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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS VILLOCH



# FIJI

## WHERE THE CHIEFS RULE THE REEFS

HOW LOCAL FISHING REGULATIONS REVIVED A DESPERATE ECOSYSTEM



Explosive colors typify Fiji, from cotton-candy corals to electric wrasse (opposite).

Anemonefish and giant clams off Taveuni; Frigates Passage surf from below (opposite, left); High Chief Ratu Apenisa Vuki (opposite, right).



**G**RAND CENTRAL STATION IS HECTIC. Dozens of shimmering chevron barracuda circle in unison as if caught in a transparent silo. Along this wall in Fiji’s Namena Marine Reserve, I watch a pair of 7-foot gray reef sharks patrol; in a display to rival the barracuda, hundreds of bigeye jacks perform their own dance.

That’s when the largest of the grays — one that had been trying to shake a pesky remora — circles back toward me. In seconds, I’m peering straight into the black slit at the center of his yellow eye, hoping the remora hasn’t put him in a scrappy mood. But he moves on, attracted to something beyond in the cloud of purple soft corals and colorful reef fish.

In just one dive I’ve experienced more action than some divers might in an entire year. But Namena wasn’t always like this. Only a few years ago, it was heavily exploited by both commercial and local fishermen.

“Trust me, 15 years ago you wouldn’t have seen any of those things,” says Johnny Singh, a marine biologist at the nearby Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort. “Forget about grouper, forget about bigeye jack. They all would have been gone.”

The story of how the once-overfished Namena Marine Reserve became a standout dive destination — and why numerous other reefs around Fiji’s magical archipelago are seeing their own renaissance — has drawn me halfway around the globe.

It was 10 years ago that a Fijian marine ecologist named Alifereti Tawake explained to me how chiefs in villages around Fiji were taking conservation into their own hands

by declaring local marine protected areas, often after consulting scientists from the University of the South Pacific and conservation organizations. This was possible because in Fiji’s remarkably intact culture, villages maintain substantial control over their traditional fishing grounds, or *qoliqoli*.

An ancient custom called for sometimes setting aside portions of a *qoliqoli* — to honor a deceased chief, for instance — so it wasn’t a stretch to use a similar system for long-term conservation. Thanks to years of commercial fishing and, in many cases, heavy subsistence fishing — which in Fiji includes collecting almost anything alive, from the smallest reef fish to sea cucumbers and urchins — marine populations had dropped so much that meals and incomes were threatened. Tawake said that when his grandfather, an elder in Daku village, was a young man, he could catch a dinner’s worth of fish on the reef before his wife finished boiling a pot of cassava root. By the time Tawake was a young man, the same task could take a whole day.

Today there are more than 100 official, locally managed marine areas in Fiji, with countless more under development. As a result, village after village has seen fish populations rebound inside reserves — and then spill out into places where fishing is still allowed.

**“FIFTEEN YEARS AGO YOU WOULDN’T HAVE SEEN ANY OF THOSE THINGS. THEY ALL WOULD HAVE BEEN GONE.”**



An 850-pound, 14-foot tiger shark wows divers at Pacific Harbor's Bistro; Fiji's lush waterfalls beckon (opposite).



## The Guide to Fiji

Average water temp **Low 70s in winter, low 80s in summer**  
Average viz **100-plus feet** What to wear **3 to 5 mm wetsuit**  
When to go **year-round, high season is April to September**

### Must Do

Take the 12-mile boat trip to surf perfect lefts near Frigates Passage with Waidroka Bay Surf & Dive Resort, near Pacific Harbor.

fish, humphead wrasses and whitetip sharks.

**Eagle Rock** This pinnacle in the Nacomoto Passage protected area attracts the big stuff.

### Must Dive

**Caesar's Rocks** Admire candy-cane nudibranchs and explore swim-throughs thick with black and soft corals at these five coral pinnacles in the newly created Yanuca Reserve.

### Travel Tip

Air Pacific runs flights between Los Angeles and Nadi, Fiji. Sister airline Pacific Sun offers island-hopping flights throughout the country.

### Bring Back

Hand-carved three-legged *tanoa* bowls, used to mix kava, come in all sizes and serve as a fitting reminder of late nights with the locals.



### Nuku Balavu Reserve

Skirting the reserve are Lighthouse and Golden Nuggets, a series of colorful coral bommies frequented by plentiful reef



**More on the Web** [sportdiver.com/fiji](http://sportdiver.com/fiji)

In most cases, these reserves have been established in shallow fishing areas near shore. About a dozen also are dive sites, in many cases set aside to attract traveling divers whose donations help villages expand beyond their dependence on fishing. My mission was to experience as many of these spots as I could, and to learn whether the plan is working.

### KAVA AND CONSERVATION

Sirilo "Didi" Dulunaquio is largely responsible for the existence of the Namena Reserve, a barrier reef system surrounding the small island of Namenalala.

While a divemaster at the luxurious Cousteau resort during the 1990s, he worked with the chiefs of the 10 villages in the Kubulau District, which collectively held the rights to Namena. Eventually the project consumed him full time; today he's employed by the Wildlife Conservation Society in an effort to help villages combine traditional and modern conservation techniques.

When I accepted

Dulunaquio's offer to introduce me to Kubulau's high chief, I had no idea what type of journey would be required. We headed out early to the small town of Savusavu to buy drugs and skirts — though that's not exactly what the Fijians call them.

The mild narcotic kava — ground root of a pepper plant made into a woody-flavored tea — is a foundation of Fijian culture. During his 15 years of traveling to numerous islands and villages to discuss conservation, kava has been one of his most important tools, Tawake says.

"At times you have to sit up drinking kava late into the night," he explains. "That's how they get to trust you."

A 2-pound clump of whole kava root is the customary gift when entering a village. Donning a Fijian wrap, or *sulu*, also is considered good manners; surprisingly enough, I didn't own one, until now.

For two hours, we follow increasingly narrow and rough roads running through mountainous jungle and coconut, taro and cassava plots skirting Savusavu Bay. Arriving at Kiobo village, we meet Ratu Apenisa Vuki — the high chief — after Dulunaquio helps me through a formal introduction ceremony where we present our gift.

Forgetting that Fijians try to avoid answering questions

negatively, I ask the chief if he had dived Namena.

"Plenty time," he says, and then adds with a laugh, "in my dreams."

The chief's father declared the reserve in 2004, a decision made with an eye toward sustaining their way of life for future generations, a common theme in many conversations to come during my two weeks in Fiji.

After a windy lunch of fish boiled in coconut milk, bread fruit, taro leaves and sea-grape algae cooked in lime juice, Paulo Kolikata — head of the Kubulau Resource Committee that oversees the reserve — explains that a portion of the \$25 fee paid by every scuba diver to visit the reserve is used to send village children to college and trade schools. Another chunk of the revenue covers the costs of patrolling the reserves, where poachers armed with spears or explosives occasionally try to sneak in.

"We are doing our best to save our reefs," Kolikata says.

Later, villagers break out guitars and a large kava bowl. After a few traditional Fijian and American songs, they mix the brew and everyone drinks from a communal coconut cup, following a set ritual: one clap with cupped hands before each serving, three claps after.

### Continuing Education



Kava is said to have a relaxing effect, and I suppose it does. But sitting in a remote island village in view of one of the best dive sites in the world, in a country with multiple ways of saying “no worries,” it was sometimes hard to tell the difference between before and after.

The next morning we explore Namena. Besides two dives at Grand Central, we drop in on 60-foot-high coral towers at a site called Chimneys. Here the main attractions are the immobile variety, which also benefit from protection — eliminating fishing can help keep a whole reef system balanced and healthy. The towers are absolutely covered with soft tree corals in more colors than I can track — their shallow tops are so plastered with anemones and their accompanying fishes that I’m tempted to extend my safety stop until my tank runs dry.

#### DOLPHINS AND CYCLONES

After a gut-tossing, shouldn’t-we-be-a-little-straighter landing at the tiny airport on Kadavu, I begin a 90-minute boat trek around the nearly roadless island to Waisalima Beach Resort & Dive Centre, home of the classic castaway experience. Its few rustic thatched huts are just steps from the water; you might be forced to share your space with a land crab, but the payoff is a rare and delicious isolation.

The first morning I head straight for the Naqoro Passage, a cut through the Great Astrolabe Reef, which skirts the island’s southern side. Here the diving is decidedly old school, flipping back out of an open boat on our way down to the Purple Wall, where we’re greeted by a 3-foot Queensland grouper. With visibility at least 100 feet, it’s easy to see the scattered stalks of purple soft corals along with sea fans as big as my 5-foot-10-inch frame, and sections of star coral twice that size; countless snapper, grouper, jacks and parrotfish accent the scene. Later, while diving the other side of the passage, we spy a six-pack of large whitetip sharks behind a rock, dodging the current; toward the open sea at the end of the wall, a huge humphead wrasse leads a school of parrot and unicorn fish. I am becoming a serious believer in reserves.

Between dives we swim with a pod of 20 spinner dolphins. Maika Mua, Waisalima’s divemaster, tells me



#### Deco Stops

Visit **Fijian villages** and thank a local, or even a chief, for setting up reserves while you experience true island life. The **Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort** offers weekly trips to **Nuku Balavu village**. From **Matava Resort**, stop in at **Kadavu village** and jump from the nearby cliffs at the **scenic waterfall** just past town. To get away from everyone, kayak out to the sandy, palm-lined beaches at secluded spots like **Naviavia Island**, near Cousteau. In Pacific Harbor, slide across a river and through the forest with **Zip Fiji**, or raft the whitewater on the **Navua River**.

## TRADITIONAL VILLAGE RIGHTS EXTEND ONLY TO THE REEFS — THE DEEP BLUE WATERS ARE OPEN TO COMMERCIAL FISHING.

that according to island elders, dolphins inside the passage mean bad weather coming. But we continue to the village of Matasawa Levu, hidden in the mouth of a mangrove estuary. Villagers treat us to an informal kava ceremony in the community house, built in part with the fees of the 500 or so divers fortunate enough to visit Naqoro each year.

Stories abound of how many fish they used to take from the passage a few decades back. Seven cups of kava later, the head of the reserve committee, Salamisa Baselala, finally arrives. He tells me that they recognize Naqoro as especially important because it’s a major spawning ground for grouper and other fish.

“That’s why we are trying to protect it,” he says, “for the children and our grandchildren.” And it’s working. “People are coming and telling me they are happy to see many fish in the passage.”

My next stop is a 30-minute boat ride farther around the island. Matava Resort comes as a bit of a shock in such a remote place, with its groomed grounds, high-beamed thatched *bure* house with polished mahogany floors and equally swank guesthouses.

I head out with divemaster Simon Parry in Matava’s nearly new, purpose-built aluminum dive boat to see the Nacomoto Passage protected area. High seas from a cyclone a few hundred miles away deny us the outer half of the passage, but there’s still plenty to see at Eagle Rock, a pinnacle smack in the middle of Nacomoto. It’s one of Matava’s go-to sites for big stuff, such as a 4-foot spotted eagle ray I admire at 80 feet down. I see Parry pointing at what seems like nothing — until hundreds of yellowtail barracuda rush into focus. Even without the eruption of fish, the pinnacle itself is an attraction, with grouper grottoes and formations such as an upper silhouette that’s the spitting image of a ship’s bow.

#### ZIP LINES AND TIGERS

On the southern side of Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest island, (Continued on page 88)



Rainbow Reef swim-through is alive with color; blue-ribbon eels (bottom, right); fish-eye view of Fijian idyll (bottom, left).



(FIJI continued from page 72)



Pacific Harbor bills itself as the adventure capital of Fiji, offering everything from a zip-line complex to world-class surfing reefs. But the town's most famous attraction by far is underwater.

My base is the Pearl South Pacific, where I see air conditioning and television for the first time the entire trip. Situated on Fiji's longest sandy beach, the resort looks out to the island of Beqa. At the edge of the property sits the Aqua-Trek dive shop.

Back in 1999, the director of the shop's dive operations, Brandon Paige, then with Beqa Adventure Divers, launched a now-famous shark-feeding operation. There was some trepidation from the locals about the idea of purposely attracting sharks, but Paige worked closely with one village to set aside a nearly dead section of over-fished reef as a new reserve where he and his team could give it a shot.

Shark dives now run in two locations within a protected area that has grown to encompass three nautical miles. Aqua-Trek does its feedings at the Bistro, a 15-minute run out, attracting an impressive eight species of shark, plus a now-thriving population of giant trevally jacks and about 400 other species — up from fewer than 300 counted during a 2004 study at the site.

There are differing views among scientists and conservationists about the pros and cons of shark dives, but the Pacific Harbor version offers an undeniably spectacular, heart-thumping experience. On our dive to 60 feet, the bulls are plentiful. Even when you know where they're going — and you know they know where they're going — these notorious predators still can be disconcerting.

But even they can't compare to what comes next. As one of the leaders bangs his tank to signal the end of my very last dive in Fiji, I spot what is undoubtedly the most impressive underwater sight

I have ever witnessed: An 850-pound, 14-foot tiger shark approaches our line of divers. The big mama, a regular known affectionately as Scarback, makes four more passes, including one directly over my head as I marvel at her giant jaws, at least 2 feet wide. She's a living example of why this initiative is so important — because even an apex predator needs our protection.

#### SUCCESS AND HOPE

Though it looks like the quintessential vision of dive paradise, Fiji is of course part of the real world — and nothing here is perfect. There still are reefs in need of protection. Various villages and groups are working to set aside more areas, including premier dive sites like the Rainbow Reef near Taveuni.

"I can only imagine what it would look like if it were a protected area, because it's already so full of life," says Julie Kelly, a co-owner of Taveuni Ocean Sports.

But traditional village rights extend only to reefs — the deep blue waters in between are open to substantial government-sanctioned commercial fishing that can severely reduce overall fish populations.

Aqua-Trek's Paige believes the combination of feedings and diligent patrolling has made the shark reserve a success, but there are concerns. The tiger shark population, for instance, has declined in recent years; his hunch is that commercial fishermen might be to blame. He's now advocating that the Fijian government declare all of the country's waters a shark sanctuary, following the lead of Palau and the Maldives.

So there is work to be done, but my dives have convinced me that Fiji's locally managed reserve network already has made one of the planet's best dive destinations even better. Numerous studies documenting impressive increases in marine-life populations within the reserves support that impression.

For Tawake, the reserve pioneer who drank so much kava and gave up so much sleep in the name of making it all possible, the network's success is a source of great pride, as well as hope for his own 4-year-old son.

"I went to Kadavu for Christmas, and I met with chiefs who I worked with. Just the look on their faces when they're talking about the kinds of

fish they're beginning to see, and the number of fish ...." He pauses. "The satisfaction you get, I would say — I cannot explain it in words." ■

*Special thanks to Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort (fijiresort.com), Taveuni Ocean Sports (taveuniocceansports.com), Waisalima Beach Resort & Dive Centre (waisalima.com), Viti Water Sports, Matava Resort, the Pearl South Pacific (thepearlsouthpacific.com), Aqua-Trek, Waidroka Bay Surf & Dive Resort (waidroka.com), Air Pacific, Pacific Sun Airlines (pacificsun.com.fj) and Tourism Fiji.*

#### Fiji Listings

**Fiji Visitors Bureau**  
fijime.com/diveme

**Air Pacific**  
airpacific.com

#### DIVE OPERATORS

**Aqua-Trek — Mana Island**  
aquatrekdiving.com

**Dive Tropex Tokoriki**  
tokorikidiving.com

**Reef Safari — Shangri-La**  
reefsafari.com.fj

**Scuba Bula (Fiji) Ltd.**  
scubabula.com

**Scubahire Fiji**  
bequadivers.com

**Subsurface Fiji**  
subsurfacefiji.com

**Subsurface Musket Cove Marina**  
subsurfacefiji.com

**Subsurface Treasure Island**  
subsurfacefiji.com

**Taveuni Dive**  
taveunidive.com

**Viti Water Sports — Nadi**  
vitiwatersports.com

**West Side Water Sports**  
fiji-dive.com

#### DIVE RESORTS/HOTELS

**Castaway Island**  
castawayfiji.com

**Dive Namale**  
namalefiji.com

**Garden Island Resort**  
gardenislandresort.com

**L'aventure J.M. Cousteau Fiji**  
fijiresort.com

**Matava Fiji Premier Eco Adventure Resort**  
matava.com

**RA Divers Fiji (Five-Star Dive Resort)**  
radivers.com

**Sonaisali Island Resort — Fiji**  
sonaisali.com

**Vatulele Island Resort**  
vatulele.com