

**Taka Dive, June 2007, David Shem-Tov (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA.**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 25 to 26 C, calm, choppy, currents. A previous correspondent named this dive operations previous boat as the 'Kaka'. Unfortunately, her description is still apt. This operation is targeted at inexperienced backpackers. Many are enticed by last-minute discounts, ensuring that the boat always leaves full. The boat operates on a tight back-to-back schedule, requiring passengers to vacate their cabins several hours before return to port so that they can be serviced by the crew. Great food and fairly attractive cabins on a well designed new boat could not make up for the most unpleasant cruise director and dive crew we have ever encountered on a live-aboard. Had there been an option to disembark during the three-day cruise, we would not have hesitated. We booked this cruise because it was operating during the minke whale season. Unfortunately, one of the two encounters with these skittish creatures was swiftly terminated by a crew member who donned scuba gear and jumped into the water (in contravention of Australian law) and ensured the immediate flight of the whale. UW Photography Comments: No electrical facilities except those in your cabin. Rinse tank was used for everything.

## COOK ISLANDS

Tucked between French Polynesia and Tonga, the Cook Islands have a breezy South Pacific atmosphere. The main island of Rarotonga has good food and a variety of hotels. There's decent diving through a cut into the lagoon that has sharks and

strong current, but overall the diving falls short of other South Pacific locations. Even most New Zealanders, their closest neighbors, pass on the diving.

**Amedee Diving Club, dove while on a cruise, February 2007, Dee Wescott (diverdee@mac.com), Waikoloa, HI.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, calm. I found them because the company I contacted (from the cruise ship) was closed on Monday, so they turned us over to Amedee. You do need to know that you will be gone over lunch and they only provide tea, coffee and excellent pastries, so if you need more than that, bring it. They really try hard. The subjects available to shoot made up for any shortcomings on the part of the boat or operators. There was nothing much done for UWP, but they didn't know that we were UWP before we came and when they set the boat up.

## FIJI

For left coasters, it takes about the same amount of time to get to Fiji as it does to the Caribbean: ten hours nonstop from L.A. Prices are comparable and air packages can include New Zealand/Australia extensions at little extra cost. Fijians are polite, friendly, modest, and religious, so watch your language, and wear nonrevealing clothes to town. Wetsuits are staples year-round; currents add coolness and in some places they're vigorous, so carry surface signaling devices. In September 2004, American Dan Grenier, the former operator of Crystal Divers, disappeared with another diver while leading divers from Bamboo Reef Resort on

Nanau-I-Ra. The weather can be stormy June through September; short, heavy showers are possible any afternoon year-round, especially around Beqa Lagoon. The year-round average temperature is 80 or above; nights average 69 degrees in winter.

## Beqa Lagoon

**Aqua Trek, Pacific Pearl Beach Resort, June 2007, John and Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, mostly calm, no currents. The Pacific Pearl Beach Resort is located at Pacific Harbor, a few miles from Suva. It is on Beqa Lagoon. San Diego Shark Diving Company, owned and operated by Doc Paul Anes, organized a trip to dive with Aqua Trek. Their shark-oriented dives had been featured by such dive leaders as Howard and Michelle Hall and Stan Waterman, who filmed the activity. The Pacific Pearl package offered room with breakfast for a week and a daily two-dive boat trip including two days of shark dives. Additional dives were available if desired. The large pool and scenic grounds provided a luxurious resort atmosphere. Convenient village shopping, restaurants, and a selection of tours were available. Some guests went river rafting, for example. One night a native foods dinner was enjoyed at a condo resort next door, complete with kava ceremony and entertainment. The coral reefs of Beqa Lagoon were surprisingly lovely and the photo results were gratifying. Because the guests were spread out all over the resort, the contact was not as close as on a live-aboard but, nevertheless, a community spirit developed. We shared photos, experiences, and good wishes

for each other. The highlight of the trip was the day the tiger sharks appeared. The group was grateful that the two big tiger sharks were friendly, and that they thrilled us by coming close without using any advantage of their awesome size and power. In fact, the shark wranglers of Aqua Trek had more on their hands to control the divers than the sharks! We were able to obtain some terrific video and stills of the variety of sharks that showed up for the feast: nurse sharks, bull sharks, white tip reef sharks, gray reef sharks, black tip, and, of course, the tiger sharks! A huge collection of tropical fish gathered around also, and the activity even attracted a large Napoleon wrasse. No Nitrox. That would have been helpful for the profiles we were diving. In general, the diving was well organized with proper safety lines, arrangements, briefings, and space on the dive boat. However, there was little consideration for photographic gear in terms of rinse buckets or other special provisions. There was no shower on board. BYO rinse water. We were given drinks and cookies after the first dive. Dive gear could be left on the boat, rinsed by the crew, and prepared for the diving the next day. Items such as computers and cameras were taken off by individuals. We wore our suits back to our room, where we washed everything in the tub and hung it out to dry on our patio. Doing two dives a day was a reduced diet of dives. However, this level of activity provided more time to edit photos and deal with the increased demand of energy to move gear and fit in other activities such as shopping, having a look around, seeing something of other sights and sounds of Fiji.

**Beqa Adventure Divers, Lagoon Resort, September 2006, Paul deVegvar (theyoumao@aol.com), Mount**

**Vernon, WA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 to 76 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. Beqa Adventure Divers is at the Lagoon Resort in Pacific Harbor. They offer both soft coral and shark/big fish dives. They are among the most professional diving establishments anywhere. We have dived a total of three months in Fiji over the last two years: at Wananavu Resort with Kai Viti Divers; on the Nai'a live-aboard; Tui Tai adventure cruise; Dive Kadavu, Kadavu Island; Koro Sun Dives on Savusavu, Vanua Levu; and Garden resort on Taveuni Island. Beqa Adventure Divers' shop manager, Andrew, answered all our e-mails to help schedule the best time frames for us to meet all the different species of sharks that commonly visit their dive sites. We saw all seven species of shark their web site stated we might see. Andrew gave us a tip about the best months to see which species. We saw two different tiger sharks 3 out of the 6 times we went on shark dives with them. The tiger sharks were so close so you could touch them if you dared. Andrew also helped us fix our regulator, loaned us his personal diving computer when one of ours malfunctioned, and gave us several valuable diving tips to enjoy diving with sharks even more. He is the best dive shop manager we have encountered diving anywhere. Their dive boat is well maintained and organized. Each diver has a personal bin to stow their gear. The staff is friendly and helpful, and the dive masters are very experienced, some with over 20 years' service. Dive guide Russi has spent 4 years as a dive master on the Nai'a live-aboard. He not only shows you where and what to see, but also how to approach underwater creatures and structures. Lighting, colors, and currents: his dives are like well conducted

pieces of music. They have some guides who are well worth the commitment to follow underwater. Beqa Adventure's soft coral dives offer you bottom time according to your ability, and so cater to divers of all levels of experience and ability. We have done some soft coral diving with them that was as good as, if not better, than the best dives we had with Kai Viti Divers up north or from the Nai'a live-aboard. The shark dives are safe and thoroughly and precisely organized and briefed. They are also exciting, fun, and memorable. If you plan to dive with them, the Lagoon Resort is also a perfect match for a place to stay, since the shark dive boat departs right from the doorstep of the Lagoon resort. We have also dived with another dive shop that operates in the same areas; the difference is like staying at well-run Four Seasons hotels or at some roadside motel.

**Beqa Adventure Divers, Beqa Lagoon Resort, May 2007, Steve G. Rosenfeld (oceanstevenr@roadrunner.com), Westlake Village, CA.** Experience: 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm and flat. The dive operation, Beqa Adventure Divers, is located onsite. The resort is situated on a river about a mile from the ocean. The resort has about 25 rooms that are large, with plenty of storage area. Each room was clean but nothing fancy. There is a small refrigerator and a television with 3 English channels. The resort has large common areas, a pool and a good-quality restaurant. The nearest entertainment and additional restaurant are about a 30-minute walk or a 5-minute cab ride. Beqa Adventure Divers is the only boat authorized to feed sharks in the marine reserve. The boat is a 35-foot steel hull vessel that was built for divers. It is run by 2 large outboard motors. There is a large boarding lad-

der. There is no head. The shark dives are done 4 times a week; the other 3 days are reef dives. It is about a 30-minute boat ride to the shark feed. The crew takes down large plastic trash cans full of fish food. There was one shark feeder and 4 safety divers. We saw up to 2 dozen large bull sharks up close; there were also black tip, white tip, and nurse sharks. During the 4 days I dove, we did not have a tiger shark but there were supposedly 2 tiger sharks during the prior week. During the feeding there were hundreds of other fish looking for a handout, including trevally, snapper and a large grouper. The shark action can get quite exciting, but I always felt safe and the crew was excellent. I did one day of reef diving. We went to a wreck that was an intact fishing boat lying in 100 feet of water. The second dive was on a reef full of small fish and beautiful soft corals.

**Beqa Lagoon Resort, April 2007, Martha Mandel (peonyfarm@sbcglobal.net), Glendale, CA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Excellent services. Rooms were in private bures with huge, fully tiled bathrooms with marble floors and walls; each had a spacious sitting room, firm king mattress, 4-poster bed; always had enough hot water; coffee/tea maker is provided in every room; good A/C Gourmet meals 3 times a day; great chocolate desserts! The dive boats were efficient; nothing fancy, yet provided rinse buckets for cameras and plenty of drinking water for the divers. The boats were never overloaded with divers. Two "feed the sharks" dives were available; I think that I'd rather just see the sharks randomly while diving, yet I'm glad that I experienced this. The corals and marine life are abundant. One complaint: a dive guide (not Delana) was harassing a puffer fish on the night

dive. Fish were abundant and exotic; Delana is the best Divemaster/guide.

**Beqa Lagoon Resort, May 2007, Tim (f196clax@earthlink.net), Apopka, FL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Beqa Lagoon Resort was well run by GM Mark. The rooms are large, beds comfortable, well-furnished suites with sun decks. Meals were good. Service was great. The diving was limited to 2-tank boat dive per day. The crew insisted on no drift diving. This excluded some of the better sites when current was present, which is most of the time. Reefs had nice soft and hard corals with plenty of tropical fish above 45 feet. Below that, everything looked destroyed. We did not get to any outer reef dives. DMs did allow you to stay past 60 minutes. Disappointing was the lack of beach diving. Could only attempt at high tide, which is once a day. Low tide and you had to drag yourself across 100 yards of reef. Low tide was the only time available for us so we tried it once. Visibility was 10' to 15' max. 15' depth 100' off shore.

**Beqa Lagoon Resort, June 2007, Debbie Posich, San Diego, CA.** Experience: 500+ dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy. The property has nicely manicured gardens surrounding a variety of accommodations. We had a beachfront bure with a small plunge pool on the porch and a large hammock in our private yard area. The bure was nicely decorated and included a small refrigerator. A water heater, instant coffee and tea bags were also provided in the room. Fresh water can be an issue during the dry season, which explains the low water pressure in the shower. We really only have two complaints about the accommodations: our bed cover and pillows smelled of

somebody else's B.O. and, as divers at a dive resort, we were surprised to discover there wasn't a place dedicated to hang wet dive gear at the bure. This was our first trip where we left our clothesline and clothespins at home they were sorely missed! Entertainment from the local villages almost every night. The local Fijian people are truly a delight. The food ranged from good to good. Dining is family style, with everyone eating at common tables, but they will happily set a separate table for you if desired. Breakfasts were always a choice of eggs or pancakes or French toast. In the morning you are given your menu choices for lunch and dinner. Entrees ranged from a variety of seafood items to chicken, lamb, and beef filets. Lunches included pastas and sandwiches as well as fish. For larger portions, put big or extra next to the food item and they will plus size the portion. Desserts are good and beautifully presented. The native dive masters and crew were great. This was our third trip to Fiji; for Fijian diving, we found the diving good, but not great. The fish, anemones and soft corals are there and are beautiful, just not as spectacular as other areas in Fiji. Good shore diving is available anytime; just grab a tank. They offer two boat dives per day and they did not crowd our boat. The resort was full, yet most of the week we had just 8 divers on our 40-foot boat. Seventeen divers from a Maui-based dive tour group were all on one boat. On our first day there were only four divers, so they offered us their fast boat. The trips to the dive sites were indeed faster and the back roll into the water couldn't be easier, but there is no easy way to get back into the boat. No swim step, no ladder and no hand-hold. The ladies were literally plucked out of the water by the boat captain — what service! The two 50 (ish) year old men

had to claw their way onto the deck any way they could. Both either bruised or cracked ribs. Beqa offers an open water shark dive. We were nearly face-to-face with four large nurse sharks that acted like begging puppies, six large bull sharks and two tiger sharks (a 13-footer named Princess and an 18-footer named Scarface). To round out the population, the 30 x 30 schooling mass included a number of smaller reef sharks and several hundred other fish ranging from huge jacks to large remora. Not for the faint of heart, the tiger sharks look like striped busses underwater. Purchase the video that they offer to prove to all of your friends back home just how crazy you really are. The general manager is not a diver and his wife, while certified, doesn't like to dive. This may explain the lack of hooks or lines for drying dive gear at the bures and the somewhat hazardous conditions on the fast boat. There is a duty free shop in the baggage claim area in the Nadi airport. For those who might want adult beverages in your bure, buy a bottle of your favorite and buy the mixers from the bar at the resort. Beqa has a full service bar and they charge USA bar prices for their drinks.

**Beqa Lagoon Resort, June 2007, Larry Walters, West Chester, OH.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, calm, choppy. The diving is the best I've experienced; little chilly, but worth it! Lionfish like you won't believe! Short boat rides to site (15 to 30 minutes for the most part) and all your gear is loaded on/off your boat for you. Pretty nice gear storage room with assigned shelf, drinking water supply, bathrooms, but does need a ventilation fan to move some air through room. The food is unbelievably good, with choices, but buffet mostly. They have a nice pool and massage room with nice

atmosphere. Two bars for after diving; one near water (no beach/sand to speak of and one larger near walk within the restaurant. There is a computer/camera room about 12 x 12 with low pressure air nozzle.

## Kadavu

**Dive Kadavu Ltd., Matana Beach Resort, February 2007, Don Beukers (d.beukers@sbcglobal.net), San Jose, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 45 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm, choppy. My wife and I checked into the Matana Beach resort with 4 others for a week of diving and relaxation; we got a shock upon checkout time. I had paid for 5 days of diving, turned out I had paid for 5 two tank dives. We were briefed that we would go to Astrolab Reef and to Kong mountain, both all day dives. Upon checking out there was a charge of \$1035.00 Fijian for the additional dives, a waterfall trip @\$40 each, plus value added tax. This was quite a surprise because in addition we had a bar bill for wine, beer and a couple of margaritas (for my wife).that added an additional \$679.72 Fijian to the above amount. The bar bill (\$4 beer, \$35 bottle of wine, etc.) was up front, with the prices shown, but there was no other place to get wine or beer. I just wish that all the info was up front, to eliminate the surprises. The bures were fine, the resort holds 20-plus people and there were only our six there for a week. It would be hectic if 20 were in house. The dive master, Joelii, was great; you waded to the boat, hauling your gear, and set it up on the tanks. After the final dive, we hauled our gear to the bure and rinsed same and placed the items in a lockup for drying for the next day.

**Matava Resort, December 2006, Susan Reiter, East Haddam, CT.** Experience: 250 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 feet. Water: calm and flat. The most memorable part of this trip will be the accommodations. After traveling across the bay in a small motor boat with no overhead covering in a rain storm for 50 minutes, we were warmly greeted and handed lanterns. We assumed there was a power outage because of the storm and climbed several sets of stairs up the jungle-covered mountainside to our thatched cottage. Mosquito netting over the bed, and outside shower and toilet, and yes, no electricity. But in the morning, what a spectacular view of the water and surrounding islands, not to mention no neighbors. The food was brought in by boat daily and was superbly prepared. The staff was helpful and attentive. Most of the time we dived alone with the dive master, who led us to see and swim with mantas, three to four at a time. The distances were not more than 30 minutes to each dive site. The whole experience was so remarkable that it's hard to remember the downside. The boats were small and our stay was too short.

## Mamanuca islands

**SubSurface Divers, Funky Fish Resort, November 2006, Eldon Okazaki, Sunnyvale, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm, currents. The good: Namotu island (Wilk's passage) and Pinnacles were good dive sites with lots of different fishes (and sharks) and color coral. The resort had some houses for families, dorm and bures for backpackers; resort not set up for divers; the food had small quantity. Unlimited dives (\$516, USD) only meant 3 boat dives per day; but, I could have dives more

days than 6; that resort was the 2nd best on the Malolo island; mostly all drinks were added to your final bill; the private room did not have lamps, storage drawers, etc.

**SubSurface Scuba, Treasure Island, February 2007, Marylou Hernandez (hmarylou@hotmail.com), Snohomish, WA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 40 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, surge, no currents. We left late consistently for morning dives (45 min.-1-1/2 hours late). You return after two dives in the morning, no head on the boat. Not even drinking water on the boat. They have a sign that says "protect our reefs No Gloves," yet they allowed at least one older woman to wear gloves and she proceeded to dive by holding on and swimming from coral to coral. I watched her crash into and break several pieces of staghorn coral. The dive guides refused to correct or educate her (she spoke no English but they have at least one dive guide who spoke fluent Japanese! When I asked about it they just shrugged their shoulders. Pro-tanks consistently filled to 3000 psi.

## Matagi

**Matagi Island Resort, September/October 2006, oak, Waikoloa, HI.** Experience. 3000+ dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. First trip back to Fiji since the coup of 2000 ended my job as dive operations manager of Fiji Forbes Laucala. We stayed for two weeks on the neighboring island of Matagi owned by Noel and Flo Douglas and managed by daughter, Christene. The bures are roomy and comfortable, with meticulous attention to detail. The food is impressive; the presentation, quality and service from the friendly staff will rival any fine dining restaurant in the States. A worthwhile but tough two-hour hike

along the rim of Matagi will reward you with stunning panoramic views of the islands of Taveuni, Qamea and Laucala. Since Matagi is a crescent-shaped island, there's a horseshoe bay with a secluded white sand beach and the only access is to be dropped off by boat or paddling by kayak. A picnic lunch with wine or champagne will be provided if requested. If you've ever fantasized about strolling au naturel with your honey on a tropical beach in total isolation, this is the beach! Side trips to Bouma Falls on Taveuni and a village tour on Qamea shouldn't be missed. Matagi is the only dive operator that dives the sites east of Laucala. Although capable of handling large dive groups, the largest number of divers during our visit was six. The dive guides are former employees of Laucala, Iowani Baleicolo, a.k.a. Bale, one of the few licensed Fijian boat skippers in the north, and Ratu Joe Cakobau, who is a direct descendent of arguably the most famous chief in Fijian history. Both graciously deferred to re-visiting some of my favorite dive sites. All diving is drift diving and both Bale and Ratu Joe know which sites to dive when the current is most favorable to seeing the soft corals at full bloom. Our first dive was the Yellow Wall east of Laucala. Upon descending along a sheer vertical dropoff, we hit this site spot on as the entire wall was an explosion of yellow soft corals. This definitely rivals the more famous Great White Wall in the Somosomo straits between Taveuni and Vanua Levu. Other sites were Noels Wall, where near the end of the dive, the large school of chevron barracuda still congregate off the dropoff and if you move slowly, you can hover while the entire school slowly encircles you. White tip reef sharks appeared on almost every dive but the treat was to see the occasional gray reef

or black tip sharks patrolling off the walls or eagle rays and turtles, which we saw at The Corner (Franks Place) along with the many large camouflage groupers that hang out along the top of the reef. Some of the sites haven't recovered from the bleaching in 2000 or sustained damage during the cyclone of January 2003 but we didn't visit those sites. Others have come back remarkably. Broken Reef near Matagi was a great shallow dive where you meander around large bommies of acropora table corals with blue or white tips. Seven Peaks between Qamea and Taveuni has come back with large colonies of purple and red soft corals with swarms of purple and red anthias fluttering in the current on top of the bommies. Stillwaters, near Qamea Beach Resort, is one of the best for moderately fast currents but all kinds of visual candy from soft corals, barracudas, white tips, swarms of smaller tropicals, anemones with anemone fish, flatworms, etc. Bales best trait is finding the smaller stuff; nudibranchs, and little shrimp and crabs that hide on the underside of anemones, so slow down and look for the unique smaller life that's part of every reef. After our first few dives, my companion, who had previously only dived in Hawaii, commented, These coral gardens are just like in Finding Nemo! No wonder you loved it so much here. The weather was rainy at times and the seas moderately calm, but that didn't prevent us from any of our planned activities. The Douglas family and staff are gracious and hospitable hosts. Be sure to pet and say Bula! to Flo Douglass pet fruit bat, Jonathan!

**Matagi Island Resort, April 2007, Peter Bernstein (pjbernstein@juno.com), Cocoa Beach, FL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, choppy, no currents. This

was our 5th trip to Matagi Island. The resort has 12 bures plus the owner's 2 bd villa. A new dining area and pool will open any day. Gorgeous surroundings with excellent diving. They offer a 2-tank dive every morning. The boat is a 30-foot outboard (25-30 kts), side benches with a dive ladder. Most dive sites are from 5 to 25 minutes. Intervals are either on the boat or nearby beach with tea, cookies, etc. I've never seen another dive boat except when we went to Somo Somo. This trip costs extra and takes about 1 hour. Diving here depends on the tides — which can be extremely strong.

## Qamea

**Qamea Resort, March 2007, Victory Bary and Maureen Strazdom (vbary@yahoo.com), Cranford, NJ.** Experience: 230 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, choppy. A magnificent resort, similar to Lalati. Lovely accommodations and property. The staff had the friendliness and desire to accommodate that makes Fiji so special. Dive masters Frank, Matt and Sam were terrific. The soft corals and giant clams are spectacular, as are the schools of small fish and the nudibranchs and flat worms. Anemonefish (orange, orange-finned, tomato) everywhere. Do make the side trip to Rainbow Reef on the other side of Taveuni — breathtaking forests of soft coral. Like Lalati, about two-thirds of guests are honeymooners/anniversary celebrants, so dive boats never crowded.

## Taveuni

**Aqua Trek, Garden Island Resort, October 2006, Michael Judd, Oregon City, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 F, currents. The island itself is lovely, even in the

largely gray weather we had. Everyone is friendly. Garden Island Resort was OK, but not great. The rooms were a typical good-sized motel room, and the AC worked. They were well cleaned without fail every morning while we were out diving. One of those important little details: they give you fresh soap, but you have to bring your own shampoo. All have a patio or balcony with a view across the Somosomo Strait to another island. The grounds are well planted and maintained. One of the large trees is a fruit bat dormitory. Watching these three-foot wing-span mammals fly like birds, coming and going in the daytime, was fascinating. You do get a number of choices of which type of mediocre food you want. There was an unpleasant little surprise at checkout, when the bill for items not in our pre-paid package included about \$40 for meals, the times we ordered the “hot breakfast” rather than the “continental breakfast.” This was news to me, and I pointed out to the desk clerk that their voucher and other materials said “three meals a day,” without limitation, but got nowhere. The diving in this “Rainbow Reef” area is excellent. Given the location of Garden Island, the longest boat trip was no more than 20 minutes. There is a wide variety of soft corals in the full palette of colors. We didn’t see a lot of big stuff (half-dozen sharks, a few mid-size Napoleon wrasse), but the smaller tropical reef fish were abundant. If you like angelfish and butterflies, this is the place. They hang around with lots of anemonefish, plus a number of scorpionfish and lionfish. My personal highlight was seeing my first blue ribbon eel ... and my second, and third and fourth and fifth. There was at least some current on most dives; sometimes it was enough to require some extra work and atten-

tion, but never a major concern. Aqua Trek dive operation was a pleasant, fun bunch of guys. Unfortunately, they were also rather disorganized and careless. It was nice that the crew set up our BCs and regs on the tank for every dive, but on four dives out of eleven my strap was not tight enough to hold the tank in place. Twice when I opened the tank valve the O-ring was leaking. The biggest “oh-oh” was finding out that they had set me up for the second dive on a tank with 200 psi. Pre-dive instructions were short and not very informative. A typical briefing: “This is Jack’s Point. There’s nice coral here. The reef is over there. The current is fairly strong and running this way. Keep the reef on your right shoulder and follow the dive leader.” Then we rolled back into the water one at a time, as the boat and the divers drifted apart. Not surprisingly, we had instances where the divers were separated at both the beginning and end of dives. It didn’t get to the point where anybody was in imminent danger of taking an unplanned trip to New Zealand, but more information and organization would definitely help. The Lavena coastal walk is worth doing. It’s three miles of well constructed pathway, mostly along the ocean shore until the last half mile, when it heads inland to a beautiful falls. The last hundred meters is over slippery rock along the small river, but there’s a rope to assist; at the top you swim and wade to a pool at the foot of a double waterfall. This “fifty-something” made the trek without too much huffing and puffing, and can certify that the path is easily negotiable even in a deluge.

**Aqua Trek, Garden Island Resort, March 2007, Don Beukers (d.beukers@sbcglobal.net), San Jose, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 45 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm, currents.

Resort: 30 motel type a/c rooms (15 rooms each level) with small balcony, daily maid service, continental breakfast, lunch and dinner choices from small menus that did not change for the week. Grounds kept up. Freshwater pool and hammocks to use to relax. Reasonable prices on drinks. The Fijian help were wonderful and remembered your name from the first day. A small boutique with limited items. Snorkeling in the front of the resort was interesting. Surprisingly, the coral is in great shape with only 5 to 7 feet of water covering them. There was one large group in the resort that took over one of the Alum. The other Alum. boat (both covered, with two ladders each) was used for the other divers (approx. 10 average per day). You did not have to touch your gear; they washed it and reset it up on the tanks before going out and after each dive. A break between dives on the beach for tea and cookies. Because of the overcast skies, the colors did not come out as they had done on a previous trip but the soft corals, fish life and sea snakes were wonderful. The corals are pristine and are thriving.

**Aqua Trek, Garden Island, July 2007, Rita and Bob May, Oak View, CA.**

Experience: 500+ dives. Water: 80 F, calm and flat, strong currents. We look forward to our yearly visit to Taveuni. We love our friends at Garden Island. The dive guides are the best ever. The soft coral is awesome. Every color. This year had perfect weather and glassy water. The coup caused some cancellations. We saw no problem.

**Jewel Bubble Divers, Home, August 2007, Larry Polster (larrypolster@sbcglobal.net), Martinsville, IN.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy. Jewel Bubble is a small operation with local

ownership, but the 6 pac boat made for great trips to Somosomo straits and the Great White Wall. I made this trip three times in 2 weeks and it was magnificent every time. The operator makes sure the currents are in the correct direction for the wall of blue/white soft corals to be in full bloom. Their rental gear was new and in good shape for those who don't want to drag their own gear. Many brought their mask, fins, and regs, and rented the rest. The locals are friendly, and extend the warm greeting of "bula" as you walk along the roads, or dive operation. The down side of this small boat is room for only one medium-sized rinse bucket, so if more than one photographer, you hold your camera during the trip. But the photo opportunities are so fantastic that you don't mind the inconvenience. The soft coral capital of the world! Spectacular colors, lots of small critters; bring your macro lens, many reef fish, not many large fish, but white/black tip reef sharks are common.

## Vita Levu

**Coral Coast Scuba, Shangri-La Fijian, February 2007, Marylou Hernandez (hmarylou@hotmail.com), Snohomish, WA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy, no currents. I have never seen an operation less helpful when it comes to your gear. You haul your stuff from the shop to the Jetty each day. They say they have facilities to store your gear, but apart from hanging your wetsuit/BCD with the rest of the rental gear, my gear was stored on the floor of the manager's office. One day they weren't sure he would be at work in time for the 8 a.m. dive to unlock his office. They wanted me to just use their gear instead. When I complained, they looked for a key to

the office a little harder and found one! Out of 8 dives, at least 4 times I had to change tanks because the fill was at 2500-2600 psi! No offer of even fresh water to drink on the boat to stave off dehydration! UW Photography Comments: No place to store or charge camera batteries. No place to wipe down or dry camera between dives. Ask for a freshwater bucket to be provided or it won't be on board.

**Kai Viti, Nananu Beach and Dive Resort, April 2007, Nik Ellis (nikellis@san.rr.com), San Diego, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, choppy, no currents. Kai Viti, owned and managed by a Los Angeles ex-pat couple, is one of the best dive boats we have used. Dive masters allowed divers to move freely at their own pace; pointed out critters, formations, swim-throughs and other stuff. Divers were allowed to surface according to air use with 400-500 lb remaining. This allowed conservative breathers to dive longer. The boat is clean, roomy, well maintained, and reasonably fast. The crew is extremely attentive, gear is set up and ready, crew will assist as much or little as the diver desires with donning gear, moving to the rear platform for an easy entry. Exit ladder is easy with or without gear; crew is at the ladder to take up BC and other gear. Most days included 6 or 7 divers; the boat comfortably accommodated 12 divers one day. High-end snacks and lunches were abundant. Filled tanks were left on the dock daily for shore divers. Top accommodations, friendly staff, great service, exquisitely prepared cuisine with outstanding presentations. (And fun kava ceremonies).

**Kai Viti Divers, Wananavu Beach Resort, June 2007, Rick Bates (un-drwatr@sympatico.ca), Ajax, Ont.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 81 to 81 F, calm, choppy. We were met at Nadi airport as arranged, and enjoyed the two-hour drive to the opposite end of the island. The driver was full of information about sites and local history along the way. Bags taken down to our beachfront bure and dive gear left out for morning pickup by dive shop staff. Gear was rinsed and placed out for us on the boat each morning after that, and rinsed out and hung to dry after our last dive of the week. Staff on board the boat included a husband-and-wife team who were superb! Briefings, safety, and diver comfort always paramount. There was always a dive master in the water if you wanted to follow him around, good at pointing out small critters and special features. Fresh home-baked snacks and drinks available after every dive. We often had to cross the channel to pick up divers at another resort, which wasn't a big deal. No more than 8 to 10 divers every day on a boat that was set up for about 16, so there was lots of room. Limited space with protection from the sun, however. Their second boat appeared to be roomier, but it was always more crowded. Dives were wonderful, although they got a little repetitious as the week went on, but the crew was happy to take us further out into the Blich Waters (Kora Sea), where the diving was nothing short of spectacular. Some trips were 3-tank dives with boxed lunches provided by the resort if ordered the night prior. No big fish during this time of year, but macro and reef life more than made up for it. We spoke with a number of other divers at Wananavu who were booked in with the other dive shop nearby who had many complaints, and it was clear that we were with the better operation of the two. Meals were fully stocked buffet

breakfasts, including omelets to order. Lunch and dinner were from a limited selection from a menu. Food was always reliable, but nothing too spectacular. The staff remembers your name from the moment you arrive and were 100% attentive and helpful throughout our stay. Many afternoon activities offered, including visit to a local village; all were fun and worth the effort. Our package deal including dives and meals was economical. The bures have large showers, double sinks and great AC. We did not sense or see any effects of the ongoing political problems in Fiji.

**Kai Viti Divers, Wananavu, August 2007, Larry Polster (larrypolster@sbcglobal.net), Martinsville, IN.**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. The dive masters were great; leave your gear outside your bure the first day and they picked it up. They changed tanks, rinsed your gear, and had it all back on the boat again the next day. The dive shop had a few shirts and caps, but out of most popular sizes. The rental gear looked OK, but take your own if you have it. We had high winds on most days of the 2 weeks, but finally made it to the Bligh Waters for three-tank dives on a couple days, with great shark diving in strong currents. The closer dive sites were great for beginners, but not as exciting for experienced divers. The resort was older but well kept. We enjoyed a beach bure, important if you have a non-diving companion. Snorkeling was poor from shore, but a \$50 snorkel trip was good. The band boys were playing at lunch and dinner, and Kava was always available at dinner. They don't usually tip in Fiji, but have a "Christmas Fund" you could contribute to at the end of your trip. This is split among the staff at Christmas holiday. The food was plentiful, but like most resorts, it

was the same ol' menu and it got boring after a week. Be sure to have your driver stop in Lautoka or Ba on the way (2.5-hour trip) to Wananavu. You can purchase wine, beer, and snacks (not on Sunday). The resort is remote and expensive if you purchase adult beverages or munchies from the shop. If you like "spirits," be sure to purchase at duty free store at the Nadi airport before getting your bags. A bottle of vodka in town is \$80 compared to \$20 at the airport. The sunsets were great, the water colorful, and the Fijian music pleasant. I would only stay at this location for a week and spend the rest of your dive trip at Taveuni, Kadavu, or Beqa. Plenty of soft corals, reef sharks on many dives, couple dives had leopard shark, plenty of nudis; take wide angle and macro; the captain could usually advise which dive to take macro, but only after he arrived at the site. No camera table, but good rinse bucket.

**Kai Viti Divers, Nananu Beach and Dive Resort, August 2007, Justin Jones (jayjoans@yahoo.com), Concord, CA.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, choppy. Nananu Beach and Dive Resort was fabulous. The Fijian people made us feel part of their family from the first moment we arrived. Private bures located on the top of the ridge provide for cooling breezes and amazing sunset views. Bures 11 and 12 are the highest and most private. Food was delicious and large portions. 24-hour power, no TV, no phone, but excellent cell coverage through Vodaphone. Separate A/C units and small refrigerators in the bures, outdoor showers on private patios (no indoor shower). Better beach than Wananavu, also features the only pool on the island. Sea kayaks, tennis, fishing, hammocks, and available kitesurfing and windsurfing lessons

nearby. Kai Viti promptly picks you up at Nananu's private pier at 8:15 am. Excellent dive staff, custom-built dive boat with plenty of room, flat step-off exit, and easy entry ladder. All dives were dictated by your own computer. DMs found interesting critters during dives. Kai Viti is the only land-based op to go out to the Bligh water, and that is a 3-tank day at an extra fee. Approximately 1 hour boat time to dive sites in the Bligh; other great sites are an easy 20 minutes from Nananu resort. Weather and divers dictate trips out to the Bligh. Mosquitoes in Fiji; breezes help, but bring repellent. We booked air directly through Air Pacific via LAX. Long travel days, arriving in Nadi after 10.5-hour flight from LAX, then 2+ hours in a van to Rakiraki, then another 20 minutes by boat to Nananu.

## FRENCH POLYNESIA

Tahiti and Moorea are everyone's dream of the South Pacific, and despite their pricey resorts and food, these French-speaking islands are now attracting North American divers to join in the plentiful reef shark action. There are a range of accommodations and restaurants, some reef diving, and plenty of great scenery. The once-snotty French attitude toward others has lessened considerably.

### Moorea

**Top Dive, Club Bali Hai, June 2007, Dennis Lewis (basileuslewis@msn.com), Fresno, CA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. I read prior reviews in Undercurrent and other publications and settled on Scuba Piti

because of small groups and, importantly, they do not feed the fish. We arrived at our hotel, Club Bali Hai, on a Sunday. Scuba Piti had called to say that their boat was out of the water and that there would be no diving that week. No offer of help in booking another company or anything. The manager of Bali Hai heard my you have got to be kidding, called TOPdive and set things up for us including having the shop pick us up the next day. Dive groups ranged from four plus a DM to a top of six plus a DM. The DMs were multilingual and energetic. Helpful since on any dive you would hear English, French, German, Portuguese or Italian. After the first dive, our DM was Nicolas Buray. He has the wonderful ability to keep track of everyone, yet stay back enough so that we all got to do the dive we wanted. If we wanted to see something specific, he would lead us to it. If not, we were free to explore. If you looked around, he would be there. Maybe just above the reef keeping an eye on us. Maybe watching that shark to make sure that none of us were on its dinner menu. After the first day, we were free to dive our computer limits as we saw fit. Feeding the fish clearly changes how the fish interact with us, especially the sharks. I did not like that each dive site teamed with fish and sharks — reef and lemon — and that they seemed comfortable with us. The turtles would come right up to us. Some divers would give them food pellets by hand. I don't know what it would have been like had there not been a big bag of fish scraps in the water. The fish life seemed plentiful and healthy even some distance from the feeding area, but how much of that is spillover from the feeding? I hear that the locals have been feeding sharks and rays for 40 years. Perhaps it is too late to stop without a major impact