

SPECIAL REPORT

**HOW-TO
TIPS:**

SNORKELING PHOTOGRAPHY

skin diver

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WHY SHARKS DON'T BITE DIVERS!

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The Cayman Islands

SHARKS YOU SHOULD KNOW: The Bonnethead Shark

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The Sere cruises the Fiji Islands
Okeanos Aggressor to Coco Island
Mike Ball Dive Expeditions to Coral Sea & PNG

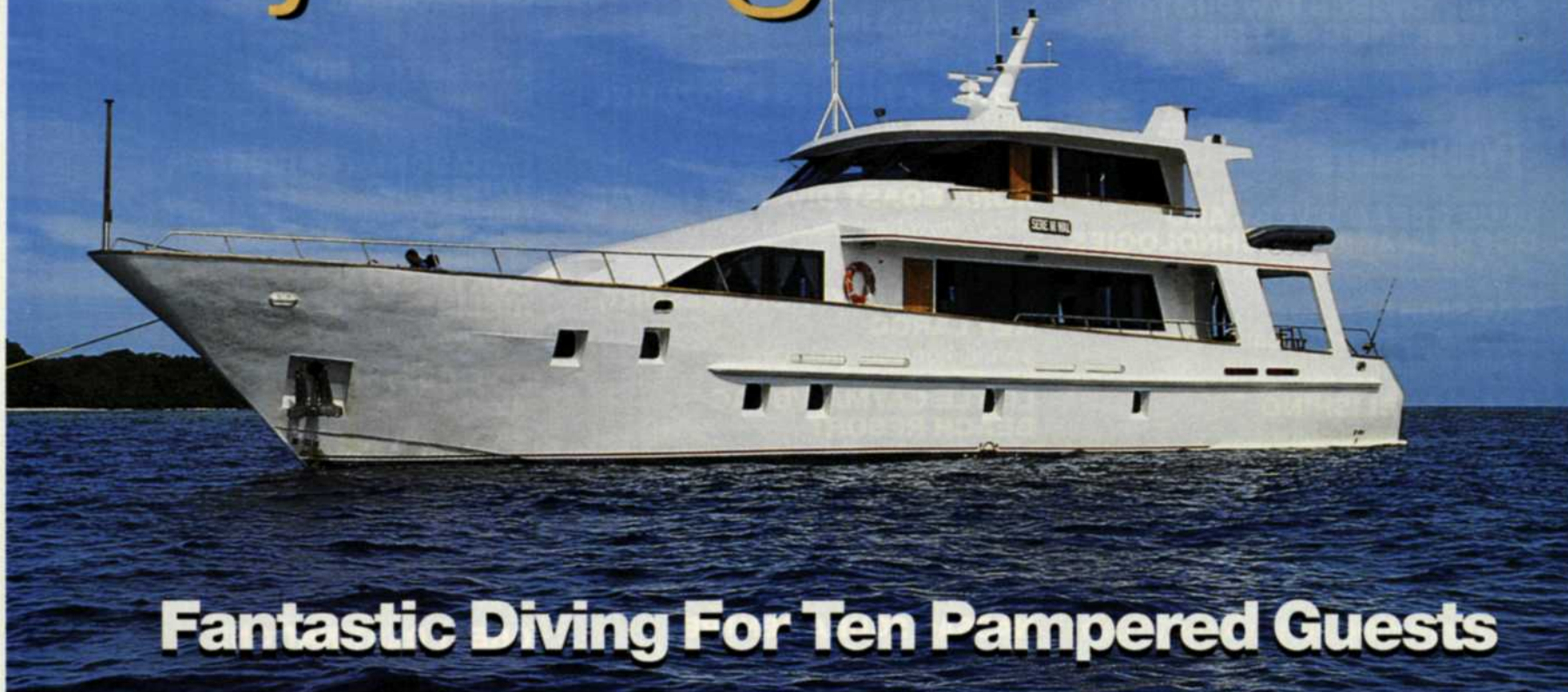
DIVE GEAR REPORTS:

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I LEARNED... Florida Cave Diving Puzzle- Which Way Up, Which Way Out?



Fiji's Elegant Sere



Fantastic Diving For Ten Pampered Guests

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK AND SUE DRAFAHL

Your initial consideration when deciding where to spend your next dive vacation will be choosing a land based or live-aboard operation.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both and many divers have a hard time making a decision. In recent years, live-aboards have evolved into a high quality diving choice. New dive boats are constantly being added. One of the newest is the *Sere* and she is one beautiful boat! No expense was spared in her design; she was built solely to spoil her guests. Launched in January 1995, this custom built vessel is owned and captained by Greg Lawlor, a fourth generation Fijian. He takes great pride in making each trip one to remember.

Built specifically for diving, the *Sere* is 101 feet long, with a 22 foot beam. She accommodates a maximum of ten divers and a crew of four. With this many square feet per diver, you quickly begin to realize what diving comfort is really about. It is very easy to be on a part of the boat and not see anyone else.

Four large, individually air-conditioned staterooms are below decks, two on each side of a long hallway. Each room


has a large double bed with a single bunk above it. There are drawers under the bottom bunk for clothes. There are additional drawers in a desk/dresser on the opposite side of the room. The bathroom is very large and has its own private sink, toilet and a shower big enough for two.

A specially designed fifth stateroom is near the lounge on the middle deck. This "honeymoon suite" boasts a very large bed, private bath and several large windows on the port side.

The lounge on the middle deck has several large couches and chairs arranged around the video center. Divers can watch prerecorded videotapes or view the results of guest videos recorded on a previous dive. A large dining table is aft of the lounge and accommodates all the guests comfortably. Food is prepared in a very large kitchen below decks and brought up to the dining area. Both American and Fijian foods are served. The crew is also able to prepare meals for guests with special dietary needs.

For those who want to catch a little sun, there are lounge chairs on the forward sundeck and on the upper and lower aft sundecks.

At the *Sere's* stern are two spiral staircases that lead to the dive deck. A large bench on the swimstep allows divers to comfortably sit down and put on their tanks. Once they are fully geared, they



Top: After being spoiled by Fiji's fine diving, *Sere* guests can relax in luxury on the 101 foot live-aboard. Above: A territorial dispute brings a pair of damsels within kissing distance.

simply stand up and take a giant stride into the warm Fijian waters. When guests return from the dive, their tanks are placed back on the bench and filled for the next dive. Fresh towels are available at all times, as they are constantly recycled through the boats' laundry system.

The *Sere* accommodates the special needs of the underwater photographer. Crew members hand you your camera and take it from you as you go in and out of the water. A freshwater rinse tank is near the two camera tables. There is one camera table outside and another inside, for more delicate camera systems.

Diving aboard the *Sere* is just about as good as it gets. Even though the boat is 101 feet long, Greg moors it right on top of most of the dive locations. This means you merely jump off the swimstep and descend to the dive site. On

those few occasions when the *Sere* cannot be moored over the reef, a skiff is used to transport the divers to and from the site. All traveling to different areas is done at night in order to maximize the number of dives during the day.

Most of the diving is in or near an area in Fiji called Bligh Waters. This band of nutrient rich water, between the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, has an extremely high level of animal life. Each *Sere* trip differs slightly owing to divers' needs, weather and overall conditions.

It's hard to say which site is the best, everyone has his/her favorites. Fortunately, the *Sere* dives most of the favorite spots, such as Beqa and Astrolabe Lagoons, Wakaya, Namena, Savusavu, Taveuni, Lau Group and Vatulele.

Wakaya is one of our favorite Fijian critter dives. The main dive spot is a narrow channel where the tide exchanges. Large, deep walls at the end of the channel give shelter to Leafish, Blue Ribbon Eels and friendly octopus. A large Hammerhead Shark frequents the area. Night dives here are spectacular, with possible sightings of crabs, lobsters, shrimp, cuttlefish, octopus, squid and nudibranchs.

Gau is a very popular drift dive and is where the *Sere* makes its village trip. The *Sere*'s skiff takes you to one end of the 60 to 90 foot deep channel, drops you off and picks you up at the other end. The current is usually mild and features schools of sharks and Barracuda.

A two to three hour village trip is usually scheduled during the tidal changes. Here you have the opportunity to meet and be entertained by some of the friendliest people on earth. You can drink kava, dance and listen to music performed by the villagers.

Namena Island has several dive sites around it but the best is **Grand Central Station**. The edge of the deep channel, where it dumps into the deep blue, is filled with large schools of Barracuda.

One of our favorite bommies is called **Kansas**, because of the yellow soft corals that completely cover the top. The sides of Kansas are a macro photographer's paradise, where you'll find yourself trying to decide which animal to photograph first.

E-6 is by far the best dive spot in Fiji and, weather permitting, is one of *Sere*'s stops through the Bligh Waters. This 3,000 foot high seamount requires a special mooring setup.

The best dive spot on E-6 is **Cathedral Cave**. It starts on the face of E-6 at about 40 feet, goes into the reef a short distance and then turns back out to the

Sample Sere



GETTING THERE

Flights to Fiji are available through Air Pacific and Qantas. The nonstop Air Pacific flight from Los Angeles to Fiji's International Airport in Nadi is approximately 10 hours. The outer islands can be reached via the local carriers, Air Fiji and Sunflower.

Air Pacific	Qantas
(800) 227-4446	(800) 227-4500



Above: The *Sere*'s guests reside in simple elegance in four ensuite staterooms; a fifth ensuite stateroom (not shown) provides a double bed and large windows.



Above: Greg Lawlor, the boat's captain and owner, gives a dive briefing. Below: Spiral stairs lead to a large dive deck, where guests have ample room and a water level swimstep for an easy entry.



deep wall. The actual shape of the cave looks very much like a bent horseshoe. The cave can handle six divers at one time and has some of the most diverse animal life we have ever seen. We have spent at least 30 dives in this cave and always find something new to photograph. We have seen five foot tall soft corals with base stems more than ten inches thick. On these soft coral branches, we have found coral cowries, camouflaged shrimp, fish and crabs. The cave walls are loaded with nudibranchs, flatworms, sponges and every type of soft coral imaginable.

The *Sere* is based in Suva, Fiji. It is easily reached via Air Pacific's ten hour flight from Los Angeles to Nadi. You then transfer to Suva via either Sunflower Airlines or Air Fiji. The *Sere* is based near the Tradewinds Hotel, where you can stay if you arrive early or plan on doing some additional sightseeing after the trip.

The luxury and comfort offered by the *Sere* makes live-aboards the diving answer. Now the question is, "How fast can you pack your gear to leave?"

To book your dream vacation, contact Fiji's longest established live-aboard operation, Captain Greg Lawlor, Mollie Dean Cruises Holdings, Ltd., P.O. Box 3256, Lami, Fiji Islands; (800) 443-0799, 011 (679) 361-171, fax 011 (679) 361-137. 🐠