

dive geo
dive exploration

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DIVING IN THE LAND OF 'BULA':

The South Pacific's Fiji Islands

Jack's reef sports a healthy — and beautiful — mix of hard and soft corals.

As the plane begins the descent into Nadi (Nan-dee), Fiji, passengers eagerly press their faces closer to the windows. Glistening below is the multi-colored turquoise water of the Pacific, a scene that is beautiful to behold from an aerial view, but for divers holds a special allure. Upon arriving, guests are met with a chorus of “bula, bula” (Fijian for hello) from a crowd of friendly, smiling Fijian faces. For many of these travelers, this will be the trip of a lifetime when

they experience the gracious people, the romantic palm-studded beaches, and especially the world-class diving.

Volcanic Origins

Fiji, northeast of Australia and southwest of Hawaii, is made up of 330 islands, of which only about 100 are inhabited. The largest of the islands are Viti Levu (vee-tee lay-vu), which is home to the capital city of Suva, and to the north, Vanua Levu Island (van-ou-a



lay-vu). Eighty percent of the population lives on these two islands, which make up 87 percent of Fiji's landmass. The highest point is Tomanivi (toh-man-e-vee) at 4,369 feet (1,324 m), the tip of a long-extinct volcano. All the islands are the remains of volcanic activity. Most of the largest lagoons, such as Beqa (bang-guh) lagoon in the southern islands, are the remains of volcanoes that have long since collapsed.

Since there was no written language before the Europeans arrived, the early history of Fiji is sketchy. It is accepted that the first inhabitants were the Lapita, who came to the islands around 1500 B.C.; they were named for an area in New Caledonia from where it is believed they originated. The islands were visited and partially inhabited by the Tongans and Samoans, who left behind many of their traditions that are still practiced today.

The Fijians are some of the warmest and most gracious people in the world, but it has not always been that way. At one time, they were cannibals. One historical account states that when Captain Bligh was thrown off the *Bounty*, he made his way between Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, but he chose not to land because of the reputation of the fierce warriors who inhabited the islands. The practice of cannibalism began to change in the 1830s when Christian missionaries arrived, and by 1874 Fiji became a British crown colony. In 1970 Fiji gained independence from British rule.

Elections in 1987 created a coalition of mainly Indian descendants, and this arrangement was a major source of unrest for the native Fijians. In the early 1990s, a coup headed by a Fijian military officer of Melanesian descent set the stage for free elections held in 1992. Fiji now has one of the only governments in the world primarily run by its endemic people in which the "Greater Council of High Chiefs" remains very influential in the politics of the country.

The Fijian economy is one of the most developed economies throughout

Colorful anthias are scattered across the reef like confetti.

the islands of the South Pacific. About one-third of all national industry consists of sugar cane processing. It is not unusual to see high stacks of sugar cane being transported to the processing plants on small-rail trains. Other exports include gold, clothing, timber and processed fish, and one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy involves the growing popularity of tourism.

Fijian Traditions

Perhaps one of the most time-honored traditions is the kava ceremony. Kava comes from the roots of a plant in the pepper family. Dried roots are pounded into a powdered form and mixed with water.

Participants in the kava ceremony sit in a circle on the floor with their Fijian hosts. A small bowl is filled with kava from the larger ceremonial bowl and is then passed to the first guest by the cup bearer. The bowl is refilled for each participant when it is his or her

turn to drink. There is an established ritual around the kava ceremony that includes clapping of the hands three times after emptying the bowl and making a “yucky face” to indicate how yummy the concoction tastes. Even though it looks like muddy water and has a bitter taste, kava is said to have a calming effect.

Travelers can also share in the tradition of storytelling. To preserve their heritage, each generation passes their history to the next generation through the art of storytelling, known as the Talanoa (tal-uh-no-uh), and the stories were often shared during the traditional kava ceremony. Another popular form of storytelling is known as Meke (meck-ee), which includes dances created by the Fijian natives that were also used to carry their history down through the ages. The Meke, frequently used to entertain visitors to the islands, is performed in native costumes and provides a most enjoyable show.

The Soft Coral Capitol

For all avid divers and underwater photographers, get ready for an incredible diving adventure in what is known as “the soft coral capitol of the world.”

Between Vanua Levu and Bega (bang-uh) Island, divers can experience breathtaking diving on numerous sites such as Dream House Reef and Dreadlocks in the Savusavu straits and the Chimneys in Namena (na-me-na) National Park. Taveuni (tav-e-un-e), Fiji’s third-largest island, offers some spectacular sites including Rainbow Reef, the Great White Wall and Jack’s Reef.

Although the dive sites share certain commonalities, they also maintain their uniqueness. For example, divers can slip into the blue water at Dreadlocks and enter a surreal world, where it is possible to see dozens of pale-blue jellyfish, some as large as dinner plates, gently pulsating through the water column.

Divers can also enjoy the Chimneys, named for the two side-by-side bom-

COLLEGE

Facts and Figures

Location: Latitude: 12°-21°S. Longitude: 176°E-178°W. Located about one-third of the way between Hawaii and New Zealand.

Time: Greenwich Mean Time plus 12 hours. Fiji does not observe daylight-saving time.

Seasons: Fiji is south of the equator, so summer in the United States is winter in Fiji and vice versa. Summer has less humidity, but it is the rainy season (November to April). The season for cyclones is November to April, but strong cyclones are uncommon. The dry season is May to October. June to October is commonly considered the best months to go, but any time is good. Temperatures in the summer range between 72 and 88 degrees Fahrenheit (22 and 31 degrees Celsius) with water temperatures from 78 to 80 F (26 to 27 C). Winter is only slightly cooler with temperatures between 68 and 80 F and water temperatures from 76 to 80 F (24 to 27 C).

Money: \$1 U.S. = \$1.60 Fijian. The basic unit is the Fiji dollar. Money exchanges are common in large airports and shopping centers. Smaller towns and villages may not be able to exchange money, so one should plan ahead. Credit cards are accepted at major shopping centers.

Electricity: Fiji uses 240 volts, three-prong plugs like those used in Australia and New Zealand. Many hotels provide adapters, but a wise traveler will take their own or have dual-voltage appliances.

Measurements: Speed limits are posted in kilometers. Dive operators generally use both feet/meters and psi/bar when communicating dive data.

Entry requirements: U.S. citizens will need a passport, which is valid for four months past their Fijian visit, and a return or onward going ticket. If requested, U.S. citizens as well as citizens from certain other countries can receive a visa for four months.

Transportation: Taxis and buses are common and inexpensive. Ferries and light planes are used to travel between islands. Many resort operators will pick you up at a predesignated area to ferry divers to their operation. Driving is on the left.

Official Language: English. Fijian is widely spoken.

Health: Fiji is not a malaria area and health facilities are common. In general, it is a country where health issues are not a major concern.

Getting there: A 10-hour flight from Los Angeles airport by Air Pacific, the Fijian national airline, or by Air New Zealand. One will fly into Nadi International Airport, then take a commuter flight on Sun Air to one of the other islands if needed.

Dress: Casual dress is the norm. Cover-ups are required when leaving the beach areas. When visiting villages, men and women must wear sulus (sue-loos), a type of short skirt. Sulus are considered appropriate any time. Women should plan not to wear sleeveless shirts away from the beach.

Tipping: Individual tipping is generally not expected. For good service, many hotels have established a Christmas Fund. At the end of the year, this fund is equally divided among all the hotel or dive staff.

Accommodations:

Vanua Levu:

Koro Sun Resort www.korosunresort.com,
info@korosunresort.com

Namale Resort www.namalefiji.com,
namale@namaleresort.com

Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort
www.fijiireport.com, laventurefiji@connect.com.fj

Beqa Island:

Beqa Lagoon Resort
www.beqalagoonresort.com,
(800) 542- FIJI (3454)

Taveuni:

Maravu Plantation Resort
www.maravu.net, maravu@connect.com.fj

Garden Island Resort www.aquatrek.com,
info@aquatrek.com

Matangi:

Matangi Island Resort
www.matangiisland.com,
info@matangiisland.com

Fiji Visitors Bureau:

In the United States
call (800) 932-3454
([800] YEA-FIJI)

Or e-mail
infodesk@bulafiji-americas.com

Web site: www.bulafiji.com

Live-aboards:

Tui Tai Adventure Cruises
www.tuitai.com,
(877) 682-5433

Nai'a www.naia.com.fj
explore@naia.com.fj

Fiji Aggressor
www.aggressor.com,
(800) 348-2628

mies (coral outcroppings) rising out of the sand. The bommies are carpeted with swaying multicolored soft corals feeding in the current, and hundreds of anthias are scattered across the reef like purple and gold confetti. Bannerfish and Moorish Idols often circle divers with a hint of curiosity, and a white-tipped shark may be seen resting in the sand, keeping a watchful eye on the visitors to his home. Closer to the surface divers may see bright-orange clownfish dart playfully among the tentacles of the anemones they call home.

Another great dive is Rainbow Reef, which is off the shores of Taveuni. The reef is covered with corals of every color, ranging from pink to purple, orange, and yellow. Multitudes of anthias appear to dance to the rhythm of the currents. Teeming with color and fish life, this site is an underwater photographer's dream.



Divers may also have the opportunity to experience The Great White Wall. In sharp contrast to the typical colorful soft corals, white soft corals are in abundance on this wall dive. Jack's Reef is also home to some incredible hard corals. Instead of the usual brown or white coloration, these corals are light blue, golden, brown or pale-red. A variety of marine life seems to enjoy this site as much as the divers. Fantasy Reef, off Beqa Island, is also another site that attracts divers. Living up to its name, this reef has its share of soft corals plus enormous red sea fans. Near the top of the reef is a large red anemone filled with dancing clownfish, which are always a great source of entertainment.

OS SYSTEMS

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Fiji's topside beauty is rivaled only by its underwater magnificence.

Island Hopping and Eco-tourism

Diving is not the only adventure Fiji has to offer; topside activities are as varied as the Fijian marine life. Eco-tourism is extremely popular, and many areas provide a lush, tropical background for hiking, backpacking, camping, rafting or kayaking, and nature preserves also provide hours of entertainment. Northwest of Viti Levu is a chain of islands known as the Mamanuca (mama-new-ka) Group that has become a haven for backpackers, who often island-hop aboard large, fast ferries that shuttle them to and from the Mamanucas daily. There is even a live-aboard that offers food, lodging, snorkeling and kayaking.

Because the islands are volcanic in origin, there are many rivers, streams, and canyons to explore. One especially beautiful area is the Bouma National Heritage Park on Taveuni, where travelers can see three awe-inspiring waterfalls along the hiking trail.

The firewalkers of Beqa Island are another must-see. If travelers are there at the right time of the week, they may be

fortunate enough to experience this incredible feat. The firewalkers really do walk on extremely hot rocks. This is one occasion in which the audience is happy to just be observers.

There are numerous tourist areas with great shopping opportunities. The large towns like Nadi have downtown areas, which are filled with souvenir shops. One can find anything from small trinkets to large, intricate wood-carvings, some of which can cost as much as \$10,000 U.S. Do not forget to check out the unique tapa cloth paintings, made from the bark of the paper mulberry or breadfruit tree. By the way, bartering is common practice so travelers should not be shy.

Fiji is a destination that offers something for everyone. Accommodations range from inexpensive "backpacker hostels" to thatched roof huts called burres, to luxurious all-inclusive resorts. Activities vary from exciting adventures such as scuba diving or backpacking to experiencing the enchanting beauty of a picturesque beach during a quiet stroll at sunset.



The art of firewalking is believed to have been first performed on Beqa Island.

Isa Lei — Farewell to Fiji

As travelers leave for their journey back home, they can reflect on the words of Fiji's famous song of farewell, "Isa Lei," that is sung to visitors leaving the islands. One part of the song asks, "Oh! Forget not, when you are far away," while another states, "Every moment my heart for you is yearning." Fiji beckons all to return again. 