
Marlin Bay Resort, Fiji

Another damned beautiful bommie, and another, and another

Dear Fellow Diver,

That South Pacific moonless night sky: black as octopus ink, punctuated with a million sparkling stars. After a festive evening, I walked barefoot back to my bure, along a path on the manicured grounds lighted by torches and lanterns. Out of the shadows slipped the night watchman, greeting me with the traditional "Bula." He unlocked my bure door and bid me good night.

A towel I had carelessly dropped after my shower hung on the rack. Dirty laundry I had left in arattan basket had been washed, folded, and stacked on the shelf. My bed covers were turned down; a fresh hibiscus lay on my pillow. I climbed into bed to read, then reflected on dinner: a light yam soup, steamed bok choy with sesame seeds, broiled swordfish sprinkled with green onion and tomato, basmati rice, a delicate chiffon key lime pie -- and this resort claims that its main attraction is diving.

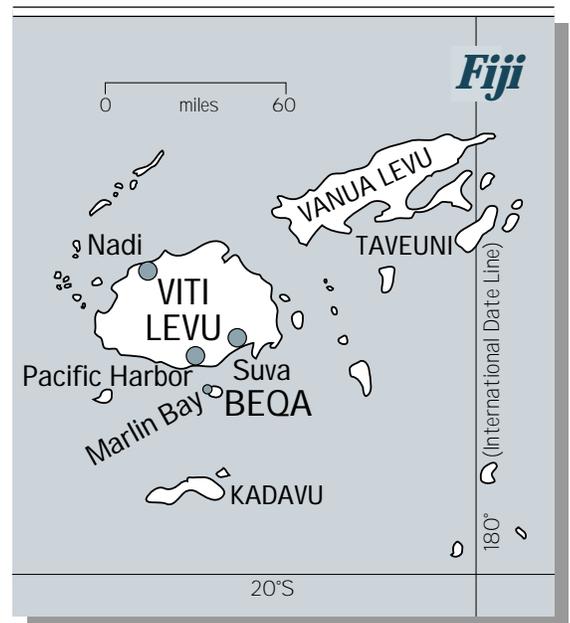
Marlin Bay, built by Californian George Taylor, is located on roadless Beqa (pronounced "Benga") island, 45 boat-minutes off Fiji's main island, Viti Levu. To compete in the Fiji dive market with the likes of Moody's Namena, Dive Taveuni, Matagi, and Cousteau, a resort must attend to detail. Taylor has, indeed.

For \$2,100 a head, including airfare from L.A., 15 people from my local dive store visited for a week in November. Several added time at a second resort -- and a good thing, too. Half a dozen got hit with the flu and missed one or more diving days. (Tip: Don't travel in flu season without an inoculation.)

Air New Zealand arrived in Nadi ("Nandi") at 6 a.m., where a chartered bus drove us three hours to Pacific Harbor to board two resort boats for a rough, 45-minute ride through wind and rain. But the picture-perfect Marlin Bay resort and the warm greeting lifted the gloom, and the sun appeared. After freshening up, we were briefed on the diving and the week's activities, then served a fine lunch. The rest of the day was R & R.

While George has attended to details on land, his dive boats, which travel up to 30 minutes to the sites, fall short: two 26-footers with small cabins and a third, open boat. Our group and two other divers at the resort took up all the room; a full resort, three to a bure, would jam these boats.

Each person was assigned a boat and a guide for the week. My guide was 19-year-old instructor Abe Veidmark, who had left a "normal" job in Phoenix just three weeks before. Remarkably



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mature for his youth, he congenially dealt with us aging boomers and let everyone do his own thing (or buddy with inexperienced divers). Shallow and mostly lacking the notorious Fiji currents, Beqa Lagoon is pretty much a no-brainer, anyhow.

The diving topography is similar everywhere: seamounts (called "bommies") rising from the 60- to 100-foot bottom. Fifty feet is the delineation between reef and rubble; the closer to the surface, the more the bommies are festooned with colorful corals and fish, like so many Macy's Christmas trees.

Each bommie has its own hard-coral characteristics, which include stacks of plate corals; circular stands of coral fingers (from which hundreds of colorful juveniles rose like steam clouds); loose, silver-dollar-sized razor coral; fine specimens of brain coral and antler coral. At Three Thieves I found what appeared to be a "cabbage patch," a type of coral for which there is no Caribbean comparison.

But it's the multihued soft corals, not the hard, that differentiate the South Pacific from the Caribbean. Some look like giant flowers, others like large bonsai trees, with thick, white stalks sporting pink broccoli clusters. Parts of the reef are covered by penny-sized soft corals, looking like a '60s shag carpet. When the sun shone -- less than half the time -- colors glowed like neon in the shallow waters.

The fish life is splendid. On one dive, my buddy shined his light on what looked like a moray but whose needle-fine teeth gave it away as a crocodile snake eel. Blue-ribbon snake eels, curious creatures

with a golden nose, hiccupped while weaving in the water. I watched a skinny, two-foot-long flutemouth shoot off like a missile at schools of red and blue and black anthias. Several ringed pipefish, cousins of the seahorse, wriggled along the coral. The lumpy bodies of bright-yellow puffers seemed unsuitable to a life underwater. And those clown triggers, their black bodies dotted with a score of penny-sized white spots, sporting a yellow-and-black-spotted saddle and an orange mouth outlined in blue: God is not humorless. A tire-sized batfish

Night Dive or Not Dive?

Many dive resorts that depend on packages offer optional night dives and charge extra, then cancel if too few sign up. For people traveling half the globe, that's pretty cheesy.

Marlin Bay requires four people for the night dive, but only three signed up. Still, they would have gone, but when two of the three decided to dive from the beach, the night dive was canceled. It was no big deal and there were no hard feelings.

However, time and again I have seen night dives canceled because four or six or whatever the minimum was didn't sign up. People had traveled thousands of miles, spent a grand or two for a week, and then were denied even one lousy night dive.

It ain't fair. Wise up, guys, and look at the big picture. For that kind of money, you should bust butt to take out one diver — for free, even.

Tip for the reader: If night diving is important to you, ask for a guarantee ahead of time, regardless of the number of divers going, and get it in writing. A good dive resort will not renege. B. D.

Travel Warning

The 800 number for the dive travel agency Innerspace Adventures (800-833-7327) has been disconnected, as has their Key Largo number. I did connect with their fax number (813-596-3891) and requested a new telephone number — no reply. If I had dive travel booked with Innerspace, I would be scrambling to confirm reservations and payment with my destination. J. Q.

stopped at a cleaning station for a preening. Small tridacna clams were common: a fish picked at the siphon of one, only to get blown away time after time. I showed a beautiful spider shell to a diver who reciprocated with a large tiger cowrie. We replaced them, a rule of the game.

Seven Sisters, rising to 10 feet, is a typical dive. Visibility had dropped to 40 feet (it ran a dull 30-70, while the 3-mm-wetsuit water was a constant 76), so I followed my compass to the first pinnacle. Squirrelfish and soldierfish hovered under every coral plate. I found a blue flatworm and a nudibranch. Tentacles of a small lobster wriggled from a hole. As I moved past tree-like soft corals, thousands of goldfish-sized anthias darted about. In the distance unicorn fish hung, while two large parrotfish made sand as only parrotfish can. I found two anemones, one harboring saddleback anemonefish, the other orange anemonefish. Butterflies were common: long-nosed, oval-spot, saddleback, reticulated; Moorish idols with perfectly outlined yellow-and-black stripes, an orange belt on their snout, and a body-long thread fin swam in pairs. I watched two lovely fire dart fish, with their swordlike, lemon-yellow dorsal fins, hover above the sand. Then I kicked across the bottom 100 feet to the next bommie, where the scene repeated itself.

And there's the rub. While life on each bommie is prolific after a while it begins to blend together. We repeated two sites in six days of diving, but they were all so similar it mattered little. The jaded diver will say, "If you've seen one, you've seen them all." The curious diver will say, "Wow, great dive! Let's do it again!"

Dear *In Depth*,

Tuna Meltdown

On November 9, 1995, I was aboard the dive boat *Don Jose*. We were anchored on El Bajo seamount, a dive site in Mexico's Sea of Cortez renowned for an abundance of marine life, including schools of hammerhead sharks.

Small groups of divers were going out in skiffs to drift dive over the seamount. Between dives I saw pods of dolphins and noticed a small helicopter circling the area. Shortly after that the tuna ship *Maria Veronica* arrived. In a matter of minutes, without any warning whatsoever, the tuna boat and its tender dropped a net directly across the bow of the *Don Jose*. Within moments, the tuna net encircled the entire seamount. Inside the circle of net was one of our skiffs with four divers aboard. If these divers had been in the water, they surely would have been killed.

The *Don Jose's* captain quickly cut our anchor, which had become entangled in the tuna net. As we left the area, we watched the *Maria Veronica* cut its net and ditch its equipment. Our captain radioed the *Maria Veronica* for an explanation. We were told that the spotter helicopter saw the pods of dolphins and a large dark area under the *Don Jose* and concluded that the seamount was a large school of tuna. Furthermore, they said that they were unaware of the seamount's existence because it was not identified on any of their maps; they were also unaware that we were anchored and that we were diving, since no dive flag was flown. While it is true the *Don Jose* was not flying a dive flag, it's difficult to believe they could not tell we were anchored and that divers were in the area, as their spotter helicopter had made several passes close to our ship and the skiffs containing divers.

The following day we returned to El Bajo. As I made drift dives over the seamount, I was sickened by what I saw — tuna net caught on most of the north mount, chains and steel cables on the main seamount. Worst of all, the entire south seamount was completely covered with tuna net. Caught in and under the net were many, many fish. The marine ecosystem had been severely traumatized and will undoubtedly suffer permanent damage.

It seems apparent that the *Maria Veronica* should be held accountable for its actions and responsible for removing its nets and equipment from the damaged seamount. In addition, the Mexican government needs to take stringent action to protect its natural resources and its tourists by establishing and mapping marine sanctuaries in the Sea of Cortez and initiating a mooring system at El Bajo and other popular dive sites such as Los Islotes, Las Animas, and San Diego Reef.

Deanna and Dave Hotchner
Mt. Prospect, Illinois

Baja Expeditions and another local dive operator helped organize a massive cleanup to remove the nets, cables, and debris from the seamounts. They were helped by an arriving dive group. The Mexican government reacted quickly; it fined the Maria Veronica \$50,000 and agreed to a Baja Expeditions request to fund a study on creating a protected area.

J. Q.

Readers rate Marlin Bay 5 stars for food, accommodations, and service. The diving gets 3.5 for experienced divers, 4.6 for beginners.

J. Q.

Our group had but two jaded divers. They had been elsewhere in the South Pacific, and for them something was missing: big-fish action, even on our one dive outside the lagoon. Oh, during the week I saw half a dozen whitetip sharks, none more than three feet, a couple of Spanish mackerel, an uncooperative stingray, a few crevally, and a flowing school of at least a thousand parrotfish -- a remarkable sighting. But Beqa Lagoon is sort of the Bonaire of Fiji. If you think size matters, you'll have to live your macho dreams elsewhere.

Still, it's a dream vacation, made so by a wonderful staff, especially chief cook and bottle washer Christian Grodin, a graduate of a five-year hotel-management school in Austria. Christian ensures that one doesn't eat at Marlin Bay -- one dines, on imaginative, visually appealing meals, prepared with the freshest of ingredients, presented at candlelight sit-down dinners in the large, open-air great house.

Dinner might be braised New Zealand lamb in a port-and-cabernet sauce, or tuna steak, with sauteed zucchini cut to look like fish tails. Desserts, such as chocolate mousse or Bailey's Irish Cream ice cream, were light and perfect. For lunch, Christian once served buffalo stew and a light green salad, and for non-meat eaters, skewered shrimp and steamed vegetables; another day, sautéed wahoo accompanied by soba noodles with a peanut sauce.

Getting There

Fiji? More convenient than you might think. Eighty percent of the Canadian and American divers who read this missive can, if they wish, leave home Thursday morning, spend a week in Fiji, and return home

Saturday evening, nine days later. Connections are that good.

On Air New Zealand, depart L.A. at 9:30 p.m. Thursday night. After crossing the International Date Line, arrive in Nadi at 7:00 a.m. Saturday morning, then connect to the outer islands. Spend seven nights, dive six days. Depart Fiji Saturday at 7:20 p.m. a week later, traverse the dateline again, arrive in L.A. at 1:40 p.m. Saturday, and connect for home.

Air New Zealand, which stops in Hawaii, usually has the best fares and packages to many Fiji resorts (though not dive resorts). For extra bucks you can stop over in New Zealand or Hawaii. ANZ is a Delta mileage partner; to use frequent-flyer mileage, you must plan months in advance, since they're tight with the freebies.

Qantas and Air Fiji fly nonstop from Los Angeles. I flew nonstop to New Zealand on United frequent-flier miles, toured for four days, then flew round trip to Fiji for \$600, using a New Zealand travel agent: Jemma Morris, Global Travel, Auckland (011-64-9-379-5520 or fax 011-64-9-377-0111); her fares from NZ to any South Pacific outpost were 40 percent less than the same itinerary through U.S. travel agents. B. D.

At 7:30 a.m., after coffee and strains of Vivaldi, we could breakfast on thin, light buttermilk pancakes or a tomato and-basil omelet (or both, and accompanied by *pommes frites*), or perhaps a Maui onion omelet, preceded by mango, papaya, watermelon, and banana. For once I could enjoy fine meals on a dive trip without gaining weight, and still indulge in sweet dive bread and mango juice between tanks and scarf up hors d'oeuvres such as Indian bread with a peanut dipping sauce, accompanied with a fine Fiji bitter, before dinner.

Christian's wry humor and Austrian accent, like a character from Hogan's Heroes, kept everyone smiling. Cheery Ken (King of the Reef)

Tuicakau, whether tending bar or entertaining with his weekly Baba's coconut show, tickled me with his infectious laughter. The schedule includes a fire walk by nearby villagers (locals, not hotel performers, who walk on rocks hot enough to ignite wood), a 90-minute round-

trip hike to a beautiful waterfall, a tour of a local village, an evening kava ceremony (where you're served Fiji's herbal intoxicant), a picnic on an island after the dive (where our boat captain lifted by the tail a languid but poisonous four-foot banded sea krait); or you can skip diving and tour Suva when the boat goes in for supplies. Some souls even attended Sunday-morning church services in the local village, where the beautifully harmonizing 40-person choir is larger than the congregation.

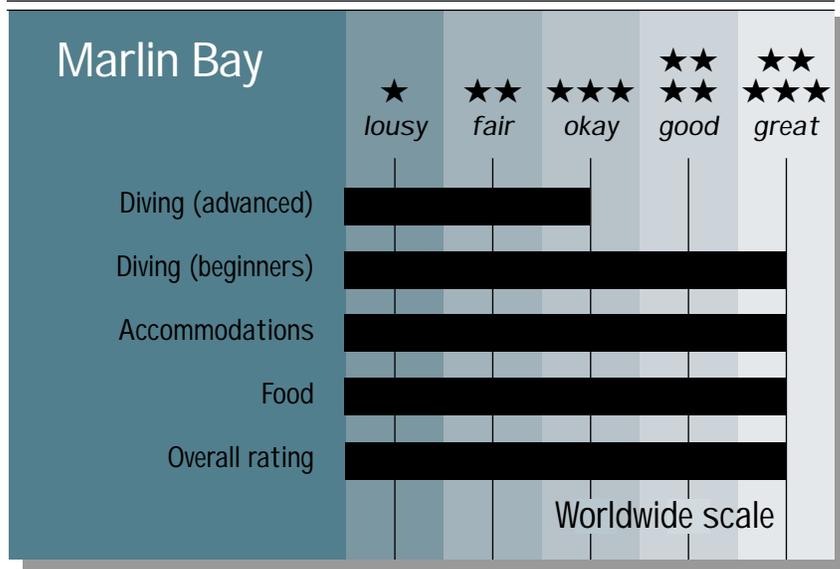
Or comb the tide flats. Or take a tank off the beach. Or snorkel in 2- to 20-foot-deep water. In one hour I encountered the regulars -- squirrelfish, damselfish, snappers, and goatfish -- and dottybacks (somewhat like a royal gramma), a trevally, a great range of butterflies, bannerfish (truly three-cornered critters), Moorish idols, anemones and their fish, a birdnosed wrasse, a cubed boxfish, an Abbot's moray, and bright-blue starfish, as well as crown-of-thorns.

Or just relax on the porch of your seaside thatch-roofed bure. Each encloses 600 square feet, separated by a half wall that serves on the bed side as a storage area. A comfortable couch, chairs, and a day bed in the sitting area are complemented by cheerful wall hangings. Overhead fans kept my room pleasant in the low-80° temperatures. Rain fell on three of seven days, apparently not an uncommon pattern on this rainiest part of Fiji.

My recommendation? An excellent choice for a first-time South Pacific visitor or anyone content with a couple of easy tanks free of excessive currents, with fine accommodations, splendid food, and long, lazy afternoons to decompress from the worries of home.

Now, two months later, I think less about the diving and more about the fine resort and its people -- and the 9 a.m. Saturday departure, when the staff, with guitars and ukelele, stood on the beach and sang sweet goodbye songs. The tears on the cheeks of some of my fellow travelers was evidence enough that Marlin Bay attends to detail, even to the last minute.

Ben Davison



Request a wet suit rental in advance if you don't have one; you're on a roadless island with no airstrip, so bring what you need. . . . Have them arrange a day room at an airport hotel if you have a long wait for a flight, or decompress for a night or two at the Four Seasons, 15 minutes from the Nadi airport. . . . The dive boats left at 9 a.m. and returned before 1 p.m.; with computers, dives lasted well over an hour, with no complaints. . . . They load all your gear, unload afterwards, and rinse. . . . C-cards were checked. . . . Owner George Taylor was on the premises in November, which he says is the best time of year. Marlin Bay, 011-679-304042, fax 011-679-304028.

Ditty Bag