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# Ben Davison's **In Depth**

*The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers*

## **In the Solomons, on the *Solomon Sea***

*Some of everything and then some more*

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*The better the diving, the more live-aboards? The Solomon Islands are not exactly on the beaten path, but they now have three live-aboards operating in the area. The newest kid on the block is the Solomon Sea — time to check it out.*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

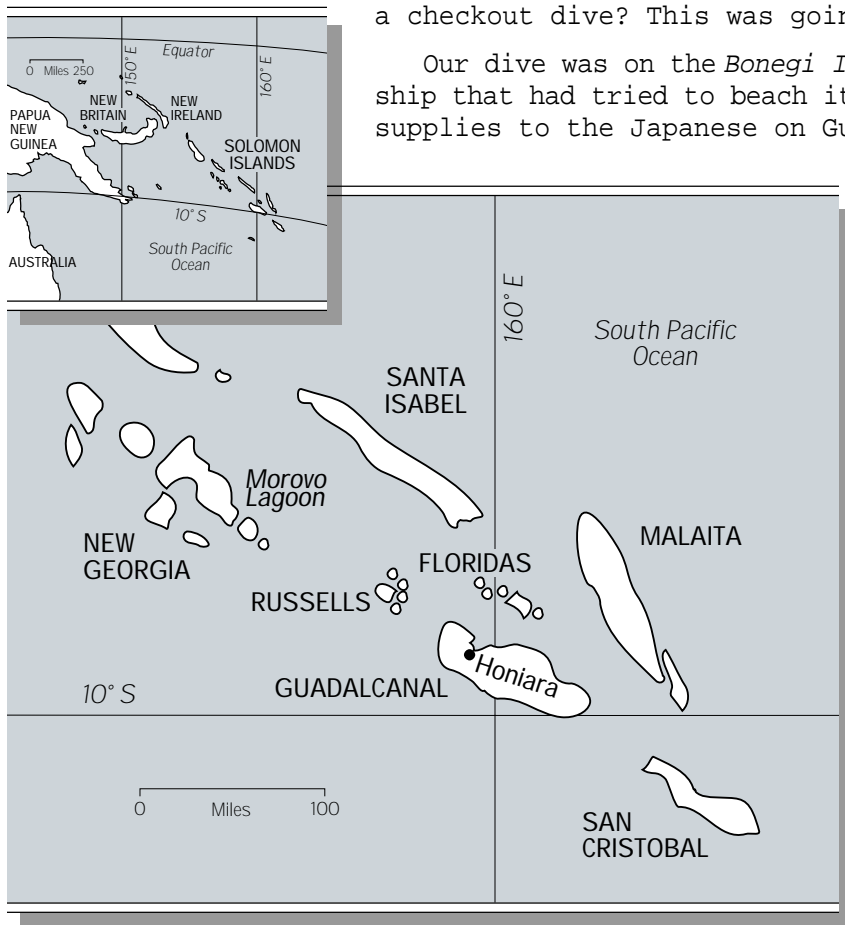
The water in the lagoon was still and flat, the nightmoonless -- perfect for a night dive. Dive lights swept across the bottom, searching for the bizarre. The tropical tranquility was suddenly interrupted by the launch driver's voice: "There's a 14-foot croc swimming right above the divers! What should I do?" Visions from a *National Geographic* special of a giant Nile crocodile erupting from the water to grab a full-grown wildebeest crept into my head. Was I frightened? No. I was listening to this drama over the ship's radio as I sat on the deck of the *Solomon Sea*. It was the only dive on this trip I had decided to sit out, and I was relaxing with a cold beer. And the divers in the water? They never even saw the croc.

### **The Anti-Agressor**

When I stepped off the skiff and boarded the 80-foot *Solomon Sea*, a few people said hello, but I couldn't tell who was crew and who was guest. I found the salon and a cold drink -- the heat at the airport in Honiara had been cooking temperature. After a while someone came by and told me my cabin number and I found that. It was one of three below deck. It had decent storage, good lighting, great air-conditioning a double lower bunk and a single upper. The private shower/bathroom was exceptionally spacious. I wandered around the ship and found the two main-deck cabins, which looked the same except they had the luxury of a porthole. All were on the opposite end of the boat from the dive operation and the compressor. I wandered around some more, found the storage bins under the seating on the dive deck, assigned myself one to empty my dive bag into, then set up my equipment on one of the aluminum 80s lined up behind the benches. The tanks were being filled on the spot from a long compressor hose coming out of the engine room.

The other two boats in the Solomons are the 20-passenger *Bilikiki* and the 26-passenger *Spirit of the Solomons*, both operated by Bilikiki Cruises (011-677-20412).

J. Q.



## Solomon Islands

Whatever I wanted I just looked for or asked. No one said anything about the boat routine or even much about the diving -- it just happened. In some ways I found it refreshing no canned diving routine here. I began to think of it as a live-aboard for experienced divers who wanted to dive and not be pampered. And the checkout dive backed up my new theory.

### Break 'Em In Like You're Going to Dive 'Em

I had left Fiji on a Solomon Air flight at 8:00 a.m. and was on the boat by 1:00 p.m. By 3:00, we were ready to fall in the water for our checkout dive. After we suited up on the dive deck, someone asked what the dive plan was. "Jump in, find the wreck, and follow the deck down to 130 feet, where there's an easy penetration." A 130-foot wreck penetration as a checkout dive? This was going to be adult diving.

Our dive was on the *Bonegi I*, a World War II Japanese supply ship that had tried to beach itself in a last-ditch effort to get supplies to the Japanese on Guadalcanal. I knew this because a young Air Force major on board had read everything ever written about the Pacific war theater. He was a walking, talking history book who added another dimension to the diving in this part of the world

The bow of the *Bonegi I* was gone, but the rest of the wreck began around 25 feet and went down at a steep angle to 225 feet. I cruised down the deck, checking out the anemone fish and their anemones, nudibranchs, blennies, and soft corals along the way. I had a good laugh at the expense of my buddy, who was attacked by a crinoid that clamped itself to his camera cord and then to his wetsuit and would not be shaken loose. Then it was my turn: offgassing in the shallows, I dropped down to the sandy bottom and nearly

swallowed my regulator when a seven-foot section of the ocean floor erupted under my knees and became a large ray.

### Crack in the Solomons

Most of the diving in the Solomons is done on the wrecks around Honiara, the nearby Florida Group, the Russells, and Morovo Lagoon. On our week-long trip we would take in both the Russells and the Floridas.

An overnight passage brought the forested hills of the Russells into view as I sat on deck with my morning cup of tea.

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The *Solomon Sea* is a comfortable boat. The main salon might be a little crowded with a full load of ten divers, but deck space is the boat's long suit. A crew member came by and said we would be diving in an hour. On my way past the bridge, another crew member told me to get ready because we would be diving in ten minutes. Thirty minutes later I was in the water.

The plan was for the boat to swing in close to the sheer limestone bluff so we could step in from the *Solomon Sea's* large rear dive platform, but a last-minute change put us fully suited and ready to go in the inflatable, a routine that would account for about half of our dives on this trip. The other half was mother-ship diving -- suit up and step off.

The perfectly vertical limestone bluff rose more than 100 feet out the water and was capped with impenetrable green jungle. An eight- to ten-foot-wide crack split the wall from top to bottom. It was in front of this fissure that I backrolled into the 84' sea. White sand covered the floor of this parted rock; the reflected light sparkled in the near-perfect visibility, turning the water a brilliant turquoise. I followed the narrow, meandering passage as it cut its way into the island. Rising from 60 feet to the ribbon of light at the top, I inflated my BC.

I was floating in a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. If I stretched both arms out, I could almost touch the rock walls on either side of me. A hundred feet straight up, a lush tropical growth of bromeliads, orchids, and trees leaned over the edges of the crack, sending twisted vines down the sheer rock sides. Drops of water seeping from the jungle floor above created an eerie pinging echo as they broke the silence in the narrow canyon. A parrot squawked as it flew over the crack. Poison darts would start whizzing around me any minute, but I was reluctant to leave the surface. By a secret passage, I had penetrated the impenetrable jungle.

Rock, caves, and cracks became the highlights of the Russells. On one dive, a cave opening at 60 feet led through a

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## The Great Snapshot Caper

A couple of years ago, renowned underwater photographers Chris Newbert and his wife Birgitte Wilms were diving from the *Bilikiki*, shooting pictures in the Solomons. On their way back to the U.S., during a lay-over in Fiji, they decided to sort out some of their film and have it processed in Honolulu. Birgitte had numbered and logged all their film before leaving the Solomons. When they opened the bag, they discovered that 48 rolls of film were missing. That represented 1,728 times of meticulously focusing, composing, and coaxing equipment to work to photograph subjects that took traveling halfway around the world to find.

They immediately notified the live-aboard of the loss. The *Bilikiki* crew looked high and low but could not find a single roll of film left behind. The airlines searched; still no film. It was an unsolved mystery.

Many months later, Chris was at Seaviews, an Oakland dive consumer show. Naturally, he took time to check out the winners of the photo contest. One of the winning photos really stood out. It had a familiar style and subject — too familiar. He was sure this photo was his.

Chris called the FBI to convince them that his film was a major theft worthy of their participation and that, because divers from the Solomons trip had crossed state lines on their return home, it was under their jurisdiction. The FBI bought it and obtained a search warrant for the home of the Seaviews photo contest winner, a female diving instructor from the Bay area who had also been aboard the *Bilikiki*. During that search they found 24 rolls of undeveloped film in the freezer, still bearing the code markings that Chris and his wife used.

Chris brought a civil suit against the woman that was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. However, a criminal case is still pending.

The moral of this story: Never rip off photographers — you might not like what develops.

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large passage to a room with an open top. The crew's timing for the dive was impeccable -- the sun lit the submerged cavern with an ethereal light streaming down from above. Divers rising slowly in the light looked like a Renaissance painting of angels in scuba gear ascending into heaven.

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## The Discover Pacific Pass

Every time I plan a dive trip to the Pacific, I start telling myself that if I'm going all that way I need to stay longer and do more. If you can find the time, Air Promotion Systems is currently offering 30-day air passes that may save you some money.

A Discover Pacific Pass lets you add Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, or the Solomons to a Fiji trip for \$399, or add two destinations for \$499. Add-ons are also available from and to Australia, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and New Zealand. A Discover Solomons Pass allows four flights within the Solomons for \$199 with additional flights \$50 each.

Mention the passes to your travel agent or call Air Promotion Systems at 800-677-4277 or 310-670-7302 for more details.

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The boat made short hops between dives around the various islands. On Lisa Mata was a 60-foot-wide crevice in the limestone with a cave entrance on the bottom at 150 feet. A shark that was supposed to make an appearance at the cave entrance was a no-show, but it was exciting to look up from the bottom of the canyon, through what must have been 200-foot visibility, at the school of barracuda strewn about the surface like pick-up sticks. As we came back out of

the crevice and rounded the corner, the wall with pink, mauve, and purple encrusting sponges, corals, and anthias looked as though a divine designer had color-coordinated the scene. But we live in an imperfect world; a little further along the designer wall we came face to face with the devastation of dynamite fishing.

### What's the Point?

Not all the diving was cracks and caves. For an afternoon dive we moved into the calm, protected channel between islands and jumped in on some submerged war junk. I found an interesting array of sea life not normally seen on an open reef. Juvenile batfish, eight-banded butterfly fish, a black-and-white-banded sea snake, gold-spotted flatworms, and numerous and various nudibranchs used the jeeps, road graders, trucks, and such for a safe haven.

Off the rocky points of these islands where the current split were good fish dives with generous schools of pyramid butterfly fish, batfish, and baitfish. Off one of these points, as we were suiting up on the dive deck, I heard each of my five fellow divers in turn ask once again for the name of the site: "What's the name of the point?" I gave up trying to keep track of place names and began to relax.

### The Stage, the Props, the Cast of Characters

Meals were relaxing and were usually in the main salon. Breakfast was our choice of pancakes, scrambled eggs, toast, and what they call bacon in this part of the world (but looks more like ham). Lunches and dinner were good: spaghetti, steak, seafood, tuna quiche. I never complained. Because several

*It was nice that by the end of the week we could find dive-site names and descriptions on the blackboard. I imagine that as Fred refines his operation over the next few trips these minor details will be worked out. I just hope his operation doesn't get too slick. I enjoyed the freedom.*

*J. Q.*

divers on my trip had more cameras than sense, we sometimes had to eat around their equipment, but I'm used to that on a live-aboard. Photographers will be pleased with the large, rubber-covered camera work and storage space on the dive deck, but it's much cooler to work on the dining table in the air-conditioned salon.

Slowly I was figuring out the main characters aboard the *Solomon Sea*. Fred Douglas was in charge. The Douglas family first came to Fiji in 1840. They now run the Matagi Resort and the *Matagi Princess* live-aboard. Fred, who married a Solomon Islander, wanted a live-aboard in the Solomons-- so he had one built to his specs.

For the first few days after boarding, I hardly ever saw Fred. He seemed a bit reserved and was working behind the scenes to make everything happen the way it should. And, I admit, Fred was knocking himself out making sure we got what we came for, to dive. I was impressed by the way he spared neither time, energy, nor fuel to make sure we were getting to the best diving at the best time.

The other chap who seemed to be sharing boat responsibilities was Brian Bailey. Brian, who's named in the acknowledgments of an amazing number of fish identification books, is an Australian expat who has been around the Solomons for 26 years. On this trip he was Fred's guest, taking a break from his own boat, the 54-foot *Wyune*. It was my good fortune; he knew the area well, he knew the sea life well, and he was a great storyteller.

Also arriving on my flight from Fiji was Togi, an affable Fijian with a good sense of humor, who was on leave from the *Matagi Princess* and knew his way around a dive boat.

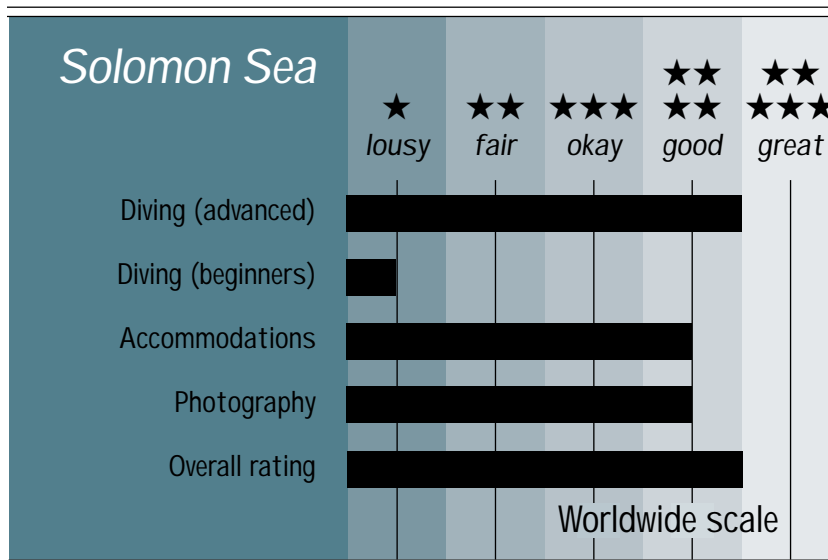
Within a few days, after I had become familiar with Fred and crew, I really began to appreciate the nature of their operation. It was much more like a small expedition with everyone taking part in deciding where, what, and how to dive, rather than some canned itinerary that makes a trip seem more like an elaborate amusement-park ride.

## The Wreckers vs. the Reefers

Our small group of six divers (none had come directly to the Solomons -- all had been diving elsewhere first, from Fiji to Tonga) had different ideas of what to dive. A few were more

*In Depth* readers rate diving in the Solomons 4.5 stars for experienced divers vs. 3.3 stars for beginners; 4.2 stars for large pelagics, 4.7 for tropicals, and 5 stars for the coral.

J. Q.





*... In the Solomons, the big-creature action is determined by the currents, and the currents here are unpredictable.*

intent on wrecks, while others wanted more reef action. Our mix -- some of each -- was decided after a few discussions and votes, but I can see that it might become a problem if you fell into a group where you were badly outnumbered.

We decided to switch locations midweek. Some divers wanted to do the wreck of the *USS Kinawa*. After another smooth night crossing, we awoke in the Floridas. A morning dive at Passage Rocks (I know the name of the site because from this morning on we had dive briefings at a chalk board in the lounge, with the name of the site written down) took me along a wall in a gentle current with hedgerows of six- to eight-foot sea fans and enough white soft coral to be named the Great White Wall if there were not already one in Fiji. A few blacktip and whitetip sharks, a large wrasse, and excellent small fish life were on the scene, but the big jacks and tunas mentioned as "could be's" at the briefing were missing.

I was starting to get the picture. In the Solomons, as in most places, the big-creature action is determined by the currents, and the currents here are unpredictable. Fred told me about an exploration dive in the Floridas. He had dropped in and was swimming leisurely along a channel when a massive wall of current hit him from behind -- hit him so hard and fast that it ripped the mask off his face. It was all he could do just to get to the surface

## Throwing a Sun Block

*Consumer Reports* recently tested sunblocks and found that most SPF 15-18 sunblocks — the level recommended by cancer experts — did what they said they would. Below is a chart rating the sunscreens in the SPF 15-18 category that are advertised as extended water resistance products.

SPF	Product	Immersion time	UVA score	Cost/ounce
19	Bullfrog Sunblock, The Body Gel	6 hrs	3	\$2.04
17	Neutrogena Sunblock	6 hrs	4	\$2.91
15	Vaseline Intensive Care Moisturizing	8 hrs	3	\$1.75
15	Bain de Soleil All Day Waterproof	6 hrs	5	\$2.55
14	Hawaiian Tropic Sport Sunblock	8 hrs	4	\$2.37

(Immersion time is the labeled time, in hours, that the sunscreen should last in the water. UVA score is *CR's* judgment of UVA blocking, based on how well the sunscreen filters out the ultraviolet thought responsible for premature skin aging; 5 is best.)

If you won't be in the water more than an hour or so, you can get about the same protection, usually for less money, from the 80-minute waterproof products. You can get sufficient protection, at a very good price, from these three brands: Solace Sunblock (from Kmart), Eckerds Sunblock, or Rite Aid Sunblock. Each costs well under a dollar an ounce.

Also of interest in *CR's* report was that if you want to use children's sunscreens, they work "perfectly well" on adults also; and that typical T-shirts have an SPF of about 6, but their SPF plunges when they get wet. I wonder what the SPF of a 3-mm wetsuit is when it's wet?

*If you also care about how your sunblock smells and feels, the May 1995 issue of Consumer Reports covers these features as well.*

## Black Attack

When the currents run, so does the big stuff. Fred timed our dive perfectly at one of my favorite dive sites in the Florida Group, Twin Shaft Pinnacle. We anchored over the top and Fred waited until he could see the current moving. Through the clear blue water I could see the fish schools starting to move. I stepped off the dive platform and dropped down 50 feet to the flat top of the pinnacle. A round hole about ten feet in diameter looked like a giant well below me. I continued to drop down into the shaft. The sides were festooned with soft corals; I spiraled in 360-degree turns, taking them in as I went deeper. At 110 feet the shaft made a 90-degree turn and opened out on the side of the pinnacle.

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The fish action in the blue was intense. Schools of baitfish, triggerfish, fusiliers, and batfish engulfed the edges of the pinnacle, while tuna, wahoo, kingfish and blacktip and white-tip sharks raced in and out. A nine-foot gray shark patrolled the edge with its entourage of lampreys. I rose to the top of the pinnacle and found a point on the edge to hang and watch the action. I took my eyes off the feeding spectacle to glance down at the reef below me, where a gorgonian anemone was feeding itself. The second I looked down, a frisky little three-foot blacktip raced toward me, zipping just inches over my head. It immediately turned and came back at me. This time I jabbed at it with my hand and it shot off into the blue.

We dived the same site again and found that the current had died and the 100-foot vis had dropped to 40 feet. It was not the same dive, but crocodile fish and other tamer goodies still made it interesting.

The next morning we did the *Kinawa*. The sea was calm and the water looked clear. The wreck is deep; it starts at 150 feet. Brian insisted it was a great dive -- but then, he had been a salvage diver. I decide to go down and take a look. Unfortunately, as I dropped, so did the visibility, from 100 feet on the surface to 30 by the time I hit the deck of the *Kinawa*. Not willing to hang on a line to decompress in return for seeing so little, I gave it a cursory glance and headed for the surface.

Later in the day we fared better on Tanavula Point in Sandfly Pass, where I saw a giant grouper come up from the deep. Larger than Fred, who was swimming in front and below me, it came up behind him with an aggressive attitude and looked like it was going to try to swallow him. The rest of the dive, I had to divide my time between the tunicate-covered wall, schools of jacks, the manta, the St. Bernard-sized wrasses, and some 10 to 15 sharks.

A hard day of diving behind me, I sat on the deck of the *Solomon Sea* as she slipped into a calm lagoon for the night. The sun was setting over the tops of the palm trees. Two bird-sized butterflies engaging in a fluttering battle flashed their brilliant iridescence as they passed overhead. The white wings of a covey of cockatoos turned pink in the light of the

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Most wholesalers book the *Solomon Sea*. I booked this trip through Island Dreams, who originally had me flying Air New Zealand — leave L.A. Sunday night (all day to get to L.A.), get off the plane in Auckland, New Zealand, at 6:00 a.m. Tuesday, have the day to look around, catch a Solomon Air flight that afternoon (Discover Pacific Pass for \$399, Auckland-Honiara-Auckland) and be on the boat by 10 p.m.. Great connections, no layovers. . . . It might work for you, but it didn't for me — the boat schedule changed. I still ended up on Air New Zealand, but into Fiji. Island Dreams (800-346-6116 or 713-973-9300) also has a home page for booking and travel info on the WWW at <http://www.islanddream.com/island/index.htm>, if you have a web browser. *Solomon Sea* runs \$250/day all-inclusive except bar drinks, which are reasonable (wine comes with meals). . . . E-6 not available, but photographers are catered to with large charging station and camera storage; no rental gear . . . They need to add marine identification books to their too-small library . . . Malaria is present, so be sure to contact CDC (404-639-2572) at least three weeks before traveling. Mosquitoes were not a problem on the boat, but I would still be cautious . . . Getting in four to five dives a day and diving the way you want to dive is great freedom, but requires some restraint. There's O<sub>2</sub> aboard, but the nearest chamber is in Fiji. . . . Fred was excellent at moving the boat at the right times to get in the maximum number of dives, including one almost every night . . . The weather could not have been better when I was there in April; the wind was down and seas flat. Diving is year-round with plenty of places to get into the lee, but April and May are great, with October, November, and December next best.

## Ditty Bag

*The Solomon Sea has an excellent E-6 setup, but no one there knew how to use it, a situation that could change. However, most photographers only want to process a roll or two to see how things are going, then develop the rest back home. With only ten or fewer divers on board, that's not really enough film to make it worthwhile to mix the chemicals.*

J. Q.

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*I think more opportunity for going into the villages would be a vast improvement in the Solomon Sea trip. The Solomons are little affected by tourist dollars; some of these islands remain almost unseen by travelers. The launch went ashore a few times, but I never knew about it ahead of time.*

J. Q.

*A real plus for the Solomon Sea is that the small number of divers makes diving flexible, and it's also easy to fill the boat for a charter. Fred seems amenable to letting groups set their own itinerary and explore new areas.*

J. Q.

disappearing tropical sun as they turned in unison on their way down to roost in the green jungle. It would be a moonless night -- a good night for a night dive. Naw, I might just miss this one and drink a cold beer instead.

### **Solomons and *Solomon Sea* in a Clamshell**

The *Solomon Sea* is not overly luxurious, but I found it to be an excellent dive boat. The dive platform is large and convenient, with fresh towels waiting after every dive. Fred and crew were slow to warm up, but once they did, I enjoyed their company immensely. The attitude of the boat is laid back, with few or no diving rules imposed on you, and is bestsuited for experienced divers. Deep freaks will be happy, as plenty of the wrecks and caves are deep, although most dives don't require great depths to enjoy.

The crack and cavern dives in the Russells will probably stand out in memory long after all the big-fish dives have run together, but if I could dive only one, I'd be hard pressed to choose between the Floridas and the Russells. Even with three live-aboards now working in the Solomons, there remains an enormous amount of unexplored territory.

The Solomons are a destination in their own right, but they are definitely a bargain right now as an add-on to Fiji. When I think of Truk, I think of wrecks. When I think of Palau, I think of the big-creature action of Blue Corner. When I think of Fiji, I think of soft corals. And while the Solomons may not match in intensity any of their specialties, it has all of them.

John Q. Trigger

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# **Accidents and Incidents**

## ***Learning from the mistakes of others***

From time to time we report on case studies of divers' deaths so that we may all learn from them. The cases cited here come from the analysis of 1993 deaths by the Divers Alert Network. While the facts are edited from DAN's reports, the commentary is solely our responsibility. This is the second of two parts.

### **Cardiovascular Disease**

Cardiovascular disease, especially when undiagnosed, plays a significant role in diving deaths. It is frequently present in severe form without symptoms until a sudden heart attack or stroke occurs. In general, it's the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the U.S., killing

nearly a million people per year. The death rate for men is significantly higher than for women.

Heavy physical exertion increases the risk of heart attack or stroke. Given the unique effects of immersion, divers with coronary artery disease may well be taking excessive risk. Although highly motivated individuals who meet certain requirements do dive successfully with coronary artery disease, people with known risk are usually discouraged from diving. Those who dive anyway must understand the limitations imposed by the disease.