



Dispatches about the best dive locales, accommodations and adventures for those seeking to live the diving life.

Destinations

By Jack and Sue Drafahl

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Thanks to cost-saving travel specials, this is the perfect time to go to Fiji

■ Though known to many as just another one of those tiny countries on the other side of the globe, Fiji is actually an island paradise where fragrant flowers abound and azure waters grace some of the world's most beautiful palm-fringed beaches.

Fiji also is a unique dive destination that features a wide array of topside and underwater adventures. The Fijian people are so friendly that visitors are welcomed as honored guests and a new name is never forgotten. Plus you can find accommodations designed to fit most any pocketbook, featur-

ing everything from comfortable thatched-roof cottages called *bures* to five-star luxury hotels.

But alas, there have been some problems in paradise. During the last year, Fiji's civil unrest sent the nation's tourism industry plunging to new lows. Just when things started to settle down, a second uprising occurred last fall.

Slowly Fiji is starting to recover. The Fiji Visitors Bureau and the Tourism Action Group have waged an aggressive campaign to encourage tourism. According to local resi-

dents, most of the incidents that occurred last year were very isolated and travel advisories have been lifted. Life is returning to normal, and many dive resorts are offering reduced rates on vacation packages, which makes Fiji a great travel buy.

So why would you want to venture so far from home in search of new diving adventure? Because these islands offer an unparalleled range of quality dive sites with an overwhelming diversity of marine life that ranges from lionfish, leaf fish and flat worms to nudibranchs and schools of tropicals that comprise



every color on an artist's palette.

The beautiful Fijian waters boast diving conditions to satisfy everyone from novice to advanced scuba divers. The diving opportunities range from virtually motionless seas to current dives guaranteed to challenge the heartiest of divers. You can find shallows where coral formations rise from the sea floor, as well as deep walls where soft corals and sea fans sway in the underwater breeze.

LAY OF THE LAND

Fiji is divided into three regions based on their weather and diving conditions.

The northern section includes the waters around Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu, and the islands of Taveuni, Laucaia, Matagi and Qamea. This is the wettest area of Fiji, so it offers some of the most lush rain forests, streams and waterfalls. Offshore is where you will find many of the colorful soft corals feeding during the tidal exchange. You can also find calm bay diving, spectacular walls with deep crevices and shallows that are home to more animals than you can count.

The central region has drier weather and incorporates the islands of Kadavu, Vatulele and Bega Lagoon. You will find soft corals that



rival those in the north, prolific hard corals, huge sea fans, sloping walls and shallow reefs.

The western portion of Fiji is made up of Mamanucas and Yasawas islands. Here you will find water-sport activities and accommodations to please everyone. This is the driest and warmest area in Fiji, so you can just about count on sun year round.

A TASTE OF ISLAND CULTURE

In addition to great diving, Fiji offers a fabulous blend of ancient culture and customs.

One of our favorite traditional Fijian events is called a *meke*. This is where members of all ages from a local village join together for an evening of native song and dance. Usually it is accompanied by the sharing of the kava bowl. (Kava is a mixture of dry yaqona root mixed with water to form the non-alcoholic universal drink of Fiji.)

Fiji has something for everyone. You'll enjoy memorable underwater experiences soaring above the rainbow gardens of soft

coral. And between dives, you can marvel at the tropical rain forests and magnificent waterfalls.

Fiji is easy to get to, but hard to leave behind.

Fiji Facts

■ Fiji is west of the International Dateline and just northeast of Australia. The official language is English, and although Fiji has its own currency, the U.S. dollar is accepted everywhere.

■ Since Fiji is located south of the equator, its summer is November to March and winter is April to October. Average temperatures range from 86 degrees in summer to 73 in winter.

■ Flights are available through Air Pacific/Quantas. Remember that you must pay a departure tax of \$20 Fijian. To make a reservation, call Air Pacific at 800-227-4446.

■ To travel, you need a passport that is valid more than three months beyond your intended stay. Pack light, as baggage is restricted on the smaller inter-island airlines.

■ Tipping is not the norm. You can contribute to a staff appreciation fund at most resorts that is divided equally among the entire staff. 

More Info.

Fiji Visitors Bureau

800-932-3454

 For a listing of Fiji travel specialists, please go to www.sportdiver.com.

