
Dirt Strips and Swim-Throughs

Bommies and boggy bottoms at Matana Resort, Kadavu, Fiji

Dear Fellow Diver,

"Help, I'm sinking!" My dive buddy held his camera bag over his head in the chest-high salt water.

Minutes earlier, our flight from Nandi had touched down on Kadavu's dirt airstrip. Someone was there to meet us; we just had to ask around until we found out who it was. Then, struggling under the weight of our dive gear as the Fijians from Matana Resort walked alongside, we crossed the dirt road and walked out into the bay. Three hundred yards out was the pontoon boat that was to ferry us to the resort.

Not all of the bay's bottom is sand; some of it is mucky tidal flats, and that's where my buddy got into trouble. A sandal sinking beneath under eight inches of mud makes the next step hard, but thinking about the diminishing distance between his camera and the salt water gave him an adrenaline rush, and he quickly rescued himself.

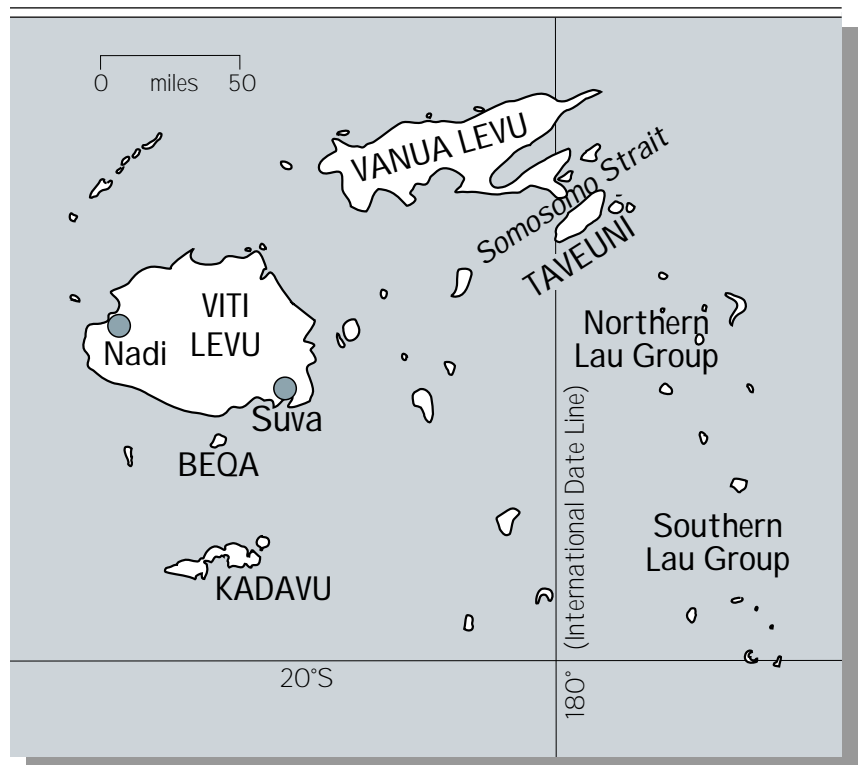
The shoreline in front of the resort, a 10- to 15-minute ride down the coast, is steeper, fortunately, so there a boat can pull right up to the beach. Matana's tidy landscaped grounds are in the middle of a long, white stretch of sand. Other advantages of this location would reveal themselves as the week went by: The steep beach profile makes for decent offshore snorkeling and night dives. Coral heads loaded with clownfish, morays, and a host of small Pacific tropicals reside within ten yards of shore in 10-15 feet of water. The view from the north-northwest side of the island is perfect for dynamite sunsets, complete with a cloud-shrouded volcano in the distance.

A Parallel Universe

If you've ever been to Guanaja in the Bay Islands of Honduras, you have a good picture of the island of Kadavu: roadless, green-jungled mountains rising from the blue. And if you've stayed at Bayman Bay

Bob Forster, the expat Aussie who now runs the resort, told me his son, who started Matana, heard that Japanese investors were thinking of buying land on Kadavu. Because Fijian law states that no resort can be built within sight of another, he bought and built the resort in the visual middle of the long beach where it now sits.

J. Q.



Fiji

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on Guanaja, you have an excellent picture of Matana Resort. It's up the wooden stairs to the main building in the treetops, a high-over-the-water sunset view, and tropical ambiance. Like Bayman, but a little funkier.

My deluxe beachfront unit was as big as Montana. With real walls, doors, louvered windows with screens, grass mats on floors, hot water, and more-than-adequate electricity until 10 p.m., I was a happy camper. The room spilled onto an enormous porch with lounge chairs and tables. A refrigerator was stocked daily with filtered water in bottles, and an electric kettle was handy for making coffee, tea, or whatever. There was a large bucket for rinsing gear after a dive and a line for hanging things out to dry. Security was a non-issue; doors were left unlocked, and dive gear loitered on the porch.

The beach, only a few steps away, had plenty of room for sun lovers as well as shade for the wise. No-see-ums were nowhere to be seen, but mosquitoes tried hard to compensate.

Flat Top, Bommie Bottom

I liked the dive boat, a stable, twin-hulled 27-footer with two 80-horse motors and a flat deck. Aluminum tanks store down the center, with benches on either side and storage space for gear under each seat. Dry storage is conveniently located in nets above the row of tanks. The boat carries hot coffee and tea, water, oxygen, a DAN first-aid kit, and a radio, even though most dive sites are only 10-15 minutes from shore. Entry was a gentle giant stride into 82 water (March); two metal ladders make for an easy return.

Several Sorts of Resorts

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There are four dive resorts on Kadavu; two upscale (Malawai Plantation and Kadavu Matana) and two budget class (Nukubalavu Adventure Resort and Albert's Place). Malawai is the most exclusive (read expensive) resort on the island, with only three deluxe cottages along the

waterfront on beautifully landscaped grounds surrounded by a 348-acre private plantation. At the other end of the spectrum, Nukubalavu has advertised that a couple of their bures have recently been upgraded with electricity, hot running water, and private toilet facilities, making Albert's Place the most primitive.

Dive briefings are clear and helpful, with prepared color charts for each site. Most of the diving is on Namalata and Tuvuki reefs, which are in front of the resort. Thirty or more dive sites are listed, but many of these were so similar I couldn't tell them apart -- large bommies (coral heads) starting as shallow as 10 feet and going down to 60-90 feet. Even easy diving with clear viz (70-90 feet on the inside of the reef, 120+ on

the outside) on bommies richly covered in both hard and soft corals can become repetitive. But some had distinctions: a few surprises, good tidbits for macro, and a dive crew that knew just where to find the blue ribbon eels, a cowry with its mantle out in the day, or the seafan as high as Michael Jordan standing on Magic Johnson's shoulders.

The young Fijian divemasters were friendly, helpful if you asked (I figured this out by the end of the trip and got as-

sistance carrying gear through the bay) and unobtrusive. Guides Peter and Bure rotated days; both were big on swim-throughs. On each dive they had a canned routine -- go down, lead the group through a swim-through in the bommie, come out on the other side, point out a few things, then back to the boat. However, playing follow-the-leader was not required, and I was free to dive whatever profile I was comfortable with and wherever I wanted.

On My Own

At Butterfly Bommie I swam over a four-foot-long sea cucumber that looked like a child's toy, the kind you can sit on and push with your feet. It reared its ugly head. I had heard stories of sea cucumbers puking up their stomachs, literally turning themselves inside out as a defense mechanism; well, just thinking about it made it work on me. I moved on toward the bommie. On the way I passed over a couple of foot-long spider shells and a blue-spotted stingray beating the sand with its wings.

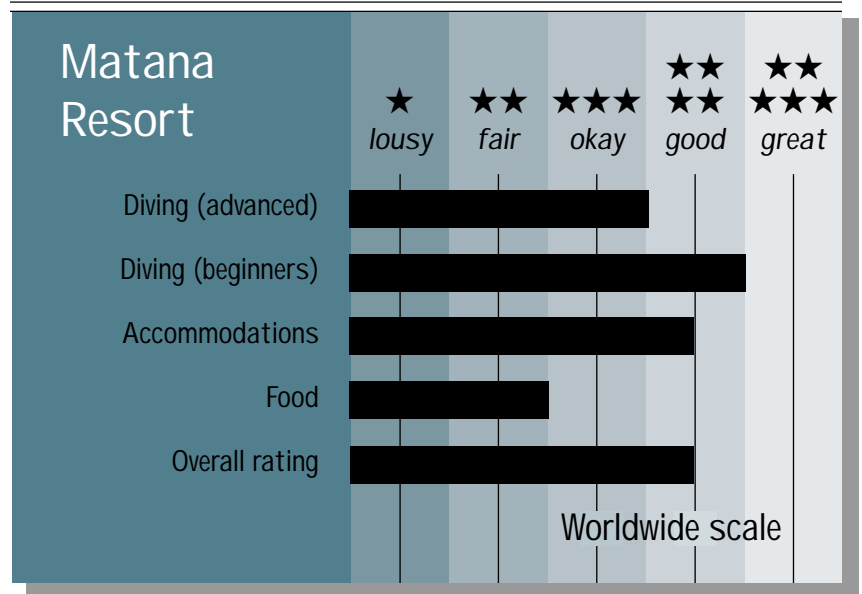
Poking around the bommie, I discovered various flatworms, a few good-looking nudibranchs, and a bright-yellow split-tailed poison-fang blenny mimic (wasplike sting). I became entranced with this small yellow fish with its snake-like movements -- so captivated that I almost didn't look up when the light from above went out. I was in the shadow of a manta that had just cleared the bommie and was sailing over the top of my head. I could have reached out and touched it. Nice surprise.

Big critters were not the norm. On most dives we saw the usual clownfish, assorted small tropicals, a couple of little sharks, a few lionfish, swarms of anthias, and sometimes schools of jacks and barracudas.

The Near-Great Yellow Wall

Perhaps the best dive was the Yellow Wall, a passage between two large bommies completely covered with soft yellow blooming coral. It was similar to the Purple Wall of Matagi or the Great White Wall on Rainbow Reef off Taveuni, but without the grand scale. On the other hand, I didn't have to fight rip-roaring currents as I would have in the Somosomo Strait.

Some of the more unusual dives were through a complex series of tunnels meandering through the reef structure (as I said, the dive guides are big on swim-throughs). At Crazy Mazey, the



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Overall, this is an excellent place for divers seeking easy, no-current, drop-over-the-side diving with good macro and excellent night diving. It's comparable to the diving in Beqa's lagoon, though not quite as dynamic as Taveuni or Matagi.

J. Q.

forks and branches were so numerous that sticking close to the dive guide and having a good light were essential. It was a full 45 minutes of winding through caves and canyons. There was also talk of diving the Evil Trench, a cavern at 170 feet alleged to have numerous bronze whalers; it didn't happen.

Bitters at the Bar, Food on a Leaf

After a hard day of diving, a two-tank morning, a one- or two-tank afternoon, unlimited shore dives, and night dives if four divers were willing, it was time to climb the steps to the veranda, kick back, and shell out two bucks for a cold Fijian Bitter (not really bitter, just good beer). The sunset crowd consisted of a German traveling alone, two British women on extended holidays, and two American women celebrating recent divorces. It was a relaxed atmosphere -- good conversation, good sunset, very little else to do.

While the beer and company were great, the food was ordinary. In the mornings there would be a couple of choices for each meal on the chalkboard. Tell the cooks your selections, and you were set for the day. Breakfast was coffee, juice, fruit, toast, a choice of cereals, pancakes, eggs, and sausages or bacon. Typical lunches were chicken salad, spaghetti, or sandwiches. Dinners were fish, chicken, lamb chops, and such.

The meals are rather pricey - \$40 per day for the package. (Tip: You can eat well for \$24-\$26/day by skipping the meal deal and ordering à la carte.)

The food is not ordinary on the one-night-a-week love feast. A fire is built during the day in a pit in the sand. Pig, fish, chicken, breadfruit, and local veggies are wrapped in banana leaves, buried in the coals, and covered with sand to bake all day. That night, sitting cross-legged before a woven mat with a fresh banana leaf plate, you enjoy the feast while the local chief ser-

enades you with his guitar. This was one of two times that I really got a taste of Fijian culture.

The other taste was at departure. Standing on the white sand beach, the entire staff and others from the village sang a touchingly beautiful farewell song. An elaborate and fragrant lei was placed around each guest's neck. I felt South Pacific to the core.

M. E.

Ditty Bag

Matana can be booked by most dive travel agents or reached direct at 011-679-311-780, fax 011-679-303-860. The cost for a double was \$100 per night. A short distance up the hill are ocean-view rooms that had the same

facilities as my unit, slightly smaller but with a better view, for \$70/night. There are also four small beachfront units that rent for \$35 single or \$50 double with two shared toilets. The resort can accommodate at most 20 divers. Electric is 220 Volt. . . . E-6 lab was there, but no chemicals. The reference library is poor. . . . A ten-dive package costs \$300. Near-new rental equipment is available. . . . The rainy season ends around the beginning of April, when the water cools and begins to clear. Prime time is probably April-May. . . . Both Sunflower Airlines and Fiji Air list daily flights of about 45 minutes from Nadi (the international gateway), as well as frequent flights from Suva. There are many inexpensive, clean hotels near the Nadi airport for overnight or half-day use. Airport pickup and return are free. I stayed at the New Westgate (720-044, fax 720-071) for about \$40 a night.