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The Secrets of Diving in Fiji

An Island Nation Rich in Culture Invites Divers to Explore Its Depths

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JACK & SUE DRAFAHL

Surfing the Web one day, we ran across Fiji's new home page. The text read, "Fiji—the way the world should be." If you've ever been there you would know that is the absolute truth. Fiji is a special place where the people are so friendly they have no word for stranger. This island paradise offers magnificent flowers and lush foliage that can only be rivaled by what lies beneath the crystal blue waters that gently lap the shoreline. You can find deep walls, comfortable shallows, current cuts, soft corals, hard corals and animal life galore.

Fiji, a group of more than 300 islands in the southwest Pacific, is northeast of Australia and New Zealand and southwest of Hawaii. To get a better idea of what it has to offer, we have divided it into three regions—western, central and northern.

The northern section includes Fiji's second largest island, Vanua Levu, along with Taveuni, Laucala, Matagi, Qamea and several smaller islands. The wettest area of Fiji, it is also the lushest. Here you will find virgin forests, streams and dozens of waterfalls near the island shores. The offshore reefs are prolific and offer some of Fiji's most famous diving.

Savusavu is the largest town on Vanua Levu but don't blink when driving through it. There are several different resorts nearby, offering a range of accommodations to fit any budget or desire.

Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort features 20 *bures* (Fijian cottages), nestled in the coconut trees overlooking Savusavu Bay. It is home to Project Ocean Search, an educational study program started by Jean-Michel in the early '70s. It offers a full service dive store with a 37 foot V-hulled dive boat with twin 330 hp engines, on-site E-6 film processing and a freshwater pool. Planned activities for the whole family include trips to mangroves, local village visits, tide-pooling, snorkeling and kayaking.

Eco Divers is for those on a budget. Two fast inflatables allow divers to enjoy all the same sites visited by Jean-



A diver finds a photogenic colony of soft corals. Top: An elegant specimen of the soft corals that proliferate on Fiji's reefs.

Michel Cousteau Resort. Eco Divers features a retail dive store with changing rooms and showers. They serve as booking agents and can arrange for all types of local accommodations. Eco Divers can also arrange land excursions to villages and treks through the rain forests.

If you are looking to get away from it all and be totally pampered, Namale Resort is the place. Recently renovated, it now offers eight *bures* that capture the essence of luxury and simplicity. The *bures* are nestled into the flora and fauna, guaranteeing privacy. Namale offers two dives a day and many other activities.

All the sites are buoyed and shared by all three dive operations. The diving around Savusavu Bay is easy and offers something for everyone. Coral bommies such as **Nuggets** and **Split Rock** are home to animals galore. The depths can range from a few feet to more than 100. Lots of small critters live in the nooks and crannies.

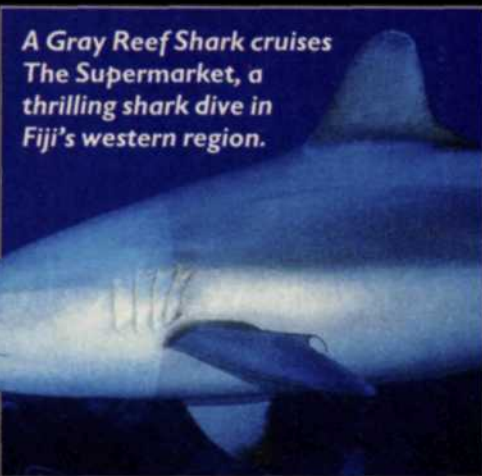
Deeper wall diving can be found in the **Koro Sea**. Here the current exchange offers more of the soft corals for which Fiji is famed. **Hole in the Wall** has dozens of large colorful soft corals adorning the breathtaking walls. Oh, yes, there is a beautiful swim-through at the top of the wall that gives the dive its name. About 20 miles to the south, some of the best diving can be found off **Namenalala Island**. Here the tidal exchange through two current cuts offers a dive that keeps the adrenaline pumping from start to finish. **Grand Central Station** is the best, with large schools of Barracuda, sharks and rays swimming along with you.

Just to the east is Fiji's third largest island, Taveuni. It is home to several resorts offering everything from backpacking tents to luxurious accommodations where dinner is served on fine china. Nicknamed the Garden Island, it offers rich greenery adorned with flowers of every color.

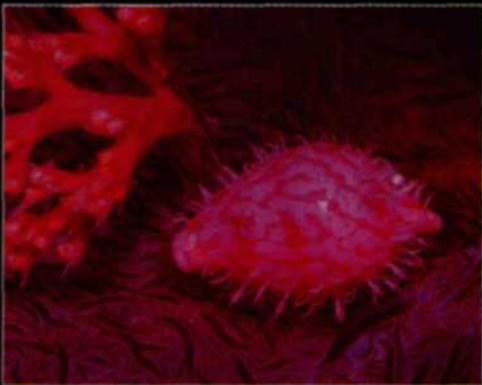
The **Somosomo Strait**, between Taveuni and Vanua Levu, offers some of the finest diving in the world. Here you will find **Rainbow Reef**, covered with soft corals feeding during the tidal exchange. This is the home of the **Great White Wall**, which is covered with hundreds of white soft corals all feeding in the current.

Dive Taveuni is owned and operated by the Cammick family. It features eight private *bures* surrounded by sprawling gardens. Meals are exquisitely prepared and served on the outdoor patio so you can enjoy the sunset overlooking the Somosomo Strait. A recent addition is a hillside swimming pool that offers a panoramic view.

Garden Island Resort is a traditionally styled hotel that sits on the edge of the Somosomo Strait. It features 28 comfortable rooms, freshwater pool, restaurant and open air bar. The hotel was recently purchased by Aqua-Trek, which operates dive centers in Nadi and on Mana Island. The dive operation,



A Gray Reef Shark cruises The Supermarket, a thrilling shark dive in Fiji's western region.



Above: A waterfall cascades from a verdant cliff in the interior of an island in Fiji's northern region. Left: The coloration of this tiny mollusk keeps it safe within a branch of soft coral.

Rainbow Reef Divers, offers diving on some of Fiji's finest sites in minutes.

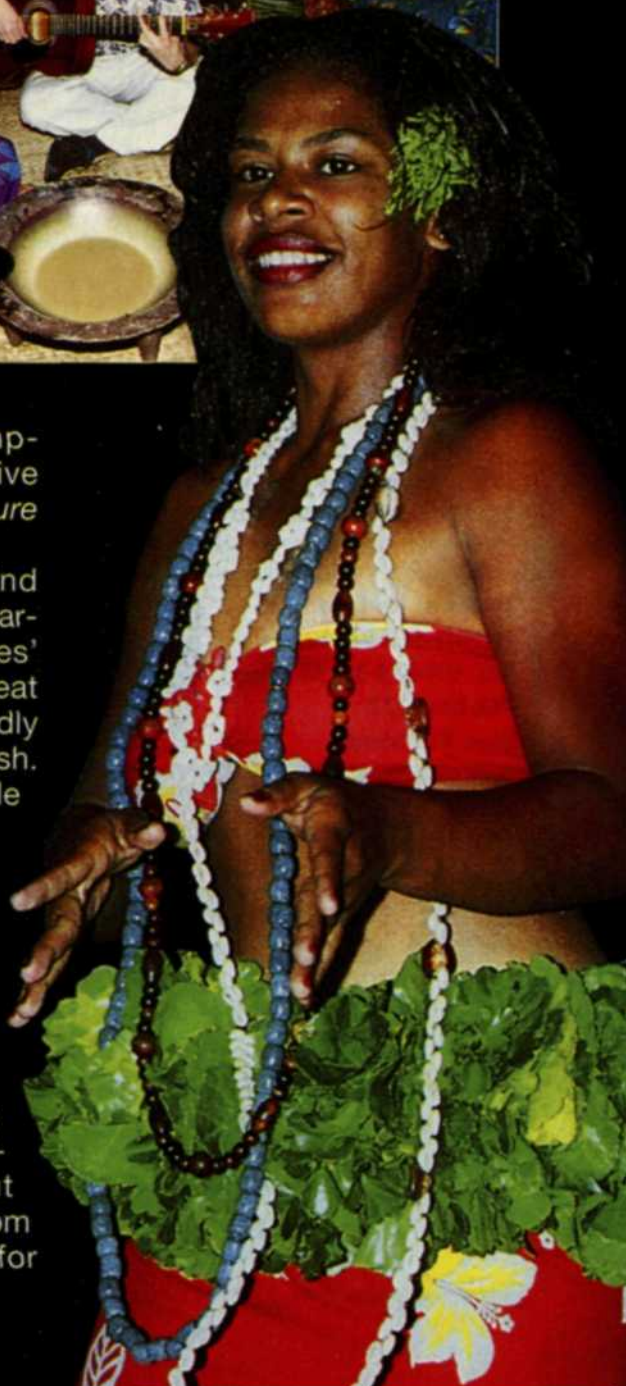
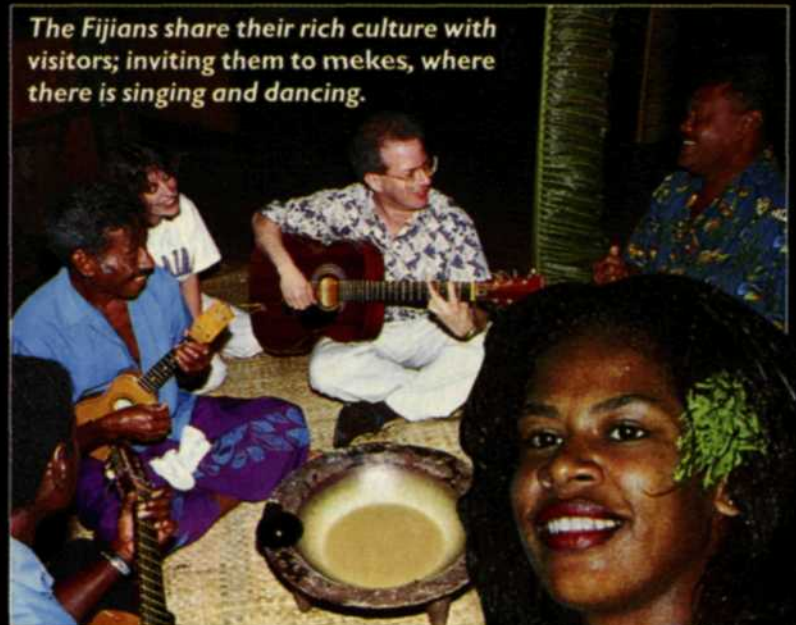
Aquaventure Taveuni offers diving in the Somosomo Strait as well as the waters to the north. They service guests of Taveuni's northern accommodations, such as the Maravu Plantation Resort, which features 10 *bures* amid 54 acres of tropical gardens. There is also a campground on the beach adjacent to the dive operation which consists of tent sites, *bure* and dormitory.

Just northeast of Taveuni you will find tiny, privately owned Laucala, an island paradise that was originally Malcolm Forbes' getaway. Fiji Forbes is a 3,000 acre retreat with seven oceanfront *bures* and a friendly staff dedicated to fulfilling your every wish. Best of all, there is no set diving schedule here, you dive when you want to.

Matangi Island is a 240 acre private island run by the Douglas family. It features 10 *bures* and even a romantic getaway perched in the treetops. At the nearby island you will find the Qamea Beach Club, which has 11 beachfront *bures* set in 43 acres of tropical gardens.

The waters around these islands offer a diver's paradise. All three island dive operations have their own special sites but some are shared by all. Depths range from 15 to 130 feet and dozens of sites run for

The Fijians share their rich culture with visitors; inviting them to mekes, where there is singing and dancing.



Fiji

miles along the walls in front of the islands. As you drift along the wall you find many overhangs and deep crevices, home to an array of colorful sealife. At the bottom of these crevices you will find rubble piles where shrimp, nudibranchs and crabs

make their home.

There are several live-aboard boats that cruise the Fijian waters. Each has its own special sites but their routes tend to overlap. Live-aboards show you fabulous U/W sights but generally offer limited cultural experiences.

Live-aboards can also reach locations almost impossible to get to from resorts. One of Fiji's best dive spots is **E-6**, in the middle of the Bligh Waters, and accessible only by live-aboard. The depth around this pinnacle is 3,000 feet, making it an incredible wall dive.

The 85 foot *Matagi Princess II* is owned by Carol and Nigel Douglas. With six deluxe staterooms this boat can accommodate 12 divers. It tours the diverse and pristine sites of Fiji's north.

The 120 foot *Nai'a* is family owned and operated by Rob Barrel, his sister Alex and her husband, Todd Edwards. The *Nai'a* is designed to accommodate up to 18 guests in nine spacious staterooms. They cruise the waters near Wakaya, Gau and Namena, where you can expect to see

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The 101 foot *Sere* is owned by Greg Lawlor, a fourth generation Fiji resident. There are five deluxe staterooms that will accommodate 10 divers. The *Sere*'s travels include most of the areas the other vessels cover. The *Sere* is now an Aggressor Fleet vessel.

The newest addition to Fiji's waters is the *Fiji Aggressor*, scheduled to be operational late this month. It will cruise the northern waters based at Savusavu and the southern waters from Suva.

The central area of Fiji has drier weather than the north yet still offers variety underwater. It includes Kadavu, Bega Lagoon and Vatulele.

Kadavu is Fiji's fourth largest island. It is very remote, with virtually no roads. Access to the two main dive operations is by boat only. Matana Beach Resort/Dive Kadavu offers accommodations that are oceanfront as well as those nestled into the green hillside. Either way the view is marvelous, especially at sunset. Malawai offers luxurious colonial style cottages on 348 sprawling acres of greenery.

Both resorts have their own sites, spread out on one side of the island. The reef is made up of strings of large coral bommies. Most have swim-throughs big enough for divers and are decorated with red, pink and white soft corals. **Blue Tang** is a popular dive where you often see Blue

Tangs, of course, but also Blue Ribbon Eels, Jawfish and, if you're lucky, leaffish. You will find Fijian animal life well represented here. There is even **Robert's Wreck**, sunk by Malawai's owners.

FIJI BOUND

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 takes approximately 10 hours. The outer islands are reached via either Air Fiji or Sunflower Airlines.



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Bega Lagoon is the crater of an extinct volcano. The soft corals here compare to those found in the north. Diving here is either with Bega Divers or Marlin Bay Resort.

Vatulele is in between the central and western regions. It offers the superb weather of the west and the dynamite diving of the central region. This elegant island paradise offers 15 Mediterranean villa style *bures* and is dedicated to un-

surpassed cuisine and personal service. The diving off Vatulele features vivid soft corals, prolific hard corals, enormous seafans, sloping walls, pelagics, Garden Eels and anemonefish.

The western portion of Fiji is made up of the Mamanucas and Yasawa Islands. There are accommodations and watersports to please everyone. The weather here is nice year-round and its proximity to Nadi International airport makes it the perfect spot for family holiday getaways.

Mana Island offers extensive guest rooms designed for the whole family, while Beachcomber offers endless activities catering to the young at heart. Aqua-Trek operates the dive facility on Mana as well as a full-service retail facility in Nadi. Beachcomber's diving is run by Sub-surface Fiji Limited, which features a scuba training pool at the water's edge. Both facilities offer nitrox.

The number one site in the west is **Supermarket**. Dozens and dozens of sharks are handfed by Aqua-Trek's Api Bati. Divers form a circle on the seafloor surrounding Api and the sharks come from every direction. You can also dive the **B-26 Bomber** or be surrounded by batfish at **Gotham City**.

Fiji offers something for everyone. The friendliness of the natives is almost unbelievable. Fabulous Fiji is the way the world should be! 🐟



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