

Fiji: With three world-class diving sites, the islands are an irresistible attraction to the underwater explorer

Challenge of the rainbow corals



I was 60ft below the surface of the warm Fijian sea, surrounded by a rainbow of colours. The soft coral, in magenta, marmalade orange, canary yellow and lilac, blossomed on the reef like flowers in a carefully cultivated garden, the vivid colours illuminated by shafts of sunshine penetrating down through the water.

Tyrone, our lean, imposing Fijian dive master, caught my attention and invited me to see what he'd captured. He opened his cupped hands releasing what can best be described as a miniature flying carpet. It was a Spanish dancer, a 3cm-long sea slug, which normally slithers across the reef, grazing on algae. While on the reef, this black creature with flecks of green, blue and purple is uninspiring, but release it into the open water and it becomes entrancing. It moves by undulating the sides of its body, gracefully swirling around until it settles again on the reef.

We were diving the Rainbow Reef in the Somosomo Strait, off the island of Taveuni in northern Fiji. Getting to the island is an adventure in itself. Qantas just wanted to weigh my baggage on the international flight to Fiji, but weight is so critical on the eight-seater aircraft that flew us on to Taveuni that I had to be weighed myself. As if the indignity of that was not enough, once aboard the plane I was asked to move from the



Deep down in the multicoloured "soft coral capital of the world" off the Fiji islands, divers encounter fascinating forms of marine life, from tiny Spanish dancer slugs to huge and menacing whaler sharks

right to the left of the aircraft, to balance it out. But the humiliation of being too heavy for the right side of the plane was worth it for the aerial views of Fiji's reefs, which attract divers from all over the

world. In diving circles, Fiji's 300 or more islands are known as the "soft coral capital of the world". Soft corals lack the hard limestone skeleton but make up for it in their colours. Before, when I've seen soft

coral, it has been the odd isolated clump. In Fiji you see whole coral heads and reef walls blanketed in its pastel colours. But there's more to diving off Taveuni than coral. Six-foot bronze whaler sharks, menacingly cruising the reef, are a frequent sight. And there are goby fish, which have a fascinating symbiotic relationship with shrimps.

The shrimp and the goby share a tunnel in coral rubble on the seabed. It's the shrimp which digs the tunnel but, with poor vision, it relies on the goby to keep a look out for danger. If you creep up on them, you can see the unlikely couple playing Mr and Mrs at the mouth of their home, the shrimp carefully resting one of its long antennae on the fish so that it knows when to follow its partner into the burrow for a fast retreat.

Taveuni has one of the most intimate and beautiful resorts I've ever visited. "Dive Taveuni" accommodates only 12 guests and is on a cliff-top, with spectacular vistas over the Somosomo Strait to Fiji's second largest island Vanua Levu. The evening meal is eaten on an veranda, with stunning views of Fiji's South Sea sunsets. With such a small number of guests at the table, it's more like having a dinner party than a meal at a holiday resort.

Diving is not limited to Taveuni; Fiji has two other world-class dive sites which have only recently opened. Six miles south of the main island of Viti Levu is Beqa, set in a large lagoon which has 100 dive sites, and offers the challenge to swim with oceanic white tip sharks. Beqa is also the home of Fiji's fire walkers, who tread red hot stones without burning themselves. The traditional ceremony is steeped in taboo and custom, with the men not eating coconuts or having any contact with women for two



Sunset on Fiji, and a beacon is lit to beckon the tourists

weeks before the ceremony.

The third of Fiji's leading dive sites is off the island of Kandavu. One dive here is called "The Evil Trench" and involves descending 200ft. It's not for the faint-hearted, but those who are either stupid or brave enough to make the journey are rewarded with breathtaking views.

The dive takes you through a tunnel 60ft long and more than 30ft high, and ends in an archway the size of London's Marble Arch. The exhilaration as you fly through this huge underwater structure is intense. The whole experience is enhanced by nitrogen narcosis, a phenomenon which occurs when divers descend into deep water and absorb such a large amount of nitrogen into their bodies that it makes them feel drunk.

The other high on Kandavu

comes from Fiji's national beverage: yaqona, or kava. Virtually every Fijian indulges in kava-drinking sessions, but the brew in Kandavu is reputedly the strongest.

My introduction to it came through our mellow Fijian dive guide, Dan. The kava ceremony took place at his village beneath the statuesque coconut palms and within earshot of the waves gently breaking on the beach.

The sun was just setting over the horizon as one of Dan's relatives started preparing our brew. The process involved the brown pulverised root of the kava plant being strained through a linen bag into a large ancient-looking wooden bowl.

The result was a light-brown liquid with the unset-

FIJI FACT BOX

- The author travelled with Qantas (0345 747767), which flies daily to Fiji via Sydney. Prices start at £1,187.
- In Fiji, Sunflower Airlines (00 679 723 016) operates flights to Taveuni and Kandavu. A return ticket to Taveuni costs £130, Kandavu £76. The journey to Beqa is by boat, organised through the Marlin Bay Resort.
- An overnight stay is normal on arrival at Fiji's international airport at Nadi. The Royal Denarau (00 679 750 000) quotes £180 a night but discounts are normally available.
- The author stayed at Dive Taveuni, the Marlin Bay Resort and Dive Kandavu. Accommodation, meals and a two-tank dive costs £160 a day at Dive Taveuni (00 679 880 441). At the Marlin Bay Resort (00 679 304 042) on Beqa, the same package costs £160. At Dive Kandavu (00 679 311 780) the cost is £100.
- Dive packages to Fiji can also be arranged through Scuba Safaris (01452 740919) and Hayes & Jarvis (0181-222 7840). H&J offers a one-week holiday at Taveuni from £1,749, including flights, full-board accommodation and dives.
- When to go: May to October is the best time; it is cooler, less humid and for divers the visibility is better.
- Health: Fiji is free of most tropical diseases, including malaria, but tetanus, polo, typhoid and hepatitis A immunisations are recommended. Check with your GP first.
- Money: There are two Fijian dollars to the pound. Credit cards are accepted at all resorts.
- Reading: The Travel Bookshop (0171-229 5260) recommends: *Adventuring in the Pacific*, by Susanna Margolis (Sierra Club, £10.99); *Slow Boats Home*, by Gavin Young (Penguin, £7.99); *The Happy Isles of Oceania*, by Paul Theroux (Penguin, £6.99); *Fiji Travel Survival Kit* (Lonely Planet, £8.99).

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