

David Gilmour, Who Brought Fiji's Water to the Masses, Dies at 91

An entrepreneur for more than 50 years, he built a luxurious club in Fiji and started a bottled water company, now the second-largest imported water brand in the United States.



By Richard Sandomir

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David Gilmour, a Canadian-born entrepreneur who in the 1990s built a luxury resort on Wakaya, a tiny island he owned in Fiji, then created Fiji Natural Artesian Water, turning a local resource into a leading bottled brand, died on June 11 at his home in Manhattan. He was 91.

The cause was cardiac arrest, said David Roth, a friend and business partner.

By the time he bought Wakaya from two business partners in 1987, Mr. Gilmour had built several businesses over 30 years. He imported Scandinavian home furnishings and built high-end stereos. He helped assemble a chain of hotels in the South Pacific, which made him familiar with the archipelago nation of Fiji, and he co-founded a gold-mining company.

But there was something different about Wakaya. At the time, he was mourning the death of his only child, Erin Gilmour, who had been murdered in her apartment in Toronto in 1983.

He called the island “the last bastion of sanity in the world,” his wife, Jillian (Sweeney) Gilmour, said in a phone interview. “He thought when everything went kerflooey, this is where he would go. The island itself is so beautiful. There’s an area called Chieftain’s Leap, with soaring cliffs, where peregrine falcons make their nests.”

In 1990, he opened the Wakaya Club & Spa, a cluster of eight free-standing suites on a former coconut plantation. At the time, he said, he opened it as “really just a place where my friends, those I can’t put up in my own home, can come and share the peace.” He added, “I don’t see it as terribly commercial, frankly. It will probably only break even.”

It nonetheless became popular with celebrities, including Tom Cruise, Bill and Melinda Gates (who spent part of their honeymoon there) and Keith Richards, who fell out of a palm tree there in 2006 and was flown to a hospital in New Zealand with a head injury.

Wakaya Resort in Fiji in June 1999. Acey Harper/Getty Images

One day in the 1990s, Mr. Gilmour saw guests at the property drinking bottled Evian.

“He said, ‘There’s something wrong with this picture,’ and I said, “What do you mean?’” Ms. Gilmour said. “And he said, ‘We’re on our own island, and they’re drinking water from Lake Geneva. I know that with Fiji’s rainfall, there must be a greater water source.’”

Mr. Gilmour learned of an underground aquifer beneath the volcanic highlands of the Fijian island of Viti Levu with water rich in the mineral silica. In 1996, his company began packaging and shipping its distinctive square bottles around the world.

Mr. Gilmour said the water’s purity was the result of Fiji’s geographic remoteness. “There’s no acid rain, no industrial pollution, no pesticides,” he told The Palm Beach Post in 1998. “It’s the purest virgin ecosystem.”

Fiji is now the second-largest imported water brand in the United States, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation.

David Harrison Gilmour was born on Nov. 5, 1931, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and grew up in Toronto. His father, Adam Gilmour, was an investment banker, and his mother, Doris Godson Gilmour, was an opera singer.

Mr. Gilmour studied business management for a year at the University of Toronto and then accepted his father's offer of a \$10-a-day stipend to travel through Europe, which he did for a while before returning to Canada.

"I learned what people are really like," he told Palm Beach Illustrated in 2015. "I learned to touch only what I totally believe in 100 percent. And I learned how to take care of myself."

Fiji was marketed as a luxury brand from "the purest virgin ecosystem," Mr. Gilmour said, but the product was criticized by environmentalists for wasting energy and creating plastic waste. Araya Doheny/Getty Images

He turned down his father's offer to join his bank and instead moved to Montreal to sell pots and pans door to door for a year.

His first business was importing modern, streamlined Scandinavian housewares and furnishings. He followed that in 1958 with the start-up Clairtone Sound, a collaboration with Peter Munk, a Hungarian-born electrical engineer. The company made critically acclaimed,

sophisticated hi-fi systems whose buyers included Frank Sinatra and Hugh Hefner. But it foundered after branching into televisions and shifting operations, disastrously, to Nova Scotia.

Amid steep losses, Mr. Gilmour and Mr. Munk were forced out of the company in 1968 and later settled a lawsuit claiming that they sold shares before the announcement of poor quarterly results in 1967.

They recovered quickly, starting Southern Pacific Properties in 1969, which accumulated more than 50 hotels in Australia, New Zealand as well as in Fiji, New Caledonia, Tahiti and other islands. An ambitious development that was to be built near the pyramids in Giza, Egypt, was eventually nixed by President Anwar Sadat in 1978.

Three years later, Tan Sri Khoo Teck Puat, a Singaporean banker, purchased Southern Pacific for a reported \$130 million, but Wakaya remained separately owned by Mr. Gilmour and his partners, until Mr. Gilmour bought them out.

In the early 1980s, Mr. Gilmour and Mr. Munk were among the original partners in Barrick Gold, one of the world's largest gold producers. Mr. Munk was its longtime chairman and chief executive, and Mr. Gilmour was a board member until 2001. Mr. Munk died in 2018.

Mr. Gilmour described his working relationship with Mr. Munk in 2008 with The Globe and Mail of Toronto. "I am more the entrepreneurial type who likes challenges of starting up, and Peter loves growing a colossus," he said. "Once it reaches a critical mass, I kind of get bored sitting around a boardroom table."

Fiji water, marketed as a luxury brand, was a major commercial success but, like other brands, drew scorn from environmentalists, who criticized the industry for the energy consumed and greenhouse gases created in making and shipping plastic bottles, and for the plastic waste they leave behind. Fiji, in particular, was singled out for shipping water to consumers thousands of miles away.

Mr. Gilmour sold Fiji Water to Roll International in 2004, and Wakaya to Clare Bronfman, an heir to the Seagram's liquor fortune, in 2016, after a Category 5 cyclone devastated the island. "We sold it for 10 cents on the dollar," Ms. Gilmour said. In 2020, Ms. Bronfman was sentenced to prison for her role in enabling the Nxivm sex cult.

Mr. Gilmour is survived by his wife. His marriages to Anna Wilmot, Erin's mother, and to Diane Williams ended in divorce.

Mr. Gilmour, who sold his Palm Beach estate last year for \$44.9 million, had one last company in his portfolio at his death: Wakaya Perfection, a wellness company that sells powders and capsules of ginger and turmeric grown in volcanic soil in Fiji and Nicaragua.

“David had this belief that organic, single-source, very pure, high-quality ginger and turmeric would be something that people wanted,” Mr. Roth, who started the company with Mr. Gilmour, said by phone. “And Oprah chose it twice as one of her favorite things.”

Richard Sandomir is an obituaries writer. He previously wrote about sports media and sports business. He is also the author of several books, including “The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper and the Making of a Classic.”

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