

A Menagerie of Exotic Life Lies Just Offshore

FIJI FORBES LAUCALA

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK AND SUE DRAFAHL



We have discovered a unique zoo off a remote island in the South Pacific. It has no cages, no sidewalks, no keepers, no feeding times, yet has hundreds of thousands of inmates. This menagerie is just off the shores of Laucala (pronounced La-THAH-La), an island in Fiji's northern section. Yes, we're talking about an underwater zoo! Well, it is not really a zoo but we think of it as one since we saw such a wide variety of animal life there.

But it gets even better! There is only one resort, Fiji Forbes, on this tiny island paradise. Once a hideaway for the late Malcolm Forbes, it now caters to those who want to retreat from day to day stress. Guests stay in one of seven *bures* (Fijian cottages) stretched out along a sandy beach facing the tranquil waters that are home to the underwater zoo. Each *bure* is fully furnished with a kitchen, mini-bar, one or two bedrooms, private bathrooms, living room and dining area. Plenty of space between *bures* ensures privacy.

Stress reduction is the main concern at Forbes, so schedules be damned. You can have it your way with dining, diving and island activities. Breakfast is prepared and served in your *bure* by your very own *bure* girl. You tell her what you want, when you want it and she will prepare it in minutes from the fully stocked kitchen. You can enjoy lunch just about anywhere; in your *bure*,



Above: Latticed Butterflyfish (Chaetodon rafflesi). Each bure at Fiji Forbes Laucala is fully furnished with kitchen, mini-bar, one or two bedrooms, private bath, living room and dining area.



on the beach, in the tree-house, Malcolm Forbes' former home or you can have a box lunch prepared and hike around the island. The evening meal is usually served at the plantation house or barbecue pit but you can always order a candlelight dinner in your *bure*. There's plenty of room for creativity at Fiji Forbes.

The diving offers the same flexibility. You decide when you dive, where and how many times each day. The resort has five boats moored in the harbor, so the possibilities are endless. Most of the sites are within minutes of your *bure*, with



depths ranging from 15 to 130 feet and visibility galore. Each day your dive gear will be set up for you. At the end of each day, the staff

cleans your gear and stores it in the dive locker, ready for the next day. Boats seldom anchor, instead they drop divers off at the desired site and follow the group for easy pickup upon surfacing. You can see that Fiji Forbes offers a new comfort level in diving.

The underwater zoo tour starts right under the dock at **Boathouse Reef** and stretches around the pier into open ocean. The water is about 15 feet deep, dropping below 60 feet at the end of the pier. The pier pilings are lightly covered with pink and orange soft corals, providing a great starburst effect when the sunlight is just right. Encrusting orange, red and yellow sponges try to cover the vacant spaces in the constant battle for un-

derwater real estate. Several small juvenile fish jump from sponge to sponge hoping divers or larger predators will not see them. You'll find dozens of crustaceans hiding among the rocks at the base of the pier. The hermit crabs range in size from less than one-quarter inch to more than two inches. Their shell homes are very colorful, with brown and orange patterns on the sides.

At night, the ocean floor comes alive with brittlestars, nudibranchs, moray eels, parrotfish and dozens of animals not seen in the daytime. Dozens of small pipefish and Banded Coral Shrimp forage for food. Out in the flats, you can find Upside Down Jellyfish and baby lionfish smaller than a thumbnail. Don't be surprised if a couple of squid come shooting by as you move among the pilings. If you're an underwater photographer, you'll run out of film fast on this dive.

There are dozens and dozens of dive sites at Laucala and each is home to a slightly different cross section of animal life. One of our favorites is **Anemone Reef**. The anemones provide a giant carpet of bright fluorescent colors usually found only under a black light. Photographers can capture these colors with high speed film and available light. In addition to these colonial anemones, you can find clownfish in the large Green Anemones. Most are fairly friendly, but if they seem in a bad mood it may be because they have eggs hidden under the edge of the anemone.

SDM TRAVEL AT A GLANCE

Fiji Forbes Laucala is best known for:

- No schedule; luxury and pampering
- Wide variety of everything marine
- Exceptional U/W visibility

Many of the dive sites are named after the species that has the heaviest concentration in that area. For example, **Firewalk** is loaded with a forest of fire coral that says, keep away. Fish use that as an advantage and seek safety in the branching arms of the fire coral. **Starfish Alley** is home to many types of starfish, hence the name. They come in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. If you look closely at the legs of these echinoderms, you can usually find a camouflaged commensal shrimp that rides along, sharing the starfish's food.

The Wall is for divers who like to see some of the reef's larger inhabitants. The trip out takes 45 minutes. The near vertical wall drops to the deep blue. Big fish such as Maori Wrasses, Whitetip Sharks, Wahoo and tuna drop by on occasion. The wall itself is covered with large gorgonians and colorful soft corals.

We could discuss our zoo tour forever but it's only fair to mention that Fiji Forbes has activities besides diving.

Waterskiing, Hobie Cat sailing, windsurfing, canoeing, kayaking and snorkeling are available. If you want to dry out, you can play tennis and volleyball or just relax and read a good book as the sun sets over the ocean. Fiji Forbes has something for everyone.

Food, drink, scuba diving, deep sea fishing, all watersports and even laundry service are designed to make your stay as comfortable as possible. Even your admission to the underwater zoo is part of the all-inclusive package at Fiji Forbes. Come visit Fiji Forbes Laucala and let the

friendly staff members help make this your vacation of a lifetime. For further information, contact Fiji Forbes Laucala, P.O. Box 149, Fort Garland, Colorado 81133; (800) FORBES-5 or (719) 379-3263; fax (719) 379-3266. 🐟

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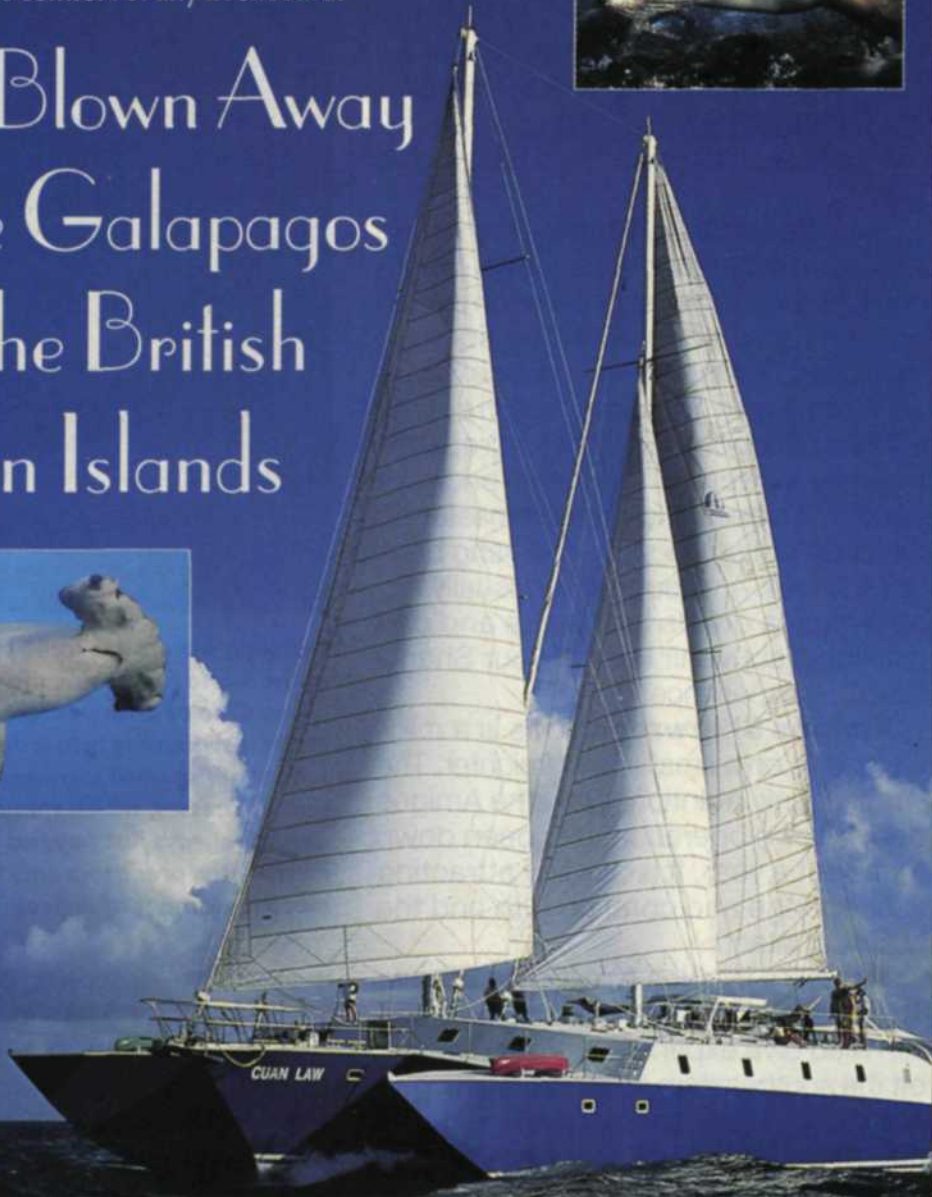


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