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Tuvalu, South Pacific

a trip back in time, when there were no dives

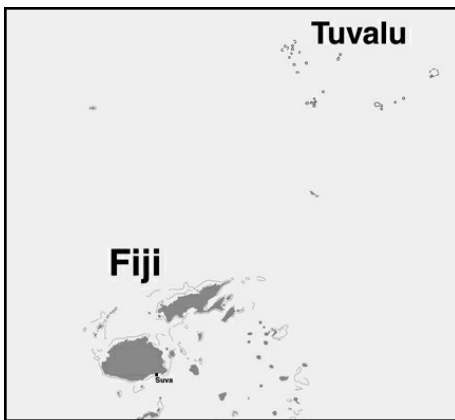
You know the dream. The one where you're the only diver at the resort and the entire operation and all the sites are yours and yours alone. How about being the only diver in the entire country?

In October I had that experience in Tuvalu, one of the smaller and more isolated countries on Earth. Consisting of nine islands totaling 16 square miles and home to 9,000 people, Tuvalu lies 700 miles north of Fiji. Air Fiji now flies twice a week from Fiji on a modern, 30-seater turboprop. Flight time is 2 hours and 15 minutes.

Upon arrival at the main islet of Fongafale, inquiries led me to Semese Alefaio, conservation officer for the Funafuti Conservation Area Project. A cheerful Tuvaluan in his late twenties, Sam is earnest and soft spoken -- in English and Japanese. Anything you want in the way of diving, he will try to provide. In laid-back Tuvalu, his energy and eagerness to learn stood out.

Encompassing about a third of the huge main atoll of Funafuti (12 x 16 miles), the two-year-old conservation area was what drew me to Tuvalu. It was a leap into the unknown. No formal dive operation existed in Tuvalu, and I didn't know if I would even be able to dive. But, the Fisheries Department had a compressor, aluminum 3,000+ psi tanks, and Sam offered to take me out. An enterprising young man, he has just started that first dive operation.

Three main channels enter Funafuti lagoon. My first dive was on the outside of Te Aua Fuagea. While there was plenty of reef life, including a green turtle, a Maori wrasse, and a white-tip shark, the coral was a bust. Cyclone Bebe, which devastated Tuvalu in 1972, had left little outside the reef but rubble. Some nice gorgonians and a few isolated corals were all that broke the monotony.



Inside the lagoon's Conservation Area, where boat rides are 10-30 minutes long, undersea life exploded. Clouds of small basslets and damsel fish, anthias, rabbit fish, shoals of bait fish, wrasses and parrotfish were present in joyful abundance. Multiple species of hard coral were not just thriving, but flourishing, in water warm enough to make tea. The water temperature was 88 degrees and on none of my dives did it drop below 85 degrees.

Incredible. You could dive naked in Tuvalu and still be warm. Yet, not one sign of bleaching. Apparently, Tuvalu's mid-ocean isolation, combined with eons of adaptation, has allowed the corals to survive in temperatures that have killed their relatives elsewhere. It was a heartening sight. On the way back, Sam took down the names of two small boatloads of fishermen we caught poaching in the conservation area. Though a new concept for Tuvalu, conservation regulations are being enforced -- which is more than many Pacific countries can claim.

I did a solo dive on American Channel (so called because during WWII Seabees blasted and enlarged it to allow ships to enter). Solo, because Sam had to stay with the boat, as there was no anchorage. (Sam assumed I knew what I was doing, or I wouldn't have been there in the first place; when diving, he was there when I wanted him, away when I didn't.) He thought I was the third sport diver ever to enter the channel, which was lined with lush coral. Despite the dimming caused by looming rain clouds, I still had 100 ft. viz. Twenty trevally joined me, perhaps to escape the vigilant white-tip that followed. Personally, I was more concerned about the cluster of Triton triggerfish that kept charging. These colorful but highly territorially aggressive fish have big front teeth and a habit of using them. I saw several 3-4 foot handsome coral and speckled cod, an encouraging sign since they have been largely hunted out elsewhere in the Pacific.

Then I found the bomb. OK, so maybe it wasn't a bomb. But it was big, fat, and rusty, and had little fins on the bottom. It also had a big chain attached to where the detonator would be. Probably an empty bomb casing that had been filled with concrete and used as a weight. I finned around it at a respectful distance anyway. Funafuti lagoon is full of WWII relics, most of them undocumented.

It had been cloudy but calm when I had gone over the side. I surfaced in the midst of a driving rain squall, with virtually no visibility. Trusting in Sam, I spent the next two hours sitting in the front on the bottom (no seats in the boat) of the 18-foot open aluminum skiff as we slammed through wave after wave, getting thoroughly soaked by salt spray while I pretended I was Ahab rounding the roaring Forties. It was exhilarating, but scary. When eventually the town emerged from the squall, I was never so glad to see a cheap hotel in my life. (Sam is awaiting the delivery of a New Zealand-built aluminum dive boat, with covered front end, head, twin Yamaha 60s, and tank racks. It'll be the best boat in the country, bar the Australian navy patrol boat that's based there).

Vaiaku Lagi, the one hotel, was built as a gift by the Taiwan government. Nine years old, it shows some wear. The 16 rooms (\$45/night) in the new wing (forget the old wing) are well-appointed and kept spotlessly clean, with decent air-conditioning, a ceiling fan, refrigerator, large bathroom with shower, desk, closet space and both a single and queen bed. A sliding glass door opens onto a small deck with a table and two chairs. Second-floor rooms have wonderful sunset views over the lagoon. The fan was mounted directly next to the light. Turn both on and the strobe effect caused by the fan blades passing in front of the light will drive you nuts. Though the roof of the hotel boasts solar hot water heaters, there was no hot water during my stay. On the other hand, the cold water isn't really cold, either.

Hotel meals are filling and basic: a tuna steak or chicken, rice and veg-

Tuvalu Diving/Vaiaku Lagi Hotel

Diving for Experienced	★★★ ^{1/2}
Diving for Beginners	★★★★ ^{1/2}
Dive personnel (Sam)	★★★★
Hotel personnel	★★★ (true island attitudes)
Accommodations	★★★ ^{1/2}
Food	★ ^{1/2}
Overall value (hotel, less food)	★★★★
Overall value (diving)	★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

Pacific Scale

etable for \$3-\$4. Though a cold breakfast is set out every morning, you can get toast or eggs, but you have to ask. The bar does business every evening, a great way to meet the locals. Friday and Saturday nights there is a twist, or disco, during which astounding quantities of Victoria Bitter beer are consumed to the thunder of speakers whose bass is cranked up beyond belief. Ask for a room as far from the bar as possible. Occasionally, displays of Tuvaluan dancing and singing are performed. Tuvaluan dancing is faster than Hawaiian and slower than Tahitian, but the music, hammered out by groups of men on a few skin drums, is tremendously percussive. Think a Polynesian version of Ravel's *Bolero*.

When the weather cleared the following day, at Moon Jelly Mountain, I saw dozens of lavender-hued, yard-wide jellyfish drifting lazily around a bommie. I was becoming inured to the profusion of coral and reef fish life, until a lonely yard-long, black and white remora decided to stick with me despite numerous kicks and waving of hands. Swimming up to Sam, it materialized right in front of his mask. On the lookout for sharks, Sam nearly dropped his cookies.

After lunch, we visited an unexplored bommie south of Funafuti near an islet named Papa Elise. Rising from the bottom at 60 feet and washed by a slight, gentle swell, the bommie was completely swathed in as colorful an explosion of hard corals as one could hope to see.

Spiraling upward, we encountered a turtle under a cleft, hard corals as delicate (and unbroken) as ice crystals, a charming swim-through, a small cave lined with columnar black sponges and lavender soft corals of the kind associated with Fiji and PNG, hundreds of unicorn fish, and clouds of reef fish. During our safety stop on top of the bommie, a big, muscular, gray reef shark spent a few minutes looking us over.

"What do you want to call it?" Sam asked me when we were back on the boat. I thought for a moment. Staghorn coral lined the lower levels of the bommie, which was topped by several castle-like coral formations. There was the magic cave, the swim-through, and even a dragon of sorts in the person of the gray reef. "Sleeping Beauty's Castle," I told him. And thus are dive sites named.

Nearby, we crossed a rough-water passage in the reef where a couple of years ago a group of divers off an

What You See When You Dive Deeper

An enormous squid that grows to 23 feet long and lives more than 3,000 feet below the surface has been discovered by scientists in submersible vehicles. They have spotted the squid in the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. This is not the well-known giant squid: "These are a real mystery," said Michael Vecchione of the National Museum of Natural History. "This is well beyond a new species. New species are a dime a dozen. This is fundamentally different."

Vecchione said these squid do not act or look like other squid, which tend to be quick-moving and highly visual. Instead of having two arms and eight tentacles, this squid has ten appendages that all look alike. "The really long skinny arms are much longer than the squid's body. Whenever the submersible came upon one, it was in a characteristic posture, floating vertically in the water with the arms spread out," he said.

Texas A&M oceanographer William Sager, who photographed the squid, said, "I had never seen anything like this. It just hung there, looking at us, as if suddenly seeing our submersible float up like a whale with lights was no big deal. We photographed it for ten minutes, and when we got to shore, we went looking for someone who could identify it."

Vecchione said the skinny tentacles would not be used to grasp prey — which is what most squid do with them — but may be used like a net. "I think those long extensions are really sticky. One animal bumped into the submersible and got tangled up in it. The animal seemed to have a problem letting go. It might go around waiting for small prey like crustaceans to stumble into it and get stuck — sort of like a living spider web. Every time someone goes down there they find something really strange. It's Eureka time."

— *Reuters and Science Magazine*

American yacht were forced out of the water by a pack of incredibly aggressive gray reef sharks. Pursuing them to the surface, one shark bit so big a hole in the yachties' inflatable that the party only made it back by seating everyone on the starboard side, to keep the rip out of the water. The sharks, supposedly, followed them all the way back to the boat. Sam says they never dove the lagoon again.

Fatal Tank Explosion

Ron Scherrer, a 72-year-old owner of the Dive Center in Sebastian, FL, died last November when a scuba tank he was filling ruptured and blew out part of his shop. The explosion split the tank wide open and shattered a concrete cooling tub. Fragments of concrete caused massive chest and head trauma, which killed Scherrer instantly.

Bill High, president of Professional Scuba Inspectors, reports that the tank was an older 72-cubic-foot steel model. It evidently had not been hydrostatically tested since 1991, yet somehow passed a visual inspection in 1999. Based on High's preliminary investigation of photos from the scene, it appears that the tank's interior was badly pitted from corrosion. The case is under investigation by local police and the shop's insurance carrier.

Funafuti reminded me of French Polynesia thirty years ago. The children smile and try to talk to you, the men still wear flower garlands in their hair when going to work, and the women gossip incessantly. There is no TV in the country that markets the dot.tv Internet suffix (there was, but the equipment corroded and hasn't been replaced). There is no media except the free monthly newspaper *Tuvalu Echoes*, put together by Sam's wife.

There's nothing much to see on Fongafale, an utterly flat spit of tree-covered land. The landing strip occupies the widest part, while in the north the island is barely wide enough to accommodate the road. Houses are everywhere; some built with concrete blocks, others that are thatched single-room structures on stilts. Situated right next to the airstrip, the "town" of Vaiaku consists of a market, a Tuvaluan falekaupule (open-sided meeting house), the two-story bank, the tiny airport terminal, a few government offices, one market, the hotel, Filamona's guest house with its Chinese restaurant, and the Australian naval facility. The hospital is a mile north of town. With the nearest hyperbaric chamber in Fiji and only two scheduled flights a week, this is no place to get bent. A brief tour of the famous Tuvaluan Marine Training Institute on nearby Amatuku Island, which trains Tuvaluans for service in the world's merchant marines, was interesting. The Women's Handicraft center at the airport has some simple shell jewelry and mats for sale. Much more interesting are the model Tuvaluan fishing outrigger canoes; each takes three months to make, by hand, and costs all of \$25.

If you want to step back in time, to experience what remains of real Polynesia, and want to have the opportunity to dive pristine, undived sites in beautiful, truly laid-back surroundings, then Tuvalu is, perhaps, just for you. I wouldn't recommend it as the first destination on a Pacific itinerary, unless of course you want to be the only tourist diver in an entire country.

-- J.L.



Diver's Compass: Best time to visit is between May and September ... Sodas and imported NZ water, a buck each, beer and booze more. Rooms serviced daily, though not on Sunday, when country (but not Sam) shuts down. The new Filamona's Lodge, near the airport, has A/C doubles \$28, singles \$24, no A/C, \$18. Telephone: 011 (688) 209-83. Filamona's serves the best food -- try the steamed fish or Mongolian chicken, with a big bowl of white rice, for \$4. There are a number of small guest houses on Fongafale, but the tiny guest house on distant Funafala Island (pop. 24) is too far away to make diving workable. If you want to get away from the big city, ask to be marooned on one of

the beautiful, lushly vegetated motus (islets) on the other side of the lagoon for a night. Make hotel reservations: 011-688-20-500. Take cash or traveler's checks to exchange at bank; everyone and everyplace expects to be paid in cash. You can rent bicycles, scooters, or motorbikes. Tuvalu may have the highest per capita population of four-wheel drives in the Pacific -- all going back and forth along the one main road, headed for nowhere. Mosquitoes are non-malarial and few. For diving, contact Semese (Sam) Alefaio. You can reach him via e-mail: fca@tuvalu.tv (or if Tuvalu's server is still down, Semese_a@yahoo.com. Or, the Tuvalu Tourism Office, Ministry of Tourism, Trade & Commerce, Private Mail Bag, Vaiaku, Funafuti, Tuvalu. Tel: 011-688-20-182. Sam charges \$40/day for the boat. For four divers, that works out to virtually nothing. Plus, per person, one-tank dive \$30, two-tank \$45 (includes tanks & weights). Diving gear \$25/person (probably without computers). The little stores on Funafuti stock only basics. Take everything you need: snacks, film, batteries, etc. If you go for a walk, few places have cold drinks. Much of the information in both the Moon travel books' *South Pacific Handbook* and its competitor from Lonely Planet is out of date and no longer valid. The Moon is more accurate and useful, with better maps.

Readers Lose Money with Scubacan

do we have a scuba scam here?

It seems there's more to worry about when traveling to Cuba these days than the likelihood you're circumventing U.S. government policy, as we reported recently. Our e-mails have been rife with complaints about Scubacan International, the Toronto-based group operator that promotes Cuban dive travel to Americans.

Many problems involve bookings Scubacan handled for the live-aboard dive boat *Ocean Diver* out of Havana, which is owned by the same people, including Wayne Hasson, who own the *Cayman Aggressor IV*. Last year, five divers from Arizona, California and Georgia individually prepaid more than \$13,500 to Scubacan for an October 2001 trip. After they made the final payments in August, Scubacan told them that they'd be joining four others on the *Ocean Diver*.

After September 11, Harry Hanes, the spokesman for the group, asked about canceling the trip and says Keith Bolender, who runs Scubacan, told him they would lose everything if they did. That's not unusual for a cancellation on such short notice, so they decided to go ahead.

However, a couple of days after the group arrived in Havana, a

no money from Scubacan and that Scubacan was in arrears for other trips. The other four reservations for the trip had been canceled, leaving the "Cuban 5" (as they had begun calling themselves) one short of the minimum booking required by *Ocean Diver*. The night before their departure, they were told that *Ocean Diver* had received a partial payment from Scubacan, but it was too little and too late. The boat crew had been sent home.

The Cuban 5 returned home and Hanes called Scubacan owner Bolender, who

contended that *Ocean Diver* had received the entire payment. After the group insisted on reimbursement from Scubacan — after all, Scubacan, not *Ocean Diver*, had cashed their checks — Bolender ignored subsequent calls and e-mails.

Finally, on October 31,

Arriving in Havana, they were told their live-aboard trip was cancelled ... then they learned it had been cancelled before they left home, but Scubacan had not informed them.

Scubacan rep told them that *Ocean Diver* was canceling their trip. Hanes called *Ocean Diver* and a rep told them that Scubacan had been notified of the cancellation ten days before the group left from home, but Scubacan had not informed them. *Ocean Diver* explained that they had received