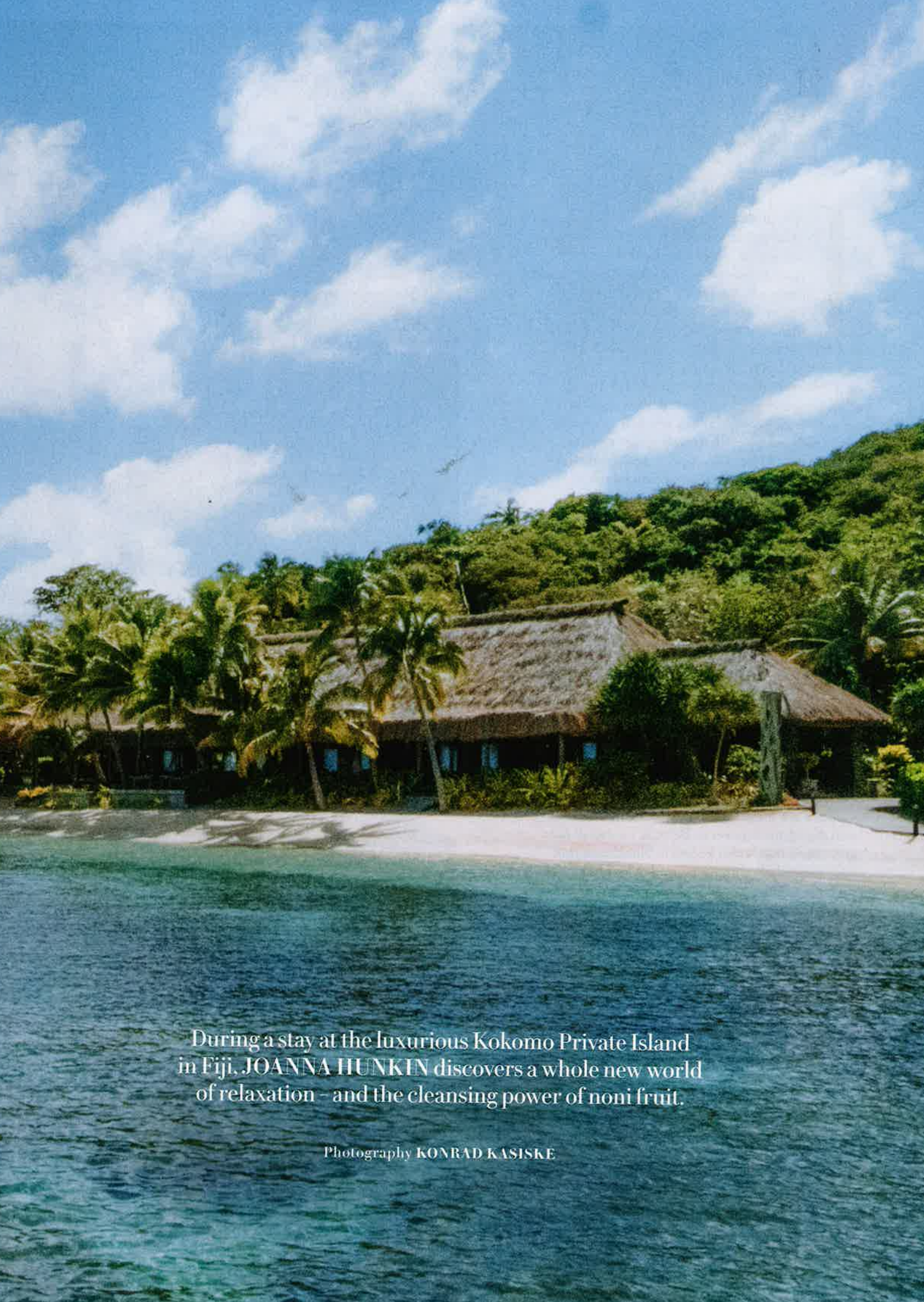


Tumblong Hills  
winery, NSW

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During a stay at the luxurious Kokomo Private Island in Fiji, JOANNA HUNKIN discovers a whole new world of relaxation - and the cleansing power of noni fruit.

Photography KONRAD KASISKE

I have discovered a new state of being. It sits somewhere between deep relaxation and full catatonia. I've decided to call it obscene relaxation. It's a state I enter repeatedly during my time on Kokomo Private Island, a resort found 45 minutes' flight south-east of Nadi. Even thinking about it now slows my breathing and warms my skin, a phantom sun beaming down.

I first enter this curious state while swinging in my oceanfront hammock, strung between two perfectly angled coconut trees, as a light sea breeze gently rocks me like an infant. It strikes again as I float in my private infinity pool overlooking that same hammock and the shallow, azure water of the island's beautiful eastern shore.

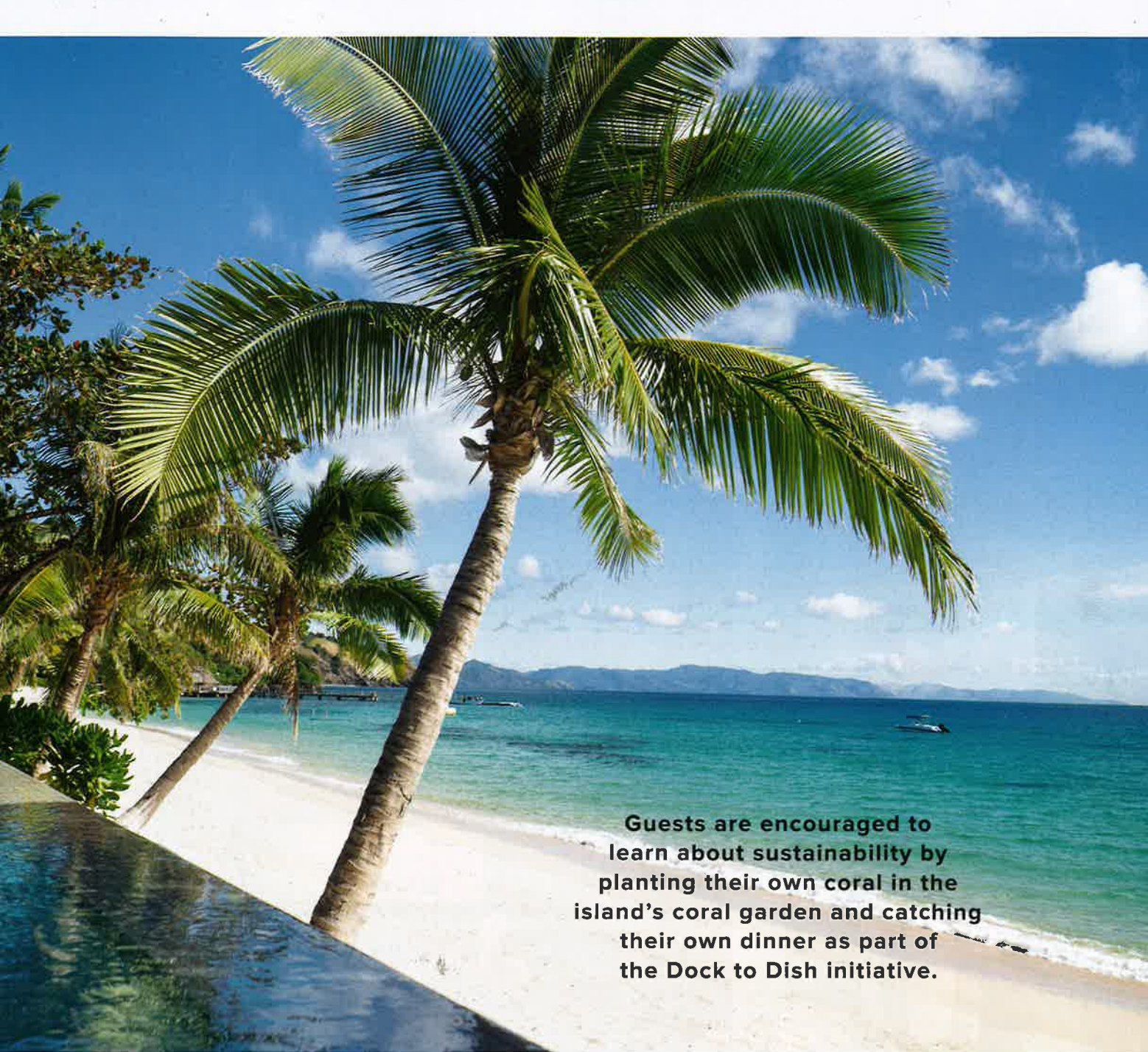
It comes as no surprise that within hours of arriving in this tropical oasis and discovering this new state of calm, I immediately fall ill, finally succumbing to whatever lurgy had wiped out half our office earlier in the week. Typically, such a malady would spell the end of any holiday fun. But not at Kokomo.

My first stop is to see the island's naturopath, Kim Campbell, who devises a custom menu of natural remedies to speed my recovery, all sourced from the island's farm and native bush. Pineapple and ginger juice is the most palatable of the panaceas, while a herbal tea made from dried papaya leaf has to be forced down with several teaspoons of honey. Anything that unsavoury must surely be good for you, and when I wake up the following morning, I'm stunned to find I'm almost completely recovered.

She's not done with me yet though, issuing me with the island's answer to Berocca – a shot of noni juice. Noni fruit – also known as blue-cheese fruit – is a particularly pungent pome that looks a bit like a green, sprouting potato. I've been warned it tastes as foul as it smells, but will deliver an immediate energy boost and increase my liver function – an instant cleanse of sorts. I brace myself for horror but it's not that bad. The juice has been cleverly mixed with lemon and fresh ginger, and the result is entirely palatable. As the day rolls on, I realise I'm feeling better than ever and by late afternoon I'm happily snorkelling in open water, entranced by a rainbow cornucopia of corals, tropical fish and the occasional reef shark.

The warm waters around Kokomo are home to a spectacular array of sea life from turtles and sharks (harmless, I'm assured) to majestic manta rays and spinner dolphins. Even by Fiji standards, Kokomo is something special and the resort's owner Lang Walker is committed to protecting this unique paradise. The Australian property developer purchased the island property nine years ago, after the global financial crisis forced the previous owner to abandon





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development plans. With a series of half-built villas in place, Walker originally intended to keep the island as a private property for friends and family. But as the beauty of the island cast its spell over Walker, he soon found himself poring over plans for a world-class resort, which opened to the public in April 2017.

Part of those plans included a resident marine biologist to help research and protect the island's unique sea life and biodiversity. Dublin-born Cliona O'Flaherty has occupied the role for two years, and has established a number of initiatives, including coral restoration, mangrove reforestation and manta conservation programs. Guests are encouraged to learn about sustainability while witnessing the programs in action, including planting their own coral in the island's coral garden, and catching their own dinner as part of the Dock to Dish sustainable-seafood initiative.

**Clockwise from top left: a master bedroom in a beachfront villa; the infinity pool at a beachfront villa; preparing a natural remedy from the island's farm; tropical fish in the Great Astrolabe Reef. PREVIOUS PAGES Kokomo Private Island.**

Kokomo sits inside the Great Astrolabe Reef, which is one of the largest reefs in the world. And like all coral reefs, it is vulnerable to climbing sea temperatures and changing climates. One of the first projects O'Flaherty set up was the coral restoration program, which identifies heat-resistant coral species and harvests clippings to grow in the coral garden, before transplanting the coral back into open water to build new reefs.

This year, she was joined by another full-time marine biologist, Viviana Taubera, as they launched the Kokomo Manta Conservation Project, which involves tagging individual manta rays in order to track their movements and identify areas of significance to better protect and preserve their habitats.

But they aren't the only ones committed to sustainability on the island. Since moving to Kokomo in May, executive chef Corey Campbell - formerly ►





of Noma in Copenhagen and Melbourne's Vue de Monde - has been introducing a number of initiatives to reduce the amount of waste on the island and develop more sustainable food practices.

Cling film has been almost completely banished from the island's kitchens and he has set up a salt farm to replace the boxed and bagged sea salt, which was being shipped to the resort each week. He also worked with resort management to build a recycling centre, where all of the island's waste is now separated and sorted. Campbell's newest hobby is taking the green glass bottles once filled with sparkling mineral water and turning them into artisanal tumblers, which will soon be rolled out across the island's three restaurants. Bottles are also used to store grains and dried goods in the kitchen pantries.

Meanwhile, an industrial-sized Hot Rot machine quickly and efficiently turns food scraps into compost for the resort's 2.2-hectare organic farm, which produces almost all of the island's fresh fruit and vegetables. More than 170 free-range chickens provide a constant supply of eggs to the resort, while Campbell has also learnt the art of beekeeping, becoming the island's resident apiarist.

Between the farm-to-table and dock-to-dish initiatives, Campbell estimates around 90 per cent of the island's food offering is locally sourced. In addition to guests fishing for their dinner, where they regularly haul in a deep-sea catch big enough to feed multiple guests, Campbell works with a local fisherman to bring in extra supplies. Tuna, trout, mackerel, wahoo, mahi mahi, snapper and prawns are just some of the fresh catch on offer during our stay. The challenge for Campbell and head chef Caroline Oakley is continuing to come up with new ways to serve it.

It's a challenge they are more than up to, drawing inspiration from around the world as they showcase

From top left: Kokomo's apiary; the boardwalk to Walker D'Plank; coconuts are used in meals and naturopathy. Opposite: the kitchen and living space in a three-bedroom villa.

### Getting there

Fiji Airways flies direct to Nadi and Suva from select Australian cities. Private transfers to the island via seaplane or helicopter are available from both airports. [fiji Airways.com](http://fiji Airways.com)

### Stay

Private villas start from \$3245 per night for two adults, including all meals and a dedicated nanny for children under three. [kokomolstand.fiji.com](http://kokomolstand.fiji.com)

a wide range of techniques and flavours. At the Beach Shack, where Campbell oversees the menu, the offering changes daily with clever twists on classic dishes, such as coconut and avocado sushi, which sees grated, mature coconut replace rice in a delicate miniature sushi roll.

Further along the shoreline - via a picturesque wooden jetty that traverses the aquamarine harbour - you arrive at Walker D'Plank (named after the resort's owner), where you'll discover Oakley running the kitchen. The Fijian-born chef was taught to cook by her Sri Lankan grandmother and brings an innate understanding and balance of spice to her craft.

Here, there are no menus. Oakley likes to keep things loose and will customise every dish to a guest's personal palate, joining you tableside before the meal to tease out what flavours you enjoy and the type of food you feel like eating. Before long, you'll be feasting on some of your favourite flavours, as a series of street food-inspired dishes land on the table.

And between courses, you'll find yourself staring into the hypnotic blue waters and once again slipping into that most peculiar of states: total serene and obscene relaxation. ●