

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Nai'a, Fiji

bright diving, weather permitting, good service all the time

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Dear Fellow Diver:

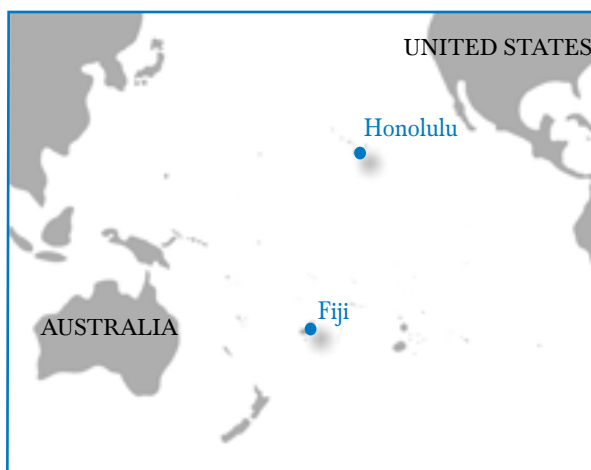
Fiji is acclaimed for the vibrant colors of its corals but it wasn't until the third day of my ten-day dive trip that I saw them. The clouds had cleared a bit when I jumped off the skiff onto a site called Mt. Mutiny. With visibility of 30 feet, I finned next to abundant yellow, gold, purple and lavender soft coral hanging from the steep wall where several white-tipped sharks lingered, and I even startled a resting turtle. Large schools of blue fusiliers and yellow damsels cascaded around me in the shallower depths. Now that's what I had come to see.

Still, some of my dives were -- to use a colorful word here -- crappy. I learned one rule that every diver should know -- you can't predict the weather when you book months in advance. I booked my trip for early May, thinking I was safe from Fiji's official November to April rainy season, but the storms decided to hang around. I spent nearly \$4,000 to dive under cloudy skies and in afternoon rainstorms. I can't fault the Nai'a for that. I last dived Fiji in 2000, enjoying healthy, vibrant corals, multiple pelagics and unique critters, so at least I knew what I was missing. Many of my dives this time were bad-weather duds, but when the sun did show -- ah, the color, the color!

From the moment I stepped aboard Nai'a, the Hawaiian word for dolphin, all signs pointed to a colorful trip. It was a veritable rainbow at Lautoka on Viti Levu's northwest coast - bright shipping containers stacked on the docks, golden sun, emerald hills, inviting deep blue water. My consolation when surfacing from murky dives was



The 120-foot *Nai'a*



that I was pampered aboard a well-run, luxury dive boat. Nai'a is a 120-foot steel-hulled motorsailer built in the mid 70s -- Rob Barrel and sister Alexx Edwards turned it into a live-aboard catering primarily to Americans. The mainsail was partially raised for stabilization but the boat was powered by motor for the trip. Nine cabins with private heads and individual A/C accommodate 18 divers. My clean cabin had two portholes, ample shelf space, and plenty of room to walk around. On the queen bed was a bright patterned sulu, a Fijian sarong to wear around the boat, but I wish I had had more than one pillow to prop myself up for reading. My shower was big enough for two but a grip bar would be good in case the boat lurches.

The 17 other divers were Americans, most of them a Colorado dive group. The leader owned a dive shop named Beaver Divers, a sleazy name he defended by saying the shop is based in Beaver Creek, although his business card stated Vail. After the usual get-acquainted bragging about dive experience and exotic trips, our Swiss cruise director and divemaster Sonia got us in the water for a 5 p.m. check-out dive at Samu Reef, just outside Lautoka Harbor, the boat's home port. The gray, murky site was not a good intro, but Captain Johnathan told me it would improve. After a dinner of filet mignon, green beans and roasted potatoes, we motored northeast to Bligh Water. I awoke to an orange and pink sunrise which quickly clouded over, and I barely saw the sun again for the rest of the trip. It was cloudy, windy and rained heavily on several afternoons.

Nasi Yalodina, Fiji's only wreck, is a hospital ship that went down 10 years ago and slips deeper every year -- its stern is currently at 100 feet with the bow at 80 feet. I swam past large bat fish before the wreck came into view but a screaming current and an annoying wrasse that insisted on cleaning my mask made me head back to the reef, colorless in the overcast sky.

At least the antics of my fellow divers were colorful as we all tried to make the best of the ho-hum diving so far. There was a pull-up contest between 50-year-old Tony and 75-year-old Brad, and the old guy won! The language, too, was colorful when divers became frustrated with strong currents and murky visibility. After a difficult dive at Cat's Meow, a site with coral-encrusted swim-throughs, my buddy and I waited on the surface in heavy swells for 15 minutes. I struggled with the boat-issued safety sausage that wouldn't open, blew a whistle and sounded the Dive Alert, but the skiff was merely a speck on the horizon. Finally my buddy ripped the sausage with his knife to get it inflated and we were picked up. When I showed Sonia the ripped sausage and said, "This is a piece of s**t," her response was, "Everybody should dive with one." Huh?

Sonia speaks six languages and her English is good but I often had to ask questions to clarify during announcements and dive briefings. She gave interesting, easier-to-follow lectures several mornings about reef creatures. She was great at finding the tiniest critters like crinoid shrimp. Eddie, the other divemaster, also had a sharp eye -- he found a banded pipefish that they claim hasn't been scientifically identified so the crew named it "Nai'a pipefish." The remainder of the 14-person crew, many of them veterans, were

Nai'a, Fiji

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★★1/2
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

friendly Fijians who serenaded us on deck with ukuleles and guitars and put on a kava party, causing some divers to sleep through the next morning's dive.

All cabins are below the main deck, accessed from the salon by a steep staircase with narrow treads -- descend backwards and hold on. There is no deck head, so after a dive one had to tackle the stairs while still wet -- an accident waiting to happen. The salon/dining area is tight; when I napped on the banquette-type benches or spread my books and computer on the tables, I had to move everything before mealtime. There's a wide sun deck up top, but no shade -- not a good place for paleskins.

The prep deck is in the center of the boat and has lots of room to suit up and store gear in individual tubs. On the benches, dive briefings took place and divers suited up, bantering off-color stories about Viagra, lawyers, and a joke about both. The dedicated photo room is adjacent with plenty of charging stations, shelf space and room to move. Air tanks were available for blow-drying camera equipment, along with a cameras-only wash bin.

Once tanks were assigned, and BCDs and regulators set up, crew took them to the rear dive deck; I never handled my tank again. Some of the Colorado group were certified solo divers and carried several yellow pony bottles, looking like they were lit up in lights. Because everyone was using Nitrox, it took crew a longer time to fill tanks, especially the mass of pony bottles. That cut down on my air time -- sometimes I was diving with 2,800 psi instead of 3,000. Some dive times were delayed by 15 minutes because tanks were still being filled. But when underwater, I could meander on my own without having to follow a guide.

The two Zodiacs were manned by Mo and Joe, both attentive and helpful, who took my tank while I was still in the water and released a sturdy ladder so I could climb aboard. Joe usually ran me back to the boat without my having to wait for other divers. Back on deck, I took advantage of two hot-water deck showers and always-ready threadbare deck towels that didn't absorb much.

At the site E-6, I back-rolled into the water and was met by a huge school of barracuda before I began investigating caverns and swim-throughs covered with sea fans and soft corals, a photographer's wide-angle dream. In the rubble, I found orange and black nudibranchs and a big-eyed, red and green manta shrimp. No current and good visibility, but those vivid reds and pinks for which Fiji is famous disappeared under the cloud cover.

Each morning, we made meal choices, choosing from two selections for breakfast and lunch, and three for dinner. A pre-breakfast of cereal, juice and toast was set out

Stung Divers: Skip the Vinegar, Use Hot Water

In the "Sea Lice Season" article from our April issue, we recommended divers feeling the burn of sea lice should immediately apply a mix of alcohol and vinegar, followed by hydrocortisone cream, to reduce the pain. Subscriber and emergency physician Ted Shieh, M.D. (Chicago, IL) wrote in to say medical experts have changed these recommendations and the consensus now is immediate water immersion.

"Treatment of exposure to thimble jellyfish larvae is the same as stings from jellyfish, fire corals, sea urchins, anemones and fish -- soak or rinse the affected areas in a warm-water bath or shower with the temperature as hot as tolerable, usually 112 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit," says Shieh. "The treatment should continue until painful symptoms subside, up to 90 minutes, although 10 minutes of a warm shower or soak is adequate for most stings. Having been stung by numerous sea jellies and sea lice, I can attest to the effectiveness of a hot shower."

The rationale: Because most marine animals' toxins can be destroyed by heat, hot water can destroy the venom both inside and outside the skin. "Vinegar can only neutralize stings that didn't penetrate the skin, but it can be used only if it's immediately available and prior to a hot-water dousing. Just in case hot water is not available after a dive, consider packing a heating pad, the squeeze-and-shake kind, to put over the exposed area."

As for treating allergic skin reactions, Shieh recommends a non-sedating antihistamine like Zyrtec or Claritin (loratadine), and a steroid cream such as hydrocortisone. "And of course, I certainly agree that when stings go beyond mild to moderate symptoms, it's time to call a physician -- or invite one on your next dive trip."

The *Baani Adventure's* Lethal Air Compressor

While it is rare these days for divers to be killed by carbon monoxide poisoning, a tragedy on the *Baani Adventure* shows it is a threat, especially in Third World countries. A Russian diver died, two Maldivian diving instructors were hospitalized and eight other divers had to be treated for carbon monoxide poisoning in their tanks provided by the liveaboard. They were floating unconscious after a morning dive at Raydhigaa Thila reef on May 22 but according to another diver on board, the problems had started from the beginning of the trip.

Lee Findlay, a New Zealand divemaster on board as a guest, told *Undercurrent* that he noted several divers and one dive guide had experienced headaches in the two preceding days. The day before the accident, the dive guide had requested a filter change on the two compressors used to fill tanks, but that obviously did nothing.

Ten divers started the fatal dive. After 37 minutes, Findlay's dive buddy rushed to the surface, saying she couldn't breathe. When Findlay surfaced, he found most of the divers and the two guides semi-conscious or unconscious. The single bottle of oxygen on the dhoni didn't work. While a diver did CPR on the unconscious Russian diver, 41-year-old Roman Rudakov, four crew just stood by watching. "None of the crew on either boat appeared to have any training in emergency first aid," Findlay said. "They were completely overwhelmed by the situation." He tried CPR on Rudakov for 35 minutes but got no response. He believes Rudakov was made unconscious by the bad air while he surfaced, and drowned while floating face down in the water.

Tests found most tanks contained carbon monoxide levels of 80 parts per million – the maximum safe level for diving is 15 ppm. Air in Rudakov's tank measured 150 ppm but because that was the maximum level on the testing apparatus, the actual level may have been higher.

Police said a crack in the air pipe leading to the Bauer compressor was poorly mended with duct tape, allowing con-

tamination to enter, probably in the form of engine exhaust. They arrested the 21-year-old man responsible for filling divers' tanks. "But it's the owners who should be held to account rather than this young guy, who no doubt got inadequate training," says Findlay. Other divers told Maldives newspaper *Mini Van News* that they discovered Touring Maldives, *Baani Adventure's* operator, failed to use a carbon monoxide filter recommended by Bauer when compressors are used in conjunction with an engine. When *Undercurrent* contacted Maldives Liveaboards, the *Adventure's* owner, booking operator Gundi Holm replied that the boat's two compressors were serviced by MA Services Male the day before the cruise started, and both compressors were reported to be working fine.

The glaring light on the *Adventure's* lack of first-aid knowledge, plus the fact that the country has no regulatory body for diving safety, made the Maldives tourism bureau organize a dive safety seminar for the local dive operators. It also plans to inspect equipment on all boats.

Maldives Liveaboards says it will start checking boats regularly, and it plans crew training in first-aid courses, compressor handling and emergency management. But Holm says it's difficult to get well-trained crew in Maldives. "Restrictions on foreign work permits don't allow us to bring more educated crew from abroad." Perhaps, but training implemented by dive operators themselves is long overdue.

Holm says divers concerned about doing a trip on that boat or the *Baani Explorer* can cancel their bookings without any fees, and Maldives Liveaboards will refund those who already paid in full.

The Centers for Disease Control lists the most common symptoms of carbon monoxide as headaches, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. High levels of CO inhalation can cause loss of consciousness and death. Unless suspected, CO poisoning can be difficult to diagnose because the symptoms mimic other illnesses.

at 6:15 a.m.; the first of four dives followed at 7:30. Full breakfast at 9 a.m. also included fresh fruit and warm muffins, eggs, maybe a cheese frittata with bacon. After the 11 a.m. dive, I was ready for lunch - - soft fish tacos and coleslaw, sandwiches or pasta or, upon request, Chef Peni made me a crisp, creative salad. Snacks at 4:30 included popcorn, chicken satay, or sashimi. Tea, coffee, hot chocolate, fresh fruit and cookies were on hand all day. The night dive started at dusk about 6 p.m. but was skipped for the village visit, bad weather or if Captain Johnathan needed more time to get to the next site. Most dinners were excellent -- stuffed chicken breast, rack of lamb and grilled tuna with fresh vegetables. The sit-down settings featured cloth napkins and tablecloths. Wine served from carafes added an elegant touch - - the wine snob in me disliked that it came from a box though my dive buddy liked it.

As we visited barrier reefs near Namena, Wakaya and Gau, we dived colorfully named sites. Mellow Yellow was named for its proliferation of yellow and gold soft coral.

Golden Sunset was a first morning dive, and despite sights of a large lionfish, a good-sized white-tipped shark, and a hawkfish and a scorpionfish, I was disappointed that there was no sunlight to bring out the yellow shades of coral. But at Anthias, named for an abundance of them in magenta, orange and red, I had good visibility, mild current and I found a field of garden eels, a pale yellow leaf fish, and an enormous anemone guarded by large clownfish. Dives ranged from 30 to 90 feet, and visibility went from 20 feet on stormy days to 90 feet. Water temperatures averaged 82 degrees, which was actually much warmer than the 76-degree air above.

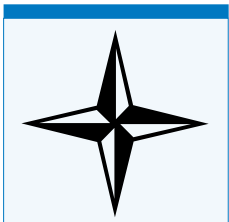
One night, we all donned our sulus for a visit to the 132-person village of Somoso. After a hearty "bula" greeting, the chief presided over the kava welcome ceremony. The muddy-brown brew made from pulverized root was served from a specially-carved bowl -- one clap of the hands to accept the cup and three claps to register "vinaka," thanks in Fijian. Kava is not intoxicating, but my lips were numb and I felt sleepy but happy. Village women sang and men performed a war dance. Some guests came bearing gifts. I brought first-aid supplies but a few brought gum and candy. Was that a good idea for the kids? And as soon as they were passed out, gum wrappers were scattered on the ground.

Then finally! Vivid color! The sun peeked through when we hit Jim's Alley. At 30 feet, the soft corals blazed red, rust, burgundy, pink and purple. Burnt-orange sea fans waved to me. I saw two large carpets of red anemones (the only site in Fiji where they live, I was told) filled with orange anemone fish. I swam among striped surgeon fish, coral groupers, magenta and yellow dottedbacks, iridescent parrotfish and a blue ribbon eel. Lack of sun didn't dent the premier dive site, Nigali Passage. The swift current dive featured schools of barracuda, snappers and big-eyed jacks, dozens of five-foot gray reef sharks and a grouper as big as dual 80s. It hung around on the sandy bottom, posing for photos. A giant clam decked out in purple soft coral sat near a patch of pristine, pale yellow lettuce coral. Banded sea snakes, Moorish idols, yellow needlefish and butterflyfish mingled.

Signs of coral bleaching and weather-caused reef damage are present but Fiji's reefs, walls and pinnacles are alive and regenerating. To experience them in full Technicolor, come between May and October when it's cooler and drier. Although as global warming is changing the reefs, it may also be making the rainy-season timeframes unpredictable.

Nai'a gets high marks for safety, crew-to-passenger ratio, food quality and service. At \$4,200 per person for a ten-day trip, you're certainly going to pay for it, but I'm one of many return guests who come for the frequent-diver discounts and the friendly coddling. I like the divemasters' respect for marine life and a conservation-conscious dedication to preserving it. Nai'a has some minor inconveniences that could be improved, but for divers wanting an upscale trip in the Pacific, it's top-notch.

-- S.M.



Diver's Compass: I arranged my trip, including hotel in Nadi, directly with Nai'a . . . Ten days cost \$4,200 and includes marine park fees and transfers between airport or hotel and the boat; seven-day trips are \$2,940 . . . Nai'a offers a return-diver discount of \$200 for the first return trip, and an additional \$100 discount for each trip thereafter, for a maximum discount of \$1,000 for the 10th return trip . . . Closest chamber is at Suva but the helicopter doesn't fly at night so don't get bent on a night dive. . . . Nitrox is \$7 per day; soft drinks are complimentary as are

beer and wine with dinner; hard liquor is \$5 and the excellent trip video is \$95 . . . On-board charges, including tips, are better to be settled in cash because Nai'a annoyingly imposes a 3 percent surcharge on credit cards (which my Nadi hotel didn't do) . . . Air Pacific (a partner of American for mileage purposes) flies from LAX on a daily code-share flight with Air New Zealand and Qantas, and fall fares were recently priced at \$1,150; however, Nai'a's Web site says they can offer

savings on international air fares . . . Nai'a's online newsletter in October 2007 announced that the boat is for sale; one crew member I asked about this didn't seem concerned, believing it's unlikely the Nai'a will leave Fiji . . . Nai'a's Web site: www.naia.com.fj

Bahamas, Canada, Caymans, Indonesia

planning your next dive trip? Here are readers' suggestions

Boynton Beach, Florida. While most divers head to the Florida Keys' reefs in droves, savvy ones prefer the reefs north of Miami, where diving is more adventurous and more interesting. Monty Chandler (Hundersville, NC) went off Boynton Beach with Splashdown Divers in May and calls it a smooth, professional operation. "It's drift diving so you float a dive flag for each group of five to let the boat captain know where you are, and you keep the dive to an hour maximum. Depths were 50 to 60 feet. If you need to surface earlier than the rest of the group, no problem, just follow the line up to the flag. It's mainly experienced divers who knew the boat's routine, not the usual Caribbean 'tourist diver.' The reef was healthy with brilliantly colored sponges, healthy coral formations, schools of diverse fish life and abundant macro life -- from jawfish and slender filefish to cleaner shrimp and tobacco fish. I saw a 300-pound loggerhead turtle taking a snooze and a 12-foot sawfish resting in the sand. What a sight!" (www.splashdowndivers.com)

Best Kept Secret in Yap, Micronesia. Charter subscriber Alan Dean Foster (Sausalito, CA) asks, "Remember the rollicking 1954 Technicolor film *His Majesty O'Keefe* starring Burt Lancaster? The real O'Keefe operated out of Yap, dealing in copra. Located on the main harbor in Colonia, his O'Keefe's Waterfront Inn keeps that same spirit alive." Done in 19th-century Pacific trader style, the Inn has only five rooms, each featuring either a king bed or two twins, private bath, a/c, hair dryer, telephone, writing desk, refrigerator, and coffee service. Opening the paneled artwork above the mantle reveals a hidden flat-screen TV with DVD player. "Every room has a private deck right on (almost in) the water, and includes a private dive locker, the highlight of which is an integrated heated fan for drying your stuff." The Inn also boasts a well-stocked bar, a grassy sitting area by the water, and an Internet cafe in the same building complex. Across the street is the Inn-owned restaurant. "Far more intimate and quieter than the Trader's Ridge and Manta Ray Bay resorts, the Inn is next to Manta Ray Bay Divers. It will make you feel like you've stepped back in time." Rooms run \$155 a night plus 10% tax. (www.okeefesyap.com). PS. Foster is a top-of-the-chart science-fiction writer; visit his website at www.alandeanfoster.com.

Bonaire House Rentals. Many divers traveling in groups rent houses in Bonaire rather than pay more money for

impersonal hotels and condos. Some good Web sites for finding houses: Bonaire Partners (www.bonairepartners.com) and SunRentals (www.sunrentalsbonaire.com), and VacationRentals.com has listings on most Caribbean islands and in Mexico. (www.vacationrentals.com). Subscriber Erik Enger (Washington, DC) recommends Bonaire house renters book dive packages through BelMar Apartments. "By doing so, I could get tanks from both BelMar located down south, or Buddy Dive on the north end of Kralendijk, and this can really save time. If you book through Buddy, you can only get tanks from Buddy. BelMar only has dive boats going out on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so this way I was also able to go on Buddy's boats." (www.belmar-bonaire.com)

Town Pier and South Pier Alert. Book these Bonaire dives in advance, before leaving home: Charlie Wallace (Simpsonville, KY), who stayed at Divi Flamingo Beach Resort, told us, "With more large cruise ships coming in, there is less time and fewer reservations opening up to dive the pier." He couldn't book a dive when he was there in February.

Bikini Atoll Divers Shutdown. Rising fuel prices, the plunging U.S. economy and a screwed-up airline have closed Bikini Atoll Divers after 13 years. Air Marshalls, the one-aircraft airline and the only way to get to the atoll, has been out of commission for seven months due to mechanical difficulties. Jack Niedenthal, tourism operations manager for Bikini Atoll, told *Undercurrent* that even though Air Marshalls may have a second plane by 2009, Bikini Atoll Divers will stay closed because of the skyrocketing cost of fuel to run the power plant on Bikini. "In 2004, it cost us \$350,000 for fuel and operations. For 2009, estimated costs will be \$960,000." Niedenthal welcomes business proposals and suggestions on how Bikini Atoll Divers can be saved -- e-mail him at bikini@ntamar.net.

Indigo Divers in Grand Cayman. While our Chapook and Web site lists several good small operations on Grand Cayman, let us also call attention to Indigo Divers, run by Chris and Kate Alpers. Rich Erickson (Marietta, GA), who dived with them in March, says they take you to better sites on the north and south shore, weather permitting, and only take up to six divers on their 35-foot Donzi cruiser. "It's more like diving with friends who have a boat," says Paul Lima (Christiana, TN), who visited in May. "Chris and Kate were attentive but let you dive your computer and were never in a rush to end the dive." Eddie