



FIJI'S

E-TICKET

TO RIDE

BY MARK SCHROPE

More than 60 feet down in Fiji's famed Somosomo Strait, a whipping current is pulling me horizontally to a reef lush with soft corals in a rainbow of colors. I suppose that's why they call it Rainbow's End. I'm holding onto one of the few dead spots on a boulder otherwise overgrown with red and orange sponges. Holding on is my only option if I want to have a proper look around. At this point, the dive is a bit like rock climbing in reverse: I look back for another bare spot to target, release, and then grab hold again. And this, they tell me, is a calm day.

Here between the islands of Taveuni and Vanua Levu,

divers live and die according to the currents. Play it safe, and you get a rousing dive with all the colors and tropical fish you could fancy. Get it wrong, and you might find yourself slammed against a cliff, or launched 60 feet up like so much jetsam.

I experienced Taveuni and longed to return thanks to the capable hands of Taveuni Ocean Sports, based at Nakia Resort and Dive. The managers, Julie Kelly and Aaron Mell, each had successful dive operations in Hawaii, but were of a mind to find a less-crowded tropical paradise. So they settled on Taveuni and joined forces with Julie's parents, who had already started their own eco-resort, complete with solar power and hydropower.

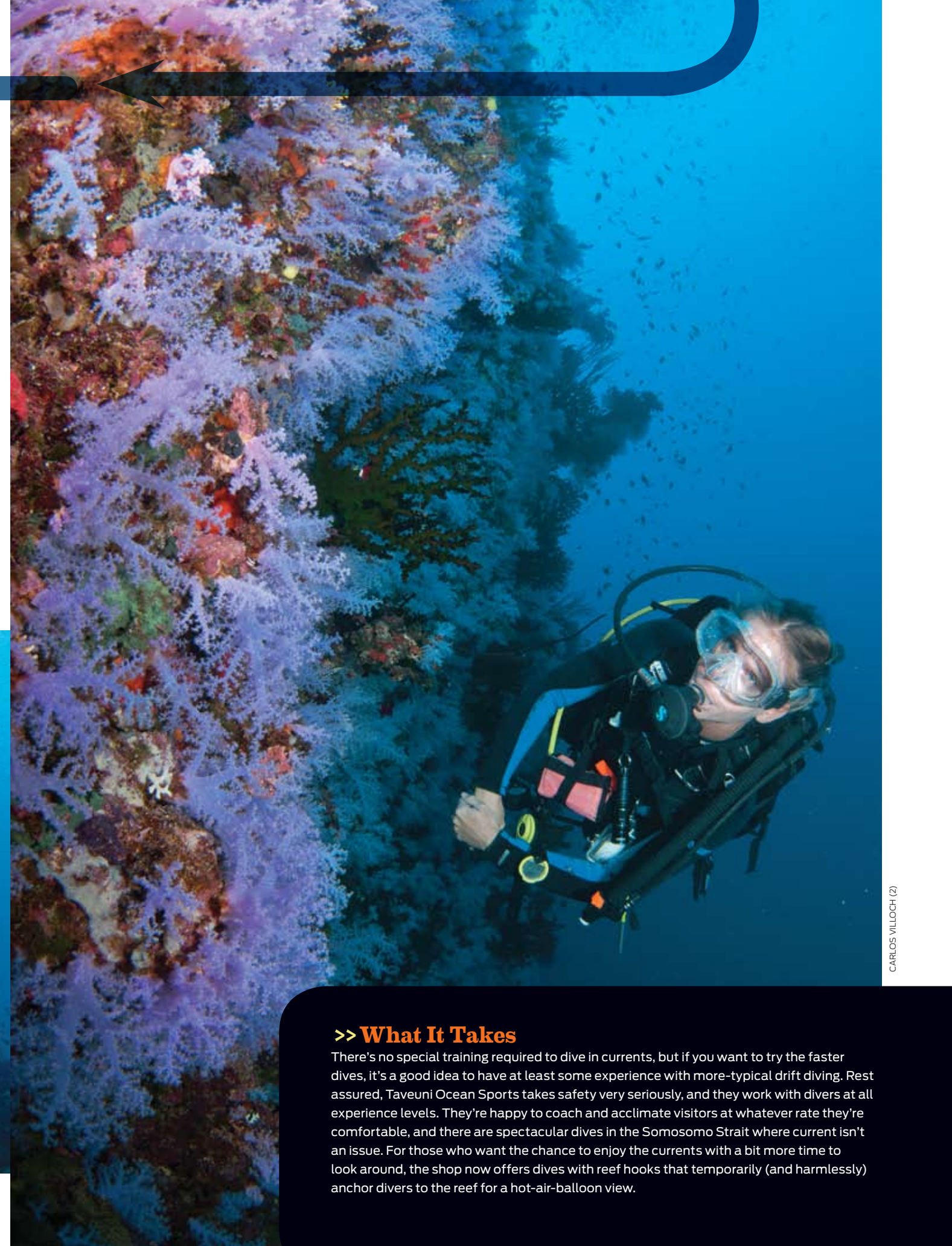
When Aaron and Julie arrived, they had to focus all their attention on deciphering the currents, which are far more complex than simple tide charts could ever express. They spent months doing multiple short dives in a day, recording the moon phase and tidal cycles, eventually wiring the patterns. "Most places in the world, you can jump in anytime," says Julie. "Here, you can't do that or you

could potentially kill people."

We began our first day at the Great White Wall, high on the list of ultimate destinations for any scuba fan. The trick with the golden payoff is reaching the cliff on a slack high tide. That's when the water's been rushing in and encouraging the white soft corals — which actually sport a slightly purple hue — to come out and feed in all their bushy glory. Of course they do that in the middle of the tide, but that's when humans get slammed.

It's at that perfect time when the tide goes slack that both divers and corals are happy. Of course, there are many days when the conditions aren't ever spot-on. One tourist demanded a local operator go regardless of the hazardous currents that awaited, not understanding (to her peril) that Fijians have a severe cultural aversion to saying "no." So, a dive-master who knew better took her anyway; the hard current smashing into the wall bounced them from 100 feet to 40 in a blink. They lived, but the humbled tourist was at a loss for words on the return trip back to the island. *(continued on page 58)*

Currents rage at Rainbow's End, where divers find a bare patch and hold on; (opposite) Julie Kelly admires white soft corals on a Taveuni wall.



>> What It Takes

There's no special training required to dive in currents, but if you want to try the faster dives, it's a good idea to have at least some experience with more-typical drift diving. Rest assured, Taveuni Ocean Sports takes safety very seriously, and they work with divers at all experience levels. They're happy to coach and acclimate visitors at whatever rate they're comfortable, and there are spectacular dives in the Somosomo Strait where current isn't an issue. For those who want the chance to enjoy the currents with a bit more time to look around, the shop now offers dives with reef hooks that temporarily (and harmlessly) anchor divers to the reef for a hot-air-balloon view.



Male Fijian anemonefish, endemic to Fiji; (opposite, clockwise from top left) brittle star on a sea star; cleaner shrimp; upside-down jellyfish; male ribbon eel.



5 Tips for Photography in the Somosomo Strait

1 Zoom In Wide-angle zooms offer greater flexibility when drift diving, letting you capture a variety of images on just one dive. Close-focus wide-angle technique

creates impact. **2 Use Light** Two strobes with diffusers help soften light and ensure the entire scene is well lit. **3 Bump the ISO** Clouds, sun position and time of day all have

an impact on your exposure settings. When light begins to fade, don't panic: Bump the ISO, which will let you maintain the beautiful blue water in the scene, at the

shutter speeds and depth of field needed to pull off the shot. **4 Models** Divers lend a sense of adventure and exploration to a drift-diving scene and add an element of

beauty too. Images also carry more impact if you can capture a diver engaged with a subject. **5 Follow the Guide** Successful drift diving requires a plan and a guide to

lead the way. Fail to follow either, and you'll be blown off the reef shooting blue-water exposures. **Want the Complete Package?** Consider shooting Nikon's

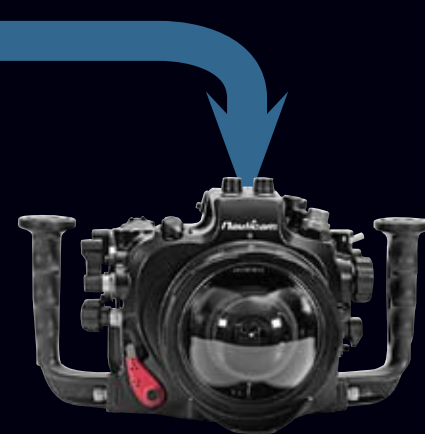
D7000 inside Nauticam's NA-D7000 housing. Its 16.2 MP DX-format CMOS sensor brilliantly cap-

tures sunbursts and allows for tight cropping so your scenics look crisp and carry impact. Add the Tokina 10-17mm

f/3.5/4.5 DX fisheye zoom lens and a pair of Sea&Sea YS-250 Pro underwater strobes, and you'll have the

perfect setup to explore and capture just about anything along Fiji's colorful abundant walls.

> DOUG SLOSS is a writer and photographer specializing in the marine environment. He's also the producer of several educational DVDs, including Adobe Photoshop CS4 for the Underwater Photographer and his latest release, Lightroom 3 for the Underwater Photographer. Learn more at underwaterphotoshop.com and underwaterlightroom.com.



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Remarkably, though I hadn't properly planned my trip, I was at Taveuni on a day when everything was just right. We began the dive through a lava tube decorated with sea fans and passed a sinuous moray eel. Emerging into the deep blue that stretches to 300 feet, we spotted large Spanish mackerel and a three-foot dogtooth tuna, then some rare square-spot anthias I would've missed if not for Julie's expert spotting skills.

We drifted gently for a moment before I saw the scene that made me gasp. I couldn't see them when we first emerged, but farther along I caught my first glimpse of the wall's eponymous soft white corals covering at least 100 feet of cliff as far up, down and out as I could see. It was the perfect moment. Each impossibly intricate coral branch was covered in individual polyps reaching for the last morsels delivered by the tide.

Kicking along the wall, we eventually had to leave the white soft corals behind, coaxed along by countless purple gobies, a school of luminous blue runners and a small whitetip shark. Back over the top of

the wall, we wandered amid coral bommies with more whites and the full array of red, orange and pink soft corals for which this country is rightly famous. Then we heard Aaron clanking his tank, and I swam as fast as I could toward him. My sprint was rewarded with a glimpse of a manta ray with a 15-foot wingspan sans one section of flesh, apparently claimed by a shark. It was flying out into the dark blue just as I arrived.

After the dive we anchored in a scenic cove on the Vanua Levu side of the strait, with requisite palm-lined beach. We wandered the white sand then snorkeled around hard-coral outcrops covered in Christmas tree worms in all shades. Squeezed fresh from fruit grown at the resort's impressive orchard, tasty passion-fruit juice flowed freely. A few runs around the cove on a modified surfboard, called a wake skate, and the tides were ready for our under-sea river ride.

At Rainbow's End, the site of the submerged "rock climb," a negative descent was our only option if we wanted to make the reef. We hit the water with BCs completely emptied and started kicking immediately.

At first I wondered what the fuss was about as we began exploring the reef at 60 feet. There were more blue runners, triggers and a blackish unicornfish, but the water was barely moving in this protected spot. Around the edge, the slope turned to wall with two whitetip sharks milling about at the top. After coaxing an exquisite lionfish from its hole, Aaron then let a cleaner shrimp climb into his mouth to perform some dental work.

The current was quickening just a touch and we had to kick harder to keep from drifting up the reef slope, an eye behind me to avoid hitting corals. Then we came around the bend and felt the full force of the current's flow. I grabbed hold of the bare patches and was parallel to a trumpetfish, working hard to fight the current. Head down so my view was upside down, I saw the lushest garden yet of my favorite purple soft corals.

The slipstream was pushing at about 2 knots, which sounds mellow unless you've ever tried to kick against such a current. A little embarrassed to be working so hard, I still noticed the anthias and other tiny fish that seemed unfazed.

I was in Fiji for the half-moon tides. During the new moon, the current can be as quick as 4 or 5 knots — definitely not for the timid. Back on the boat, in the time it took just to stow our gear, we'd drifted a mile from the reef.

The Somosomo Strait is so enticing that most nearby operators have been content to focus all their attentions there. But Aaron and Julie are also enchanted with what they see on the map a bit farther afield, and on rare days off they're exploring. The couple is content enough in their new home, but if all it takes is a little bit of "what's-around-the-bend" exploration, they reckon there's nothing wrong with expanding the perimeter of their own little diving paradise.

Fiji has numerous traditional dialects, many with their own way of saying "no worries." On the north side of the Somosomo Strait, in Vanua Levu, they say *makaleka*. To the south, in Taveuni, it's *sega na lega*. Thanks to Aaron and Julie's hard work and perpetual curiosity, you're guaranteed to find that state of mind on the waters in between, whatever you call it. **SD**

Anthias flow around a bommie at Rainbow Reef; (opposite) a fire dartfish hovers over its sandy burrow in the shallows of Rainbow's End.



>> Need to Know

GETTING THERE Air Pacific runs regular flights from Los Angeles to Fiji's international hub in Nadi. From there, Pacific Sun offers island hoppers to Taveuni.

WHEN TO GO Year-round. Water temps might drop to a "frigid" 77 degrees F during the Fijian winter (May through October). During the cooler months, dwarf minkes, humpbacks and other whales make their way through, and gray reef sharks are mating.

DIVING CONDITIONS Water temps range from upper 70s in the winter, with visibility more than 100 feet, to low 80s in summer, with visibility in the 60- to 100-foot range.

OPERATORS/ACCOMMODATIONS Nakia Resort and Dive Fiji (nakiafiji.com) offer four *bure* cottages, including one with two bedrooms and an outdoor shower. All are situated on a secluded 10 acres overlooking the Somosomo Strait and the island of Vanua Levu. Taveuni Ocean Sports (taveunioceansports.com) is on site, catering to small dive groups.

PRICE TAG Bure rates start at \$200 per night with an optional \$45 per person meal plan. Two tank dives run \$120. The resort and dive shop also offer various package specials.