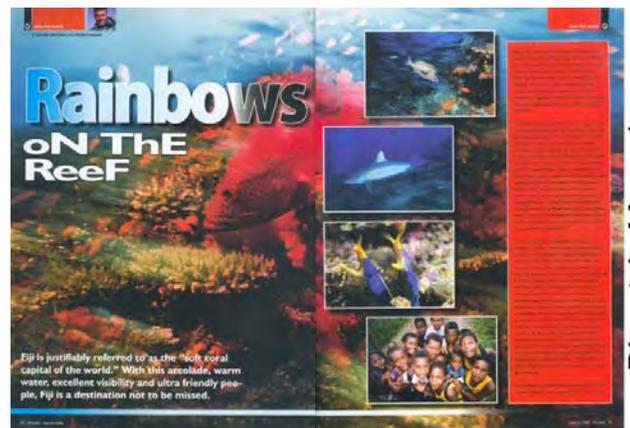


RAINBOWS ON THE REEF

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock

Red orange yellow green blue indigo and violet are the colours of the rainbow. They are also the colours of Fiji's underwater realm. In Fiji you will discover red fans, whips and ferns. Orange crabs, crinoids and sea cucumbers. Yellow sponges and sergeant majors. Green hard corals and algae. Blue waters. Indigo anthias and anemone tentacles and violets of the dottybacks and parrotfish combine in a magnificent explosion of colours. But it's the impressive kaleidoscope of soft corals that will blow



your mind away. Fiji is justifiably referred to as the 'soft coral capitol of the world.'" With this accolade, warm water, excellent visibility and ultra friendly people, Fiji is a destination not to be missed.

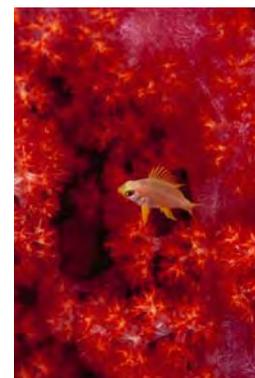
Fiji is situated in the South Pacific Ocean. It consists of over 322 islands of inhabitable size. A former British colony, Fiji gained independence in 1970. Contrary to

the friendliness of Fijians, the country was once notorious as being cannibalistic. Fiji has 2 main islands - Viti Levu (Great Fiji) and Vanua Levu (Great Land). Although Savu is the capital city, Nadi on the western side of Viti Levu is the gateway city for international flights. Taveuni, also known as the Garden Island, is the 3rd largest island. It boasts rich tropical vegetation and scenic waterfalls as well as the famous Rainbow Reef. The reef is located in the Somosomo straits between Taveuni and Vanua Levu. Somosomo means 'good water' in Fijian. Every 12 hours huge tidal movements born in the Tonga Trench pour through these straits. The current drops while the oceanic giant flexes it's muscle and changes direction to bring forth rich nutrients that sustain phenomenal reef life.





Currents in Fiji range from absolutely nothing to exhilarating. Timing is essential to see the reef at its best. Currents are the lifeblood of a reef pumping essential elements into the heart of the reef system. When the current is running soft corals pump up with water becoming extravagant bouquets of colours. The fish activity is prolific. Goldies pulsate in clouds of choreographed movement feeding on passing plankton. Predatory jacks and kingfish swoop from above onto the inhabitants of the reef bringing instant havoc to the choreography as the goldies swarm back to the safety of the soft coral network. In the deeper water the shadowy shapes of sharks are seen as they lurk for their meals. As the current turns the soft corals become limp and flaccid resembling overcooked broccoli. The reef is barely recognizable from what it resembled minutes earlier. The fish feeding frenzy slows down but now the cleaning stations become alive. Wrasse, shrimps and butterfly fish frenetically nibble dead cells and parasites off their patient customers. Fish hover near the station indicating their need for the free service. The reef life is never still.



Even the reef names reflect the many colours of Fiji. Take Purple Gardens, Golden Nuggets, Yellow Hole, and the Great White Wall- all are named after the predominant colours of the soft corals. At the famous Great White Wall on Rainbow Reef, a swim-through tunnel leads out onto a wall at 24m. Looking down the wall white soft corals carpet the reef as far as the eye can see. A lavender iridescence radiates leaving the surreal impression of an undersea ski slope. The only interruptions to the whiteness are the bold colours of the many tropical fish.



Blue ribbon eels are fairly common in Fiji. With their striking cobalt blue head and yellow fan-shaped nasal extensions they are the most elegant of eels. Blue ribbon eels behave as if they are blind, their mouths forever grasping for fictitious fish. Perhaps this fools the few that are inadvertently caught as they venture too close to the hole. Blue ribbon eels remain in the same neighborhood for long periods of time. There is more



than 1 Blue Ribbon reef in Fiji and it is possible to see as many as 6 blue ribbon eels on one particular dive. If you are really lucky 2 eels may be found sharing the same hole. They are seldom seen out of their holes. Much speculation and debate revolves around the colouration of these eels. Generally it is accepted that as juveniles the eels are black with a yellow stripe. The adult males are cobalt blue and later in life the males may change into a yellow-green female.



Diving at night is the best time to explore the reef in detail. Attention is focused on the reef inhabitants and vivid colours. Living inside the many clumps of soft coral is an assortment of marine life. Yellow damsels seeking refuge for the night in yellow soft corals are well camouflaged against the delicate polyp clusters. Decorator crabs emerge from hiding under the cover of darkness to feed on passing plankton. These crabs have stolen pieces of reef to use as their master disguise. Brightly coloured brittle stars entwine their arms around soft corals as they feed on small organisms. Parrotfish are found in every crevice of the reef seeking dormitory space for the night.



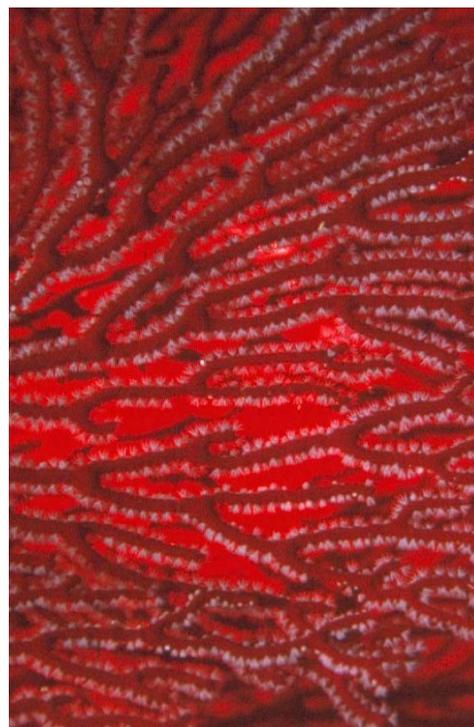
Crinoids resemble colourful underwater fireworks. They play host to intriguing and cryptically disguised critters. Not every crinoid is a suitable home so the treasure hunt is challenging and rewarding. Periclimenes shrimps can be found in the arms of a crinoid. Not only are these shrimps incredibly small but they also have the exact colouration of the crinoid, making them near impossible to see. At the feet of the crinoid live the elegant squat lobsters. These beautiful crab-like creatures are also difficult to see as the crinoid is constantly moving and the lobster forever hiding. But the biggest reward has to be the rare harlequin ghost pipefish. The

ornate markings and shape of the pipefish mimics that of the crinoid. This enables them to remain undetected. The female pipefish is considerably larger than the male. She has a silvery patch near her head that serves as a sex symbol to males. The bigger the patch, the better the catch.





Such good findings on a night dive deserve a celebration with a bowl of kava. Kava is the National drink of Fiji. It has no alcoholic properties but is steeped in symbolism and tradition. Made from the roots of a pepper plant that have been dried and ground, kava is then infused through a cloth to make this popular drink. The ritual of kava drinking has not changed over the years. Seated cross-legged around a tanoa bowl of kava, care must be taken not to point the soles of your feet towards the bowl in disrespect. Those sitting to the right of the tanoa are served first. A bilo (coconut shell) filled with silt-like liquid is presented. To accept the bilo, clap once then drink it without slurping, grimacing or hesitating. Hand the bilo back and clap 3 times slowly saying bula (life) or vinaka (thank you). After a couple of bilos the tongue may become a little numb. My faithful guidebook mentions kava has relaxing properties. I felt no different but certainly slept like a hamster in hibernation.



As is often the case with diving, the further you go, the better the diving. To get there a liveaboard boat is the answer. The Nai'a, owned and managed by Rob Barrel, is a world-class yacht designed for the discerning diver. A few years ago Rob chartered a plane to look for whales. Flying over what looked like a good reef Rob took GPS markings. He later returned to check it out as a potential dive site. The reef he discovered became so popular he named it E6 after the processing of numerous rolls of slide film. Hi-8 was similarly named for the videographers but has since been renamed Mount Mutiny after one charter refused to leave the site. Both these reefs are stunning silo shaped bommies reaching from great depths to 5 m. The walls are covered with a profusion of soft corals. In the deeper sections the unusual and vibrantly colourful chironophthya soft corals hang prolifically framing caves and overhangs with their delicate latticework. In the shallows the common dendronephthya soft corals fight for space with fans, whips, sponges and sea squirts. Colourful crinoids perch precariously looking like cheerleader's pompoms. Beyond the reef in the deep blue water is the endless traffic of game fish as they patrol the reef in their never-ending search for food. It's an effervescent explosion of commotion and colours.



Huge red gorgonian fans reminiscent of giant oriental fans face directly into the current as they scoop nutrients from the ocean. In amongst the branches juvenile fish seek protection from predators. A quick dart through the coral grill and the fish can easily escape danger. One of the smallest fish in the world is the many-host goby. Gobies traverse along the main stems of gorgonians. Their size and clever colour pigmentation on a semi-translucent body aid their disguise. Being so small is not always an advantage. The goby needs assistance to prevent from being washed away. A modified pelvic fin enables them to hold onto the gorgonian when a strong current sweeps over the reef.

Artists will confirm that mixing of colours produces greys. In the ocean the greys represent sharks. Sleek, silvery, smooth and silent, they move with stealth and speed. Grey reef, white tip and black tip sharks are common in Fijian waters. Although Fijians were known for their shark calling abilities, these days the only way to get up close and personal is to feed the sharks. At Nigali Passage, a channel between 2 reefs, the Nai'a



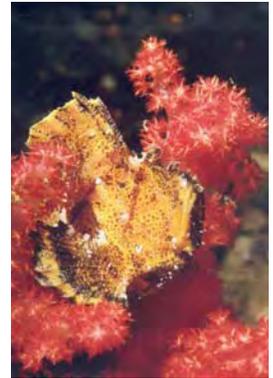
crew sets up a small feeding station. Grey reef sharks detect the scent of the bait within minutes. Their movements are sudden as they circle in the vicinity of the bait slick. Turning frequently with agitation and anticipation, they circle the source getting closer as they hone in on the smell. Size

demand some respect in the sharks' hierarchy and the largest shark feeds first. With precision, a chunk of fish is bitten off but the shark must move fast as the other



sharks try ripping the meal away. Suddenly there is a squabble over the food. All the sharks converge, swimming at break neck speed over the reef. The reef fish add to the commotion as they chase after the scraps. The shark twists and turns in an attempt to escape the scavengers who persist in forcing her to release her grip on the food. I visualize shark fin soup all over the ocean but there are no casualties this time. She escapes, devours her meal and returns to eye another mouthful.

As the sharks lose interest and swim off I turn towards the reef. A green paper fish balances perfectly on a soft coral, dazzling parrotfish nonchalantly crunch coral outcrops and the soft corals are bloated with water, looking their finest. I am loath to leave Fiji. The friendly people have shared both their culture and their country with me but I will never forget the rainbow colours of Fiji. 'Sota tale', see you again, I vow, as I wave goodbye.





Info

What is unique to this dive site?

Fiji is best known for its friendly people and being the soft coral capitol of the world

How to get there

Fly via Sydney to Nandi

How do visas work

No visas are necessary for Fiji.

Currency - Fiji Dollar

What to look out for:

Wall Diving, soft corals, sharks

Reefs or wrecks

Reef

Marine Life on sites

razor fish, sharks, anemone fish, Mandarin fish, lionfish, octopus, shrimp, gobies, kingfish, mantis shrimps, lionfish, Trumpetfish, Barracuda, tuna, turtles, snake eels, seahorse, squid, manta rays.

Depths on dive sites

10-30M

Water temperature

25-28 Degrees

What can Non Divers do

Fishing, canoeing, snorkeling, sightseeing

Accommodation

Liveaboard or Resort

Best time to dive this site

September to April

Travel contact:

Nai'a: www.naia.com.fj

Rainbow Reef: www.aquatrek.com

Location: East of Australia in South Pacific Ocean

Language: English, Fijian and Hindustani

Visas: Not required for stay less than 4 months

Wet season: Hot and humid from November to April

Dry season: Colder and drier May to October

Water temp: 25-28°C

For more underwater images and stories visit PeterPinnock.com