

A wide-angle photograph of a sunset over a beach. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey, with scattered clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a beach is visible. In the middle ground, two boats are anchored in the calm water. The overall mood is serene and romantic.

travel

with Stephen McCarty

# Solo survivor

Surrounded by honeymoon couples on Fiji's romantic Vomo Island, Rachael Oakes-Ash turns a blind eye to the 'do not disturb' signs and learns to love again.

Every single girl fantasises about "the wedding"; even before they meet "the one". Women's fantasies are big business. Vera Wang and Kim Robinson rely on this fantasy to make big bucks. We know what shade of oyster, mushroom or ivory we will wear on our big day, the Tiffany trinkets we plan to give our bridesmaids and exactly which long-stemmed flowers, white-chocolate cake and string quartet bridal waltz we want.

We also know the honeymoon destination, how many days we plan to be there, what resort wear will be suitable for lounging by the pool and what type of cocktail will suit our newlywed persona. For me? Fiji and lychee martinis.

One problem: for 13 months and 12 days I have been single. Not that I am counting. If I were, I'd know I have 187 days until I turn 38, a one-in-three chance of remaining single for the rest of my life and a 10 per cent chance of becoming pregnant (provided I am partaking in appropriate activities). As for the honeymoon, you can't have one without a man. Or can you?

"Why should all the smug marrieds have all the fun?" I think as I touch down at Fiji's Nadi airport ready for my

honeymoon for one on romantic Vomo Island. Okay, so I have had to pay the same price as two for the privilege, but who decreed crystal-clear waters, white sandy beaches and balmy sunsets are reserved for couples?

It's said tourists first visit Fiji for the tropical setting and return for the warmth of the islanders. My first taste of said warmth is provided by the strong arms of Wise and Situ as they lift me from the Vomo boat. Glad to be single, I allow myself to tumble into their chests as my feet hit the sand; until I note their wedding rings and realise I will be the only "unmarried" on the island.

Sofitel Vomo Island is an hour's boat ride, or 10 minutes by helicopter, from Nadi airport. With only 29 villas for two set on a private island, Vomo is purpose-built for love. Each villa, or *bure*, faces the ocean, perfect for mellow afternoon cocktails on your private deck.

The high chiefs of western Fiji traditionally chose Vomo for their annual retreats and it's easy to see why. Each of the 90 hectares of pure island paradise has something special – something that extends to the coral reefs just offshore and to the marine life below. The island is

crowned by Mount Vomo, which, at an elevation of 135 metres, is more hill than mountain, but the view from the top is jaw-dropping and the walk back down precarious.

It is an island for lovers – lovers of relaxation. And where there are lovers, there will be music. The food of love plays a key role on Vomo Island. It seems every Fijian can sing, play a ukulele or strum a guitar and the Vomo band harmonises local songs designed to defrost the city slickers' frozen hearts. It gets under your skin, into your soul and has you crying when you leave, especially because they insist on singing as you step into the departure boat. At first, this open generosity of spirit is disconcerting. We cold westerners are unused to the human touch and genuine concern, but as day turns to night turns to day, our smiles turn from stressed grimaces to beams from within.

But this woman cannot live on music alone and it seems newlyweds can't either. Dinner is served by firelight around the central *bure*'s resort pool. It's all palm-tree silhouettes and French champagne. Here, the animals come in two by two ... and then there's me. Thank



**Clockwise from left: sunset over Vomo Island sets the mood; hammocks tempt lovers of relaxation; a local with an octopus destined for the barbecue; The Rocks restaurant at dusk.**



God the chef, James Garden, has taken it upon himself to talk me through each course. Yet to settle into my solo holiday status, I fantasise that his intentions are romantic, but I suspect he has not had time out for a number of months and even the drunken ramblings of a western woman are better than reading himself to sleep.

Meals are included in the resort price, which is good because a bride who has been starving herself to fit into her frock can develop a huge appetite come honeymoon time. Breakfast is hearty, to replenish the energy expelled in the *buress* the night before: pancakes, eggs Benedict, bircher muesli and fresh omelettes.

Lunch is served by the pool, on your personal deck or beachside on one of the platforms overlooking the ocean. Garden has designed a menu to keep high-maintenance palates happy. Kokoda, the local fish dish, which features coconut cream, peppers and lime, is a favourite for its lightness and freshness.

But it's the dinner menu that really excels, with sea scallops, fresh potato gnocchi, prawns, lamb racks and reef fish, followed by vanilla-poached pears. Once a week,

guests dine at The Rocks restaurant, an open-air terrace of exposed wood perched atop a sandy bar and overlooking an uninhabited island called Vomo Lailai. The band provides the soundtrack for selfish lovers who choose to dine on the sand itself.

*Moi?* I choose the terrace and devour barbecued crayfish and apple crumble with butterscotch sauce. If no one's going to touch my thighs, I might as well feed them. But I need not have worried about dining alone because it seems the general manager is also in need of some conversation over a fancy drop of sauvignon blanc. Word has obviously got round that there is a single woman on the island and she isn't afraid of a chat.

After the second day, I forget to notice the couples. The female partners have sussed me out and decided I pose no threat; instead, they seek me out for girlie chats. As a result, I am never short of kayaking partners for the snorkelling trip to Vomo Lailai. Wise and Situ are more than happy to take me sailing or to accompany me on a trek to the top of the hill for early morning sunrise photo opportunities. Soon I am begging for time alone.

Hammocks thoughtfully oblige and I spend hours hanging around under the palm trees with a light breeze caressing my sun-kissed skin. Gosh, I am beginning to fall in love with myself again. All that relaxation in a romantic setting has finally got to me.

**Getting there:** Virgin Atlantic flies from Hong Kong to Sydney daily, with connecting Pacific Blue flights to Nadi. See [www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com). Sofitel Vomo Island, Fiji ([www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)) offers rooms from FJ\$1,260 (\$5,822) a night for two people, including all meals. Transfers from Nadi to Vomo can be arranged by the resort. From December, Sofitel will be offering wedding and honeymoon packages from FJ\$715 a couple at the Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa, close to Vomo. E-mail [fijisales@accor.com](mailto:fijisales@accor.com) for more information.