
Loma Loma Resort, Fiji

An unexplored paradise east of Eden

Dear Fellow Diver,

It's not often that I give thanks underwater. But here I was floating above the most remarkable garden of hard coral this side of the Coral Sea, surrounded by clusters and clouds of infinite species of South Pacific fish. An awesome site. I took pause.

First, I thanked the maker, who had an artist's eye for the coral pastels, a nautical engineer's eye for streamlining critters and affixing finny propellers, and a cartoonist's eye for creating a fish as loony as a clown trigger.

Then I thanked the president of Fiji, chief of the Lau Group of islands (and owner of Loma Loma), who keeps commercial fishing boats at bay, leaving these the most pristine Fiji waters.

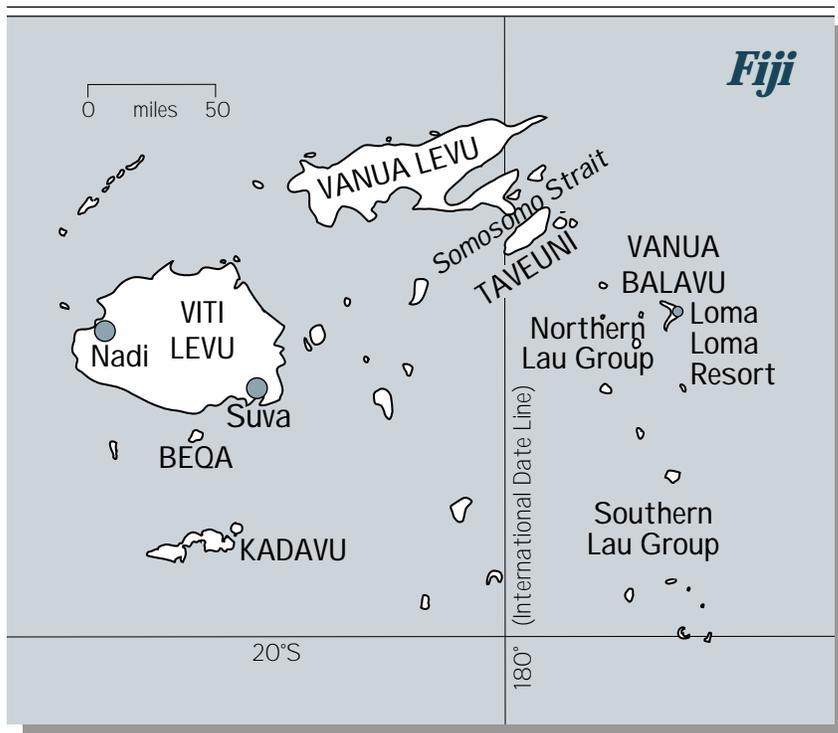
And then I thanked Russ and Chris England, two longtime readers from Fairfield, Iowa, who, after being among the first divers at Loma Loma, were kind enough to send us a travel report from their visit. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have known about it -- and neither would you.

Enough genuflecting. I broke from my meditation at Magic Kingdom when a school of batfish a hundred strong sauntered by, followed by as many trevally (i.e., jacks). All while I swam surrounded with colorful anthias and schools of fusiliers. Off then to see a large -- 25-pound? -- coral trout, battalions of sergeant fish, an occasional emperor angel, small tridacna clams with brown or green mantles, an odd mackerel . . . then, at the end of the dive, a five-foot whitetip shark.

Just about what I expected. You see, Russ, a marine biologist with 3,000 dives under his belt, told me that nowhere in the South Pacific had he seen such rich waters accessible from a land-based operation. And, because many dives were exploratory, it was great fun. I needed no more persuasion.

The partners in the year-old Crystal Divers are Dan Grenier, from Chicago, and Fijian Bendito Tiko, who between

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Flashlight Monopoly?

inspired to block distribution of dive products through other means (read "catalog") than traditional retail outlets.

In more direct action, Performance Diver, catalog retailer of dive equipment, directly sued several entities, among them Princeton Tectonics, a manufacturer of dive lights and other accessories, alleging blocking of free trade. In a ruling this January, a Federal judge dismissed the complaint against Princeton Tec. Others named in the suit — PADI, International PADI, *Scuba Times*, *Underwater USA*, Beuchat, Underwater Kenetics, EIT Manufacturing (ORCA), and the Scuba Retailer's Association — may still be facing legal action.

The issue appears to be this: It is illegal to conspire to block free trade. But it is not illegal for a manufacturer to decide who may or may not sell its product. Choosing not to sell equipment to Performance Diver is legal. Conspiring with others to boycott Performance Diver is illegal. Apparently the judge found no evidence of such a conspiracy at Princeton Tec.

J. Q.

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them have worked at Fiji's Qamea, Matagi, and Garden Isle. Loma Loma opened its seven bures (cottages) on the president's forested 22-acre island in 1988, attracting few visitors because it's way off the Fiji tourist track and didn't advertise. The airport on Vanua Balavu, one of 300 islands in the Lau group, is 220 miles east of Fiji's international airport at Nadi, halfway to Tonga; the only flights, Tuesday and Saturday, require a plane change in Suva. After all that, the last leg to Loma Loma is easy -- a ten-minute truckride and a five-minute boat ride.

To ensure that the operation was running, I called Dan from Sausalito, a simple direct dial. Yikes. He would be spending February in the states after DEMA. "Don't worry," he comforted me, "Ben will take you to the best sites," though not on exploratory dives. Since I wanted my readers to be first to learn of the unpublicized Loma Loma, I called their U.S. rep and signed up.

Crystal Divers' 24-foot open aluminum runabout is powered by a 125-hp outboard and a smaller, 25-hp backup. Dive sites can be an hour away -- more if you're exploring -- and those hard, metal seats bruise butts bounce after bounce (tip: sit on beach towels). Yet, to me, little hardships complement isolated, wild diving.

Typically, we would walk through ankle-deep water to board the boat at 9 a.m. or later, then weave past isolated islands much like Palau's

rock islands on the way to the dive. (Bat Island -- an amazing sight. Hundreds of vulture-sized fruit bats took to the skies at the sound of our motor.) Going was slow at times, as a spotter stood on the bow to look for dangerous coral heads in the shallows. Then, dive two tanks, interrupted by an hour interval in calm waters, and return by 2 p.m. -- or later, if lunching on a remote beach. (When both Ben and Dan are available, they offer three tanks.)

They select sites according to tides, ensuring slack for some and wild rides for others. The Tonga Express is a wild one. We dropped in over bones of coral, working against the current for 50 yards, then dropped over the edge into enormous numbers of fish: hundreds of banner fish (false Moorish idols), surgeonfish galore, large trevally, two large tuna,

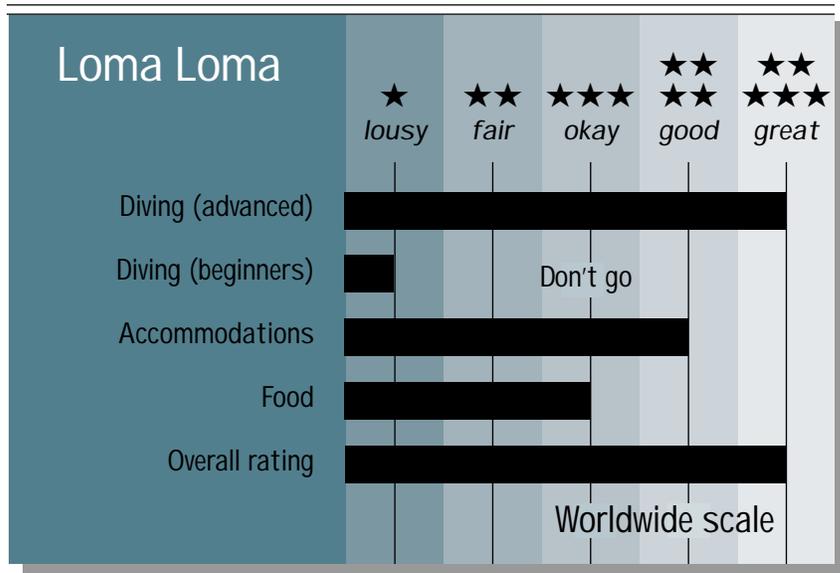
and much, much more. After ten minutes of watching the show, we slipped to 100 feet and began drifting along a wall festooned in soft and hard corals, large gorgonia, small yellow sponges, feeding crinoids, and plenty of fish. Eight disciplined barracuda swam past me, against the current, followed by a small whitetip. At dive's end, our boat captain, Dan's wife Alisi, waited above as we floated for three minutes at 15 feet. When we arrived on the surface, she hung the ladder and took our gear and fins, and we climbed aboard.

For the second dive, we entered a slack tide and paddled in the other direction. After rubble, virgin hard-coral gardens again appeared, as beautiful as any I've seen in Australia's

Coral Sea. Here and there sprouted enormous green gorgonia with stalks as round as baseball bats. Again, thousands of fish everywhere. Ben found a pipefish on a coral head, a juvenile razor wrasse did his remarkable dance for us, and a few bumphead parrots ambled by, joining scores in mixed parrot schools -- and a couple of white tips, as there were on nearly every dive. Water temperature? My Delphi read 80 degrees, but it drops several degrees in the winter, necessitating a wet suit.

Though fish and coral were superb, I was disappointed in the visibility, which ranged from 30 to 70 feet, apparently due to plankton. While runoff can affect many Fiji islands, the Lau Group is much drier, and apparently rain seldom affects diving. The Englands had better visibility last July -- up to 200 feet -- and one of our correspondents reported 100 feet and more in October. The Englands also reported eagle and manta rays, hammerheads, and larger sharks.

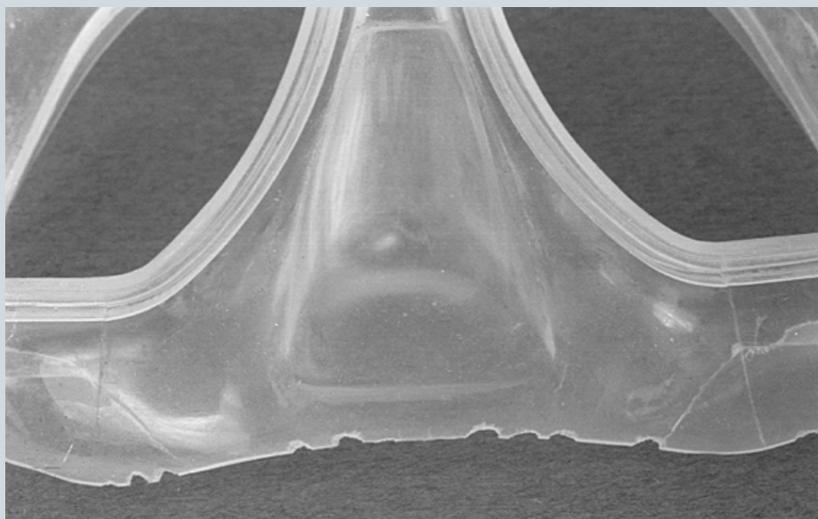
The resort's centerpiece is its large, attractively furnished, high-ceiling Great House, with a bar, lounge area, and dining area (though most meals were served outside on the



Round-trip twin-engine Otter airfare between Nadi and Vanua Balavu is roughly \$220; we were greeted at the grass-strip airfield by Jo, from Loma Loma, who offered us fresh mango juice, then transported 10 minutes by truck to the beach, where we boarded a runabout for the five-minute ride to Loma Loma. . . . Diane Reid at Sea Hunt Escapes will handle your resort, diving, and Fijian flight booking, including charter flights (800-554-2732 or 415-566-6672; you can call the resort for information at 679-880-446 or fax 679-880-303); she worked Dan and Ben at Qamea. . . . Though they provide mosquito repellent, always bring your own. . . . I inadvertently left a bathing suit there; Lynette faxed me and it arrived by air 10 days later. . . . No tipping, but leave something for the Christmas fund for cheery servers like Bela; I suggest \$5/day/person. . . . There's no sandy beach on Loma Loma, but they will motor you to several nearby beaches if you wish. . . . For the time being, they can handle only eight divers, six if a few are photographers; once they get discovered, you can expect a larger and more friendly boat. . . . and yes, this is live-aboard territory, but none is currently allowed.

Ditty Bag

well-kept grounds). For three nights, my buddy and I were the only guests, so I had time to thumb through the library, quaff Kava with five sweet-voiced guitar players and a ukelele player from a nearby village, and chat with the friendly manager, Lynette Mercer, who was always available to handle a request. Most Fijian resorts make people feel like family, but Lynette brought us into the inner sanctum. Before our bags were unpacked, she apologized for a minor sewage problem they



Cockroach Buffet

When a cockroach the size of your thumb scampers from your dive bag, there are two things you must do. In my \$250-a-night beachfront room at the Ramada Hotel in Cayman last August, I did the first: I nailed that puppy.

But I carelessly ignored the second thing and went diving the next day without checking the lip of my mask. As soon as I slipped under the water, my spanking new Tabata mask began to leak. You see, cockroaches love to munch on that silicon lip, a lesson I apparently forgot. It wasn't my first time; years ago, Honduran cockroaches had devoured another of my Tabatas.

Protection is simple: keep your mask in a sealed container or wrapped in a towel or bathing suit. In fact, more than masks are susceptible to these omnivores. While at Loma Loma, I slipped a new mouthpiece on my regulator, only to have a roach nip it the first night in the dive shop.

So keep your silicon under wraps to keep it from becoming a roach restaurant. Nothing is more frustrating than diving with the sea dribbling into your mask or mouth.

Ben Davison

were having, gave us a tour of the dive shop and the out-of-the-way staff quarters, and introduced us to everyone she could find. Having managed resorts on Fiji from 1970 (she and her ex owned Namale), Lynette has put together a comfortable operation in a place supplied mainly by an occasional barge from the big island. It ain't easy.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty is getting top-quality food, Lynette explained. While there were always plenty of fresh mango, pawpaw, and pineapple at every meal, main courses were simple. Lunch: noodleless eggplant and hamburger lasagna, tuna melts, or hamburgers and fries. Sample dinners: cole slaw with peanuts, lightly battered and fried trevally, with vegetables and a birthday fruit cake; lamb chops and steak with potato salad and green salad, and ice cream over chopped fruit; or creamy pawpaw-and-ginger soup, baked half chicken, carrots, roasted potatoes. The wine was decent, drinks inexpensive, beer and sodas gratis. While

the meals fit right in with this distant outpost, my vegan buddy struggled -- though Lynette did her best to accommodate.

I did have a little trouble sleeping, since the fan didn't move enough air in the hot summer. But the large bed, shrouded in mosquito net, was comfortable enough, and so was the 700-

square-foot bure, decorated in Tongan and Fijian prints. There were three small couches in the living area, plenty of storage room, a refrigerator stocked daily with soft drinks and beer, and a sizeable bathroom with plenty of hot water for a shower or bath (if you let it run for five minutes) and fresh beach and bath towels. Downright comfy living.

While Loma Loma measures up to this traveler's standards, it is the diving that stands out. I made eleven dives; not one would I consider only average. My initial shallow dive at South Beach, on the afternoon of arrival, was the least inspiring, but I was indeed impressed by the plentiful hard corals -- antler, brain, finger -- and plenty of fish. I spotted a man-sized thornyray with a missing tail, floating blue jellies (a couple with fish, probably juvenile trevallies, inside), and a remora that spent the dive trying to latch onto my buddy, only to fly off with joy when a ray came by. Here also I spotted a lionfish -- oddly, the only one I saw.

At Cori's Place, three- to six-foot whitetip sharks ambled by every few minutes. The next dive, while my buddy studied a spider shell, a hundred trevalies swam past; she missed them. At the Never Ending Story, we drifted along a wall below 100 feet, past a forest of soft yellow corals -- not as dense as Fiji's famous White Wall, but fascinating nevertheless. First dives went as deep as 110 feet, with total bottom time about 50 minutes. Ben would signal when he wanted us out. Often we would offgas in resplendent shallow coral gardens. I would return with 700 to 1,000 psi, but we always started with our 3,300-psi Cochran aluminum tanks full.

On Sunday we skipped a dive to attend church; the service was indecipherable, but the choir was melodic. I wore a sula -- a Fijian man's skirt -- that Lynette had on hand. Another church serves the residents of Tongan heritage, who still wear the traditional mats around their waists. A few afternoons I snorkeled, once circumnavigating the resort island. I found sea cucumbers and pipefish weaving like cobras, little triggers, upside-down jellies, lots of nice hard coral, clownfish, and anemones, and several large live cowries. You can also take a 20-minute stroll around the island, water ski, wind surf, or just pass hours playing with Frazier, Lynette's playful puppy.

While at Loma Loma, I dived three days with Italian photographer Federico Busonaro, who is about to publish a book on underwater Fiji sponsored by the Fiji government and other organizations. While Beqa has its soft coral lagoon and Taveuni the Somo Somo Straits, Loma Loma, says Federico, has it all. That's my take too.

So if you make this journey, give a little thanks, especially to your fellow readers, who trust you will respect the virgin diving; there's so little left in this world.

Ben Davison

The easterly Lau Islands are on the outer edge of Fiji's boundaries, close to Tonga. Tonga's influence can be seen at Loma Loma Resort, where the guest quarters are Tonga-style *fales* instead of the traditional Fijian *bures*.

B. D.

And you might also thank the president of Fiji, who didn't give Lynette an advertising budget, so when Sue Savela of *Skin Diver* showed up last year, she left without an ad placement. I expect this report will be Loma Loma's first publicity, and you'll know about it before everyone else. As usual, I paid my own way, traveled under an assumed name to keep my anonymity, and didn't describe my mission.

B. D.