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## TWO WORLDS OF FIJI

### Above and Below the Water, It's a Feast for the Senses

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A beam of light stabbed through the darkness. It seemed to be meticulously searching for something as it moved across the ocean floor. A second light beam appeared just beyond the first, silhouetting the first

diver. Its steady beam suddenly changed to short, frantic movements, indicating its holder had found something of interest to show his dive buddy. Both lights converged onto a single spot where two mating nudibranchs presented a photographic discovery in the exciting waters of Fiji.

More divers jumped into the water in search of undersea creatures. Topside, the dark waters were cut by the bright circular flash of light from a photographer's strobes. A second flash was closely followed by a third. This was a great night for underwater photography. Later, as the divers surfaced and recounted their experiences of night diving in Fiji, their excitement was highly contagious.

We are continually intrigued by the underwater experiences divers recount while relaxing at dinner or quietly sipping a drink in the bar. Over time, we have found the best way to really learn about specific dive sites is to listen to these yarns. We realize that often the fish aren't really as big as described and some aspects of a dive may be slightly exaggerated, but that makes for great dive stories. With more than 500 dives logged in Fiji, we never cease to be amazed by the marvelous creatures that abound in these azure waters. Sit back as we reminisce about some of our best dives!

Many of our favorite memories date to the time we spent in Fiji's northern region with Jean-Michel Cousteau, working on his educational CD entitled Cities Under the Sea. We had the

pleasure of working with a fabulous marine biologist, Dr. Richard Murphy. He showed us how to locate and better understand Fijian marine animals; skills that have proved invaluable.

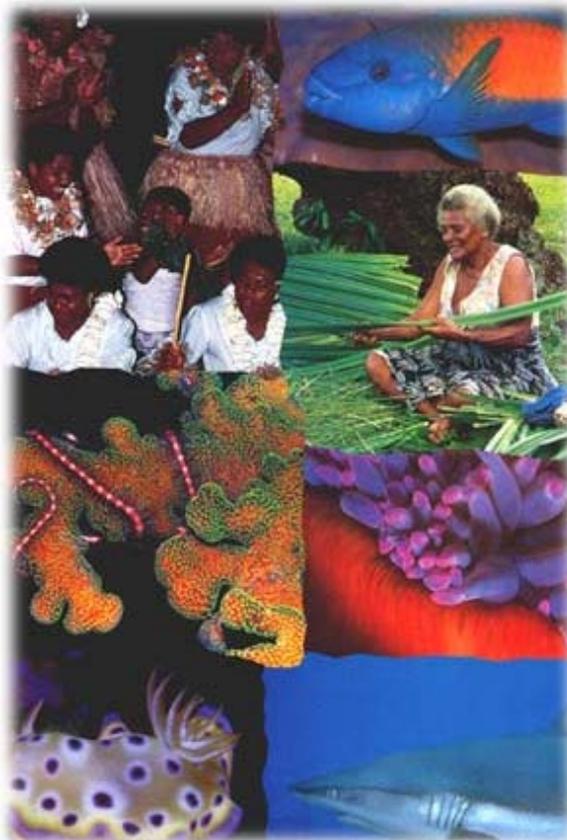
One of our first experiences was with clownfish. These are some of the most photographed critters by both professional and amateur photographers alike. Clownfish can be found throughout Fiji, both in the shallows and at various depths. Sometimes you can easily approach these colorful creatures while other times they attack. We found that when they swim toward you in a defensive mode, they usually have a nest of eggs under the edges of their anemones. If you look closely, you can see two small eyes peeking out from each of the eggs.

Once, for nine days we closely watched a nest of clownfish eggs turn from a silver-gray to orange-red. At 9:00 pm on the ninth day, each clownfish baby fired out of its egg like a rocket. We were able to capture this on film, but we realized that the experience was more valuable than any of the pictures we had taken.

Some of the most colorful animals in the world are nudibranchs. Fiji is loaded with these in every size, shape and color, but the trick is knowing where to look. The best time to find them feeding, mating and fighting is at night. Photographers with photo equipment set up for 1:2 close-ups will shoot a roll of film in no time.

The most unusual nudibranch we have ever seen was on a dive in Bligh Water between Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, Fiji's largest islands. The dive site, called E-6, is a pinnacle that rises 3,000 feet from the ocean floor to within inches of the surface. This ultimate wall dive attracts just about every marine species found in Fiji.

After surfacing from a dive, someone commented he had seen an animal that looked like a cross between a sea anemone and coral, with two horns on the front and a large tuft on the other end. When we asked how big it was, the reply was more than one foot! Minutes later, every diver on the boat was in the water headed back to E-6. This nudibranch was huge and measured 14 inches across. (Yes, we brought a ruler with us.) It was so big we had to use a 15mm lens to get the whole animal in the picture! It resembled the hard coral next to it, which made no sense because nudibranchs usually take on the color and texture of animals they intend to eat. When we returned to the boat, we checked all the identification books in vain. We eventually called it a Horta, after the Star Trek creature it resembled and, to this day, it still has not been identified.



One of the best ways to really get to know the animals on the reef is to watch a fish cleaning station. When a cleaner fish hangs out its shingle and dances on its tail, the other fish line up to get parasites removed from their mouths, gills and other body parts. On one dive in Savusavu Bay, we watched two cleaning fish set up shop. As time progressed, a large school of fish came to a screeching halt in front of this offshore bommie. The front edge of the school formed a circle around the cleaners and they worked quickly to service the hundreds of patients. As each fish was cleaned it would move to the other side of the station and wait. After about 30 minutes, the cleaners closed up shop and the school moved on.

If you are into larger animals, there are many locations in Fiji where you can swim with sharks, Mantas and turtles. You may encounter these animals on almost any dive in Fiji but several locations guarantee action. Western Fiji has a dive site called Supermarket, where you settle in a circle and sharks swim around you as they are fed in the middle of the circle. The sharks get so close the only excuse for not getting great pictures is that you forgot your camera.

Nigali Passage, in Central Fiji, is a deep, 90 foot trench where divers drift along with sharks, rays, groupers, turtles and who knows what else during the tidal exchange. On one of our dives through this opening, several divers saw a Sailfish making its way through the passage to deep ocean. One of the highlights at the end of the dive is a quick cruise through one of the largest patches of pristine Cabbage Coral in Fiji.

On one trip we had the pleasure of diving with Stan Waterman, who was shooting a film on Fiji. On one specific dive we discovered an unusual cleaning station run by Red and White Banded Shrimp. These critters were not going to clean fish, but divers. Stan was first in line to try this new experience underwater. He opened his mouth and the shrimp moved in and started to pick at his teeth and gums. We all formed a line to have our fingernails manicured and laughed so hard we kept losing our regulators.

On another scientific photo expedition we were in search of Fiji's fluorescent animals. Sea anemones and certain hard corals give off their own bright light in red, pink, green and blue. Many of these creatures are found in Fiji's northern area, in the Somosomo Strait off Taveuni, Laucala, Qamea and Matagi. On a recent trip we dived a site with yards and yards of "carpet" consisting of small glowing anemones. Photographing these animals requires high speed film, flash and a steady hand, but the results are unique photos of animals glowing yellow, green and red.

We have photographed Blue Ribbon Eels and Leafyfish in just about every part of Fiji. The problem is that you really have to slow your dive down in order to experience these animals. We have discovered Blue Ribbon Eels along deep walls, in sand flats and at the base of coral bommies. Leafyfish are almost always found on the tops or sides of the bommies. At the end of one dive near Kadavu in southern Fiji, we had saved a single shot at the end of the roll for that killer shot but were getting low on air. Just as we were about to surface, we ran across two Blue Ribbon Eels in the same hole. Sometimes patience pays off.

When we first started diving in Fiji, we heard stories of an extremely rare pipefish found in the north off Namanalala Island. There are several unofficial names, but we know it as the Rufus Pipefish. This master of camouflage is covered with reddish looking "hair" and hides in an algae of the same consistency and color. Until our most recent trip to Fiji, we had only seen a few pictures taken by luckier photographers. At the end of a dive on Mount Mutiny, in the Blich Waters everyone was out of film when Russi, our divemaster, found this pipefish along a wall at about 90 feet. We were scheduled to dive another location the next day, but everyone threatened to mutiny if we didn't get a repeat dive. The next morning, this shy little creature with a hairy face became known as the Russi Pipefish!

Many resorts in Fiji do most of their diving in the morning as the trade winds kick up in the afternoon. Afternoon and night dives are usually optional, except on the live-aboards. You will find calmer waters inside the bays, but the straits and outside walls offer the ultimate in current diving. Fiji's underwater

world has something for everyone.

Some of our best experiences happened in Fiji's other world, above water. When visiting a local village, Fijians welcome you unconditionally into their simple homes to share song and grog. Fijians take great pleasure in sharing their enjoyment of life.

If you are lucky you will be invited to a Fijian meke. This traditional event involves villagers of all ages reenacting Fiji's historical past with song and dance. During the village visit, you might even drink a cup of kava. Ground from the yangona tree root, this muddy water concoction is not to be missed! If your timing is right, you may be able to experience a traditional Fijian meal called a lovo, where the food is wrapped in plant leaves and cooked in deep pits.

In addition to the culture, Fiji offers majestic waterfalls to explore, hiking trails where rare birds abound, fragrant flower gardens, romantic island hideaways and every type of watersport you can imagine. A trip to Fiji is more than just a dive vacation. It's an experience of a lifetime. Grab your camera and come experience the two worlds of Fiji.