

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

A Fijian Primer

So Many Islands, So Little Time

Fiji is a confusing dive destination. It has a variety of diving, at a wide selection of islands and resorts. Want to dive Mana, Matagi, Namena, Viti Levu, Laucala, Namale on Vanua Levu, Qamea on Taveuni, or Mantana on Kadavu? To decipher the Fijian puzzle, we chose someone who has spent considerable time there. He's a case of the proverbial "swaying palm tree" dream at work. His entire family (including children) have decided to pack up and move to Fiji. A major part of his where-to-move criteria was great diving, and he's made several trips to Fiji to check it out. He told us up front that he doesn't keep a dive log and is horrible at remembering the names of dive sites, so if we expected to know that on Thursday at 2:57 he was at 73 feet in 27.2°C water with 2,100 psi, we would be sorely disappointed. If we wanted an overview of diving in Fiji, though, he was the man to do it. Here's his report.

"A hundred years of prodding by the British have failed to make the Fijians see why

they should work for money."
— James A. Michener, 1951

Still true, James, and the British just didn't get it. The Fijians possessed long ago what money still can't buy. The native Fijians are by far the friendliest and happiest people I have ever met. And second only to the people, it's the diving that makes Fiji memorable.

Beqa Lagoon

All planes lead to Nandi. No matter where you start, you end up at Nandi International Airport on the west side of Viti Levu, the largest island of the Fiji chain. From here, the closest diving is a 2½-hour cab ride along the Queen's Road to Pacific Harbor, followed by a 30-minute boat ride out to Beqa Lagoon, a collapsed volcano about 5 miles south of Viti Levu. If you're into shopping, nightlife, or golf, you can stay in Pacific Harbor and do day trips out to the lagoon

to dive. Beqa Divers, at Pacific Harbor Hotel, runs daily trips (well, maybe not always daily). The Dive Connection is another option for day trips; reports say they run a good operation.

I stayed a couple of nights at the "Pac Harbor" and can safely say it doesn't have much to offer. The hotel itself is thread-

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bare, and I didn't travel halfway around the world to walk into a lobby and hear country-and-western muzak. However, I *will* say that sitting in the bar listening to intoxicated Japanese tourists sing kicker music on the karaoke is good for one evening's entertainment.

If you have your heart set on staying in Pacific Harbor, I would recommend one of the many villas that are leased by the week at reasonable rates. However, if you are going to dive Beqa, why not *stay* on Beqa, a small island with no roads, nine villages and Marlin Bay Resort? George Taylor, an American, has pulled off an amazing feat. His resort is close to paradise. A dozen bures (cottages) share space with huge coconut palms that ring the edge of the small bay. Each bure has its own personal hammock tied to the coconut palms. It takes considerable will power not to get stuck in one every afternoon with a cold Fijian bitter.

Food is five star. For breakfast, your choice is omelet, French toast, or pancakes — always with fresh fruit. Every other meal is — fish. George lets you know that fish is his thing. Unless you ask otherwise, he will serve it for both lunch and dinner. I never asked otherwise, as the fish came to us prepared every which way under the sun and always fresh. People who were not fish freaks were served chicken, lamb, beef, or vegetarian. The chef is Austrian, so I won't even mention the desserts.

Villagers who staff the resort are very accommodating and friendly, but this is not unique, as it happens all over Fiji. Beqa is also the home of firewalking; you should definitely ask one of the Sawau tribe to explain how

a god once repaid a favor and gave them the ability to walk on white-hot coals.

The in-house diving operation is run by Fred, who takes daily boat trips out to the lagoon. Beach diving is unlimited, but what little we did was underwhelming. If you're a photographer or just like to poke around, you may be able to stay amused for a few dives.

On one dive, I was trying to decide which of six lionfish to immortalize on film, when my buddy pointed out four more within two feet of my head.

During our two visits, the visibility was a bit off (40–70 feet), but the current was always manageable, and Fred did a good job of tailoring the dive sites to the divers on board. Computers are allowed; once you've established that you're competent, you are not restricted on depth or time. Although a couple of dives were led, we were generally free to roam.

Most diving is shallow (I don't think I ever hit 100 feet), which gives you plenty of bottom time. For some reason, the coral on the bommies stops at 50–70 feet. Soft corals of every possible color take up every space that is not already occupied by anemones and clams. On one dive, I was trying to decide which of six lionfish to immortalize on film, when my buddy pointed out four more within 2 feet of my head.

It was not uncommon to see whitetip sharks — or as Fred likes to say, “shark butts,” since they don't hang around long enough for you to see anything else. We also surprised a turtle or two and saw plenty of little stuff like blue (and black) ribbon eels, leaf fish, and nudibranchs.

My favorite fish story from Marlin Bay, however, happened out of the water. On the dive boat between dives, I looked off just in time to see a manta with a 6-foot wingspan do a complete, out-of-water back flip — a perfect 10 for both execution and style.

Kadavu

About 60 miles south of Viti Levu is the island of Kadavu. The grass runway ends on the beach, so it's a simple matter to grab your luggage off the plane, walk a few dozen yards, and throw the whole mess into a boat for the short ride up the coast to Mantana Resort and Dive Kadavu.

The resort, managed by Debby Minto, is not as upscale (or pricey) as Marlin Bay. Perched on the side of a steep hill, the bures are comfortable and the open-air gathering/dining room has a stupendous sunset view. Breakfast is cooked to order and other meals are served buffet-style.

Most reefs in Fiji are privately owned by villages, so the dive operators have to cut deals with the village chiefs before any anchors are dropped. Dive Kadavu was evidently having just such a chiefly disagreement during our stay; Eric, who runs the diving, apologized that we would miss a few of the better sites. As a consolation, I suppose, we did some exploratory dives, with the usual mixed results.

That's not a complaint. I love to jump over the side of a boat and tell myself that I'm going where no man has gone before. I was happy as a clam.

On a typical dive, we would take a short boat ride, roam around coral-smothered bommies, and get swarmed by your basic South Pacific menagerie. All dives were made inside the reef, so currents were never a factor. Visibility was quite good and we had unrestricted diving. One spot we visited was called, I think, the Yellow Wall. It was a spectacular sight: one species of soft coral (guess what color) blanketed what is not really a wall but a huge bommie.

Sometimes, though, it's the little things that burn an image into your brain. My favorite dive here was at night, when three of us dropped into a large swim-through with lights off and were suddenly confronted by a hundred phosphorescent eyes about the size of a nickel. Turning on our lights, we high-beamed what turned out to be a crew of very surprised flashlight fish.

Taveuni

Heading north, you get to Taveuni (sometimes called the "Garden Island"), home of the shark god and the international date line. Take a short stroll down the road from the Garden Island Resort and you can straddle yesterday and today — or is it today and tomorrow?

Be sure and check out the natural water slide (wear an *old* bathing suit) and take a trip to Bouma Falls, one of Fiji's many waterfalls. Another hot tip is to rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle and make a run up the switchback road, 3,800 feet to the top of the volcanic ridge that runs down the center of the island. It's a wild drive, and

you need to get permission, but the view of the ocean and the inland lake that feeds the waterfall is well worth the hassle.

The review of Garden Island Resort in the November 1993 issue of *In Depth* was spot on. I have reliable information that Garden Island is now up for sale. You can never predict the effect of a change in ownership, so it might be wise to check before booking a trip.

On first meeting, I thought the folks at Rainbow Reef Divers, next door to the Garden Island, were kind of stuffy and that we were in for a week of regimented diving. I was wrong. I agree with the reviewer; they run one of the most professional dive operations I've ever seen, easily managing that sometimes delicate balance between personal freedom and safety.

The current in the Somosomo Straits can be ripping. I surfaced from one dive to find the aluminum ladder lying horizontal, bouncing on the chop. I'm not a big fan of anchored current dives and would rather consume copious quantities of air than resort to grabbing stuff on the bottom (even dead stuff) to pull my way back to the boat. The problem here, as elsewhere in Fiji, is that if you try to drift dive, the boat can go in one direction while the divers go in several others.

One dive-site name I will always remember is the Great White Wall. What a trip! Descending in the current, you get one shot to stab yourself into a tunnel, just to be spit out over the dropoff at 100 feet. Kicking back and blasting down the wall, you are confronted by a panorama as white as a Colorado ski slope. As on Kadavu's

Yellow Wall, one species of coral (white, in this case) dominates the landscape as far as you can see.

Matagi

A short boat ride from Taveuni is the incredible island of Matagi. The Douglas family owns the whole island, and it's another no-road, no-car, volcanic-mountain tropical paradise. Matagi is the sister to Malcolm Forbes's Laucala Island. Old Malcolm could have owned anything anywhere, so I think that speaks well of these islands.

The Douglases have built a beautiful resort in a beautiful setting, with the best-crafted bures that I have ever seen. Matagi is impeccable. The Fijians run the whole show; as Douglas so eloquently puts it, "You didn't come all this way to look at me!"

The closest I can come to a real complaint is that the food was only good, not great. There's croquet on the lawn and killer volleyball games in the afternoons. One hint: the staff always wins.

Diving off the beach is worth burning a tank or two. During our stay we saw baby lionfish and (oh boy!) copulating nudibranchs. The boat diving is quite good and the dive operation is smooth, though a bit conservative — we were told to honor a maximum depth of 120 feet and were quizzed about depth and time after each dive.

Not to be outdone by Kadavu or Taveuni, Matagi has its own monochromatic wall dive. This time the soft coral is purple and it's called — you guessed it — the "Purple Wall." I managed to sneak down to a little over 140 feet (at the suggestion

of the dive guide, which kind of contradicts my earlier comment) and look back up the wall. I was lost in a sea of undulating purple.

Advice

Consider at least a two-week visit to Fiji. Stay one week on one of the western islands, then head up north for the second week. This will ensure the widest diversity of geography, climate, and diving, with the

added bonus of getting two distinct dive vacations for the price of one plane ticket.

For those who want to sail the seas and dive until water-logged, there are live-aboards in Fiji, but that's another story.

Accommodations

Pricey/upscale: Marlin Bay Resort, Beqa; Matagi Island Resort, Matagi

Moderate: Mantana Resort,

Kadavu; Garden Island Resort, Taveuni

Diving

Taveuni - 9.5

Matagi - 9.0

Beqa - 9.0

Kadavu - 8.0

(1-10, Pacific scale)



A Faceful of Mask

Just the Ticket for Underwater Duets

Last year we asked three of our editors to take a look at two of the better-known full face masks: the Interspiro Divator MK II and Diving Systems International's EXO-26. We wondered if full face masks, with their advantages of a dry face in cold water, freedom from jaw fatigue, the ability to sing underwater (along with other forms of communication), and the safety of a continuing air supply after passing out, held any appeal for sport divers. Our editors had mixed reactions, ranging from approval ("I like this toy") to claustrophobia ("It grabs the back of your head like the Alien"). The units we tested were well built and performed flawlessly during our field analysis. Each unit has automatic lens defogging; each is communications-adaptable; each provides a Class A second-stage regulator as part of the purchase price. All list for around \$700 — so we were surprised when we saw a dive-equipment catalog offering a "full face mask" for \$64.95. We couldn't resist.

On test dives, the IST "Blue-Light Special" provided a solid seal and decent visibility in a very low volume mask. It's definitely not an Interspiro or an EXO-26, but you can buy 10 of them for the price of either of the top-of-the-line masks. With the IST, you use your own regulator. Removing the rubber mouthpiece from your reg, you insert the metal or plastic part of the second stage through the hole in the mask and secure it with a cable tie. The mask then becomes your mouthpiece. I first installed an ancient

Scubapro reg and found that I could easily inhale and exhale through either my mouth or my nose. I tried a Poseidon and a Conshelf SE2, and both worked nicely. The rubber nose pocket on the mask provides easy nostril-pinching/ear-clearing capability. To keep the lenses from steaming up, the IST has to be defogged with either saliva or a commercial product. The mask is attached to your head by a "spider" consisting of three rubber straps: one over the top of your head, two more at about cheek

level. The buckles for the spider adjustment are not the easily adjustable or quick-release types found on fancier masks, and fine-tuning the fit of the mask once under water is almost impossible.

These masks may be inexpensive, but they're not toys. Don't be lulled into thinking that you don't need to practice with them before you take a plunge into open water. They're still full face masks. A few ditch-and-don exercises with a competent, attentive buddy are absolutely required. When practicing or doing real dives, carry a backup mask with you at all times and have your octopus ready. Be aware that unless you can turn off the air at your second stage, the regulator will tend to free-flow as you break the seal when removing the mask. It will stop once you've got the mask off.

If you'd like to try using a full face mask, but can't mortgage the farm at this time, IST's Full Face Mask is an inexpensive way to try out the technology and experience the sensation of diving with a dry face and without a large object in your mouth. It can be ordered from Mr. Diver, Inc., at 1-800-532-2228; ask for item no. 35012.

