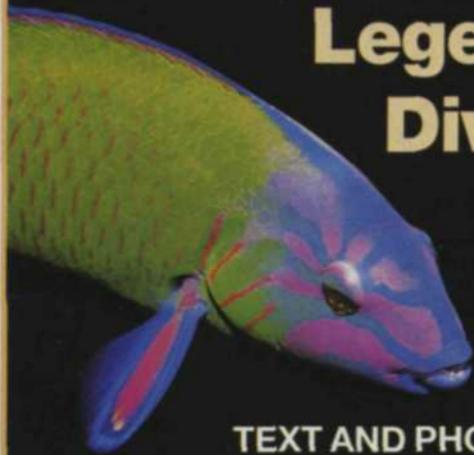


Savusavu

Legendary Diving in Fiji's North



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JACK AND SUE DRAFAHL

We were into the dive only ten minutes and had already found one-half dozen lionfish, a moray eel, a sea snake and numerous nudibranchs. We were quickly running out of film. The visibility was great, there was no current and we were only 100 yards from the front of our resort on Savusavu, Fiji. We exited the water, reloaded our cameras and made a second shore dive with a swimming yellow seahorse.

At this point you may ask, "If the diving is this good right offshore, what is it like on the 20 some odd dive sites around Savusavu?" If we had to describe it in one word, we would say that Savusavu has variety. Its dive sites vary greatly in depth and animal life and offer two types of conditions. Savusavu's inside bay is usually calm, relaxing and perfect for those who want easy diving and a great variety of animal life. The outer reefs have more current, deeper walls and, generally, larger



Background: Split Rock, only 50 yards from shore, is a microcosm of Fijian U/W enchantment. Top: A colorful wrasse. Above: Local boys don traditional garb.

animals. Once you dive both, you will never want to leave Fiji.

It was so easy to get to Savusavu, we wondered why we had not come here long ago. A 10½ hour flight from Los Angeles takes you directly to Nadi International Airport. There are also flights from Hawaii, Japan and Australia. Once you arrive at the Nadi airport you will find customs and immigration easy, as the airport is small and friendly. Luggage carts are plentiful for moving your dive gear to the next airline counter. If you plan on staying an extra day or two before a trip to Vanua Levu, there are plenty of hotels in Nadi.

Downtown Nadi offers all types of Fijian gift shops. Flower lovers must see the Orchid Gardens, just minutes from the airport. These extensive gardens were originally part of Raymond Burr's estate (he was TV's Perry Mason) and have some of the most exotic flowers we have ever seen.

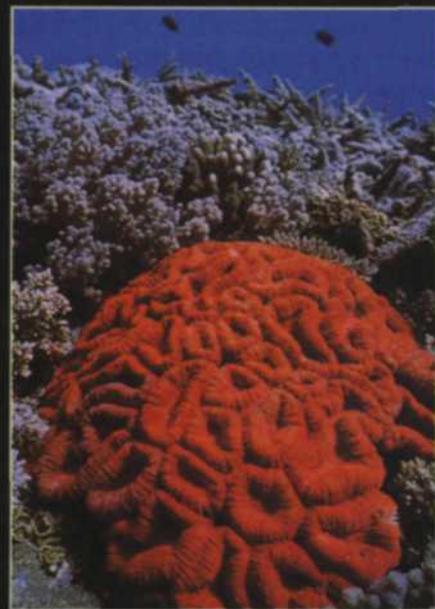
The one hour trip to the smaller island of Vanua Levu is on—of course—a smaller plane. On the way you get a great view of some of the smaller islands that make up the 300 Fiji Islands. Once your plane lands on the grass runway, your luggage is loaded in trucks or vans and transported to your hotel.

The first adjustment visitors have to make to Fijian life is easy—you need (and will want) to smile all the time. The Fijian people are friendly, courteous and genuinely happy to have you visit their unstressed world.

During your 10 to 20 minute ride through the Savusavu countryside you'll see a lush green landscape with high mountains off in the distance. As you pass the local people, you will match them smile for smile and shout, "Bula" (a Fijian greeting). Eventually your south seas tour will bring you to one of the three Savusavu land-based dive operations. Namale Resort, the closest to the airport, is outside the bay on the south coast of Vanua Levu. Eco Divers is near the center of Savusavu and takes guests to sites both inside the bay and on the outside reefs. The Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort is on the shoreline, near a point where the bay and outside reefs intersect.

Our first dive off Savusavu was to a spot on the outside reef called **Fingers**. Moorings were used here instead of anchors. When we reached the bottom we found ourselves facing endless patches of both soft and hard corals. We were busily shooting clownfish, nudibranchs and endless schools of fish when we noticed several of the hard corals were fluorescing. Up to now most of the fluorescent studies we have done required black ultraviolet light. Here the conditions were such we could see the fluorescence in daylight and it could be

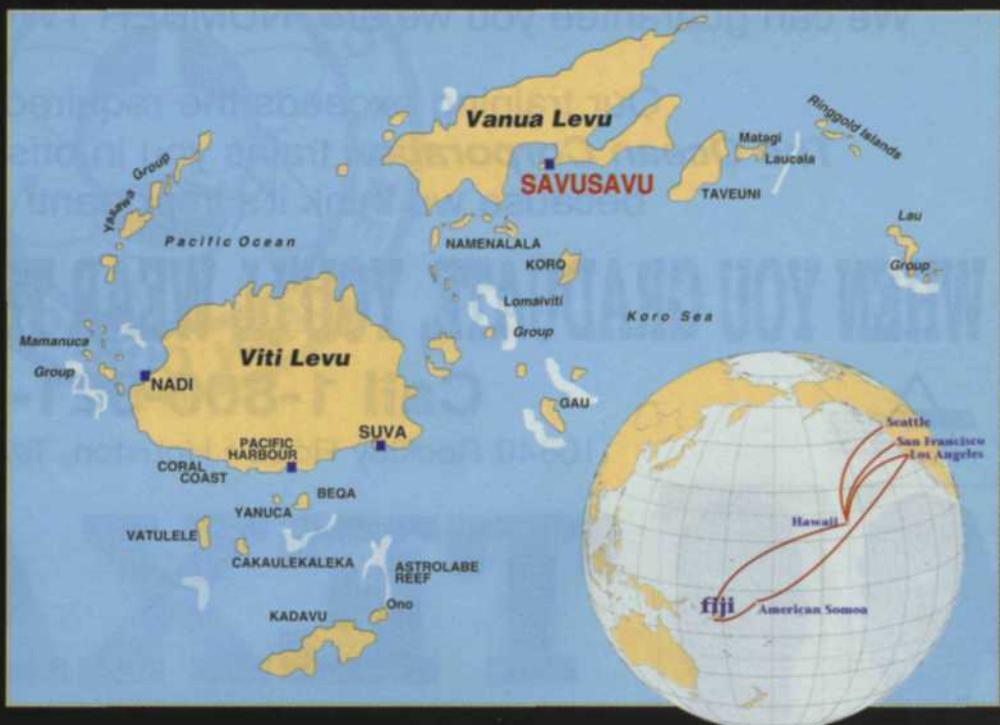
(Continued on Page 106)



Fiji's north is famous for its otherworldly creatures: beautiful soft corals (top); indescribable nudibranchs (*Chromodoris kunei*, above); and (below) such elegant flatworms as *Pseudobiceros bedfordi*.



Above: This unusual photo of fluorescing coral was taken at 60 feet on Fingers Reef without special lighting equipment.



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SAVUSAVU, FIJI

(Continued from Page 35)

photographed without any special lighting equipment; we used available light.

On the second dive we moved to **Hole in the Wall**. When you swim through the opening, the vertical drop-off supports huge gorgonians. Large tuna, Spotted Sweetlips, mackerel and Barracuda cruised by. A couple of sharks swam in for a look but took off when they saw us. Over the next couple of days we dived the outside, visiting **Grotto, Big Blue, Shark Alley** and **Canyons**. These four sites are close to each other and similar in their basic formation but different enough to make each an excellent dive. Common to all the sites were fish cleaning stations and large schools of fish. It was easy to join the schools and watch as the fish went about their daily routine.

The weather got a little choppy one day, so we moved to the inside reefs. We were expecting less than we had seen on the outside but were very impressed when we made our first inside dive at **Nuggets**. This site has two very large coral heads covered with yellow soft corals, hence the name. The animal life on this spot was incredible. We found octopus, mantis shrimp, Spanish Dancers, a Rainbow Flatworm, Goatfish, clownfish, Leaf fish and so many other animals that it was days before we wanted to try another spot.

Our next visit was to **Mystery Reef**. We're not sure what the mystery was, other than it offered a totally different

look. When you first come down on this reef, you will be impressed with the size of the gradual dome-shaped hill that covers an area the size of a football field. The entire hill is covered with a field of coral that looks like a cross between a sponge and soft coral. At first it appears there is no animal life but as you near the bases of the corals you realize that the forest underneath is loaded with thousands of different animals.

After diving both the inside and outside, we packed our gear and took a 20 mile boat ride to one of the most spectacular sites we have ever seen. **Namenalala** is a small island with a submerged reef forming a ring around it. On opposite sides you will find openings big enough for large boats. Each day the current moves back and forth through these two passages. Depending on when you dive, you would swim through the cut to the edge of the wall or, if the tide is going the other way, from the wall through the cut into the shallows. Sharks, turtles, rays and Barracuda all have their places near or over the wall. The top edge of the coral ring, near the surface, featured huge schools of colorful fish, guaranteed to delight any diver.

We split away from the main group of divers to try some beach diving near the Jean-Michel Cousteau resort. This is when we discovered **Split Rock**. This site can be dived or snorkeled. The maximum depth is about 23 feet and the coral head comes within about six inches of the surface. It's 50 yards from shore and can be reached by boat, shore or both, depending on how much time you have. The coral head is split down the middle, creating a home for large schools of fish. On our first dive we found one-half dozen pairs of clownfish. One pair had just laid its eggs, so we photographed the eggs as they developed into little clownfish. We also saw two very busy fish cleaning stations and several types of nudibranchs. We had enough subjects on this one spot to keep our camera shutters clicking for several days.

It may sound like all we did was dive but actually we spent quite a bit of time hiking in the rain forest, tidepooling, reading by the pool and making visits to the local village. If pressed, we could go into to great details on all these events—but then we wouldn't have an excuse to go back for a follow-up story! 🐟

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