

Escape to Fiji

By Scott Johnson

THERE IS AN unpredictable land of beauty and wonder that is the perfect antidote to the brain numbing grind of daily life... A place and people to rejuvenate your imagination and renew your thirst for adventure. The time has come to turn your back on the mundane and escape to where the unexpected looms, sometimes right over your shoulder...

A massive 3.5 metre (11 ft) bull shark has been slowly circling me for the past five minutes, and with each subsequent loop it is moving in a bit closer. Turning from side to side, I spot the shark coming in for another pass. Of course, tracking one animal through my camera's viewfinder can be challenging when forty other equally impressive specimens are scouring the area. It is easy to get distracted and thus miss the shot.

The robust bull is almost within the desired range when I feel my Aquatica housing being tugged firmly to the right. I assume my assistant, Petero Niurou of Beqa Adventure Divers, is merely trying to show me another shark, so I ignore the gesture. I am locked in on my target and refuse to lose focus. Another more violent yank forces me to respond.

I hurriedly look over my shoulder intending to tell Petero to back-off. My frustration turns to awe when I find an even larger bull mouthing one of my Sea & Sea strobes, with brilliant white teeth gleaming.

Petero, pre-occupied by other curious sharks, eventually sees my predicament. He extends the metal rod he carries for such occasions and "politely" raps the teething behemoth on the head. The bull lets go and swims away as if nothing had happened, while Petero and I shake our respective heads in amazement.

The Republic of Fiji encompasses 1.3 million sq km of the South Pacific Ocean and includes more than 320 islands, of which only 111 are inhabited. Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, the two largest islands, account for 94% of the 945,000 population and 86% of the 18,270 sq km of land.



right: A juvenile fujian banded iguana - one of many up-close and personal wildlife encounters that await visitors in Fiji

Lauren (my wife and model) and I begin our extended holiday by spending a week aboard the Fiji Aggressor II to explore dive sites between the two main islands. A dusk dive at Namena Island's Kansas leaves us thinking of Halloween. Our lights wash over a veritable field of partially-closed magnificent anemones that resemble bright orange pumpkins. Scurrying pink anemonefish are obviously on the wrong end of a trick-or-treat as they are gradually being evicted for the night from their safe, comfy homes.

At Gau Island's Noku Wall, a reef octopus perches atop a coral head and continuously rubs its body with one or more tentacles, much like a bird uses its beak to preen. The colour and texture of its skin change with each caress.

On a later dive, we overcome a strong tidal current running through the Nagali Pass as we manage to reach the natural rock wall that serves as the quasi arena for the Fiji Aggressor II's shark dive. A 100-kilo malabar grouper decides to park itself about one metre from my tenuous position, effectively blocking any and all opportunities to observe the grey reef sharks or schooling bigeye barracuda. No matter what I try, I cannot photograph around this Sumo wrestler look-alike, nor adequately reposition myself without risking being swept out of the channel. Surrendering to the situation, I begin to examine my curious admirer more closely. The Malabar has dark polka dots all over its body, big fleshy lips and bright, inquisitive eyes. I smile as this gregarious fish seems to be posing. So much for the sharks... this dive has now become an extended grouper photo shoot.

An extended surface interval passes quickly during a visit to the Nawaikama Village. The highlight of the excursion is a Kava Ceremony. This traditional exchange features a variety of native dances and the opportunity to taste a kava root concoction called yaqona. A bilo, which is half a coconut shell, is dipped into the mixture and served to each person according to his or her status. The Chief of the village drinks first and from here, it is a steady cycle of scooping until all have had their fill.

The Aggressor's home port is the Raffles Tradewinds Hotel marina in Suva, Viti Levu. Fascination awaits us even here. Both at the beginning and end of our charter, Lauren and I sit transfixed as banded sea kraits crawl out of the water and on top of the rock wall that outlines the hotel property. The experience proves to be just a taste of what awaits us on Toberua Island.



this page from top: A healthy-looking anemone getting ready to close for the evening, leaving residents outside | Octopuses grow large on the reefs of Gau Island

opposite page from top: A large Malabar grouper demands attention; ecosystem health in the South Pacific is unparalleled, as evidenced by schools of fish, including barracuda



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A short taxi ride takes us to Nakelo Landing for our boat crossing to the renowned Toberua Island Resort. LaLa, our guide for the day, is waiting to take us to Mubualau, a small, uninhabited island known to be a refuge for the kraits.

A semi-wet, beach landing precedes our trek into the heart of the island. LaLa cautions us to look up and down before each step. Flying fox fruit bats and red footed boobies rest in the tree tops. When we make too much noise or get too close to a booby's nest, the birds respond by raising their tails and dropping excrement bombs in our general direction. Adorable, fuzzy, white booby chicks, which look bigger than their parents and nests for that matter, show little fear or concern.

Eventually, I begin to notice circular shapes on the rocks, tree stumps and along the ground in all directions. We have found the kraits and they are further from the water's edge than I thought likely or even possible. Members of the only genus of amphibious, oviparous sea snakes, kraits leave the ocean for a variety of reasons, such as to drink fresh water, escape predators, digest food, lay eggs, slough skin and for courtship. Though a krait's venom is ten times more toxic than a rattlesnake's, it's gentle

demeanor and small fangs significantly reduce the risk of life-threatening bites for divers.

Though two nights of pampering at Toberua are simply not enough, we next travel to Savusavu, Vanua Levu to observe Fiji's only resident pod of spinner dolphins. These aerobic marine mammals live in Natewa Bay, the most expansive deep-water bay in the Asia-Pacific realm. Collin McKenny, owner of the resort where we will be staying, greets us at the air strip, puts our bags in her SUV and tells us to hold on. Cratered, unpaved sections of road lined with "Reduce Speed" signs have us bouncing and chuckling all the way to the romantic hideaway called Lomalagi, the Fijian word for "Heaven." A picturesque resort nestled in the hills above Natewa, Lomalagi is also a working coconut and copra plantation.

top clockwise from left: A villager at Nawaikama prepares yaqona – a drink derived from the kava root | Red footed boobies are easily photographed on Mubualau | Banded sea kraits find refuge on uninhabited islands

opposite page: Water clarity is legendary in Fiji, where sea fans and soft corals grow to incredible size



The following morning finds us in the bay searching for the dolphins. Within two hours, we find both pods near one another. Each time we slip in the water and attempt a slow approach, the dolphins move away. We content ourselves watching them from the boat as spinners playfully perform their namesake spins in our wake as we repeatedly make figure 8's.

From Heaven, aka Lomalagi, we fly back to Suva for our final destination in Fiji, the Lagoon Resort at Pacific Harbour. Like so many other places in these idyllic islands, this hotel has an interesting history. The Lagoon Resort was originally built by Arabs in the early 90's as a casino. Subsequent changes in the Fijian government prompted the controversial form of entertainment to be outlawed. Jim and Heather Sherlock, the current owners of the property, now promote more wholesome activities, like shark dives, zip lines across the jungle canopy, golf and even sky diving.

The Lagoon Resort is also home to Beqa Adventure Divers (BAD), which is famous for its controlled shark feeds and soft coral dives in Beqa Lagoon's Shark Reef Marine Reserve. Andrew Cumming, BAD's Dive Operations Manager, emphasizes training for his staff and guests. "Our goal is to consistently offer the best shark dive in the world by protecting the sharks and reef, training our staff, educating our guests and investing in the future," he says.

On our first day of diving the BAD Shark Program suggests the operation is meeting if not exceeding its goals. We swim with blacktip, bull, Grey reef, reef whitetip, silvertip and tawny nurse sharks. In particular, the muscular, powerful and seemingly fearless bulls demand our attention.

Lauren and I have photographed a variety of sharks in oceans around the world. BAD's shark encounter is clearly unique and offers the best combination of species, energy and overall value in an organized setting. Additionally, the soft corals on the wrecks and reef sites in Beqa Lagoon are among the healthiest of our trip. The sheer abundance, size and variety of the species we see, from corals to eels and fish, are impressive.

BAD diving has been the perfect conclusion to this Fijian holiday. We are already planning a quick return. How long has it been since you escaped the daily grind to find your own invigorating adventure? Fiji is waiting for you. [SDAA](#)

below:: Sharks feeds attract a variety of species, including impressive bull sharks
opposite page: A well-earned respite



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