

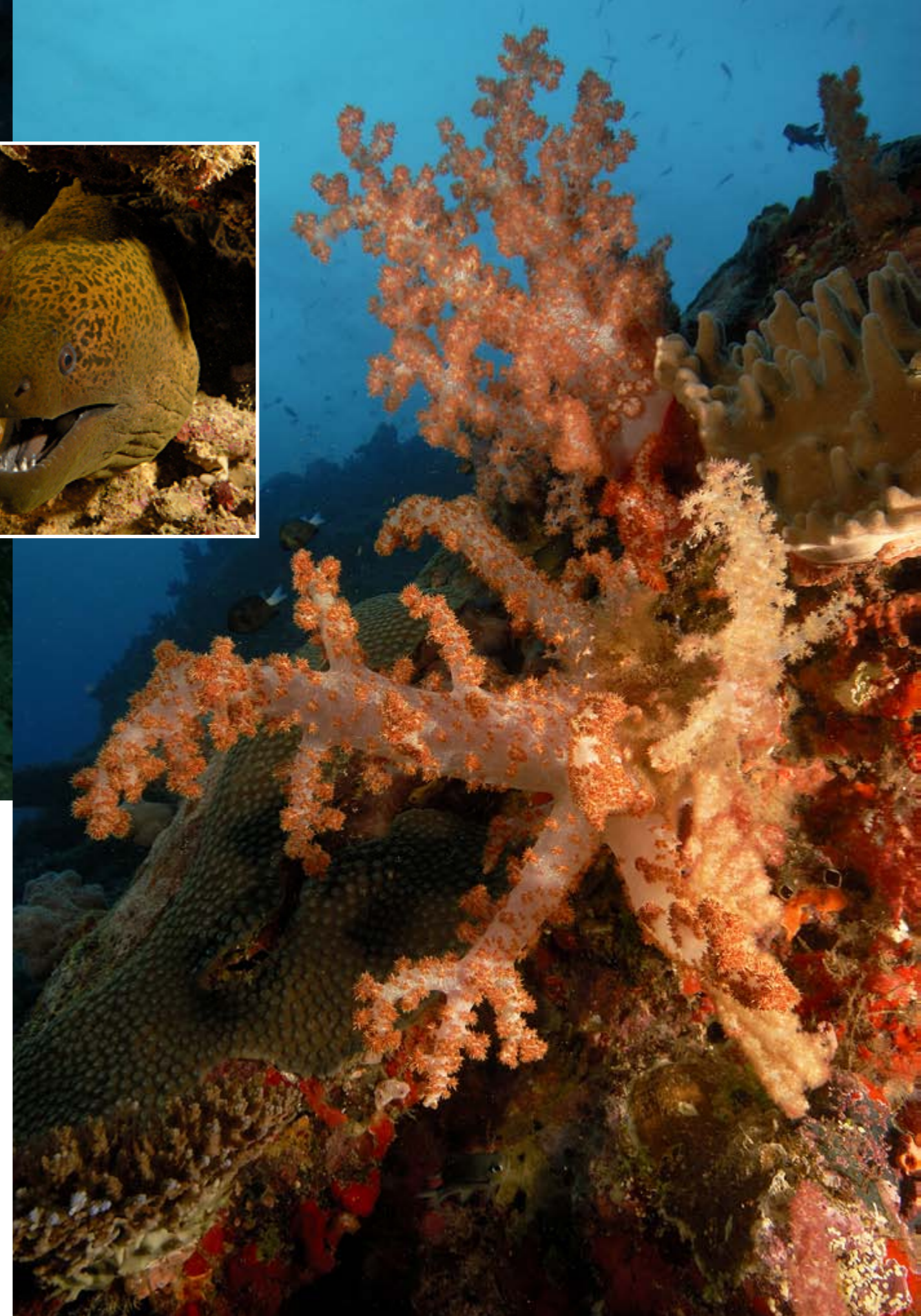


# Fabulous Fiji

*Shark diving & vibrant reefs in Beqa Lagoon*

Text and photographs by Scott Bennett





“I’d like to introduce you to some of our friends “ enthused our guide Manasa, AKA *Papa*, as he held aloft a well-worn loose-leaf binder. The photographs within produced nervous laughter and a couple of anxious glances amongst a few of the divers. Then again, with names like Scarface, Hook and Big Mama, these were no ordinary friends. They were sharks, and we would soon be making their acquaintance.

Lying at the crossroads of the South Pacific, the Fiji Islands have long been famous as an idyllic tropical paradise. While famous for its vibrant coral reefs, Fiji’s Beqa Lagoon (pronounced *Beng-a*) on the main island of Viti Levu is rapidly gaining fame as a world-class shark diving destination.

Two flights and 15 hours after leaving my home in Toronto, I arrived at Nadi’s international airport on the island of Vitu Levu. Stumbling bleary-eyed into the arrival hall, I was greeted by an energetic group of local musicians performing traditional Fijian music. Their level of enthusiasm at 5:15AM was nothing short of astonishing! It was infectious too, and soon, everyone standing in the customs queue forgot his or her

fatigue. Feeling somewhat energized, I collected my gear and stepped out into the cool morning air.

Waiting outside was my driver and after loading up the van, we set out for the journey to Pacific Harbour. Soon afterwards, the first rays of dawn bathed the landscape with golden light, revealing immense fields of sugar cane spreading to the horizon. For many years, sugar cane was the mainstay of the Fijian economy, although nowadays tourism has replaced it as the primary source of income. Sadly, that industry is now hurting, as the December 2006 coup dealt tourism a severe blow. As usual, the media exaggerated everything well out of proportion. In actuality, the entire incident was pretty low-key,

Bull shark at “The Den”; One of Shark reef’s friendly Java morays





without a trace of violence. Outside of Suva, you wouldn't have known anything had happened at all. Life carried on as usual with one notable exception; nervous tourists cancelled trips. Not THIS tourist, as it takes more than a coup to keep me away from a good diving destination!

Along the way, we passed Hindu temples and mosques, a testament to the country's large Indian population. Descendants of workers that were brought over by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work the cane fields, they now comprise a large percentage of the country's population. After an hour of driving, the never-ending fields of sugar cane were replaced with rolling hills cloaked in lush vegetation. The southern coast of Viti Levu receives abundant rainfall, resulting in a landscape so green it would

make Ireland envious. Two hours after departing the airport, we arrived in Pacific Harbour and headed straight for Beqa Adventure Divers, situated on the grounds of the Lagoon Resort aside the Qara-ni-Qio River that empties into Beqa Lagoon.

### The Eagle has landed

On hand to greet me was Andrew Cumming, the shop's easy-going manager. No stranger to sharks, Andrew arrived in Fiji by way of the Bahamas, where he worked in Walkers Cay for shark conservationists Gary and Brenda Adkison. Unfortunately, I'd arrived a tad late to partake in the day's shark dives, so the day was spent recuperating and getting my camera gear ready.

Early the next morning, I was picked up for my first dive via the shop's

courtesy shuttle. As the shark dives are held four days a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, our destination was Carpet Cove, situated close to Beqa Island. To get there, we boarded the *MV Predator*, the shop's sleek and spacious hydro-foil catamaran. Along with our guide Elik, there were only two other divers on board. Most people come to Beqa just for the shark dives, but the lagoon's broad expanse boasts more than 20 dives sites.

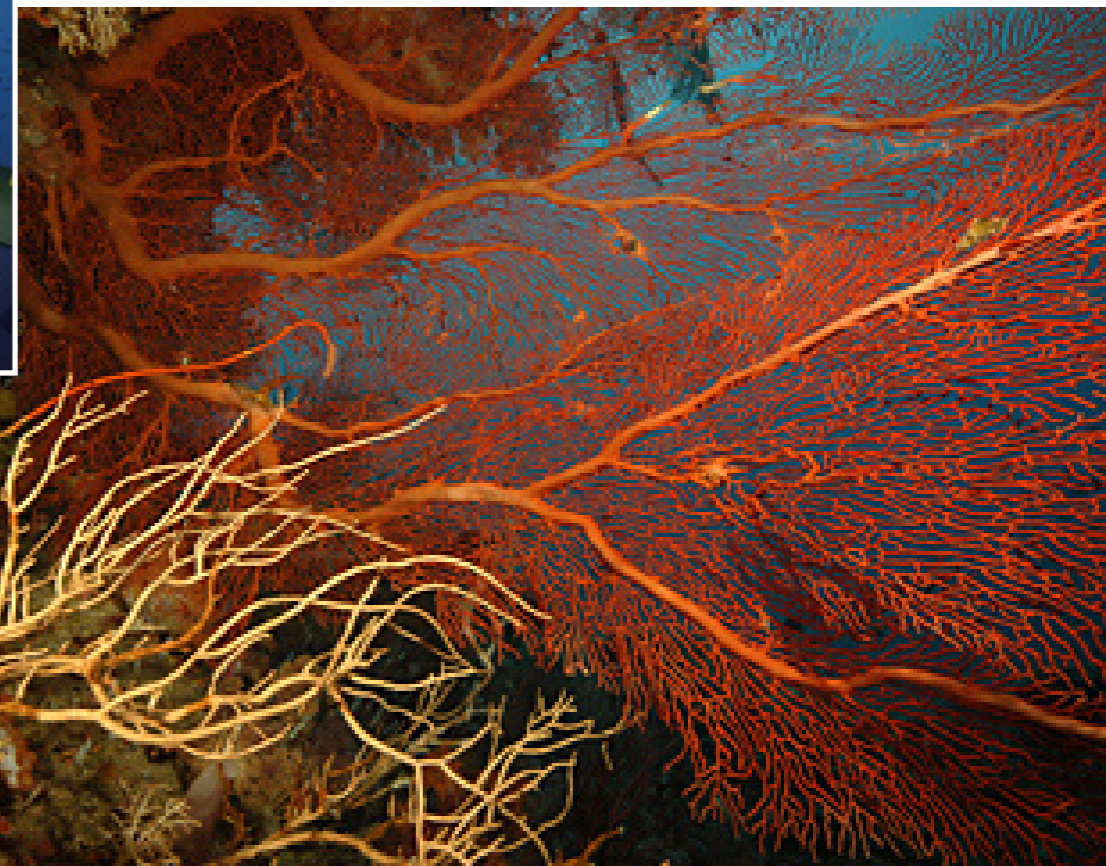
After departing the jetty, the boat headed downriver for the lagoon. The lush tropical vegetation fringing the river soon gave way to extensive stands of mangroves. Coupled with the forest-clad hills on the horizon, the entire scene resembled the location of a jungle movie, which, I found out later, it actually was. A few years

LEFT: The lush countryside is dotted with clearings planted with cassava; ABOVE: Whip corals adorn the walls at ET





LEFT TO RIGHT: Some of the dazzling soft corals to be found at Carpet Cove; Hungry diners greet the dive guides are Shark reef ; Fan corals line the entrance to ET's subterranean passage



previously, "Anacondas: Hunt for the Blood Orchid" was filmed here, where Fiji stood in for Borneo. (Anacondas in Borneo??? Don't ask.) The dilapidated ship constructed for the film, "The Bloody Mary" now graces the grounds of the resort near the dive shop. With nary an anaconda in sight, we safely negotiated the river and reached Beqa Lagoon after a pleasant ten-minute trip. After another 15 minutes, we arrived at our destination.

**Surprise**

The beginning of the dive featured a somewhat unexpected surprise. Resting on the bottom at a depth of 30m was a large wreck, a Chinese trawler measuring 25m in length. Sunk in 1996 to create an artificial reef, she rests upright at depth of 30m in the middle of a large sandy area populated by legions of undulating garden eels. While the sides of the vessel were fairly devoid of growth, ascending to the upper deck revealed a myriad of coral growth. Schools of fish darted about while feather stars decorated railings like undersea floral arrangements. After a bit more exploration, we headed for shallower water. Beqa Lagoon is often dubbed "The soft coral capitol of the world", and Carpet Cove more than lives up to its name. Rising to within eight metres of the surface, a series of

pinnacles were shrouded with coral growth of unparalleled luxuriance. Innumerable basslets and coral trout swarmed amongst soft corals garbed in vivid colours of red, orange and purple so vivid it almost hurt the eyes! I was so engrossed photographing the corals, I nearly missed a trio of great barracuda swimming past. On the bottom, abundant ribbon eels twitched spasmodically in the gentle current.

**"Follow me"**

The second dive was also made at Carpet Cove but at a different set of pinnacles. If anything, it was even more spectacular than the first, with more corals and even more basslets. At one point, a friendly batfish approached. Then, as if saying, "Follow me", he led me over to a rocky overhang where an obliging cleaner wrasse performed a full tune-up.

My home for the week was the newly opened Uprising Beach Resort. Set back from a palm-fringed beach offering expansive views of Beqa Lagoon, twelve bures surrounded by lush tropical gardens provide an elegant blend of traditional Fijian architecture and modern sophistication. Each comes with a balcony and ocean views as well as an outdoor shower.

A newly constructed dorm at the rear of the property caters to those on a budget. Owner Rene Munch, resort manager Alfie Christoffersen and the enthusiastic staff ensure the atmosphere has the relaxed feel of a small family run resort offering a taste of real Fijian ambience. A wide selection of activities is available, from water-skiing, kayaking and snorkelling to white-water rafting, horseback riding and cultural shows at the nearby Arts Village Pacific Harbour.





Despite the empty food containers, the ever-hungry fish still hope for one last-minute tid-bit ; Trevalley feeding frenzy, Shark Reef; A short distance inland is the lush vegetation of the Serua mountains

Sitting by the pool with a cold drink was enough to inspire terminal laziness! However, there was diving to be done!

In marked contrast to my first day of diving, the Shark Dive trip was jam-packed! Something was fishy too. Literally. The three large wheeled garbage bins conspicuously parked at the stern were brimming with 600kg of fish parts, courtesy of a fish processing plant in Suva. The wafting aroma from the containers provided an appropriate backdrop for our dive briefing. On board was a crew of eight including the two senior shark feeders, Manasa and Rusi. Prior to the advent of Christianity, the residents of Beqa Island worshipped sharks and made a covenant with the Shark God. In return, they were promised that sharks would never harm them, and they could forever swim without concern. As both Rusi and Manasa hail from Beqa Island, this was a good omen indeed!

### Marine Sanctuary

Established in April 2004, the Shark Reef Marine Sanctuary is the first of its kind in

Fiji. Working closely with the Fiji government and the reef's traditional owners, Beqa Adventure Divers has designated the waters of Shark Reef as a protected marine reserve. The reserve wouldn't be possible without the co-operation of the villages of Wainiyabia and Galoa, which are Shark Reef's traditional owners. Both have relinquished fishing rights in the reserve. In return, a fee of FJ\$20 is collected from each diver who participates on the Shark Dive. Each month, the money is deposited into each village's community bank account. Conservation won't work without the direct involvement of the local people, who have to see the benefits from protecting the reef as opposed to fishing. Depending on the season, up to eight shark species can be seen here, including grey reef, blacktip, whitetip, lemon, sicklefin lemon, silvertip, bull and tiger sharks.

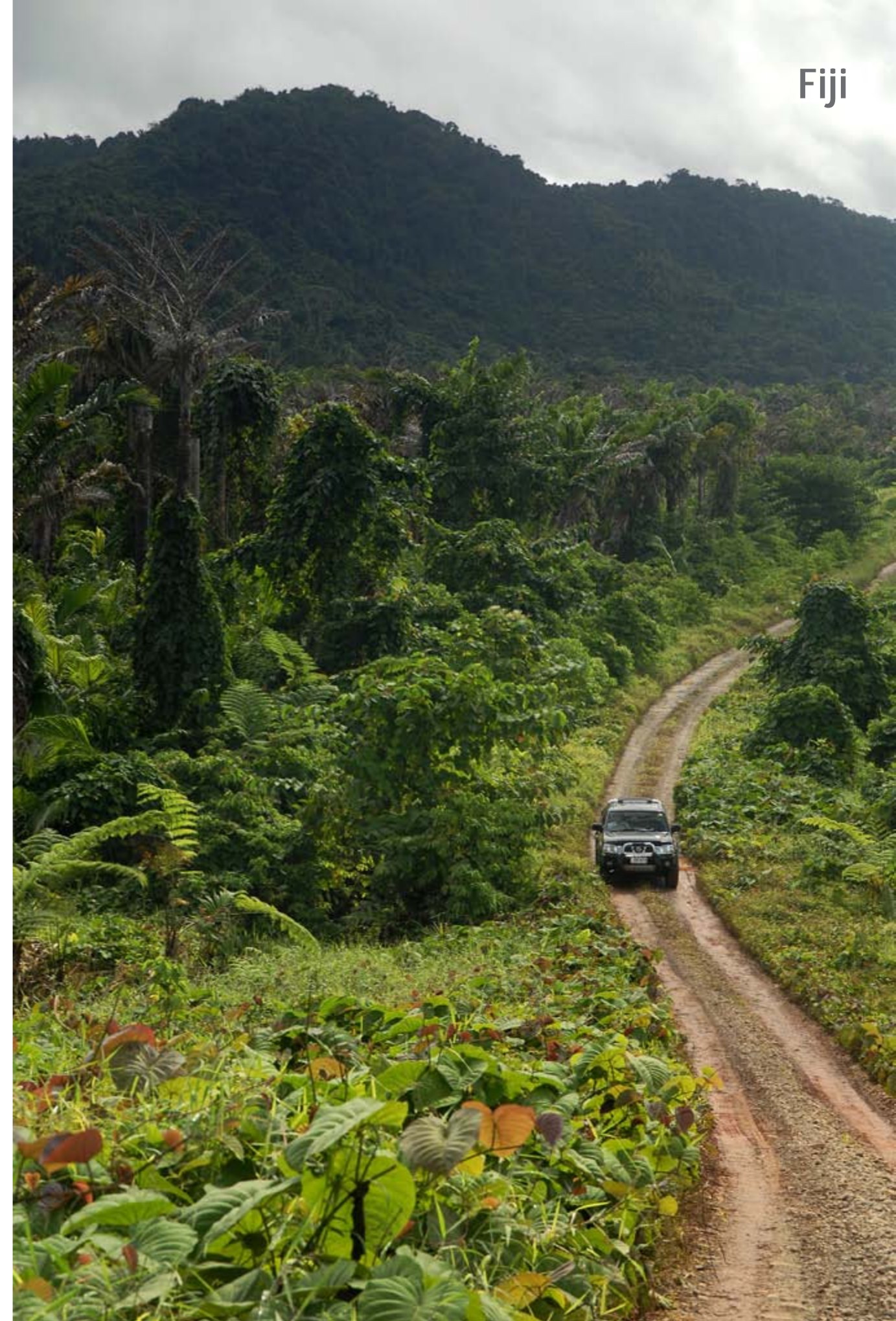
One of the greatest challenges facing the reserve is the prevention of illegal fishing. Reef wardens trained and recruited from the local community

vigilantly patrol the area on a boat provided by the Shark Foundation in Switzerland. The crew is on call 24 hours a day to perform random checks to ensure illegal fishing doesn't occur. In addition, ongoing research studies are carried out to learn more about these majestic yet misunderstood creatures.

### Diving with the sharks

After descending to 30 metres, the divers assemble behind a wall constructed of rock. Situated on a ledge next to the drop off plunging into the depths of Beqa Passage, this is The Arena, the first of three feeding sites visited during the first dive. The large wheeled garbage containers had already been sent down and placed in position and the first of the day's customers had already showed up.

Giant trevallies, some a metre in length, swirled about, eagerly joined by a multitude of fish including red bass, rainbow runners, Napoleon wrasse, spotted eagle rays and a myriad of reef fish. At last count, over 267 species have been seen observed here.







Reef scene, Carpet Cove. NEXT PAGE: Lavish coral growth earns Beqa Lagoon "The soft coral capitol of the world"

Elsewhere, trevallies are usually found in pairs or small schools, but more than a hundred can be found at Shark Reef. The sound of the boat engine brings them out en masse, excitedly encircling the shark feeders like an underwater tornado. Anywhere else, they would be an attraction on their own, but here, are but a prelude to the main event.

*"...the first dim silhouettes patrolled past, coming closer with each pass. The sharks had arrived!"*

While Manasa or Rusi have never been bitten by the sharks, both men bear an assortment of scars from the unrelenting trevallies. Divers are instructed to keep their hands at their sides, lest one of the over-eager trevallies mistake an errant finger as a fishy morsel!

With unbridled anticipation, everyone waited for the star attractions. We didn't have to wait for long; out in the blue, the first dim silhouettes patrolled past, coming closer with each pass. The sharks had arrived!

After a few minutes, Manasa motioned for everyone to join him down in the arena. The Shark Dive must rank as one of the easiest dives of all time; just take a seat and watch the show!

First to arrive were a few bull

sharks including one massive specimen that turned out to be "Big Mama." They were soon joined by a trio of tawny nurse sharks, with one specimen easily four metres long. They all knew the drill and were soon over to investigate the containers. Within moments, their heads were right inside, greedily gobbling the contents like big grey vacuum cleaners. The number of fish was simply overwhelming; you almost didn't know where to look!

After 17 minutes at The Arena, it was time to head to shallower water and the second feeding station called The Den. Here, the feeders were engulfed by the smaller shark species. Whitetip and blacktip reef sharks, along with the occasional grey reef, approached for a handout, completely obli-

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ous to the divers. After approximately ten minutes, everyone ascended to the reef top and the final feeding station. Yet more—in a seemingly limitless supply of sharks—appeared, along with hordes of rainbow runners, yellowback fusiliers and sergeant majors.

Camera batteries exhausted, I reluctantly surfaced after 50

enthralling minutes. And this was just the first dive!

During the surface interval, the initial unease of some divers had all but evaporated and everyone couldn't wait to get back in the water. By the time the hour was up, everyone was suited up and eager to go.

The second dive is called The Take Out. Situated at a depth of 16m, this is where the

big fish action is! Bull sharks, unmistakable with their blunt heads and stocky builds, were already circling in the blue as everyone took their positions. Photographers get a prime position at the end of the wall near the feeders.

In order to get fed, the sharks must follow a very specific procedure, approaching the feed-



travel

Fiji







Fiji

**Giant groupers**

Subsequent dives at Shark Reef were nothing short of exhilarating, with each dive providing a



I'm sure the sharks, trevallies and red bass were somewhat baffled by our presence. I could imagine them asking, "What are you doing here, it's only Thursday!" After a quick inspection, they soon realized there would be no handouts and we were left in peace.

With all of the big fish swimming around, it's very easy to overlook the little things. It was almost comical searching for nudibranchs when bull sharks could be seen patrolling the waters just off the wall!

**Wealth of critters**

Close scrutiny of the wall revealed a wealth of critters, as a plethora of nudibranchs and



ers from left to right. Failure to do so means missing out! Even the new arrivals learn the drill very quickly and the entire operation runs like a well-oiled machine. Dive guides armed with pokers take position behind the guests, lest any of the sharks get too close.

The next 35 minutes were spellbinding, as an endless procession of bull sharks swooped by only metres from my camera. I watched in awe as the massive jaws opened to take the bait, often swallowing it one bite! Unfortunately, I missed out on the tiger shark. He was around though, having made an appearance a few days before my arrival. Still, with more than 20 bull sharks on one dive, I'm not complaining!

totally different experience. On the second day, we were treated to an additional visitor. Swimming amongst the seemingly endless hordes of trevally was one of the resident giant groupers, complete with a little entourage of juvenile golden trevallies. It was only when a nurse shark swam by that the scale become apparent. This was one seriously big fish!

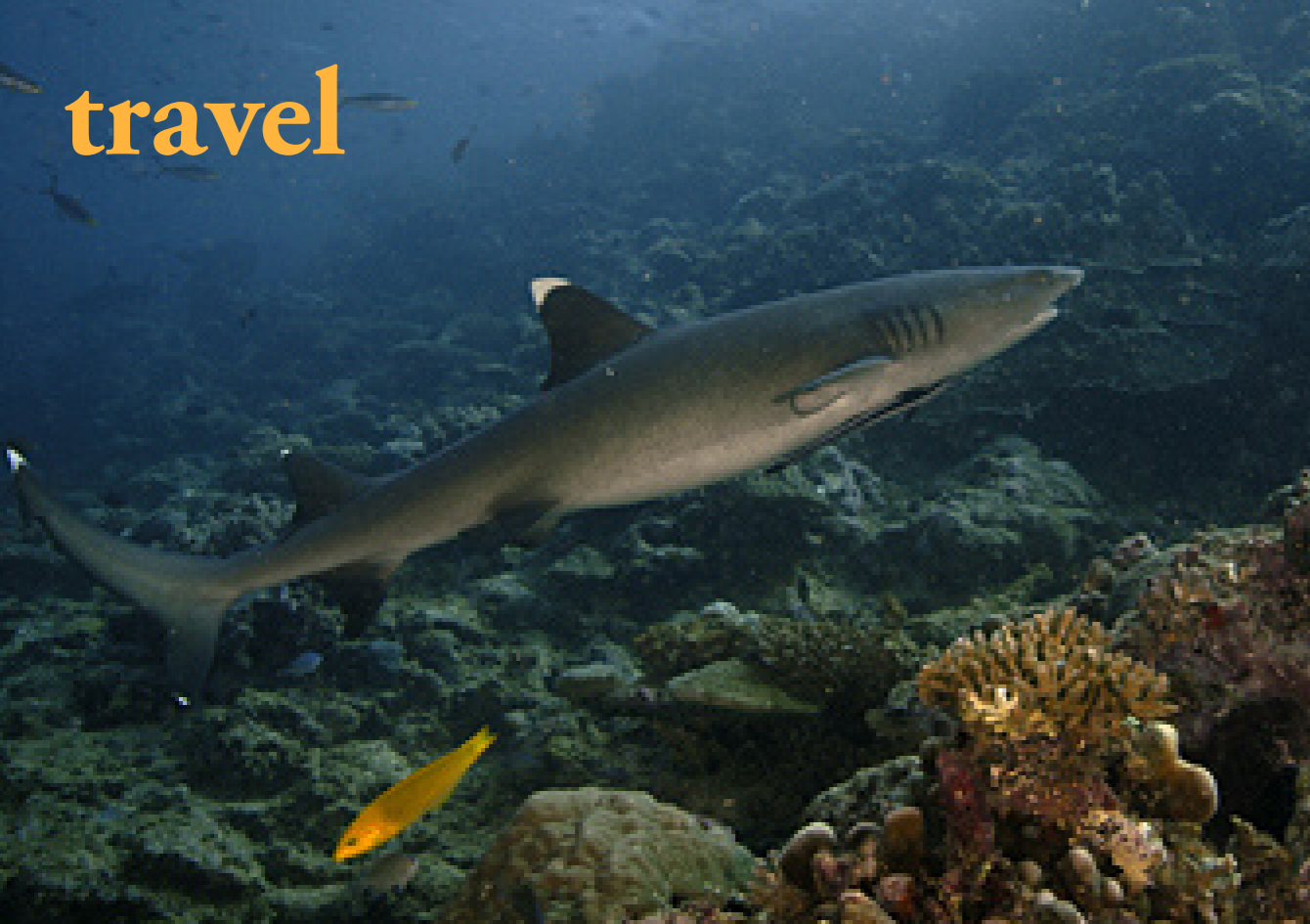
I found out later from Manasa that this individual hadn't been seen for some time and weighed in excess of 200 kilos. Apparently, this wasn't even the big one! That honour belongs to the aptly named "Ratu Rua". Translated as "Big Chief" in Fijian, this behemoth tips the scales at an astonishing 600kg! Despite having a mouth big enough to swallow your head, he's fortunately benign. Still, he's the chief around these parts, and the sharks will give him a wide berth.

**Macrofest**

After several days of shooting wide-angle shooting, I was eager to indulge in some macro photography. Unfortunately, the ripping current in the lagoon prevented us from visiting the sites Manasa had in mind, so we headed for the protected waters of Shark Reef. As this was a non-feeding day,

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A hungry whitetip looks for a handout, Shark Reef; Fan coral at ET; A pair of whitetips resting in the shallows at Shark Reef; A friendly tawny nurse shark with it's entourage

**Pinnacle ET**

In marked contrast to the full boat on the previous day's shark dive, the boat was remarkably empty for the next day's diving. With Manasa as our guide, today's dive consisted of a grand total of two: Michael, a photographer from Australia and myself. After checking our gear, we headed out under somewhat foreboding skies for the morning's first dive site. Once in the lagoon, the water got progressively rougher during the 40-minute trip. Our destination was ET, a lone pinnacle thrusting upward 25m from the seabed and bisected by a 10m long passage.

As we were gearing up, Manasa came to the unfortunate realization that his mask had been left behind. Without a spare on the boat, I

thought our dive was going to be over before it had begun! He quickly assured us that the dive was very straightforward and we could easily do it on our own.

Descending from the choppy surface, the pinnacle's huge silhouette quickly came into view. We promptly discovered the passage and decided to check it out. It is actually quite wide and will comfortably accommodate several divers at once. In the centre, a chimney ascends towards the

surface, illuminating the passage with dancing beams of light. The rocky interior is home to a variety of shrimps, crabs and nudibranchs.

Exiting the opposite side,



Fiji

I surprised a small whitetip who made a hasty retreat before I could snap a

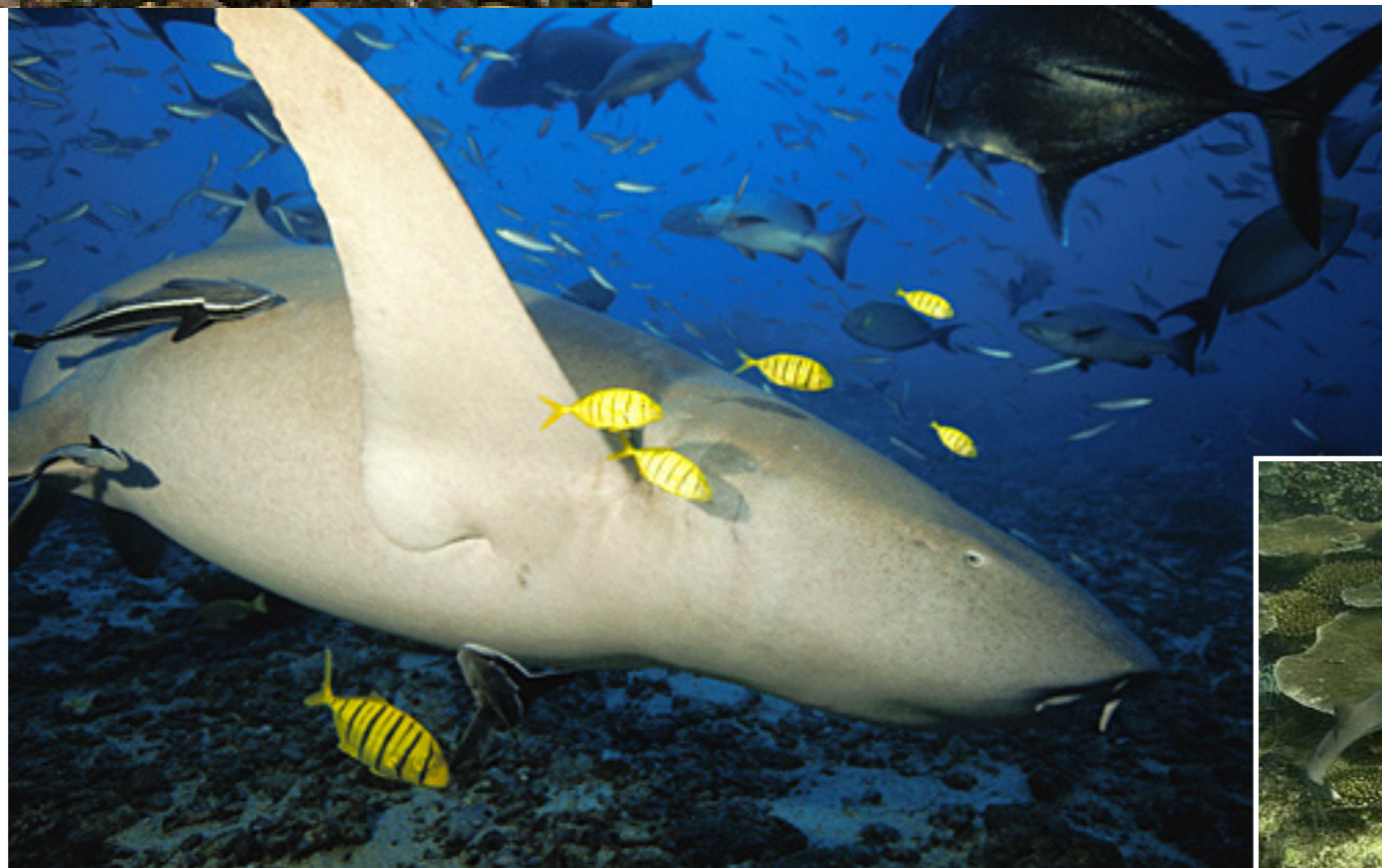
photo. Every square metre was cloaked with exuberant coral growth. Lacy veils of cascading fan corals competed with vivid red and yellow whip corals. Large fans sprouted from the rocky walls, while copious overhangs provided shelter for abundant soldierfish, squirrelfish and a host of well-camouflaged scorpionfish. The ensuing hour flew by at a rapid clip and my

flatworms crawled amongst the rocky overhangs. One of the more curious subjects was an incredibly lop-sided starfish. One disproportionately large arm was surrounded by a quartet of much smaller ones. Manasa told me later the big arm was probably the original and the others had re-grown from it.

Shortly afterwards, he motioned me over to a crevice under a large rock. Hiding underneath was one of Shark Reef's resident Java morays. It was a big one too! For the next ten minutes, he played a game of hide and seek with my camera. Moments after retreating into a crevice, curiosity would get the better of him and would cautiously peer out to check on my whereabouts.

**Lovo?**

Later in the day, I had a drink with Courtney, the resort's affable food and beverage manager. While perusing the dinner menu, I was intrigued by the heading *Lovo* that was accompanied by an enticing list of dishes. She went on to explain that a Lovo was a traditional Fijian feast. A variety of dishes are cooked over hot stones in a makeshift



underground oven. "We can put one on this week if you'd like" she offered. As a diehard foodie, my arm didn't have to be twisted!

*The rocky interior is home to a variety of shrimps, crabs and nudibranchs.*







run for the door screaming. The centrepiece of the meal was the walu, still wrapped in the palm leaf and served with *miti* (onion

with coconut milk) In addition, plates were piled high with chicken, lamb shoulder and lamb neck and raw fish in coconut milk "cooked" with limejuice. Vegetable dishes included cassava, taro and *palusami* (taro leaf with corned beef.) The meal was incredible; by the end, I was so full I almost had to punch a new hole in my belt!

camera was exhausted by the endless photo ops. Unfortunately, the weather had worsened by the time we finished the dive, so we had to make our final dive of the morning at Shark Reef. It's a rough life diving in Fiji!

**Lovo day**

Back at the resort it was Lovo day. I wandered over after lunch to discover preparations were well underway with the involvement of most of the resort's kitchen staff. The light drizzle that started falling did nothing to dampen everyone's enthusiasm. "Just how many people were you expecting?" I enquired, gazing at the mountain of food that was laid out by the already blazing fire. Above it, heaped on a platform of wooden planks, was a mound of hot stones, superheated

by the intense flames.

First up, an enormous *walu* (also know as *wahoo*) had to be cleaned and prepared for cooking. Another lady was busy at work making the fresh coconut milk, squeezing and straining clumps of the grated coconut flesh from a massive bowl. Taro leaves were stuffed with the coconut milk, onion and corned beef before being folded into neat parcels. Whole chickens were marinated in garlic, ginger and soy sauce before being meticulously wrapped in palm leaves. If that wasn't enough, a couple of lobsters were added along with unlimited numbers of taro roots.

When everything was ready, a bed of shredded cassava long sticks was laid out above the hot stones and the various items added in layers. Everything

was enclosed under a layer enormous taro leaves before being covered with a heavy tarpaulin and partially buried under a layer of earth. Incredibly, everything was ready a mere 90 minutes later. By this time, the drizzle had turned to a downpour. Removing the tarpaulin, thick clouds of smoke laden with enticing aromas wafted into the rainy night, revealing tantalising glimpses of the feast.

Finally it was time to eat. As it turned out, a sizable number of people had arrived from around the area. Word had been sent out via the "Coconut Wire" (word of mouth) and by notices put up in the shopping centre in nearby Pacific Harbour.

There were enough meat dishes on the table to make any die-hard vegetarian



**Country excursion**

On my final day, I wanted to see some of the surrounding countryside. Joji, one of the barmen, agreed to take me out for a spin in the resort four-wheel drive. A torrential downpour started as we headed out early for the morning market in the nearby town of Navua. A wooden structure covered the major portion of the market, but a number of vendors were huddled outside under a canopy of colourful umbrellas.

Everyone was extremely friendly and posed readily for photos. I can imagine what they must have thought of this crazy foreigner taking pictures of them in the rain!

We then ventured indoors and wandered amongst the myriad of stalls.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Chinese trawler's colourful propeller; Market vendor, Navua; Red-lined flabellina; Jane, one of Uprising Beach Resort's ever-pleasant staff; Soft coral, Beqa Lagoon

Fiji



good income as a result, so this is clearly a win-win situation.

After all the close proximity to the sharks, what was the worst thing that happened? A spider bite, and that occurred aboard a domestic flight from Vancouver to Toronto on the way home!

**Getting there**

Fiji's Nadi airport is serviced by more than 85 flights a week, with direct flights from Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Japan and the Pacific. From North America, direct flights are available from Los Angeles. Transfers to Pacific Harbour can be arranged by Beqa Adventure Divers or the Uprising Beach Resort Taxis are also available at the airport, but are more expensive than pre-booked transfers. Visitors from most countries are issued a four-month tourist free of charge visa upon arrival. All visitors must have a return ticket.

**When to go**

Due to the moderating effects of the surrounding ocean, Fiji enjoys a mild climate for most of the year with temperatures hovering around 25 degrees Celsius. Humidity is generally high. The rainy season extends between November and April. It's wise to book the shark dives well as far in advance as possible. For bull sharks, the largest congregations can be found between January and May. Be sure to book the Shark Dives before leaving home, as they are becoming extremely popular and the trips fill up very quickly. On one day, several people who showed up at the dive shop at the last minute were turned away. ■



The tables groaned under a bountiful selection of colourful produce, spices and fresh fish. On a series of tables near the back were objects resembling large brown highway pylons constructed out of gnarly roots. Pulverized into powdered form and mixed with water, they make *kava*, Fiji's national beverage. Long playing an integral role in traditional Fijian society, it is consumed in ceremonies as well as a social beverage and a cure-all for various ailments. One of the fellows I'd been diving sampled a glass during a day trip to a local village. He likened it to brown dishwater that makes your lips go numb. One of the vendors asked if I'd like to partake in a glass. The prospect didn't sound particularly appetizing, especially at 7:30 in the morning on an empty stomach, so I politely declined.

The rest of the morning was spent exploring the back roads through the

fields of cassava and taro. Stopping by one farm, we were given huge chunks of freshly cut watermelon, the perfect antidote to the humid morning.

Before I knew it, it was time to leave for the airport. I'd come for the sharks but discovered so much more. With its exhilarating blend of sharks, stunning coral reefs and superb macro, Beqa has it all! During my six dives at Shark Reef, I saw more sharks than I've seen during my entire 500+ logged dives!

Shark feeding doesn't come without a degree of controversy. Some argue that feedings promote un-natural behaviour and the sharks become dependent on it. On the other hand, the establishment of the marine reserve not only protects the sharks but the host of other fish found in the area. Sharks are more numerous now than before the reserve was established, and the local villages are earning a





# fact file



## Fiji



**History** In 1970, Fiji became an independent nation, after being a British colony for almost a century. Two military coups in 1987 interrupted a Democratic rule. The coups were spurred by concern over a government that was thought to be dominated by the Indian community made up of descendants of contract laborers who were brought to the islands in the 19th century by the British. Heavy Indian emigration followed the coups and a 1990 constitution that cemented native Melanesian control of Fiji. The loss of population caused economic difficulties, while ensuring that Melanesians became the majority. In 1997, a new

more equitable constitution was enacted. In 1999, free and peaceful elections resulted in an Indo-Fijian government. However, in May 2000, a civilian-led coup brought with it a long, drawn out period of political turmoil. In 2001, parliamentary elections provided Fiji with a democratically elected government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase who was re-elected in May 2006, only to be ousted in a December 2006 military coup led by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, who then appointed himself acting president. Bainimarama was finally appointed interim prime minister in January 2007. Government: republic. Capital: Suva (on Viti Levu)

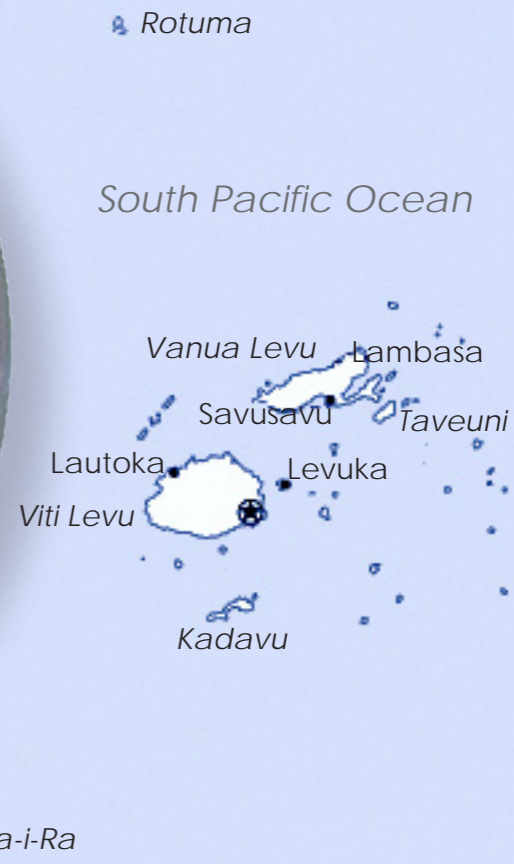
**Geography** Fiji is part of Oceania. It is an island group in the South Pacific Ocean, located two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand. Fiji includes 332 islands; about 110 are inhabited. Terrain: mostly mountains developed by volcanic activity. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m. Highest point: Tomanivi 1,324 m. Coastline: 1,129 km

**Climate** is tropical marine with only slight seasonal temperature changes. Natural hazards: cyclonic storms may occur between November and January.

**Environmental issues** deforestation and soil erosion. Fiji is party to several international agreements including Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Law of the Sea, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer

RIGHT: Location of Fiji on world map

FAR RIGHT: Map of Fiji and its islands



Protection, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands

**Economic** Fiji has forest, mineral, and fish resources and is one of the most developed of the Pacific island economies, yet it still has a large subsistence sector. Major sources of foreign exchange include tourism (with 300,000-400,000 tourists annually), sugar exports, and remittances from Fijians working abroad. Fiji sugar enjoys special access to European Union markets, but will suffer from the EU's decision to cut sugar subsidies. One-third of industrial activity in Fiji is sugar processing, but it is not efficient. The 2006 coup damaged Fiji's tourism industry. The length of the industry's recovery time is uncertain. Long-term problems range from low investment and uncertain land ownership rights to the government's difficulties in managing its budget. However, increases in overseas remittances from Fijians working in Kuwait and Iraq are significant. Natural resources: timber, fish, gold, copper, offshore oil potential, hydropower. Agriculture: sugarcane, coconuts, cassava (tapioca), rice, sweet potatoes, bananas; cattle, pigs, horses, goats; fish. Industries: tourism, sugar, clothing, copra, gold, silver, lumber, small cottage industries

**Currency** Fijian dollar (FJD)  
Exchange rates: 1EUR = 2.75FJD, 1USD = 1.63FJD, 1GBP = 3.30FJD, 1AUD = 1.35FJD, 1SGD = 1.07FJD SOURCE: XE.COM

**Population** 918,675 (July 2007 est.) Ethnic groups: Fijian 54.8% (predominantly Melanesian with a Polynesian admixture), Indian 37.4%, other groups 7.9% (European, other Pacific Islanders, Chinese) (2005 estimate). Religions: Christian 53% (Methodist 34.5%, Roman Catholic 7.2%, Assembly of God 3.8%, Seventh Day Adventist 2.6%, other 4.9%), Hindu 34% (Sanatan 25%, Arya Samaj 1.2%, other 7.8%), Muslim 7% (Sunni 4.2%, other 2.8%), other or unspecified religions 5.6%, none 0.3% (1996 census). Internet users: 80,000 (2006)

**Languages** English (official), Fijian (official), Hindustani

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Colonial War Memorial Hospital  
Suva, Fiji Islands. Operated by Ministry of Health, contact: Dr. Frances A. Bingwor,  
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