

Pacific Divers (Raratonga), October 1999, Kevin Bailey and Lorraine Dillon (kevcbailey@hotmail.com), Croxley Green, Herts, UK. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 25c. Boat small RIB. Dive restrictions, but necessary due to nearest deco chamber in Auckland New Zealand. We completed 15 dives with Pacific Divers. We would have completed more. Nevertheless, the weather was unseasonably bad with lot of rain and even on a sunny day the sea was unusually rough so much so that Graham and Chris decided not to go out and dives were canceled at the last minute. This was a good decision as when we did get out on a calmer day it was still very rough and particularly unpleasant in a small RIB. The rough weather also restricted where we could dive as one side of the island was far too rough to dive for the whole two weeks. Pacific Divers is well run and 20 New Zealand dollars cheaper per dive than Cook Island Divers the other main dive operator on the Island. Graham was very easy going but Chris could be quite blunt and rude at times and we had been told this before seeing them. We personally had no problems with her, (especially at 20 dollars a dive cheaper!) and this shouldn't put anyone off diving with them as they were very professional and knew the Island extremely well. The number of divers on the boat ranged from a maximum of 7 to a minimum of 3. After each dive Graham and Chris had coats on hand for those feeling the cold and a hot drink and snack on returning to the dive base. Some

divers like us felt the cold and had 5mm suits with a hood while others did with 3mm shorties. The coral reef that runs round the whole island was in excellent condition, in fact the best I have ever seen, however the fish life was very disappointing indeed. This is because the local Islanders have very little else to eat. Most foods are imported apart from fish. The locals will eat any fish life that is not poisonous and even kill large groupers for sport. There are small fish reserves set up for six months at a time around the island but after six months the reserve is moved elsewhere and fishing allowed to recommence in that area. This is such a shame in view of the coral and you had to look really hard to find any fish life. We had two very good dives, one at Ednas Anchor and the other at Matoroa Wreck where we see two Spanish dancers, four Eagle Ray, a large Blue Trigger fish that follows us for most of the dive, two leaf fish, and two scorpion fish fighting, this is a must dive if you go. On both these dives you also go to the drop off which is spectacular to see. The visibility was excellent every day and the current was negligible apart from the surge at 5 metres and above although this was unusual for the Island. This is a good place for a beginner to learn as the diving is easy and very good value for money with Pacific Divers.

Fiji

The April/May coup chased tourists away in droves, and they're only now coming back, so

Fiji's prices are better than ever. For Left Coasters, it's easier to get to Fiji than to the Caribbean: ten hours nonstop from L.A. Airfare and an all-inclusive week at many excellent resorts can be had for under \$2500 per person; air packages can be tailored to include New Zealand/Australia extensions at little extra cost. Sunflower Air is more squared-away than Fiji Air for local flights. . . . When you go to the outer islands, and travel light to avoid getting popped for excess weight. . . . Fijians are polite, friendly, delightful, modest, and religious, so watch your language, and wear non-revealing clothes to town. You guys should have someone teach you how to tie a sulu so you, too, can go home in a skirt. . . . Wetsuits are a staple year-round; currents add coolness, just like the wind chill factor. . . . Taveuni has great diving but it's terrible for beginners; there's high current velocity damn near daily. Bring a compass, and carry both day and night emergency surface signaling devices (tubes, strobes). . . . This is a good area for sea snakes, soft corals, stonefish, and clown fish. . . The weather can be stormy June through September; short, heavy showers are possible any afternoon year-round. The year-round average temperature is 80 or above; nights average 68-69 degrees in winter; bring a sweater. . . .

Beqa Lagoon/Pacific Harbor

Aquatrek, Central Pacific Harbor Resort, November 1999, Leslie Chow (lchow@wco.com), San Francisco, CA. Vis: 70-90 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Weather: sunny, rainy, cloudy. Water: calm, currents. Comments: Many Crowns of Thorn starfish have damaged the hard coral in the Lagoon. Shallow dive sites with pinnacles. Less soft coral than at Nananu-I-Ra. Aquatrek does a good job with beginning divers; less interesting for experienced divers. Some current. Was told that the sites outside the lagoon are better but we didn't go there. They are chumming a site for future shark feeding dives. Central Pacific Harbor rooms are pleasant but bathrooms need updating. Very nice people, very nice beach, views. Day programs for kids. Rooms away from dining area are much quieter, second floor rooms have balconies. Coin-op laundry. Robert Trent Jones golf course is fun but poor drainage and odd grass has taken over fairways and greens. Interesting test with 1970-80s vintage rental clubs. Lovo night with fire walking was interesting. Food is good with large portions. Indian restaurant across the street has good cheap lunches. River/waterfall/village tour up the Navua river is low key and interesting (Discover Fiji) and a good activity while waiting for the midnight Air Pacific flight to LAX. Upper Navua white water rafting (Class IV-III/II) reputed to be good but could not book during my stay. **(800-541-4334; Fax 679 415-398-8990)**

Aquatrek, Lagoon Resort, May 2000, Tane. We saw one burned out store and an occasional soldier but they were glad to see us. Lagoon Resort, Pacific Harbour, owned by Jim and Heather Sherlock. Ph. 679 450-100, lagoon@is.comlagoon@is.com.fj and did 6 days of diving in Beqa lagoon. Jim contracted with Aquatrek, owned by Brandon Paige, E-mail: aquatrek@is.com.fj, Ph. 679 702-413, website: <http://www.aquatrek.com> for all our diving and these guys know Beqa Lagoon like it was their back yard. The Fijian and Indian people were open and friendly and glad to see us. Prospective vacationers who canceled their vacations to this paradise because of exaggerated State Department warnings, cheated themselves out of an outstanding value.

Dive Connections at Pacific Harbor, January 2000, Ernest Manewal, Sitka, AK. Vis: 25-45 ft. Water 80-83 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: Dive buddy and computer. Pleasant family run operation. Limited space for camera gear and no rinse tank. Helpful; would drive their car to your accommodation to pick you up. (679 45-0541 or 679 30-0169; Fax 679 45-0539)

Lalati Resort, Allison Batlin, Austin, TX. (Most idyllic dive vacation ever. Having spent several vacations on Beqa Island at Marlin, we tried the other side of the island and the new resort, Lolati, a "small jewel" in the middle of the South Pacific under the very watchful eye of the famous Austrian chef, Christian, formerly of

Marlin Bay. His presence is seen everywhere as all needs are very carefully met and anything less than perfection is not acceptable. There are 5 beautifully decorated and well-maintained bures, with a 6th under construction. Each has a large bedroom with sitting area, and another bedroom to the side that can be shut off for privacy. The bure has a large dressing area with shower and separate toilet area. A nice bonus is the tea kettle with coffee and hot chocolate along with a jar full of Christian's wonderful chocolate chip cookies replenished every day. The best part of the bure though is the large veranda overlooking the bay complete with lounge chairs, and sitting areas. Waking up in the morning to the sunrise, stepping out to your private veranda with coffee in hand is a great way to start the day. The diving was spectacular! John was the very well versed divemaster but would readily turn the show over to Seta, the island native who knew the waters and its diverse family of fins as if we were taking a stroll around his neighborhood. He showed a never-ending enthusiasm for all there was to see. The temperature averaged 78 degrees, and visibility was good. The most on a single dive was 8, 3 being the dive master, Seta, and crew. In a week we saw well over a dozen blue ribbon eels, several large moray eels, several octopus, turtles, schools of barracuda, sharks on almost all dives, and more clown fish than Barnum and Bailey could ever hope to employ. Beautiful technicolor soft coral. After diving the Caribbean, entering the waters of

Bega was like Dorothy discovering Oz. The afternoons were filled with island picnics, fishing, village visits, wakeboarding, and shell collecting, or simply a ride on one of the many beachside hammocks with a good book. Each night, Christian would create another tremendous dinner, each surpassing the one before. The top dinner of the week had to be the sesame coated ahi tuna, seared and topped with a wonderful wasabi sauce. Dessert was Christian's world famous Chocolate tower. The Lalati Resort is as close as I have come to perfection in a vacation. Warm Fijian hospitality. I can still see their wonderful smiles and hear the harmonious singing. Saw no evidence of a coup. If anything, it was actually much nicer and less crowded. Dove one sight that Marlin Bay does not, "Highway to Heaven," along the outer wall of the reef. Great drift dive starting with a swim through at 85 feet, then sailing along the wall at 70 feet. If you are familiar with Bega Island, Lolati is closest to Storm Island, the closest point to Pacific Harbor, shaving 15 minutes of crossing time from Pacific Harbour, about 15 minutes in calm water. The owners believe in giving back to the people of Fiji. They have set up several programs for the people of the island. They hosted International Relief Team in March, who performed cataract surgeries on 28 islanders in the laundry bure. They have now set up a computer in the kitchen where Christian teaches the locals how to use the computer. Linda, the owner, is also setting up an infirmary for the islanders. To find people that truly

care about others and give back like they do is truly rare. (619-742-0677)

Marlin Bay Resort, October 1999, George A. Bogard, Rockwall, TX.

Vis: 60-75 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Dive restrictions: 100f. (+679-30-4042; Fax +679 30-4028)

Marlin Bay Resort, October 1999, Gerald Bonnington

(gbonnington@home.com), Tualatin, OR. Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 80-82 degrees. Sunny. Water: choppy. Restricted to 130 ft, your own computer profile, back in boat with 500 psi. Boat had no freshwater rinse tanks on board for the last 4 days we were diving. The resort was very nice. The grounds were beautiful, and the staff was wonderful. The food great! The dive operation was the worst that I have encountered in 30 years of diving! Our boat, the "Wild One" was totally unorganized. Our best dive briefing consisted of "Swim around two bommies and come back to the boat," and our worst was "No current, look at ocean stuff." On that particular dive there was a five-knot current when we entered. The divemaster didn't wait for anyone and left two inexperienced divers to fend for themselves in a current. The rest of the boat crew was uninterested in helping us until the owner chewed them out. Then it did improve slightly. Dive shop was nonexistent for help. The owners comment was that divers were a bunch of "whiners." I think his attitude flowed to the dive staff. He said that two divemasters had recently quit, which may have explained the lack of organization.

Marlin Bay Resort, December 1999, Roger C. Dennis and Ruth Rouse, San Jose, CA. Bega Island (pronounced "Benga"). Sunny/cloudy/rainy/some wind with rain squalls, water 79-80 F. Visibility varied as rains caused runoffs into lagoon and reduced vis near surface. Most dives were in less than 70ft. of water. No diving restrictions, 2 dives per day (morning), one night dive. We joined a local dive group on a dive package that included air, rooms, meals, dives. The dive operations were fine. The DM's tried to repeat dives the next day at the same sites that we "voiced down" a few times. Dives were limited at times due to sea conditions inside the large very large lagoon. The atmosphere was restful, entertaining, and side activities included visit to a village and a muddy/slippery hike to a waterfall. The food was superb! We ate in a large communal dining area, carrying umbrellas at times due to rain showers. (679) 304 042. Fax: (679) 304 028, Reservations: 1-800-542-345

Marlin Bay Resort, March 2000, Jim and Sandy Rhodes, Lafayette, CA. Vis: 60 to 80 ft. Water: 84 to 86 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130'/500 psi under boat. Beautiful coral (best I've seen at one spot — Cutter's Reef); many different colors, luminescent. But crew dropped anchor on coral more than once. Dive guides uninterested; 2 boats operating only during our visit, so approx. 20 divers/boat. Topnotch food and accommodations; beautifully landscaped location. Fiji beer 2.50 US; wine 4.00/glass US.

Marlin Bay Resort, April 2000, Gary Peterson (garyP@nanosecond.com) Gardnerville, NV. Vis: 50 to 80 ft. Water: 80 to 84 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes. Depths 70 to 100', that's where the bottom is. 10-1/2 hrs. LAX to Fiji; 2-1/2 hr. bus ride; 30 min. boat ride and worth it. Grounds, bures, staff and food A+ (don't miss desserts). No bug bites, 2 boat dives each day, not enough for us. Soft corals galore. Dive operation off beach to boats. No dock. They handle all gear so not too bad. Great value \$1700 all inclusive with air from LAX.

Marlin Bay Resort, April 2000, Bob Schiermeier, Bartlesville, OK. Vis: 100+ - 40 ft. Water: 81-83 degrees. Caters to large groups. Both boats were full when the groups were there. One day between groups I was the only diver and they still took just me to a good site miles away. Divemasters gave the experienced divers freedom to dive their own profile. Excellent gourmet food. Fire walking ceremony. Would have had a better time if weather had been better.

Marlin Bay Resort, Castaway Island, August 2000, Wayne Joseph. Six nights at Marlin Bay and four at Castaway Island. We had a great time. We went through a few military checkpoints (looking for guns) and were always greeted by a happy "Bula" by the soldiers. Third time for Marlin Bay for my wife and me, first time we brought our daughters (14 & 11). Beqa Lagoon has great diving, but some coral bleaching. Water was 80 degrees. Saw lionfish, blue ribbon

eels, sharks, schools of barracuda, lots of interesting macro critters, did some wreck dives. The resort is getting bigger as George has added several bures and is building 6 more. They now have 3 large boats to carry divers and they are pretty comfortable, but could use a camera tank filled with fresh water (not salt water). The dive guides are very capable and they carry all your equipment, except your wetsuit. Russell is "in charge" of the dive operation. One night we saw him give a dive orientation to a group of divers (he read from a script) and never saw him again for the rest of our stay, except at some meals. Christian is no longer the chef and the food is not the same, but it was still much better than what I've had at many other resorts. They try to accommodate children and vegetarians. The 14 yr. old went on 4 dives with me. They completely enjoyed snorkeling, looking for shells, and playing with children from the village and others that weren't diving. Ratu Kenny also kept them busy helping at the resort if they wanted. The Fijian people love children and helped to make their stay very enjoyable and entertaining. Castaway Island has a bit more activities for children. The crisis presented a problem as only about 24 guests (it can hold about 200) were there. The Fijian people who have been laid off get no unemployment, so it has been a serious problem for them. The accommodations here are good, although the food is interesting. They mix Italian, continental, Asian, and Indian cuisine's. The employees here were great with my children. They let

my youngest help make pizza. The diving is different from Beqa. There are lots of fish, sea snakes, sharks, eels, and blue spotted stingrays, but not much soft coral. People come here to relax and then dive. The dive operation has a new boat with twin 200 hp outboards. It gets to the dive sites quickly. They go out 3 times a day (weather permitting) and each trip is a one tank dive. It's a great place to stay & "dry out" after the rainy days that are usually in Beqa. (Castaway: 800-888-0120, +679 66-1233, +679 310-568-0009; Fax +679 310-388-0708)

Kadavu

Matana Beach Resort, December 1999, Uwe Haensch (uh@totacc.com), Alamogordo, NM. Vis: 3060 ft. Water: 78-84 degrees. Weather: sunny, cloudy. Water: calm. Restrictions: 5 min safety stop to start with at least 500psi, 50 min max., 130 feet max., follow divemaster. Very nice resort, beachfront bures are the best, excellent food and service, you eat with the owners and the staff/ dive staff. Good beach, a place for nondivers as well (kayaking, wind surfing) pickup at "airport" and a 10 min. boat trip to resort. Daily flights from Nadi with Sunflower airlines, always on time. Dive operation disappointing, excellent service but 50 min. time limit is a joke (most diving between 80 and 15 ft), they only went to local Namalata reef, didn't want to go to Astrolabe or wrecks (although they advertise it!), they always avoided sites with current (all guests were experienced divers), 2 tank this

morning dives with 1.5 hrs surface interval on remote beach, optional afternoon or night dives boats comfortable and fast, excellent dive briefs. Local divesites good for small critters (nudibranchs, pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, etc.) and corals; night dive rather boring, not much to see overall. (+679 31-1780, Fax +679 30-3860)

Mantana Beach Resort, April 2000, Jim and Sandy Rhodes, Lafayette, CA. Vis: 60 to 80 ft. Water: 82 to 84 degrees, calm and flat, no currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130' max; most sites less than this. Other than the one-two days when it rained 28 inches in 36 hours (a record) the weather was good and visibility remained ok. Excellent dive operation; max 8 divers per boat and 2 dive guides per boat; very helpful and accommodating. A very friendly, laid-back family operation (Aussies), with Fijian dive guides and a New Zealander (PADI course director). Fiji beer 2.00 US; wine/glass 4.00 US.

Matana Beach Resort, June 2000, Bill and Ruth Maki, Lubbock, TX. Started sunny but front moved in with clouds and rain. Water conditions: no currents, mostly calm and nearly flat. Water 78F. Wetsuit needed (3mm or less). Visibility 40-100 ft. Restrictions were 15-ft safety stop and 50 minutes max bottom time. Dive Kadavu is one of the best-run dive resorts we've experienced. The bures were spotless and comfortable. The food was fine and included samplings of Fijian, American, and Continental cuisines. The standard dive package includes 2

morning dives but an afternoon dive and a night dive are extra-cost options. Diving is from a catamaran that is well laid-out, stable and fast (15 minutes max to each site). Don't expect spectacular walls or high-voltage pelagic dives here, but the bommies in 50-90 feet of water have their own set of attractions (canyons and swim-throughs and walls of soft coral). The dive guides knew each site very well and the guides were skilled at spotting interesting small creatures. We photographed pipefish, flatworms, small crabs, and various small fish (including several varieties of anemone fish and gobies with their bulldozer shrimp house-mates). We saw different species of nudibranchs on almost every dive.

Laucala

Forbes Laucala, May 1999, Belinda J. Machen (wkranch@swbell.net) Lockhart, TX. Vis: 150 to 200 ft. Water: 75 to 80 degrees, choppy, some currents. Divemaster did whatever you requested. Forbes Laucala was incredible. Accommodations and food were outstanding. We had our own separate bure that was kept clean and tidy by Alice, our bure girl. She was an absolute delight and very informative about the traditions of Fiji. We were very lucky to have Irene, Joe and kuku Tui available to show us the many fascinating sites on the island. We watched the Kava actually being ground by Irene's son for the nightly Kava ceremony. Malcolm Forbes residence on the island is not to be missed. Every night

at dinner the staff would ask us what we wanted to do for the following day. It was wonderful to be asked what times we wanted to do different things instead of feeling as though we had to meet someone's schedule. Now for the most important part, the diving. It was absolutely the best. Kerwin, the dive master, was very interested in learning about what we were interested in seeing and always provided it for us. We saw hundreds of clown fish, many lionfish and so many other varieties of other fish that there is just not enough room to list them all. We also saw sharks, dolphins, sea snakes, and on and on. The corals were unbelievable, so many colors and varieties. We saw clams that with a touch would open and close, very interesting. Beginners to expert divers will find sites to fulfill any need they would have, especially since Laucala Island is basically located where the currents are very calm, but Tavenuni is only a short distance away where the diving is more for the expert diver. Laucala Island is an all-inclusive resort and I mean that everything is included; for example deep sea fishing, hiking gourmet picnics, etc. (U.S. 800-367-2375, 719-379-3263, 719-379-3266; Fiji +679 88-0077, Fax +679 88-0099)

Nananu-I Ra

Crystal Divers, November 1999,
Anthony V. Dresden, Arlington, VA.
 Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees.
 I heeded "Undercurrent's" advice to go west and try the diving in Fiji. As I was thumbing through the *Chapbook*, I came across a glowing review of

Dan Grenier's new owner/operation on Nananu-I-Ra in Fiji—Crystal Divers. After checking out the web site at www.crystaldivers.com and sending a couple of e-mails to Dan, I booked. Crystal Divers is a first-class operation from start to finish. Dan sets the standard for what diving should be and which is so rarely. He and the entire Crystal Divers staff are committed to making sure that you have the best dive experience. This was driven home to me one morning. Two divers asked Dan if we could go to the Neptune site and Dan said "The tides are all wrong, but they will be right next week and we can dive it twice." Without the tides and currents being right, we would not have seen the wonderful soft corals and large schools of fish and would have come away disappointed. He really cares about the quality of your diving. It was all that I had hoped Fiji to be: the beautiful soft corals, pristine hard corals, gorgonia; the enormous schools of chevron barracuda; huge schools of juvenile parrotfish, big bumphead parrotfish, lionfish, moray, turtle, eagle rays, trevally, jacks, pelagic triggerfish, nudibranchs, the E-6 wall that breaks your heart it's so beautiful. Crystal Divers has a brand new, roomy and fast boat that can get you to and from the dive sites quickly. There is plenty of shade to protect from the strong sun, and also a couple of times in my case, heavy tropical showers. On the first day, after handing over my dive gear, I never handled it again. It was always fresh water rinsed, dried and ready to go. The new tanks were always filled to

3300 psi. There were fresh towels on board as well as drinks and snacks, and on the longer trips to sites like E-6, sandwiches and fresh fruit. I also have high praise for Mike who captains the boat and is a divemaster, and especially Llisoni, a Fijian divemaster, who I thought was first rate especially when we were diving in fairly high seas (5 feet) one day. Given the currents, the diving in many sites can be challenging and it's reassuring to have that level of competency nearby. I rented a lovely house on the beach and wonderful lunches and dinners prepared by Dan's wife Alisi were brought to me, or sometimes I was invited to take them down at Dan's house and the dive shop. No tv, radio, newspapers - perfect. Staff was just great and took care of me from the minute I left my hotel in Nadi where I was picked up by a driver for the 2.5 drive to Rakiraki and then a short boat ride to Nananu-I-Ra. There are also a couple of resorts nearby, such as the Wananavu, which you may want to consider, especially during our winter/Fiji's summer since there is no air conditioning in the rentals and limited fans. When the breezes die down, it can get very hot. Check out Dan's website for the latest info on where to stay. (+679 69-4747; Fax +679 69-4877)

Crystal Divers, Wananavu Resort and Sekola Lodge, November 1999, Leslie Chow (lchow@wco.com), San Francisco, CA. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Sunny, rainy, cloudy. Water: calm, currents. Dan Grenier is doing exploratory diving as

well as visiting (with an excellent new covered dive boat) the further sites usually frequented by live-aboards such as E6 and High-8. Abundant soft corals, including interesting yellow syphgonian soft corals at High-8, nudibranchs (many chromodoris, including chromodoris kuniei), healthy corals, very large and multiple types of anemone with anemonefish. Storm runoff, low tidal volume and plankton lowered visibility during my visit (50-100 ft), particularly in the closer sites. Can have some current. Family-run Wananvu Resort is very pleasant with well ventilated and comfortable bures with deck, sitting area, fridge and ceiling fans. Proprietors John and Vonnice Gray are hospitable ex-pat New Zealanders. Also stayed at Sekola Lodge, a home stay with Jennie and David Elliason another hospitable expat NZ couple, in a studio apartment in their beautiful house on Nananu-I Ra. Dan's Fijian wife, Alissi is an excellent cook and will do the cooking if you rent a houses on the island (1 week minimum). Mosquitoes can be aggressive in the still weather after rains, so be prepared. Be sure you clarify rates. Booking thru a travel agent may result in a 20% higher rate so you're better off booking directly with Crystal Divers via email/web site. Also a 5% credit card surcharge.

Crystal Divers, Wananavu Beach Resort, December 1999, Uwe Haensch (uh@totacc.com), Alamogordo, NM. Vis: 3075 Ft. Water: 80-84 degrees. Weather: windy, rainy. Water: choppy. Profile:

yes. Dive Restrictions: start ascent with at least 500psi, back on boat at least 300psi. Excellent resort, no beach but nice pool, bures comfortable and spacious with 2 large ceiling fans weather cloudy, sometimes rainy, air temp. 76-82F 2.5 hrs cab ride from Nadi, transport arranged via. Two, sometimes three dives a day (3 with lunch on boat), boat well suited for divers, 10 divers max. and 5 min. during my stay Crystal Divers is an excellent operation, Dan and his people very nice and professional day trips to the more remote sites (E6, Mt. Mutiny, purple haze), corals/soft corals from another world, lots of small stuff other sites: mantas, grey and whitetip reef sharks, schools of barracudas/jacks/bannerfish/batfish, healthy corals and fishlife; trip to brand-new sites (didn't even have a name) very exciting. Last evening: barbecue party at Dan's house, his wife is an excellent cook

Crystal Divers, 2000, Bill Myers, Pittsburgh, PA. Bottom line is diving is fantastic. Only bad thing was bleaching at Caribis reef due to very warm water in Jan-March that hurt the huge soft corals. Dan Grenier has discovered many new sites around Vatu-i Ra Pass. Only he has the GPS settings for these because he and Mike discovered them on scooters exploring. Many of these dives can be done on both out going and incoming tides. At Black Magic Mountain, a pinnacle in Bligh Waters, at 90 FT there are so many huge black coral trees I thought I was dreaming. The entire site is covered with soft and hard corals of

every color with life everywhere. Dan set up a down line so we wouldn't blow our air swimming against the strong surface current. Once at 40 ft current lightened a bit but still required some work. My amputee buddy who dives without his artificial leg did fine. At 90 ft Dan Grenier gave the shark sign and pointed, 1,2,3,4,5... Big Gray reefs, bigger than I have ever seen. Big Silvertips swam a little farther out. I came up with about 50 psi at most. All dives in Vatu Pass are great and are much better than E6 that we did one day as a first day followed by Mount Mutiny for the second. The *Nai'a* and *Matangi Princess* were out there. Did E6 on wrong tide so it wasn't up to its reputation but guests who did E6 under right conditions all agreed that Dan's new sites are much better. Mt Mutiny was a great dive, tons of fish. One side is great for coral and the other for fish. Our group selected the fishy side and were rewarded with giant trevally and dogtooth tuna rounding up a bait ball of small jacks. Saw gray reefs, white tips and tons of fish. You must see these sites while they are still pristine. MerMaze is a shallow pinnacle with swim thrus and a mind-blowing array of critters and nudis. Macro Heaven. All divers said they never saw so many Nudi on one dive. This is the only dive site for just macro. All others are great for wide and macro photography. Dan is a great instructor. A young honeymooning couple who just got certified were up to speed in a few days. Dan knows how to teach and is a great hand holder for those who need that. Freedom for others

once they pass the test. They sighted a 7-ft Mako shark on one site but I missed this encounter. House Dan rents are great and locals are super friendly eager to show their shore fishing skills and invite you in for Kava. The other option is Wananavu resort that I stayed at in 1998. I liked staying at the house on the island better because you can mingle with the locals and play with the sea snakes at night.

Crystal Divers, Wananavu Beach Resort, March 2000, Robin and Marta Humphrey, Crystal River, FL.

Four of us used Tropical Adventures as the Travel agent. Make sure your package specifies what entity is responsible for each aspect like "transfers." We wound up having to pay some transportation costs twice. Once in the "package" and once there, since no specific company was named as responsible. We also shopped for air fare. Tropical Adventures was the best we could find, but when comparing notes in Fiji, found that others had fares \$500 cheaper round trip Lax-Fiji on the same flight! We paid \$1100 and change for coach fare on Air Pacific. The warmth and gentleness of the Fijian people needs to be mentioned here. Their serene and welcome personalities overshadow any inconveniences that occur in a normally hectic long trip. Dan Grenier and partners Julie and Mike of Crystal Divers do a great job of seeing to it that your diving needs are taken care of. Crew members Alfred and Giorgio are very attentive and safety conscious. The all aluminum 450 H.P. Yanmar Jet boat is designed with the

diver in mind. The Yanmar gets you there but with way too much noise. Good reefs and good vis are a 1-1.5 hours away. Water temp 86F and vis was 80-100 feet. With mostly Caribbean diving as a comparison, the reefs in Fiji were less traveled and much more colorful with soft corals in spectacular colors. Sharks on almost every dive. Lion Fish, schooling Barracuda and little current this time of year. Very prolific fish life. Stayed at Wananavu Beach resort who "pinched a marvelous Chef from a major local resort. Food was excellent, and the service was as well. Villas were lovely as was the Resort setting.

Crystal Divers, McDonald's Guest House, May, 2000, Susan Crane, (WildCrane@aol.com) Seattle, WA.

Vis: 25 - 50 ft. Water: 80 - 82° F. Weather varied but could have been sunnier. Water: currents most dives. Dive own profile: yes, see below for limits. We spent our first week in Fiji at the Garden Island Resort on Taveuni, where we dove with Aquatrek. Based on everything that we'd heard about Taveuni diving, and the unknown of diving off of Viti Levu, we expected that our first week would be outstanding, and our second week would be mediocre. The reverse turned out to be true. Dan Grenier, the owner of Crystal Divers, is one of the most outstanding dive operators we have ever encountered. The major difference is that Dan and his partners are still excited about diving. Dan is continually discovering new dive sites. He finds something that looks interesting on the fish finder, then he

takes the scooter down to check it out. We dove a number of pristine sites that had never even been discovered by the live-aboards. We found entire bommies covered in soft corals of every hue, and the biggest gorgonians we had ever seen. The health of the marine environment and the variety of marine life were vastly superior to that which we experienced on Taveuni. Small tropicals were prolific, and we had the opportunity to watch wahoo feeding. I will never forget the whoosh as the wahoo passed by, nor the sound of the wahoo's jaws snapping a baitfish in half. We often dove nine or more miles offshore. Crystal Divers has the perfect dive boat for long day trips — a 42-foot aluminum jet boat — that cruised at 20 knots. Crystal Divers also boasts competent, knowledgeable local dive guides who work very hard to please the divers. Dan's partner, Julie, was very good with the beginners, but her tendency to herd divers created some friction with the more experienced divers onboard. She would do well to take her cues from Dan, who when in the water was always unobtrusively aware of the group, but left the experienced divers to set their own profiles and dive times. At the recommendation of Crystal Divers, we rented a cabin at MacDonald's Guest House, which is located down the beach from Crystal Divers operation. These were BUD-GET accommodations — \$22 nt. for an immaculately clean two-bedroom cottage on the beach. (tel: 694-633) MacDonald's caters mainly to young world travelers, many of whom stay in their perfectly adequate dorm at \$8 nt.

By week's end we were craving air conditioning and hot water, but the food was good, the staff was pleasant, and the guests were interesting. The only impact that the coup had on Nananu I Ra was that the beer supply ran out for one night.

Crystal Divers, Wananavu Resort, June 2000, John Fritch (jfritch@quiknet.com), Citrus Heights, CA. Vis: 50 to 100+ Feet.

Water: 77 to 80 Fahrenheit, currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Depth Limits placed on second dive if first dive was deep. People were allowed to use their own good judgment regarding profiles. Fiji is suffering from political instability from a bloodless coup beginning about two months before our trip. However, I scored the real coup with a world-class dive trip at a bargain price. We flew on an Air New Zealand 747 with only 66 passengers! (I'd always dreamed of sleeping flat across a row of seats.) We experienced no travel problems on Viti Levu, passing through a series of checkpoints on the main highway. I felt safer in Fiji than I have while driving through Mexico. The Wananavu Resort had lost much of its clientele, mostly New Zealanders seeking a break from the winter chill, now driven away by the coup. Despite the setback, the Gray family that owns Wananavu, delivered the most memorable vacation experience for my family. Our room was large, spotlessly clean and in excellent working order. I opted for the meal plan with my accommodations and never regretted it. With a generous

menu that included shellfish, fish, lamb, beef, chicken, veal, pork and vegetarian entrees, this was no place to attempt to lose weight. My son still dreams of the “dahl” soup. Sarah, who runs the front desk, personally expedited every request, delivering a level of service I’ve never encountered in the US. Remote and beautiful location. There’s no phone or TV, so bring a good book! Crystal Divers is already a favorite among *Undercurrent* readers. It didn’t take long for me to find out why. Dan Grenier attends to each diver’s needs. He had my 13-year old son within arms reach on the first few dives. By the end of our stay, my son was diving like a veteran — without weights, on deep, high-current, advanced dives. The experience was priceless: hammerheads, gray reef, white tip and black tip sharks; lionfish, scorpionfish, trumpetfish, pipefish, tuna—plus the usual assortment of reef fish and soft coral that make diving Fiji famous. Dan’s attention to detail is probably best reflected by his dive boat, a custom-built aluminum 40’ jet boat. The dive ladder hangs at just the right angle and has hand rails that smoothly transfer from ladder to boat deck. An advanced GPS/Data Chart system allows Dan the ability to scout potential new dive sites during our surface interval. Julie Trussell was a wealth of information about the marine biology unique to Fiji and was excellent at locating interesting subjects for photography. Dan’s wife, Alisi, extended a personal welcome to divers by inviting everyone to the Grenier home to sample some of her

incredible cooking. It is little wonder why Crystal Divers is the charter of choice for the informed diver! UW Photography comments: I use a housed video camera while diving. Dan Grenier and Julie Trussell were exceptionally responsive to the needs of photographers. One day, the rinse tank was overloaded with equipment and my video housing wouldn’t fit. Julie then hand-rinsed my housing and put it in a safe place. The very next day a second rinse tank had been added to the boat. What service!

Crystal Divers, Karen and Joel Schulman, June 2000, Steamboat Springs, CO. We had been following the political situation in Fiji for the last few weeks and, though we are both positive thinkers, we wondered just what we would find when we stepped off the airplane in Nadi. We did not experience any problems as visitors in the country. To the contrary, we were warmly welcomed by all whom we met and felt very comfortable. Suffice it to say that we did see military checkpoints on our way from Nadi airport to the island. Our driver, who works with Crystal Divers to transport guests to the island waved to the military folks and they waved back. Crystal Divers is a small, personal, professional dive operation. It is one of the best we have dived within 13 years. We were made to feel like part of the family. Dan Grenier and Julie Trussell, co-owners, are both extremely experienced dive instructors and boat captains. Their native Fijian staff was constantly going out of their

way to make our stay as enjoyable as possible. They brought delicious dinners to our lovely, 1-bedroom house, about a 15 minute walk to the dive shop, or taking care of us on the dive boat, the *Crystal Explorer*. The dive boat is a comfortable, fast, jet-drive aluminum-hulled vessel, which holds a maximum of nine divers plus crew. The boat is equipped with dual GPS's, depth sounder, radar, all standard safety equipment (O2, first-aid, dingy with outboard, etc.), and a marine head (for emergency use). There's dry storage above the seating area; fins, booties and masks/snorkels are kept at the stern of the boat in separate compartments. Tanks are compact aluminum 80's and are more negative in buoyancy than standard 80's, which allows for wearing less weight and doing a comfortable safety stop. Wetsuits and booties are rinsed and hung to dry after each diving day (usually two dives, sometimes 3 when requested.) Milo (similar to hot chocolate), juice, water, cookies and chocolate cake are served between dives. Yum! Generous rinse buckets are provided for camera gear and, considering that this is a day boat, there is ample room to work with camera equipment. Is this diving heaven? Dan's wife, Alisi, is an accomplished chef. Her meals were delicious, filling and creative. After a morning at sea, it was great to go back to the dive bure and have a yummy lunch served to us in an informal atmosphere with our diving friends. There was usually pasta or rice, topped with fresh veggies, chicken, fish, beef or lamb. Portions were far

more generous than I needed and I don't believe we ate the same meal twice. Dinners were served either at the dive bure, brought to our house or to the neighboring house where we ate with new friends. You don't even want to know about the desserts! At first I tried skipping them (I have been on Weight Watchers, successfully for 5 months). Then I gave in and just cut the portion in half. We dove the Bligh Water sites, most of which are unique to Crystal Divers (thanks to GPS, as they are not marked on any chart.) Our boat rides were 20 minutes to over an hour, depending on the plan for the day. Going out into open ocean enabled us to see numerous sharks; Whitetip, Blacktip, Grey Reef and a couple of Hammerheads! Many the sites often have significant current. At other sites, the dive was planned for slack tide and currents were light or hardly at all. Most diving with Crystal Divers is geared toward experienced divers. Macro critters such as colorful Nudibranchs, Flatworms, Anemone Shrimp, Cleaner Shrimp, were everywhere. Schools of Barracuda were sighted on most dives. Lionfish, and Lizardfish seemingly posed for portraits. Eels, Parrotfish, Angelfish, Needlefish, Stonefish, Groupers, Sweetlips, Wrasse, Batfish, Butterflyfish, Anemonefish, popping in and out of their host anemone were fun to photograph. The brightly colored anthias, swimming among soft corals of every hue and shape, created a rainbow of colors in our viewfinder. Could have stayed in one spot without getting bored! Most of the corals appeared quite healthy. We did see

hard coral bleaching at a few of the sites, but certainly not enough to spoil our trip. Dan and Julie planned dives on sites when the conditions were best for viewing the coral feeding, even if this meant changing sites at the last minute or diving in stronger currents.

Crystal Divers, Wananavu Beach Resort, July 2000, Don Acheson, Silver Spring, MD. Vis: 60-120 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. No depth and time loosely enforced. Crystal Divers, equipped with a fast diesel-driven water jet boat, reached distant sites, offering exciting diving. "Black Magic Mountain" is a unique combination of sharks hunting in the current flowing over a coral ridge at 90 feet and, for one's ascent pleasure, a cylindrical bommie covered with hard and soft corals, tropical reef fish, and small critters. Found 4 species of shrimp on the bommie. At another site, several of us did a 15 minute safety hang while swimming with a school of about 200 24 inch barracuda that didn't spook as I swam at less than arm's reach from the outermost fish in the school. Since many sites are best dived on an incoming tide, currents can be strong. Wananavu Beach Resort featured spacious, attractive and clean air-conditioned bures, although a ceiling fan was sufficient during my stay. The balcony of the dining room and bar was a delight at sunset. Service, overseen by Soni, was prompt, courteous, and competent. The menu was extensive enough to satisfy a variety of tastes. Seafood was consistently excellent; red meats good. A choice of wines from Australia and New Zealand were available.

Crystal Divers/Charlie's Place, August 2000, David Kleiner (davidkleiner@hotmail.com), Seattle, WA. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 Fahrenheit. The diving and dive operation are excellent. Boat leaves the shop promptly 8 a.m. returns by 2 p.m. Fast jet boat carries up to 10 paid divers, plus 3 or 4 crew. Their best sites (4 of my 6 dive days) are in sight of cone-topped Vatu Ira Island, one hour fast boat ride from Viti Levu. Other lesser, but good sites are 30 to 40 minutes away. The water was choppy (white crest to white caps, 4 of 6 days), the boat ride bumpy, occasionally jarring. Stay seated, take your Bonine, no problem for most divers. We dove the best sites even on the roughest days. Dan, owner, said November had been calm, vis still good.) My favorite sites (Instant Replay, Black Magic Mountain, Mt. Mutiny) were all pinnacles, rising from 80-100 ft. Mt. Mutiny densely covered with an impressive diversity of soft and hard corals. The fluffy picture postcard soft coral (*Dendronephthya*) is common, much in yellow and purple, also in red, light orange and occasional other colors. See an entire wall packed with such yellow corals at Instant Replay. The interesting tan/brown soft coral is dominant in parts of Magic Mountain. Less common is the pretty soft coral that looks like a hanging juniper or cypress plant/vine. A lengthy wall at Mt. Mutiny is furnished with these corals, creating a beautiful hanging garden, mostly in yellow and purple, along with orange, white and green. Occasional black corals. Coral

bleaching reported elsewhere in Fiji has not hurt these prime sites. Dan said they lost 8 sites (in the western area), they don't take divers to such sites. Raccoon butterflyfish, regal angelfish, clown triggerfish, beaked filefish, and lionfish. Barracuda are common. A couple of reef whitetip or grey reef sharks on most dives. Two turtles and one manta, no hammerhead sharks. All diving in groups led/guided by Dan, Julie (co-owner), or one of three staff members. One or two dive groups, depends on number of divers. Stay in general vicinity/visual range of group. Group moves quite slowly, very relaxed diving, bottom times 55-65 minutes. A large group from California liked to go faster, so the staff/guide went at their pace. Air hogs surface early, others continue the dive. Most dives no deeper than 100 feet, deepest on trip 112 feet, Dan is equipped to offer very deep diving on special request. Current was minimal or absent on 9 of 12! dives, most diving was from an anchored boat. Some drift diving from live boat in modest current (Dan said 3 to 4 knot currents are possible at some sites). For bigger currents (more big fish action), plan your dives around a new moon or full moon; for less current, dive around a quarter moon. The soft corals were open/feeding in modest current. Thrifty divers — stay at Charlie's Place on Nananu-I-Ra Island. 20 minute beach walk to dive op, or pay for boat ride. \$33 U.S./night for entire building with 6 beds. Clean. Gas stove, fridge, electricity by generator, on in evening, part of day only. No A/C, o.k. Shower with warm

(not heated) water. Drink and cook with filtered rain water. Buy your food on the way in at supermarket in Nadi or Lautoka — food selection in Rakiraki is limited. Other cheap accommodations — Betham's (recommended by dive op), similar to Charlie's. Bring a good I.D. book, e.g. Indo-Pacific Coral Reef Field Guide, by Gerald R. Allen and Roger Steene (Julie had this one). Overall, excellent dive op, getting even better as they discover new dive sites. 22+ hours from Seattle to Charlie's on Nananu-I-Ra. Arrive a.m. from plane and Fiji taxi but miss dive boat, no dive until next day — about 48 hours from Seattle departure. Similar time frame/logistics on return — roughly 48 hours from last dive to back home.

Ra Divers, Wananavu Resort, June 2000, Robin and Joy McDougall, Fairbanks, AK. The only evidence of trouble ere army road block checkpoints at some major intersections, the cancellation of many airline flights due to sub-minimal passenger loads, and nearly empty resorts. The friendly, attentive service Fijian service was enhanced by entire orders of magnitude! And as for the road-blocks, we were greeted by fully-armed soldiers, smiling and waving. Wananavu is at the northern tip of Viti Levu (the main island). Constructed in 1994, it is the labor of love of ex-pat New Zealander John Grey and his family. There are 15 bures and 3 new two-bedroom "villas." Some are beachfront, and some are on the hillside, with a grand ocean view looking toward the Bligh Waters. All have ample screened

windows, dual ceiling fans, air conditioning (should the screens and fans are inadequate), king-size beds (with gorgeous tropical flowered bed spreads), mini-refrigerators, spacious marble-tiled bathrooms and beautiful hardwood floors. They are genuinely pleasant and comfortable. It is well-served by two competent dive operations — Crystal Divers, and Ra Divers. Both are headquartered on Nanavu-I-Ra Island, about a 20 minute run offshore. But Ra Divers moors their boats in Wananavu's protected marina, and maintains a dive shop/boutique on the premises. It is a short stroll from the beachfront bures to the dive shop and onto the jetty. Ra's boats are both 30' long cruisers, half enclosed and shaded over. Tank racks occupy the center of the rear deck. Seating is either inside the (small) cabin, or on the gunwales of the dive deck. A full complement of divers is 9-10, although that only happened one day. One day it was just my wife and myself. The runs to the dive sites were normally 1/2 hour from Nanavu-I-Ra Island. Exits were up a small swim ladder and over the transom between the twin 115 horsepower outboards. Sites are fantastic — worthy candidates for the title "Best Dive Site in Fiji." Imagine taking the canyon lands of the American Southwest, and submerging them in a tropical ocean. All the sites we dove shared this basic floor plan: sheer vertical canyons, interlocking one to another, with many hang-overs and swim-thrus. "The Maze" is truly an appropriate site name. The walls of Cayman and the Somo-somo Straits

pale by comparison. There, you have the one colorful wall in front of you — off Nanavu, the walls are all around, festooned with hard corals, huge gorgonians, sea whips, and of course, Fiji's famous soft corals. Some sites, such as Disney and Golden Dreams have a beautiful golden-orange soft coral, which seems endemic to this area. Whites and purples were also common, but red less so. Hard corals are numerous and varied. There was scattered evidence of bleaching from the last "El Niño." The magnificent anemones' tentacles were also a pure, stark white, which we were informed was also due to bleaching. The combination of the pure white tentacles with their fluorescent neon pink tips was stunning. Found large electric ray, hiding in the sand at "Breathmaker," as well as a great assortment of sharks on our trip — white tips, greys, and, I think, bronze whalers. Almost every dive had at least one shark. Schools of barracuda were common, and at "Bula Maker" we were visited by several dogtooth tuna. "Pinnacle" gave us a school of rainbow runners, and a huge school of parrotfish, busily replenishing the sand supply. Pinnacle had a great school of bumphead wrasse. All sites had a generous complement of the usual tropicals and unusual ones. We got some acceptable shots of pipefish, leaf and stone scorpion fish, turkey fish, nudibranch. Vis ran 75-100 feet in the mornings, but deteriorated to 30-40 feet in the afternoons. Water constant 82. June is "winter" in Fiji, so the air temps were around 80. Most of the dives were in the 60-foot

range, though a couple ran into the 80's. Fresh fruit every day — pineapple, papaya and coconut, and fresh water. Neither a fresh water shower, nor a rinse tank. Both Papu, headman for Ra, and Alfred, his assistant, were consummate divers, and good guides. Both very helpful spotting such unobtrusive creatures as pipefish and leaf scorpions, Papu joked that Alfred had “rat’s eyes” — he was so observant. Their pre-dive briefings were succinct. Only once when shepherding a large group of “Kiwis” did either of them seem to rush thru a dive. On all the rest, we were able to stay down as long as we liked, and our tank fills were uniformly 3000 psi. Departures were definitely on “island time” — one morning we didn’t get into the water for the first dive until almost 11:00 am. Dinners were such generous portions that she and I usually split a single meal, and were both more than satisfied. Ingredients were mostly fresh, carefully prepared, and nicely seasoned/spiced. There were daily specials, and other menu choices. Soups included seafood chowder, chicken won ton, vegetable cream and curries; salads had a variety of fresh garden vegetables, and entrees featured grilled coral trout, wahoo, steak, lamb, and stir fry. They had a variety of appetizers including kokuda (firm fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk — sort of a Fijian ceviche). Breakfasts: toast, cereal and a fruit assortment as a buffet, and eggs, pancakes, French toast, etc. cooked to order. Since we were ordering lunches in advance, we usually went with a grilled sandwich,

burger, or something of that sort. On the two days we didn’t dive, they had lovely specials, of the same sort of items on the dinner menu, with the same quality and quantity, too. Here was a pleasant bar, which was a better choice than the 2, 3, and 4 — topper dining tables, for sitting and visiting with the other guests, a pair of engineers from Canada, and families and singles from California and New York. All of the other guests who were divers, were with Crystal Divers. This depended on which travel agent handled the reservations — one seems to “push” Crystal, and the other, Ra. Crystal’s boat is somewhat larger and faster than Ra’s. It is an all-aluminum inboard jet boat, which ran to some different, and more remote sites. It also seemed to operate on a more punctual schedule. (+679 679-69-4511; Fax +679 679-69-4611)

Taveuni

Garden Island Resort, September 1999, Jim and Kandi Gill (Captjim@home.com), Pleasanton, CA. Water 73-78, Vis 65-75, 130' depth limits enforced. Anybody who went beyond this limit was not permitted to do another dive that day. The staff at Garden Island Resort are extremely friendly. The hotel and restaurant staff knew us by name and greeted us with a smile. The diving staff was attentive and would help you doff your gear, it was always washed and dried for the next day, and was all set up when we got to the boat. The dive sites were all within a 20 minute boat ride except The Zoo that took

about 30 minutes. On only one dive did the divemaster seem in a hurry to get back to the boat. The soft corals were stunning and the amount of fish, though there were no large fish other than a few 4-8' white tip reef sharks on each dive. Accommodations were very comfortable and cozy. A/C worked well and the rooms were made up each day. The food was always very good except, after 10 days, we were ready for a little change but weren't any options. Not much night life except the local band and the kava bowl; everything was closed by 10:00 pm. We weren't prepared for the remoteness of the island; dirt roads, dirt runway, cows and dogs on the runway, etc. Had hoped for more shopping opportunities. We had to do our shopping in Nadi as we were leaving. The hiking was nice and the locals are friendly and will offer you food or drink. Go watch the local team play rugby. Taxi rides are cheap. Very relaxing and enjoyable trip. (+679 88-0286; Fax +679 88-0288)

Garden Island Resort, September 1999, Mike Saffas and Lori Falls, N. Las Vegas, NV. Vis: 70 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 81. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: common sense, surface with 500 psi. Good diving, currents strong during full moon or new moon. Lots of interesting sea life, sharks, sea snakes, lion fish, eels, rays, turtles and large schools of fish. Islands are beautiful. Dive crew was great but management was not accommodating to our needs. We bought dive package with 5 days of diving. They would not let us

spread out dive days to accommodate the weather. Hotel rooms could be cleaner and in better repair.

Garden Island Resort, November 1999, Dan and Dana Harrell, Northridge, CA. Vis: 75 to 150 feet. Water: 75 to 79 Fahrenheit, choppy currents. Dive Restrictions: No-deco dives. Only one drift dive, despite several dives where a drift would have made life much easier. We would have to come up a coral mount on the leeward side of the current. Then, once in position it was each diver for him self to swim like hell to get to either the anchor line or weighted safety stop drop line. I felt as if I were sprinting for all I'm worth — and I'm in decent shape. We were told that the Somosomo Straits are the soft coral capital of the world with a brilliant abundance of soft corals, and a stunning array of sea-life. We arranged our travels through Fiji Travel (in Santa Monica, CA) and Aqua-Trek. The flight from LAX is just more than 10 hours. In preparing for the trip we took the advice of other "*Undercurrent*" readers and were careful not to over pack because of the small inter-island planes. We had no problems with a large dive bag, large suitcase and two carry-ons (our combined personal weight is 275, so if you weigh more, carry less). The weather was sunny and muggy — ideal for divers. Upon check-in at the Garden Island, I eagerly went to the dive shop to check out the diving options available. We enjoy taking advantage of special trips and night dives whenever we visit a new dive destination, because

we want to maximize our time doing what we love — dive. Every piece of literature available on diving in Taveuni talks about diving the “World Class” “Beautiful” Somosomo Straits (including the Aqua-Trek, Garden Island Resort’s info, and four years of “*Undercurrent*” “Chapbooks.” Well, let me tell you that I was sold! I wanted to night dive, take some underwater photos, borrow one of several kayaks to paddle out to a nearby island for lunch and snorkeling. Man, I was in diving paradise! Boy, was I mistaken! No beach diving. No E-6 processing (broken). No fresh water rinse tank for photographers on either of the two aluminum dive boats. Storage is at a premium for accessories, including camera equipment. No night diving. From the Garden Island resort it is (so I’m told) about 10 minutes by boat to the dive sites. The time to the nearest dive site that we dove was over 45 minutes away! The average one way trip was more than 1 hour!. Before our departure, Aqua Trek (and Fiji Travel) became aware that a big muckity-muck chief died. The son took over, and immediately banned all tribally controlled waters from fishing or any activity for 100 days. I can prove that Aqua Trek knew well in time to adequately inform their customers due to bulletins from them regarding the ban on all diving (somewhat abated later, Whew) and other updates that we saw when we arrived (these were dated 1 to 2 weeks earlier). From early November plus 100 days carries the ban well into the year 2000. Long time tribal custom? Only for fishing. And then only in

very limited areas. This ban affected nearly all of Fijian Waters. And you though this country of the “nicest people on Earth” had a civilian government. On paper only. Just ask the indigenous (former) Indian people who are trapped there. The add-on ban was an attempt to extract \$\$ from the resort operators. What cannot be sufficiently underscored, however, is that Aqua Trek and Fiji Travel had a duty to inform all their customers before this very material information. They did not, and did a terrible disservice to everyone. By the third day, the weather turned, making long boat rides in the open ocean progressively less comfortable. To their credit, given the awful circumstances, Glenn and Noreen somehow managed to convince someone to let us dive. In addition, we would like to commend Glenn and Noreen making an otherwise disastrous dive trip only a fair dive trip. Other aspects (village visit, Meke ceremony at the hotel, Bouma/Tavoro Falls, the water slide, dateline ...) of our stay were wonderful and unforgettable. Despite everything else, we were able to dive — just not the Somosomo Straits. At every dive destination there is a current that ranged from mild to “See you in Taiwan.” Except for two sites, there was no soft coral to speak of. Fortunately, only two reefs had very little live coral left, which were destroyed in the path of a typhoon. The reefs at the other dive sites had an amazing variety of hard coral. Far more than I’ve seen in Cayman or Bonaire. There were white-tipped reef sharks on all but two dives, and a dizzying assortment

of reef fish as well as bigger critters. There were Napoleon wrasse, turtles, sea snakes, lion fish, clownfish everywhere, several species of moray, including one with a dark mottled pattern that I'd never seen (yes, even in books). There were unicorn fish, several schools of large sweet lips, tuna(!), jacks of several variety, chevron and great barracuda, huge lobsters and too many more to name. Anyway, the diving was pretty good for not being the one and only promised Rainbow Reef. Bring a couple of layers of wet suits. I dove in on the very first dive wearing my Polartec dive skin. I defied gravity flying out of the water in shock at how cool it seemed. After changing into a warmer wet suit (thanks for the advice again, *Undercurrent* readers!), I enjoyed the water much more. To a person, everyone we met, saw, greeted, and became acquainted with were wonderful. It's just that the hats on much tighter on the chiefs — whose value is not based on being nicest in the world. The political climate is only a little unstable, and should otherwise not affect your trip or personal safety. I would however, suggest reading up on current events before going. Also, read up on the culture and history that are very interesting, and will give you a much better image and appreciation of the country. Enjoy.

Garden Island Resort, December 1999, Ernest Manewal, Sitka, AK. Vis: 20-45 ft. Water: 79-82 degrees. This was an expensive dive operation charging twice what the competition

was charging and their equipment was well worn mostly inherited from previous owners. The divemasters were required to furnish their own equipment and wore cast off masks and suits. They were not happy with their employer. There was a price break to prepay several dives at once but once purchased they were non refundable and non transferable even to family members who may have gotten sick etc. There were no fresh water rinsing tanks for photo equipment. Empty tubs brought aboard for sea water leaked.

Garden Island Resort, April 2000, Ellen Nitz, Milford, MI. Vis: 80 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 84 degrees, calm and flat, strong currents, one dive. Dive your own profile: no. Dive restrictions: stay in groups with dive masters. Outstanding diving. Fabulous dive operation in a well managed, clean resort. Rooms were spacious, service polite and efficient and meals were creative and delicious. Small island with a few stores, beautiful scenery, and a very friendly population of native Fijians and Indians, a few sights to travel to and swimming is limited to a boat trip to an island close to the resort. Pristine diving in clear, warm waters with few other dive operations in the area.

Garden Island Resort, April 2000, Janet Czapski, Northville, MI. Vis: 50 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 84 degrees, calm and flat, strong currents, no currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130'. This was a group of 15 divers, ranging from very

experienced to fairly new. Everyone loved the diving, even in the strong currents. Dive masters found every small critter imaginable, from nudibranches to the blue eels. Soft corals and anemones were everywhere in vibrant color. Both hotel and dive staff was awesome. Meals were great and the hotel is renovating all rooms. The ones done are lovely. New managers Glenn and Noreen are doing a great job.

**Garden Island Resort, April 2000,
Bob Schiermeier, Bartlesville, OK.**

Vis: 100+ -50 ft. Water: 81-84 degrees. Engines on their boats were broke part of the time. They brought in an even better boat though, so missed no dives -- 1 hour delay. Husband and wife couple managing the resort very helpful and accommodating. Interesting village tours. Food was good but not gourmet. Diving was good by not spectacular. Our 6 days there were very enjoyable. Kava ceremony and live music every night.

**Garden Island Resort, May 2000,
Edward Leibowitz, Jersey City, NJ.**

Vis: 40-100 ft. Water: 78-82 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limits. I prebooked my accommodations, meals and five day (2 tanks per day) dive package through Great Destinations in Sacramento California. When I traveled to Taveuni, the State Department recommended that travel to Fiji be deferred due to the political situation in Suva, Fiji's capital. I ignored the warning and found that I had no problems traveling to/from Nadi and Taveuni via Air Pacific, Air

Fiji and Sunflower. There were no problems in Taveuni or Nadi. Great Destinations kept me well informed and did an excellent job putting together a reasonably priced package from New Jersey to Fiji. I dove the Zoo, White Wall, Annie's Bommie, Ledge, Blue Ribbon EEL Reef, Jack's Place and Jerry's Jelly. Many dives had strong but manageable currents. Divemasters seemed knowledgeable about the current direction. Visibility on the deep dives was not very good. As the group ascended to the shallower portion of the dive, visibility improved immensely. Although I enjoyed diving with Rainbow Reef Divers, I was somewhat disappointed in the repetition of dive sites for the shallower dives. Coral formations in Fiji are the best I've seen scuba-diving. Underwater marine life in Palau (where I visited four years ago) is much better than Fiji. You took off from the beach in a tender and entered a bigger boat docked farther away in deeper water. Crew held both boats together while you passed from one boat to the other. In surging waters this could be a problem. Dive crew set up tanks and rinsed dive gear. On one dives, my tank slid off underwater. Luckily this did not cause a serious problem in the dive. After this I made sure I checked BCD strap and buckle before donning this gear. I did not care for the food served at the Garden Island Resort. The food contained too much sugar and was cooked with too much butter. Breakfasts were okay. I visited the spectacular Tavoro Waterfalls in Bouma National Park. The temperature of the pools of water

surrounding the falls is much colder than the ocean. Wear a light wetsuit (not nylon diveskin) when swimming in the pools.

Garden Island Resort, May 2000, Mike Landau, Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 40 to 80 ft. Water: 82 to 85 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: dive your computer. Rainbow Reef, Somosomo straits were blooming soft coral and magnificent area; has abundant sea life, sea snakes to leaf fish. Great dive resort at a fair price.

Garden Island Resort, June 2000, John Bischoff, Boise, ID. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy currents. Best food and some of the most friendly and helpful staff I have seen at a dive resort. The managers and staff were willing to do all they could to accommodate the needs of our group. Entry to the boats was difficult — a wet entry to a small boat on the shore and a transfer to the moored dive boat 100' away. If the water were rough (which it was often), bumps and pinched fingers were frequent. The boats are fairly small — luckily (due to political trouble) they weren't totally full. Most of the dive staff was helpful. Most dives had some current, and some had lots! With no shore diving to speak of, this is not a great place for beginning divers or divers with special needs, but for experienced divers, the diving was good. Because of stormy weather, viz was often 50-100', but some days it was 100-200', Air Fiji (from the international airport in Nadi to the

island of Taveuni) has a 44# (20kg) baggage allowance. Our group didn't get charged for excess, because they let us use the average weight, but individuals could pay extra.

Garden Island Resort, July 2000, Tony Richter, Burr Ridge, IL. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 78-82 degrees. Restrictions: depth. Abundance of scorpion fish, stone fish, lion fish, and sea snakes. Tons of tropical fish, regal angels, Moorish idols. Soft Coral was gorgeous. Hard coral was all dead. Current on almost all dives. Very heavy current (4-5 knots) on a couple including "the great white wall." Did not enjoy that dive. 2 dives a day. 2 night dives a week max. We only did one because of weather. Dive masters hooked up all your gear for you but they forgot things sometimes, like connecting your air hose to your B.C.! Boats were small and basic. Rooms were nice, very clean. Staff was very nice.

Garden Island Resort, July 2000, Bill McGrath (zippy@bikerider.com), Scottsdale, AZ. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 Fahrenheit, calm currents. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: Max depth if not using a computer of 115 feet. I went to despite State Department warnings! I had no problems at all with the political situation. It made for interesting conversation with cabbies as we toured the island of Taveuni, with the perspective determined by the ethnic extraction of the driver. We loved the resort. Glen and Doreen, US-citizen managers of the resort, couldn't have been nicer. The entire staff, comprising

mostly indigenous Fijians, was delightful. The food was great. Do the meal plan if you go (it's optional) and pig-out. The bar even had a decent section of Aussie, Kiwi and South African wines at reasonable prices! The dive operation used two all-aluminum, covered boats designed just for diving, and they were well suited to the task. We had eight to ten divers on the typical outing, and we were comfortable. Nitrox was available for \$10US/dive. Our package included five days of 2-tank boat dives. We purchased an additional day at \$75 US, a little pricey, we thought. Only a small tub on the boat for cameras, but clean rinse tanks at the dive shop. E-6 processing @ \$15 US for unmounted slides. The DM's were well informed about the dive sites, and gave clear briefings aided by laminated contour maps of the reef. My first trip to the South Pacific. Unfortunately, El Niño had decimated the hard coral, but the soft coral was spectacular. No shortage of colorful subject material. Many more varieties of fish than I am accustomed to seeing. It's like being on a different planet! Diving in the Somosomo Strait is affected by the tidal current. All the diving was in the morning, and sometimes the currents were nonexistent, and at other times they were ripping. If you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, you can get swept away. I found this out first-hand. Once I realized that resistance was futile, I surfaced, signaled and inflated my sausage. The DM on the boat asked if I were OK, and I gave the big 'O.' By the time the other divers had boarded

the boat I was half a mile away. They came and picked me up, and we all had a good chuckle. I was the object lesson for the week. On land, there are several beautiful waterfalls and water slides to visit. There was a Catholic mission within 20 minutes by foot of the resort. The Fijians enjoy a lifestyle relatively unaffected by Western materialism. They are friendly, almost naive, a little shy, and always delightful. They are interested in sharing their culture with interested visitors, and happy to be photographed. The children are beautiful. Overall, a wonderful trip.

**Taveuni Island Resort, April 2000,
Marc Kashinsky, Long Beach, CA.**

Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 Fahrenheit, calm currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive within your computer or tables. Diving was great, but boat rides to the dive sites were 45 minutes to an hour. Lunches on the boat consisted of soup and Fijian style pizza and bread. There were plenty of snacks afterwards at the resort. The resort, while beautiful, well maintained, the staff extremely attentive, and service excellent, was lacking in two notable areas. The meals were very simple, and most meals were buffet style. Breakfast (not buffet) was the best meal of the day. There seemed to be a problem getting water to the lower bures, which is to say, that if you were in a lower bure, you couldn't take a shower until everybody in the bures above you had taken their shower. Overall the trip was good, just overpriced.

**Taveuni Island Resort, May 2000,
Malcolm Leader, Oakland, CA. All**

services in Fiji are operating normally. The biggest problem for Fijians right now is the huge rate of cancellations of travel. The coup, if you can call it that, is nothing more than a hostage standoff confined to the Parliament complex in Suva. All other aspects of Fijian life are proceeding as normal. We had absolutely no problems traveling to or from Fiji. The airport in Nadi is functioning entirely normally. Air Pacific has canceled some flights due to a decline in travelers, and some folks are being asked to leave a day earlier or a day later than they had planned. The coup did not impact our trip or travel. The Resort is entirely self-contained, providing its own water and power. Does and Ric Cammick, the owners, are super people? Their staff is all very warm and wonderful people. Their service is superb. The food is outstanding. The diving, and the dive crew, are fantastic. We could not have chosen a more idyllic spot. The diving was mostly in the Somosomo Straits and was very varied. Some dives had a fair amount of current, due to the new moon and time of year, but the currents were managed well by the divemasters. Dive Taveuni has a spacious, powerful boat to get you to the dive sites easily and quickly (about 45 minutes to the most remote sites). For a few days, there were three of us divers on board, for many days, it was just my wife and I. With more than two divers, there were two divemasters in the water with us. Some dives were drift, but most were not. Most of the time, the currents were only an issue in the first 20 feet of water, until one got into the

lee of the reefs. Lines were provided to go down and up through the 20 feet of current, so it was no big deal. On all sites, there was abundant fish life, much more so than we have experienced in 8 years of diving the Caribbean. On some sites, there was a fair amount of bleached corals, but most sites were still very colorful, with abundant soft corals in most colors and types. Most days we saw one of more white tip reef sharks on our dives.

Matangi

Matangi Island Resort, May 2000, Mike Landau, Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 100+ feet. Water: 82 to 85 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: use your computer. Resort is top notch. Dive operation is last notch due to poorly trained, poorly administered staff and inadequate dive boats. Main dive reef not in same class as Taveuni. (+679 679-88-0260; Fax 679 679-88-0274; Fax 679 303-417-0557)

Matangi Island Resort, July 2000, Steven Glick (Ragmp@aol.com), Chicago, IL. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm surge. Depth not to exceed 130. Average dive time 45 min. The resort and diving were top of the line. The people in Fiji are truly the nicest we have ever encountered. They were so apologetic for the conflict. Matangi is an island so diving is the primary activity. The dive boat at the resort is awesome. Plenty of room to change film and store camera and video equipment (DRY) They do have water skiing, kayaking,

and sailing. The food was great. If you go in their winter it gets dark at 5: 00. Not much to do, except sleep. The diving was great. Tons of healthy coral. The colors of the coral are unbelievable. There are so many little creatures that a macro photographer needs lots of film. We saw some sharks on most dives, but everything is mainly of the small size. The dive operation is exactly how a dive operation should be run. They treat you like you're important. Have a drink with John. (Ask him why he is called elbow John?).

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Tahiti and Moorea are everyone's dream of the South Pacific, and despite their pricey resorts and food, these French-speaking islands are developing as a destination for American divers since there is plenty of reef shark action. While on the whole they're still considered a notch below many other destinations, there may well be some surprises waiting to be discovered, as some areas have not seen many divers

Tahiti

Tahiti, June 2000, Jim Virgil, Coeur d'Alene, ID. Vis: 50-150 ft. Water: 82 degrees. My wife and I took a ten-day Renaissance cruise to French Polynesia, arranging most of our dives via the Internet. We were able to dive 15 times at the five islands we docked at. We had reservations about the

French and we were worried that they would be uncommunicative and rude, but the opposite was true. They were polite, friendly and professional. The fish life and coral were very healthy on all of the islands. If you are into sharks and eels, this is the place for you, other than Tahiti that had the least of the big fish as I am sure it is fished more than the other islands. Visibility on the ocean dives (not the lagoon dives) is comparable to Cozumel and several dives it was at least 150'. Bora Bora and Moorea were the best dive spots, but all the islands were worth diving, as good as Belize, Cozumel and the Caymans. There are not many dive spots on any of the islands, so if you stayed for a week you would revisit your dive sites. The best exchange rate on the local currency was 125 French Polynesian Franks to the dollar. This was at the banks in Tahiti (or the ATM machine). Money exchangers were 115 : 1. The dive operations only gave you 100: 1. Most of the dives were \$50 US or 5000 Franks your option. Obviously it was less costly to pay in Franks or charge the dive on credit cards (no American Express). Papeete, Tahiti We dove with Dive Aquatics that is at the Beachcomber Hotel. We did two morning dives with them on two consecutive days. After gearing up (they had excellent rental gear) we took a 15 min. boat ride to the outside the barrier reef where we took a wall dive. The wall began at 50' and went down to 60'. No big fish, but lots of tropicals. The dive master guided you and kept your depth at 90'. The second dive was a lagoon dive