When we talk about E-6, we are usually referring to the processing of certain slide films. After a recent 10 day cruise aboard the Nai'a, E-6 now reminds us of the most incredible dive site in the world. This is just one of many great Fiji dives where you explore deep walls, swim with schools of Barracuda, watch sharks feed and record the world of macro on film.

Our trip on the Nai'a started when we hopped on a Qantas 747 in Los Angeles and flew nonstop to Nadi, Fiji. After a short bus ride to Lautoka, where the Nai'a is moored, we were on our way to a divers' paradise. The owner, Rob Barrel, greeted us and introduced passengers and crew. Instructions were given on setting up dive gear, while personal gear was stowed in our room by the crew. As the boat got underway, we were served lunch and in a few hours we were enjoying our first dive.

#### THE SHIP

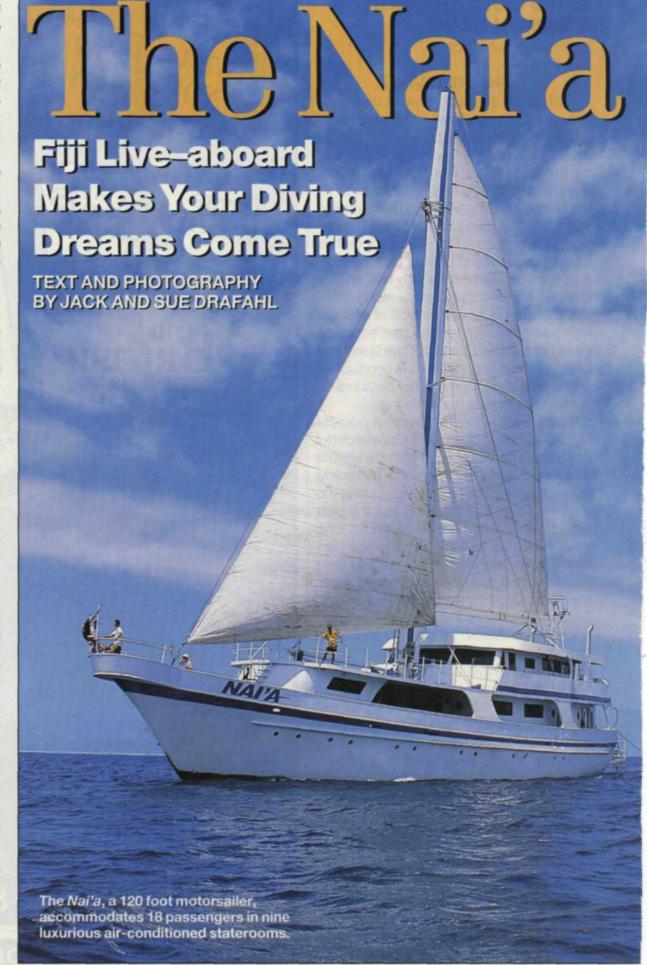
The Nai'a was designed by W. de Vries Lentsch in the Camenga, Amsterdam shipyards in 1979. Originally a personal yacht, she was converted to a luxury live-aboard in 1993. The Nai'a is owned and managed by Rob Barrel and his sister and brother-in-law, Alex and Todd Edwards. There are accommodations for 18 passengers in nine large airconditioned staterooms, eight with private bathrooms. Four staterooms have double beds, three have both a double bed and a single bunk and two have twin bunk beds. Each room has plenty of space to hang clothes and store personal gear. Staterooms are equipped with both 220 and 120 volt electricity.

The main salon, crafted out of local woods, is a spacious 625 square foot room that serves as lounge, theater, classroom and dining room. A cold breakfast of toast and cereal is served at sunrise before the first dive; there is a full breakfast afterward. Lunch is served after the second dive, snacks after the third and a white tablecloth and complimentary wine dinner is served after the dusk dive. The dress code for each meal is casual, with most guests wearing shorts and T-shirts. The meals are healthy and hearty, utilizing

locally grown produce, meat and fresh fish.

There is a large multimedia center on one side of the salon, with facilities for VHS and Hi-8 tapes in both PAL and NTSC formats, a slide projector and light box. A large music CD collection and paperback and reference book library are available for guests.

The Nai'a provides excellent photography facilities with a large camera room adjacent





the dive deck. There are storage shelves and workspace for a dozen photographers. Both 120 and 220 volt outlets are available to allow photographers to hook up a variety of chargers, lights and other electrical devices. If repairs are necessary, the on-board machinist can help you drill, cut or modify equipment. E-6 processing is available on a daily basis and processed slides are sleeved or can be hand mounted for preview in the slide projector.

The dive preparation and briefing area



Right: The delicately beautiful Blue Ribbon Eel (Rhinomuraena quaesita), is frequently encountered by divers. Below: The abundance of soft corals in Fijian waters can overwhelm the senses.





Above: Nai'a owner Rob Barrel. Left: Rob and his topnotch native crew.



Above: Two Leaf Scorpionfish (Taenianotus triacanthus) use their perfect camouflage to prowl the reef undetected.

is between the camera room and the dining hall. When you first arrive on the boat, you set up your gear the way you like it. The crew then takes it to the back of the boat where it stays for the rest of the trip. Only your mask, fins, snorkel and wetsuits return to the staging area. Wetsuits are hung to dry between dives.

The dive deck offers a lounging area sheltered from the midday sun. For those who want to work on a tan between dives, the roof over the dive and camera deck is a sundeck complete with recliners.

#### **DIVE OPERATIONS**

Diving on the Nai'a is extremely comfortable and flexible. The schedule is modified to accommodate most situations. If a pod of dolphins or whales comes by, then schedule be damned. If the passengers fall in love with one specific dive spot a new itinerary is designed to fit the divers' desires.

A typical day starts with dives at 7:30,

11:00, 2:00 and 6:30. Optional dives are offered at 4:00; several late night dives and unlimited diving are offered in between if surface intervals permit. This is definitely the trip for hardcore divers!

Most of the sites are steep walls that drop from two feet to the abyss. You start your dives deep and work your way up to the shallows. This way you waste no time making safety stops.

#### SKIFF DIVING

In most cases anchoring on the prime dive spots is next to impossible, so skiff diving is the best solution. Each dive is well orchestrated so comfort is a priority. While the divers are suiting up and being briefed, the crew is loading the skiff with gear. When the divers reach the back of the Nai'a the crew helps them into the skiffs and hands them their cameras. In most cases the dive sites are less than five minutes away.

The best part of skiff diving is that the two skiffs take turns picking up divers and returning them to the mother ship. One skiff is always on-site waiting for

divers to surface.

When you return to the Nai'a, you are helped from the skiff and your cameras are set in one of two large freshwater tanks. The gracious Fijian trade winds will dry your suit for the next dive. Two hot, freshwater showers are in the dive preparation area and a stack of fresh hot towels is always available after each dive.

#### **DIVE SITES**

Most dive sites along the itinerary are far from land and include a variety of seamounts, submerged coral reef ridges and reef cuts. Over the last three years, Rob and his crew have collected extensive data on each site and plugged it into the Nai'a's computer system. Relationships among tidal changes,

current direction and speed and location of animals are entered into the computer database. The result is an accurate, one of a kind understanding of the Fijian waters.

An excellent example of the type of diving found in the Fiji islands is a coral ridge jutting out from Nananu-i-ra, on the northern coast of Viti Levu. Dubbed Sunset Ridge, depths range from 10 to 100 feet. As you swim along the ridge, you will see

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#### NAI'A

a variety of soft corals in blues, reds, purples and sunset oranges. At 56 feet, living in a crinoid at the tip of a gorgonian, is a black and orange Harlequin Ghost Pipefish. The area is also home to a variety of anemones, clownfish, lionfish and many species of crustaceans. If you swim to 100 feet you might see Rainbow Runners, Barracuda, Surgeonfish, sharks, turtles, rays and a couple of Bumphead Wrasse.

The best example of a seamount in the Fiji Islands is the famous E-6 Seamount. It is in the narrowest part of Bligh Water, between the large islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. When it was discovered, Nai'a photographers shot dozens of rolls of slide film and had them processed in the ship's E-6 processor, hence the name of the site. The seamount rises from 3,000 feet to the surface at low tide, so anchoring is out of the question. A special mooring line has been established that keeps the Nai'a downwind from the seamount.

The Sistine Chapel, near the mooring line at E-6, is a large swim-through lined with gorgonians, soft corals and Bristle Nudibranchs. Adjoining cracks and crevices shelter many large lobster, lionfish, crabs and nudibranchs. On night dives at E-6, you are easily able to

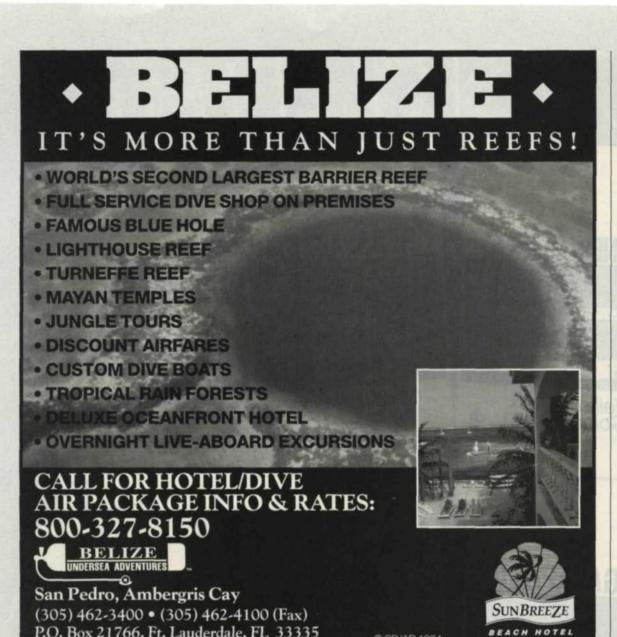
#### **NAI'A SPECIFICATIONS**

Length:	120 foot motorsailer
Beam:	30 feet
Draft:	11 feet
Displacement:	260 tons
Crew:	12
Passengers:	18
Designer:	W. de Vries Lentsch
Yard:	Camenga, Amsterdam
Built:	1979
Rebuilt:	1993
Range:	6,500 miles
Fuel:	26 tons
Water:	29 tons

find Giant Cuttlefish, Arrowhead Crabs, cowries and Flashlight Fish.

Not far away, there is a smaller seamount called Mount Mutiny. Highlights of diving Mount Mutiny are a wall of Siphonogorgiidae soft corals, an unusual thin-stalked species of octocoral found in a broad range of colors whose colonies can extend for 200 meters at depths of 60 to 120 feet.

Off the island of Wakaya lies a coral reef that offers a treasure chest of exotic creatures. On the four dives we made along this reef we found half a dozen Blue Ribbon Eels, two green leaffish, a gray leaffish, Manta Rays, Hammerhead

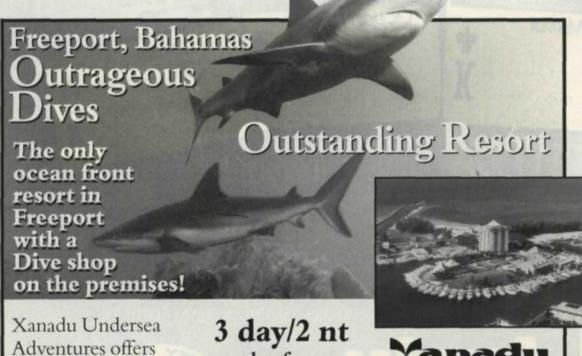




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### NAI'A

Sharks and a macro wall that would run any photographer out of film in 30 minutes. This is definitely one of those snote where it is tough to deput on the camera. At the top o the large coral heads, we found two very active fish cleaning stations that were sure to entertain any diver. Two types of dartfish were friendly enough to allow photographers a close look at their beautiful color variations.

Nigali Passage, near the island of



Qantas Airways provides convenient nonstop service to Fiji from Los Angeles.

#### **GETTING THERE**

Fiji can be conveniently reached via two international airlines:

> Air Pacific (800) 227-4446

> **Qantas** (800) 227-4500

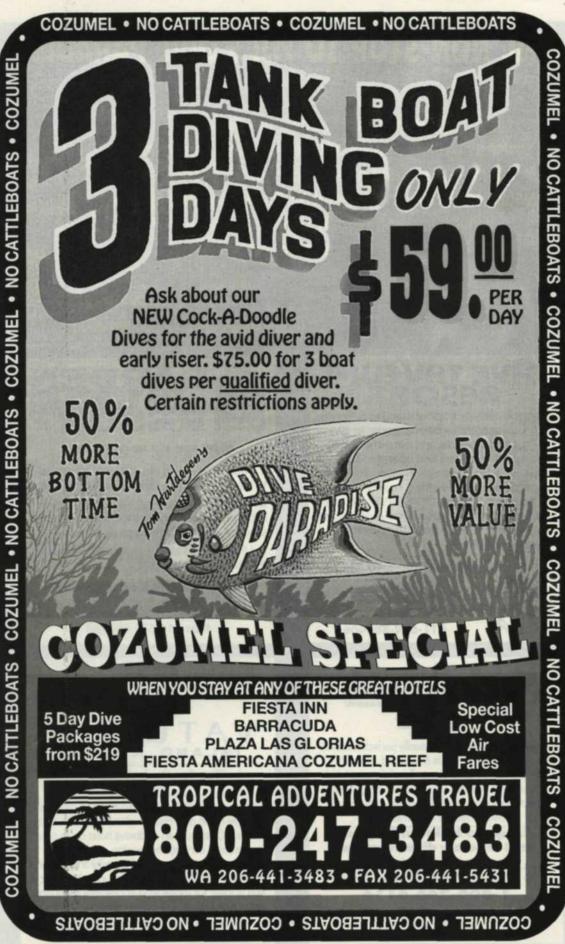
To access Fiji's outer islands, contact the following airline:

> Air Fiji (800) 677-4277 (310) 670-7302

Gau, hosts a variety of diverse dives. A narrow cut in the reef surrounding the island provides a channel of water where there are schools of sharks, Barracuda and a fish dubbed a Snapass (one reference book calls it a snapper, while another calls it a bass). Each dive is timed so divers follow the current through the cut toward the inside of the reef. The two skiffs drop the divers off so they can drift past schools of fish swimming the opposite direction. When you reach the end of the cut, you surface to find the skiffs ready to take you back.

After a couple of dives through the cut, Rob gives a briefing on a shark feeding and describes how each diver will place himself/herself during the dive. Once everyone is in place, Rob comes down with the bait on a line and ties it to a rock in the middle of the divers. At first Snapass attack the bait but eventually the sharks come in. This is the perfect time for photographers to get their shark close-ups.

If the current is not right or it is too late to dive in the cut, the Nai'a moves to Jim's Alley on another side of Gau.



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#### NAI'A

There we found dozens of types of soft coral, a large sea snake, starfish galore, many schools of fish and half a dozen species of nudibranchs. Several mantas are regular visitors, too.

Off the island of Namenalala is a site called Grand Central Station. This dive has it all: deep walls, current cuts, huge schools of fish, nudibranchs and beautiful coral formations that are perfect for your wide angle lens. Our first dive at Namenalala put us in the middle of a huge school of Barracuda (we estimated it at more than 2,000 fish) that seemed completely oblivious of us. The same school of fish greeted us on each dive we made.

For those who like deep water pelagics, this is the place. You merely swim down to the edge of the wall and wait for sharks, turtles and rays to swim by. If you let the current carry you away from the wall, you will eventually end up in Kansas. This area is covered with a soft coral, called Sinularia, that resembles a wheat field swaying in the wind.

#### THE VILLAGE VISIT

No dive trip to the Fiji Islands would be complete unless it included a village visit. Although most of your time is on board the Nai'a, many passengers feel this is one of the trip's highlights. Rob gives briefings on village customs and the sequence of events the day before visiting the village. Once ashore, the villagers welcomed us with a smile and a flower lei. Fijians are the friendliest people on earth and they were honored we chose to visit their village. After a stroll through the village, everyone has the opportunity to drink kava, dance with the natives and be delightfully entertained. The two hour trip is enjoyed by all.

#### CONCLUSION

We would have a tough time trying to pick out the best part of diving with the Nai'a. All the parts work together: The crew is the friendliest, the food is superb, diving is fantastic, the rooms are spacious and the atmosphere is very relaxing. The only complaint we have is that the trip seemed too short. We wish we could have had 10 days at every dive spot!

Bookings for the Nai'a in the United States are handled exclusively by See & Sea Travel. Most of the organization's agents have been aboard Nai'a and know the specifics of the ship and the details of the diving. They can provide up-to-theminute information on availability, water temperature, new discoveries and special airline discounts. Contact the dive experts at (800) DIV-XPRT for your diving adventure aboard the magnificent Nai'a!