

Skin Diver



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Heaven My Fiji

Its as if Pieces of Heaven Have Dropped from the Sky

by Jack and Sue Drafahl

Now, open your eyes and see your dream become reality. Welcome to Fiji! Scattered over the South Pacific, its 330 islands are welcoming more and more dive travelers every year. Once they find Fiji, it becomes embedded in their souls and they have an insatiable desire to return. One of the main reasons this happens is the people: they are truly the friendliest on earth. Moments after you arrive in Nadi Airport you will be offered a smile and the Fijian greeting of bula. Simply return the greeting by repeating bula and your life will be changed forever.

Fiji is 17 degrees south of the equator, just northeast of Australia and west of the International Dateline. The largest island, Viti Levu, is home to the largest portion of Fijis 780,000 people. The official language is English and although Fiji has its own currency, the U.S. dollar is accepted everywhere. Because Fiji is south of the equator, its summer is November to March; winter is April to October. Summer temperatures average 86F; the winter average is 73. Cooling trade winds make even the warmest day comfortable.

Accommodations throughout Fiji vary from luxury hotels with golf courses to comfortable resorts offering thatched roof Fijian cottages called bures. You can find inexpensive backpacking locales and resorts that offer affordable luxury. Fiji has something to satisfy every pocketbook.

The diving in this South Pacific paradise is as varied as the resorts and the topography. You will find calm, shallow diving inside many of the island lagoons and deeper wall diving where the intertidal currents pass among the islands. During this exchange of water the reefs are alive with soft corals of every color in full bloom. Although we hope you never see it, the Fiji Dive Operators Association has also established an hyperbaric chamber in Suva.

While Fiji is noted for its world-class diving, it also offers a fascinating blend of culture and customs. To truly enjoy Fiji, you must experience the customs that make these people unique. Many Fijians live in villages where the philosophy is care and share. No visitor is a stranger for long because these people immediately make you one of their family.

Fijis Regions: Fijis diving is divided into the northern section,

encompassing Savusavu, Vanua Levu and the islands of Namenalala, Taveuni, Laucala, Matagi and Qamea. The central and southern sections cover Vatulele, Kadavu, Beqa and the Coral Coast. The western region features the Mamanuca and Yasawa Islands. Follow us as we introduce you to some of the finest diving in the world.

Northern Fiji: One of the best ways to experience a good cross section of both Fiji topside and underwater is to visit the dive resorts around Savusavu, on Vanua Levu. Just a few miles west is the Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort. Nestled in 17 acres of swaying coconut palms are 20 elegantly designed thatched bures. The resort sits on the edge of Savusavu Bay and offers watersports for the entire family. Off the long beachfront is a gently sloping ocean floor with small, scattered coral heads and a sandy bottom. A 100 foot long dock reaches out into the bay, providing docking for the 37 and 23 foot dive boats. The resort has a full dive shop offering equipment rentals and certifications from beginning diver to nitrox. When they're not diving, guests can visit a village, snorkel in the mangroves, kayak, play tennis or take a Hobie Cat out for a spin. At the end of the day, swim in the pool, take a romantic sunset walk along the beach or simply retire to the comfort of a bure.

Eco Divers is operated by Liz and Curly Carswell. They have an extensive knowledge of Fijian customs and diving, and put together a great trip at a very low cost. Diving with Eco is easy since it offers an efficient dive operation utilizing very fast, 20 foot inflatable dive boats along with third party accommodations and food.

The road east of Savusavu takes you to a truly different type of dive resort. Namale is designed for those wishing to mix diving and romance. Eight bures are scattered among 121 acres of hilltop rain forest, providing the ultimate in privacy. Each bure is built with comfort in mind, with a CD player and frosted glass showers surrounded by foliage. Evening meals are served at a private table at different locations around the resort. When you aren't diving you can enjoy great snorkeling, tennis, horseback riding, waterskiing or just relax by the pool.

The resorts around Savusavu visit many of the same moored dive sites and work together to maintain the best conditions possible. The diving is about as diverse as it gets in Fiji. Calm, easy sites in Savusavu Bay include Mystery Reef. It has several large hard corals that slope down to a vast garden of soft corals, which is home to thousands of small critters. This is a macro photographers dream reef. There is increased current, sloping walls and prolific bommies (coral heads) on the outside reefs. Jacksons is loaded with gigantic seafans down to 90 feet, with soft coral gardens at 40 to 60 feet. At Fan Fair, you'll find coral bommies covered with seafans. There are several swim-throughs with critters hiding in all the nooks and crannies. Dream House is home to friendly schools of Batfish that circle divers when they enter the water. It makes for

great wide angle photos. Big Blue is a spectacular drop-off with giant gorgonians covered with featherstars. It is a perfect place to look for those big critters out in the blue. As you cruise along the edge of one of the reefs, you descend into a large Hole in the Wall that drops you even farther into the depths. The diversity of animal life found here is what makes Fiji diving world-class.

For the ultimate diving experience try Namenalala Island, 20 miles offshore. There you experience everything at high speed during the tidal exchange as the corals put on a show not to be missed.

Taveuni is the third largest island in Fiji and is called the Garden Island because of its lush virgin forests. This island offers some of the most beautiful scenery in Fiji. It has waterfalls, a waterslide, bush walks through the jungles, farms, coconut plantations and traditional villages. Luckily, modernization has not affected the people of Taveuni; they still live off the land.

Offshore is some of Fijis finest diving. The Somosomo Strait lies between Taveuni and Vanua Levu and offers the ride of your life when the current is running. It has been proclaimed the soft coral capital of the world. Rainbow Reef runs perpendicular to the current, which forces the water up and over the reef. The result is prolific gardens of soft corals of every color. The Great White Wall is a legendary dive featuring prolific soft coral formations. You battle the current head on until you come to a tunnel, which allows you to exit and view the massive wall carpeted with white soft corals waving in the current. This is probably the most sought after dive in the north. The Zoo is done on outgoing tides and offers big fish such as Barracuda, reef sharks, Bronze Whalers and Eagle and Manta Rays. Annies Bommie is a coral head lined with spectacular multi-colored soft corals in shades of red, purple, blue, yellow and white. The Corner is actually on the same reef as Annies; here you will be overwhelmed by the abundance of fish. Although Cabbage Coral is common in this area, it is still a mystery as to why there is such a vast accumulation of it at Cabbage Patch. Blue Ribbon Eel Reef offers a healthy reef ecosystem, home to the elusive Blue Ribbon Eel. Photographers and divers will find the fast flowing waters of the Somosomo Strait offer a challenge to all skill levels and the thrill of a lifetime.

Dive Taveuni is a seven acre wonderland on a grassy knoll at the edge of the Somosomo Strait. Built by Ric and Do Cammick, it features six traditional Fijian cottages, nestled into beautifully landscaped gardens. Each bure has a private deck and most feature outdoor showers; some have rock interior walls, while others have courtyards walled with river rock.

Dive Taveunis Lelewai is a 40 foot aluminum catamaran that provides ample room for divers and all their gear. Travel time to the sites is less than one hour. After your first dive, the boat is anchored near a secluded beach so guests can enjoy lunch. Afterward there is another thrilling dive on Rainbow Reef.

Garden Island Resort is a two story hotel for those on a more restricted budget. It features 28 conventional rooms with two double beds and private bath. There are two additional rooms with dorm style bunks, private bath and lockers. Garden Island was recently purchased by Aqua-Trek, one of Fijis most respected operators. Irene Morrell is the current manager and her assistant is Helen Sykes. Rainbow Reef Divers, the dive operation, is managed by Stuart Gow. Garden Island Resort and Rainbow Reef Divers have recently installed permanent moorings on the reef sites to help preserve Fijis underwater paradise. The resort is right at the edge of the Somosomo Strait so you are less than 20 minutes from the dive sites. Two 30 foot aluminum boats, capable of transporting 12 divers each, can quickly whisk you to some of the finest diving Fiji has to offer. Owing to the short boat rides, two dives are offered in the morning, and guests return to the resort for lunch. This leaves afternoons free to relax by the pool, read a book under the coconut trees or tour Taveuni.

Divers with a limited budget will enjoy Aquaventure Taveuni. It services all of Taveunis northern accommodations. The staff can make arrangements for backpacking facilities with tents for hire or comfortable hotels. Aquaventure offers daily boat trips to the Somosomo Strait but also dives the areas on the north end of Taveuni.

Just off the shores of Taveuni lie the three islands of Laucala, Qamea and Matagi. Each tiny island is home to one dedicated dive resort.

Laucala, a 3,000 acre island paradise just off the northeast tip of Taveuni, is home to Fiji Forbes Laucala. This retreat was originally a getaway for the late publisher, Malcolm Forbes. It features its own landing strip with easy access. With only seven bures, the folks at Fiji Forbes can pamper you beyond your wildest dreams! One of the most unbelievable features of this resort is that you can do anything you want, anytime you want. If you want to dine by candlelight in the privacy of your bure;done. If you want lunch high in the tree tops of the Tree House;done. If you would like to dive at dawn;done. If you want to tour Malcolm Forbes home;done. This place could quickly become habit forming.

The all-inclusive tariff covers everything from diving to deepsea fishing. All you have to do is relax. You can dive as little or as much as your computer allows. The dive boats and competent dive staff are always ready to go. Dive sites are just a short boat trip away. Franks Place is on the oceanside of the reef. You never know what will show up; the abundant soft and hard corals are home to a wide variety of critters. Anemone Reef has huge colonies of anemones and their resident clownfish. Bonnies Boulders has great expanses of hard coral and swim-throughs that provide a picturesque dive every time.

Matangi Resort is a tropical island paradise owned and operated

by the Douglas family. It features 11 thatched bures with queen sized beds, living room and private bathroom. For the ultimate experience, there is the Treehouse bure, 30 feet in the air. Matangi can be reached via a boat transfer from Taveuni.

The Douglas family has dived the waters off Matangi for more than 40 years, so they know the best sites. One of our favorites is Noels Wall, discovered by Noel Douglas. It offers a variety of hard corals, vibrant soft corals and fish galore. Still Waters has a current that brings the massive soft coral stands into bloom, yet slow moving areas where you can watch the Fairy Basslets dance. At Roberts Reef you can find most anything you would want to photograph underwater; massive hard corals, patches of feeding soft corals and clownfish in their host anemones. The trouble is making your roll of film last the whole dive!

Qamea is the twelfth largest island in Fiji, noted for its lush green peaks and white sandy beaches. Qamea Beach Club is a small resort catering to the selective traveler seeking comfortable accommodations in beautiful surroundings and a friendly out-island atmosphere. To reach the resort, you must transfer by boat from Taveuni airport six miles away. Qamea Beach Club encompasses 43 acres of land, with one-third of a mile of beachfront. Nestled into the trees you will find 11 bures, with either a king or two double beds, sitting area, bathroom and veranda facing the beach. A 50 foot high chief-style bure serves as the main dining room and bar.

Guests can enjoy the free-form freshwater pool set in natural surroundings, snorkeling, volleyball, windsurfing, outrigger paddleboats, hiking or the village tours. Qamea also offers some of Fijis finest diving. Since Matangi, Laucala and Qamea are so close together, they often share dive sites. The Purple Wall is actually three vertical walls with thick concentrations of purple soft corals. Currents here can be fast, but that makes for great fish activity. Maraias Cove has mild or moderate current flow depending upon when you dive it. One wall is thick with soft corals and there are large patches of Garden Eels. Quite often you will find Whitetip Reef Sharks and Striped Mackerel.

Central and Southern Fiji: Kadavu is the fourth largest island in Fiji and home to Dive Kadavu Matana Resort. The Fijian style thatched bures have queen sized beds, private bathrooms and their own private veranda. This is a remote wonderland; there are very few roads, so transport to the resort is via boat. Bob and Rena Forster are the owners and will be there to welcome you. The virgin coral Namalata and Rooper Reefs that surround Kadavu offer some great diving. There are more than 30 moored sites, and the waters are virtually current free. The wide expanses of soft corals are open and feeding. Yellow Wall is one of Kadavus finest, where you will find walls carpeted with yellow soft corals in about 90 feet of water. Rainbow Tango also offers soft corals in every color of the rainbow. Blue Tang is named for the powder blue and yellow surgeonfish that can be found swimming among

the bommies. Great Astrolabe Reef and Ono Island are also dived.

Vatulele Resort is a one of a kind experience. It is for the discerning diver who appreciates the finer things in life. The 16 villas are nestled into the natural tropical foliage for total privacy. They feature high thatched roofs, king sized beds, southwestern decor and hammocks for two on the shaded terrace. The meals are culinary delights served in the open air dining room or on the deck at sunset.

Vatulele is a place for romance, but it also offers a wide selection of diving experiences. The waters here offer little or no current, yet you can find excellent soft corals, seafans and pristine hard coral formations. The Blue Wall is a drift dive great for viewing soft corals and passing pelagics. Abundant reef fish and resting turtles make their homes along the sloping walls of multi-colored hard coral at the Aquarium. Outer Limits is another vertical wall with a ledge where you often see stingrays in addition to the colorful corals. Vatulele definitely has diving for all levels of experience.

Beqa Lagoon stretches more than 17 miles, offering mazes of grottos and tunnels. Moorish Idols, Coral Trout, damselfish and other reef inhabitants live among the vast chain of coral bommies. Marlin Bay Resort shares the island with two villages. Pacific Harbour is close to great diving and some of the best shopping found in Fiji. This is home to Beqa Divers, owned by Dave Evans. He has been diving Beqa Lagoon since 1963, so he probably knows the sites better than anyone.

Western Fiji: Western Fiji, off the coast of Viti Levu, receives the least rainfall. Here you will find tiny clusters of islands that make up the Mamanuca and Yasawa Island chains. Owing to their warm weather and abundance of watersports, these islands are the perfect getaway for those desiring fun in the sun. Mana Island is the largest resort in the Mamanucas. This 300 acre wonderland features 70 beachfront bures and 90 tropical garden bures designed to fit all budgets. There are several restaurants serving traditional and Fijian meals that will make your mouth water. There is every watersport you can imagine in the sheltered leeward side of Mana. You can enjoy windsurfing, Hobie Cats, canoes, waterskiing, parasailing, waterscooters, deepsea fishing or a ride in a yellow submarine.

The diving operation is run by Aqua-Trek, a PADI Five Star facility. The dive shop is right on the beach, making loading and unloading a breeze. It has scheduled dives throughout the day; dawn and dusk dives are by request.

Beachcomber Island is designed for the young and the young at heart. There are bures to fit every budget and lifestyle: dormitory style bures, private bures with shared bathroom, or private rooms with bath and patio. Beachcomber also offers an abundance of watersports, as well as a band to rock the night away. There is

something for everyone, from total relaxation to all the excitement you can handle.

Subsurface Fiji Limited is the dive operation for Beachcomber. It has a qualified training staff and facilities that include a dedicated scuba training pool. The two modern dive boats make accessing the various dive sites a breeze.

The waters in the western area are protected by the Malolo Barrier Reef. Here you can find the world-renowned Supermarket. This shark encounter, hosted by Apisai Bati, allows divers to get a first-hand, close-up look at Bronze Whalers, Whitetip, Blacktip and Gray Reef Sharks. This one is not to be missed! There is also a WW II B26 Bomber. Angel Reef is sure to help you bring home pictures of angelfish galore.

On the outer Barrier Reef you can dive Gotham City, known for its friendly Batfish. This densely populated reef also has its share of Elkhorn and Staghorn Corals that are home to schools of Sergeant Majors, Triggerfish, Barracuda and surgeonfish. The Big W is at the edge of an abyss that offers big fish action. Mantas and sharks are often sighted in this area.

Live-aboards: Live-aboards allow divers to access areas not close to the land-based dive operations. You are able to get many more dives per day because there is no commuting. Each of the boats has similar itineraries, but each offers its own special sites. Although they all make village visits, live-aboards don't offer the same island experiences that land-based resorts do. But, for the hardcore diver or underwater photographer, the opportunities found on a live-aboard can't be beat.

Probably the very best dive site accessible only by live-aboard is E-6. The seamount rising sheer-sided from the depths provides extraordinary diving. Pelagics can be found cruising the pinnacle. Day dives feature schools of Barracuda, Trevally and surgeonfish, while night dives often find Leaf Scorpionfish, cowries and Cuttlefish. The Cathedral is a large swim-through lined with gorgonian fans and soft corals. When the narrow opening at the top allows the sun's light to illuminate the ocean floor, it's awesome. Wakaya offers a mixture of Blue Ribbon Eels, Dartfish, scorpionfish, lionfish and Hammerheads. Nigali Passage offers the thrill of a drift dive with Gray Reef Sharks as the water channels through the narrow cut in the surrounding barrier reef. Namena is also a popular site for diving the current exchange.

The Naia is a 120 foot schooner equipped for up to 18 divers. It is owned and managed by Rob Barrel and his sister and brother-in-law, Alex and Todd Edwards. There are nine large air-conditioned 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. The spacious salon serves as lounge, theater, classroom and dining room. Naia provides excellent facilities for the underwater photographer with ample workspace

and E-6 processing.

The Sere-Ni-Wai is 101 foot long boat custom built for diving. She is owned and captained by Greg Lawlor, a fourth generation Fiji resident. The Song of the Sea was designed to accommodate 10 divers and a crew of four. Four large air-conditioned staterooms are below deck, two on either side of a long hallway. Each has a large double bed, with a single bunk above and ensuite bathroom. The fifth stateroom is near the lounge on the middle deck. This honeymoon suite has a large bed, private bath and several large windows on the port side.

The Fiji Aggressor has just launched service in Fijian waters. It embarks from Savusavu and will make its home at Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort. It will cruise the waters of the north, offering all the amenities the Aggressor Fleet is famous for. This 106 foot long diesel powered catamaran has eight staterooms, each with a queen sized lower bunk and a single upper, private bath and shower. There is a spacious salon, large sundeck, bar and photo center with E-6 processing.

Princess II is an 85 foot boat that will comfortably accommodate up to 12 divers in air-conditioned suites. The Princess II anchors directly over the dive sites and does not utilize a chase boat as do the other live-aboards. It has recently been exploring the waters of Tonga.