

# VIRTUOSO LIFE

THE TRAVELER'S GUIDE TO INSPIRED PARADISES

May / June 2007

## Deep in Paradise

BY JEFF GREENWALD

### DIVING – AND DEFENDING – FIJI'S CORAL REEFS.

The song, coming from nowhere and everywhere, startles me. It's a familiar tune, but delivered in a muted, gurgling chant. It sounds like Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry," as performed by a porpoise. After a confused moment, I realize it's emanating from my dive buddy – 60 feet beneath the waters of Fiji's Taveuni island. Dive masters all over the world are a breed apart. Gravity doesn't suit them. They seem more comfortable underwater, gliding along effortlessly with the currents, than on land. They also tend to be quiet types; one of the defining attributes of scuba diving is that it forbids speech, which is generally a good thing. But Jone (pronounced Johnny), my enthusiastic guide along Fiji's Rainbow Reef, has decided to serenade the clown fish and barracudas: He's singing through his regulator.

Fiji is one of those places that has become synonymous with underwater adventure. While Tanzania has its lions, and Nepal its Himalayan peaks, Fiji is the go-to destination for divers seeking healthy reefs teeming with creatures. The waters are safe, without the threat of great white sharks or box jellyfish. The weather is mild, and the sea is warm, nurturing both hard and soft corals. Pilot and humpback whales migrate between the isles, sometimes joined by lucky divers.

But the waters around Fiji were not always so friendly. In 1643, the year after he "discovered" New Zealand, explorer Abel Tasman threaded his way amidst the razor-sharp reefs surrounding the Fiji islands. Tasman was a terrific navigator, but his ships were nearly shredded. His account of the passage was so harrowing that fellow navigators avoided the area for the next 130 years.

Today, the reefs that vexed Tasman are the great attractions of Vanua Levu and Taveuni, the second- and third-largest of Fiji's 333 (more or less) islands. Their coral gardens serve as home to more than a thousand species of fish: from red-striped lionfish to yellow Moorish idols, from orange clown fish to indigo fairy basslets. Four species of marine turtles are found in Fijian waters, as well as numerous varieties of sharks, dolphins, whales, and rays.

But the main draw in Fiji is the Fijians themselves: musical and gregarious people famous for their love of food, kava (a traditional, spirit-lifting root drink), and song – both at sea level and, apparently, below. Even a casual visitor is made to feel like part of the great Fijian family, and learns to honor the challenge of protecting one of the world's most beautiful island ecologies.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, VISITING FIJI FOR THE FIRST TIME, I WROTE in an essay that the islands look like "Mother Earth in a moss teddy." There's an earthy eroticism to this archipelago of isles and islets, lying 18 degrees south of the equator and 1,700 miles northeast of Brisbane, Australia. Small boats bob by rustic piers, and tin-roofed villages pepper the coastlines. But like the waters of many islands with impressive reefs and marine life, Fiji's are subject to increasing exploitation – not so much by locals, but by outside fisheries as far away as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Fijian dive operators are fighting these interlopers, for obvious reasons: Anything that threatens the ocean environment threatens Fiji's dive sites. Some foreign agencies are involved as well. In fact, I've come to Fiji on an environmental mission myself. The Seacology Foundation – whose mission is "saving the world, one island village at a time" – has invited me to report on the opening of a

community center in the coastal village of Viani. During the past eight years, Seacology has completed 18 projects in Fiji, all of which involved the exchange of buildings or services for pledges to spare local forests and reefs.

Two of Fiji's threatened reefs include some of the best dive sites in the world: Namena Marine Park, off the island of Vanua Levu; and Rainbow Reef, along the northwest coast of neighboring Taveuni. One of the reasons for my visit is to explore Fiji's reefs, and to witness firsthand what's at stake.

A few hours after my arrival, I wriggle into my wet suit. My first dive is at a site called Golden Nuggets, a mile south of the famous Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort on Vanua Levu. The site takes its name from the spectacular soft corals that cover the undersea bommies, or outcrops. The site is unforgettable for its fish alone. There are thousands of them, in every color of the rainbow; it's like floating through a dizzying display of wildflowers. And the corals themselves are astonishing: forests of what looks like gilt broccoli, waving in the swells. We also come across what the locals call magic soft corals. A mottled purple, they turn white when they're touched. The effect acts as a defense mechanism: When a fish takes a nibble, the bleached appearance implies that the coral is inedible.

The day after my dive, I attend the Seacology event in Viani – an unassuming village of wood-framed homes surrounding a large, grassy square. A muddy path leads to the porch of the new community center: an airy, rectangular building with louvered windows, yellow-painted cinder-block walls, and a colorful linoleum floor.

Several years ago, Viani's residents noticed a decline in the number of fish on their reef (and in their nets). The only solution, in such a case, is to leave the reef alone and allow it to recover. The villagers agreed to give up fishing the reef for a decade; in return, Seacology agreed to build them a new community center. It's a good example of what Seacology director Duane Silverstein calls a win-win situation.

The ribbon-cutting includes dancing, a banquet, and plenty of kava, a ritual beverage consumed at every Fijian occasion. A mild narcotic extracted from a cousin of the black pepper plant, ground kava roots are packed into a cloth ball and immersed in a water-filled bowl called a tanoa. As the host squeezes the ball, kava infuses the water. Before long, you have a few gallons of what looks like dirty washing water. The infusion makes the lips and tongue tingle, and tastes a bit chalky, but is not unpleasant. In fact, it becomes more pleasant with every cup. The Fijians, as one might guess, really know how to take the sting out of conservation.

The day after the ceremony, I fly to Taveuni. My base is a rustic and welcoming resort called Susie's Plantation, a 45-minute drive down the island's west coast, through lush tropical forests and tribal villages. Exotic neighbors (clockwise from top left): Basslets circle soft coral, Taveuni islanders prepare kava, a diver eyes a deadly banded sea snake, and pink anemonefish seek refuge in stinging tentacles.

Mount Uluiqalau (please don't ask me how to pronounce it), Fiji's second-highest peak, looms to the east.

Taveuni is known as The Garden Isle, and the term might also be applied to the island's undersea world: a wonderland of steep walls, caves, shark nurseries, and volcanic outcrops covered with soft corals. Many divers consider the reefs ringing Taveuni to be the best in Fiji – even lovelier than the corals in the marine reserve of Namena.

JONE SEEMS TO BE RELATED, BY BLOOD OR FRIENDSHIP, TO EVERY- one within 50 miles. "Welcome to my reef!" he declares as we suit up in the small dive boat. The sober Tevi, Jone's cousin, is our pilot. For the next few days, we have our pick of sites along Taveuni's southwestern coast – reefs with names like Incredible and Orgasm. It's tough to live up to such names, and the nightly

winds and overcast skies make conditions less than ideal. But the water is warm, and the visibility superb.

Diving is a bit like underwater trekking. Hiking along the central Pacific coast of the U.S., coyotes and deer are common sights – it's a real treat to spy a cougar, bobcat, or fox. The undersea environment is similar. Colorful reef fish are everywhere, and the occasional moray eel; I spot a lobster, its antennae waving from a small cave. But one always hopes to see more exotic creatures. Before long, Jone and I encounter some of the reef's more elusive residents: spotted rays, black-tipped sharks, octopuses, gleaming barracuda, sea turtles, and gemlike cowries.

Our most memorable dive is on Rainbow Reef itself, at a site called White Wall. Jone and I descend into the current and drift with it, our bodies horizontal. To our right is the open ocean, and to our left the Wall: a sloping, seemingly bottomless cliff completely covered with plumes of downy-white soft corals. I've never seen anything like it. Gliding effortlessly along, with Jone beside me, I stretch out my arms and imagine I'm Superman – flying, in slow motion, along the flanks of a snow-covered mountain range.

AFTER WHITE WALL, TEVI, JONE, AND I HEAD TOWARD ORGASM Reef: the best place to see hammerhead sharks and big rays. As we motor along, Jone spies a bright orange buoy bobbing in the sea. Tevi stops the boat.

The dive master and boatman exchange glances, and Jone turns to me. "It's a long line," he growls.

Long lines are an environmental disaster, decimating the marine population of island nations from Fiji to the Galápagos (as well as coastlines around the world). Suspended between buoys, these industrial (and often illegal) fishing lines are underwater curtains strung with thousands of steel hooks – tempting every creature that swims by. A single line might be 90 miles long – the length of one-third of the Fijian islands.

"They catch tuna, bonito, even marlin," Tevi explains. "But they take anything that comes along: dolphins, rays, turtles, everything. When they hook a shark, they just cut off the fin and throw the rest back in. We call them 'walls of death.'"

"So what are we going to do?" I ask. Tevi shrugs. "Our job is to take you diving. But if we were alone, we'd destroy this line."

Five minutes later, the buoy is in the boat. Within ten minutes there are thick coils of line and piles of steel hooks on the deck. Pulling in the entire line is impossible; we cut the monofilament and let the rest fall away – but not before I slip a snipped-off hook into my dive bag.

According to Fijian law, villagers hold exclusive fishing rights for a distance of ten miles off their coasts. The lines we're pulling in are only five miles offshore, and without adequate patrols, the islanders are compelled to protect their traditional fishing waters. "I don't understand," I say to Jone, "why the fishing boats don't just stay farther away?"

"Because the fish are closer to the islands," he says, "where the reefs are." That explains, says Jone, why divers see fewer fish today than in the past. "They are all in coolers," he says. "Or in tins, on the shelf."

AFTER TEN DIVES IN FIJI – A PLACE THAT, EVEN UNDER MOTTLED weather, lives up to its reputation as a world-class diving destination – my only regret is that I don't have another week. I'd love to try the full-day trips offered by some of the Taveuni and Vanua Levu resorts: excursions into the more remote waters of Namena Marine Park and Rainbow Reef. Even after my relatively short stay, I've seen a huge variety of fish and corals.

But my most interesting discovery didn't have gills. It was the realization that, even in Fiji, it's getting tough to be a simple tourist. Everywhere we travel these days, we run into examples of how much the planet needs our protection – above and below sea level. Learning the concerns of the locals has made my Fijian dives seem, well, deeper – and provided me with souvenirs (like that stainless steel fishing hook) far more resonant than waterlogged reggae tunes.

## **Stay:**

For dive aficionados with deep pockets, The Wakaya Club rolls out a decadent setting for a vacation among the coral: the resort's Vale O, the palatial 12,000-square-foot South Pacific bungalow, is open to guests when not in use by the owners. Located on the 2,200-acre, privately owned Wakaya Island, a 40-minute flight from Viti Levu, Vale O has wraparound balconies, a collection of Asian antiques, a dedicated staff of six for the main house and the two-bedroom guest pavilion, and a cliffside swimming pool. Five minutes away, the main resort is home to ten private bures (ranging from 1,650 to 4,000 square feet) with private gardens, two outdoor decks, and open-air showers. The resort's dive shop offers instruction and guided dives to any of the myriad sites surrounding the island. Vale O from \$7,600; bures from \$1,900. – M. M.

## **Doing It:**

Southern World Fiji introduces divers to the world beneath the waves of the island nation. The nine-day trip begins with four nights at the renowned Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort on Vanua Levu. From an on-staff marine biologist and one of the world's top PADI diving schools to spacious bures (bungalows) with private decks, the 17-acre oceanfront property is the pampered diver's dream. Daily dives reveal the fantastic soft coral and Technicolor fish population of the Koro Sea and the Namena reefs. Four days on Taveuni in an oceanfront bure at Taveuni Island Resort follow, with two tanks per day during three days of diving. Departures: Any day through 2007; from \$10,500, including accommodations, meals, dives, and domestic transportation. – MARIKA MCELROY

## **INSIDER TIPS**

Fijian Gold

The scoop on top dive spots and don't-miss delicacies from Mesi Kailawadoko of travel outfitter Southern World Fiji.

With 20 years in the industry, Fiji native and operations manager for Nadi-based Southern World Fiji, Mesi Kailawadoko has handled a sea of requests, from tame (day excursions for cruisers) to terrifying (diving with sharks). Her favorite Fiji experience? Sunsets on Viti Levu's west side.

**Why dive Fiji? >>** It's the soft coral capital of the world.

**Best months to visit >>** June through October, when the weather is cooler and dry, and there's more sunshine.

**Top dive spots >>** Around Vanua Levu (the best sites are near the town of Savusavu and off nearby Taveuni), off the islands of Kandavu and Beqa (six miles north of Viti Levu), and in the Koro Sea around the Lomaiviti archipelago.

**Underwater, be prepared to see >>** Coral in the shapes of cabbage or cauliflower and a great variety of fish – scorpion, lion, butterfly, and parrot fish; wrasses, moray eels, and trevallies – as well as tawny nurse sharks and brightly colored nudibranchs (sea slugs).

**Top three non-diving activities >>** Hike to Bouma Waterfall on Taveuni for bird-watching, visit a local village to share a bowl of kava and mingle with villagers, or go fishing for 80- to 100-pound walu (escolar) and mahimahi.

**Fijian custom you should know but might not >>** It is disrespectful to touch anyone's head and to wear a hat when you visit a local village.

**Make sure to >>** Try out our local beer. After a day out in the sun, nothing beats a glass of Fiji Bitter or mild Fiji Gold.

**Local delicacy >>** Kokoda, raw fish marinated in lemon juice and served in coconut milk.

**Fiji's most overlooked attraction >>** Navala, which is the only village left in Fiji where people still live in traditionally built *buves* (bungalows), as our forefathers did.

**Souvenir >>** A kava bowl carved from hardwood and used to mix the traditional kava drink for consumption at special occasions.

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