

# **TRIP REPORTS**

# 10 Days in Fiji

*oh yeah. it's kinda like that.*

## Day 1

I thought the flight was at 11pm, so when we finally caught the shuttle to the airport at 8:30pm we were only supposed to be a little late. Turns out the flight had been changed to 10:30pm and we were cutting it close - considering the airline wanted us there 3 hours before the flight. All went ok though, and we got to the gate a full 20 minutes before it began boarding. Whew!

## Day 2

While most of it was spent in flight and lost due to crossing the dateline, we'll call this the day we landed. Arriving in Nadi (pronounced Non-dee) around 7:30am, we collected our luggage and boarded the bus to Pacific Harbour. On the way we stopped in Sagatoka at a shop and were greeted with FREE BEER! Gotta love this country! Our first Fiji Bitter was welcome even at 10am, and not to be our last. I'm not sure where it started, but they became known as "Fiji Baby" after that. So after our brief shopping trip we reboarded and continued to the harbor. We boarded our boat around 11am and most of us were starving by then. A 45 minute boat ride to the island of Beqa (pronounced Beng-ga) brought us within 10 feet of shore, but we had to wade through calf-deep water the rest of the way. The Fijians on shore sang to us and gave us flower necklaces in greeting, followed by some juice and the orientation to our stay. Then we



**Our Buré**

were shown to our rooms. It was EXACTLY like the one in the brochure! We changed clothes and headed down to the common room for lunch. Then after unpacking, we suited up for our afternoon check-out dive (to get our weights and things situated). The water was a balmy 84 degrees and the reef directly off the beach was fantastic.

When we were done, we showered and took what we thought was going to be a brief nap, but someone had to come knock on our door to get us to dinner. The food there was spectacular including a unique and special dessert every night. We turned in early (as became our custom) and slept the sleep of the dead.

## Day 3

7a.m. comes early (shortly after dawn I think) and we were again awakened by a polite knock on our door summoning us to breakfast. A plate of pancakes later we were off to the dive boat. As we begin to become acquainted with the members of our group, a few personalities stick out. First there is the guy that they keep calling "Cowboy Bob," but for the life of me I can't figure out why. Turns out, back in Burbank, he is always wearing boots and a hat. Not so in Fiji. By the trip's end, he is known as Fiji Bob. Then there is the German. I'm not sure if it's really his

name, but he goes by Nino. And more recently “Destructo” or “Butu, the Bavarian Moon Fish”. Construct your own visual for that one, sorry to say, I missed it and Ilene isn’t sharing the pictures anymore. Then there were Josh and Sylvia, our trip leaders who were a couple clowns themselves. There is some neat video footage of them riding each other’s tanks, or holding each other by the fins, taking turns at getting a free ride. Then there is Kevin #1 (we had two Kevins and two Marks on the trip). Kevin1 is almost as tattooed as I am which great work, beautiful in fact, which is amazing, since he’s black. You don’t usually see color like that on dark skin. He is the 3rd in the “Ipod Trio” with Nino and Josh. More amusing than their underwater antics was watching them trying to best one another in a “worst song” competition with their Ipods that they always had with them between dives. The winner I thought was the one who showed up with “Dreamweaver.”

The diving was great - warm, clearish water (not as clear as I remembered, but they had been getting a lot of rain) and I had one creature on my wishlist that I had not seen on my last trip. The Blue Ribbon Eel. Guess what we saw on the VERY FIRST DIVE. Not one, but TWO of these elusive, beautiful creatures! That set the stage for the rest of the trip.



**Blue Ribbon Eels one and two**

Upon return, we took a shower and headed to lunch. The next four mornings went exactly the same way. In the afternoons we would walk the beach, collecting shells, or one day I got a massage in my room while Mark joined the “Manly Men” for a treacherous hike up to the waterfall. A couple times we went snorkelling in the lagoon -



**Lagoon reef with kayak bottom**

almost a difficult feat in sometimes less than two feet of water, but we took the kayaks out to where it dropped to 12 feet and freedove the edge of the reef. The first time we took the kayaks out, we took the two seater, but SOMEONE



lost his balance and tipped us over. That was the first time we lost a camera. It was his little

cheapo one, so that was ok. After that we each took our own kayak. Twice on the way back in we raced another couple and the loser had to buy the “Fiji babies”. Somehow I won.

The second camera was lost on a dive. Mark was videotaping and when we came across a collection of anemone-fish he wanted to get some photos as well so he motioned for me to give him the camera out of my BC pocket. He took the pics, then went back to videotaping. But the camera was not clipped to his BC, so it floated away unnoticed. There was a definite current so by the time we got back on the boat, the camera was halfway to Maui we guessed so the search didn't go on long. At least he wasn't the first to lose a camera. He wasn't even the first guy named Mark to lose a camera. It was just that kind of trip.

So when our time at Beqa Lagoon was up, we headed to our next destination: Ovalau. We caught a taxi at Pacific Harbour to Suva. We had several hours to kill before our flight so we went into town to do some shopping. When we had about an hour left, we ducked out of the rain in a little bar called the Whistling Duck. We ordered a couple "Fiji babies" and were invited to join a group of people who had been partying there since 2am when they got off their shift at MacDonalds. They "taught" us how to dance, gave us beer and cigarettes and the only girl among them swears that the way you tell a boy you like him in Fiji is to walk up and whisper in his ear "I have a condom in my pocket." We had a great time with them and nearly didn't get out of there in time for our flight, but we went back to the airport and flew to Levuka. The son of the hotel owner was there to pick us up and then we drove almost an hour to the hotel where we had dinner and fell into bed.

The next morning we got up for breakfast and went to the dive shop. We were diving from a much smaller boat this time, and the currents were wicked. As we rounded a pinnacle I caught sight of my first manta ray. I had stupidly decided to not bring my camera since I wanted to check out the diving conditions first, but Mark had his videocamera. I motioned for him to come see the manta, but he was busy looking at something else....turns out there were TWO mantas. He wasn't close enough to the second to see as well, so he only got "Manta Shadow" on tape, but at least he saw one. Mark's ear had been hurting him off and on for a few days, and on my last trip to Fiji several people had gotten ear infections. So after the second dive, Mark decided that the pain in his ear was pretty bad, and we stopped at the hospital on our way back from lunch. A quick, free, 3 prescription visit later, it was determined that Mark's diving days were over. At least until the infection healed.

It was a hot, muggy, and mosquito filled evening that convinced me that I'd rather be back home than finish diving without Mark, so the next day we made arrangements to go home early.



**Runway at Levuka airport**

We flew back to Suva and then back to Nandi where we stayed the night. Our flight to L.A. was at 11pm the next day so we went into Nandi to shop some more. That's when we got hijacked.

I call it that, but what happened is a mix of scary, silly, stupid and frustrating. A guy came up to us and told us that we shouldn't buy from the big stores that mostly get their stuff from the Phillipines anyway, that we should go to a REAL Fijian crafts store. We agreed and asked him where it was. He wouldn't say, he LED us there. Then made us take off our shoes and have a Kava ceremony. Then he LET us go into the store where it turns out everything was WAY overpriced. Mark managed to haggle, but I'm terrible at it and ended up paying \$40 for a one inch carving of a fish. Then I said we had to leave because we were hungry. This didn't even get us away from the guy. He WALKED us to this place across the street, SAT us, and I swear I thought the guy was going to eat lunch with us when he finally left. We ate, then spent the rest of the day hiding out in the big air-conditioned stores that he'd pulled us away from.

I love Fiji, but shopping in Nandi I could have done without. The people of Fiji are NOTHING like the ones in Nandi. I'll remember that for sure.

Finally, it was time to go home.



**Vanua Levu at sunset**

# 4 Days in Mexico

*where you can GET beer at 10pm, just not from the store...*

## Thursday, 10am

After having to remove and rearrange our gear to meet the lower weight limit, we get the runaround by security whom can't seem to decide whether our dive lights pose more of a threat in our checked luggage or our carry-ons. Not even among them can they agree whether or not we are allowed to keep our batteries in them. I get so flustered by having to open my Pelican case twice that I completely forgot to remove my film from my backpack and sent it through the x-ray. A couple consoling drinks in the airport bar later, the 20 of us reconvened and chatted with old friends and got acquainted with new ones.



The flight was a short hour and a half and we stepped out into the lovely 85 degree sunshine with a cooling breeze. We admired the Perros de Policia while we waited to get through the Immigration



**Volcanic formations and sealions**

and Customs lines. Their system was inadequate and convoluted, but we managed to get through and boarded our Campos Travel vans to the hotel. It was nothing special, but it was right on the beach and I immediately changed and walked through the sand to the blue water. It wasn't as warm as I expected 85 degrees to be, but we soon were met by the dive shop owner, Bruce, who picked up our gear and gave us directions to the shop. After a brief dinner we walked the four blocks to the little shop and were arranged on



**pair of puffers**

the Ponga boats in groups of 4, 5 and 6. Another couple blocks to the marina and we got our briefing for the night dive.

Suiting up on our way to Coronado Island, I told my dive group what I had read about whale sharks. That

they came to the surface to feed at night so that this was the dive we were most likely to see them since they were known to dive deep during the day to keep cool. We did our backwards roll into the dark water

and slipped down to 30 feet. We cruised over to the edge of the reef and my buddy and I were the first ones down the wall. The “walls” actually looked architectural like they were carved or built. And in every crevase were eels, hogfish, trunkfish, and towards the end there was the cutest little round stingray, but if there were whale sharks nobody had a light powerful enough to catch them. “Did you see the whale shark?” actually became the running joke of the weekend.

We concluded our dive and rinsed our gear at the shop before walking a block up the street to the “Tecate store”. We picked up a couple six packs (at \$4.50 each) and on our way down the street to the hotel, we stopped and I picked up a few tacos at a roadside stand. They were the best damn tacos I’d ever had. We returned to our rooms and went to bed, but sleep eluded me, as I was worried I wouldn’t wake up in time for the dive since I didn’t have a watch or phone or anything on which to tell time.

### **Friday, 7am**

There’s a knock on my door to startle me awake, and I stumble down to breakfast and after some yummy chorizo and eggs we went to the dive shop and loaded our gear onto the boats. We headed back to Coronado Island, but further north to an outcropping with the most amazing volcanic formations and a whole mess of sealions. They see us and start piling into the water. Hmm.... same thing I saw at the OTHER Coronados.... I wonder if it’s a name thing.

We pull alongside one of the other boats and are instructed to follow their anchor line since it’s a bit of a blue water descent with a slight current. Shall we say, understatement of the year? The descent wasn’t bad, but the current was not only faster than I could walk, but once you turned the corner of the reef it turned into a DOWN current! As we were already at 70 feet, being suddenly pushed to 100 with the potential for deeper I began to wonder if we weren’t in a bit over our heads. Literally. I got my buddy’s attention and ascended to around 50 feet and took photos of a school of



**the Motley Crew**

puffers that were hanging out there. Yeah. SCHOOL. I’d never seen more than 2 at a time before and there were 20 or 30 right in one area all chilling and enjoying the current. At least THEY were.

We come up over the top of the reef and see that the divemaster and everyone else are already ascending the anchor-line. We had only been down about 15 minutes so I wasn’t ready to go back and I figured my buddy wasn’t either so I motioned asking if he wanted to go back to the edge of the

reef where the current wasn't so bad. He agreed and off we went. However, the notion that the current "wasn't so bad" was an error and I ended up hanging onto the reef while my feet trailed behind me, waving like a flag. After fighting it for a while, we gave in and began to ascend the anchor-line. Suddenly the anchor is pulled and is coming TOWARDS us! We knew it wasn't OUR boat whose anchor we were on, but we figured someone might have told them that we were still down and had been instructed to use their line. No such luck. Our safety stop was cut short and we surfaced to yell at the boat that "we were USING that!" They didn't seem to care and said they had to go.

We found out later that someone on the boat was getting sick and they wanted to get out of the chop. Upon surfacing we discovered that the once calm ocean had turned into a boil with whitecaps and waves breaking over our heads. And our boat? Nowhere to be seen. We looked around and saw two of the other boats, but not ours. My buddy and I are both pretty experienced so there was no panicking, but I've certainly been more comfortable. We finally spotted our boat and saw that my buddy's non-diving girlfriend who had been on the boat with us was missing. We board and my buddy asks our captain who's answer was "se fuera" or "she went away". It turns out she had been getting a little seasick as well and was dropped off in a protected cove to snorkel.

We picked her up and after a brief surface interval that included such wild sights as Kyle and Frank doing back flips off the Pongas, we hopped



**unhappy captured triggerfish**

in at the calm cove and swam around a finger reef teaming with eels that left us right in the cove where the sealions were playing. They buzzed us just like the ones back home, coming really close and then veering off at the last second. With about 60 to 80 foot vis it was quite a show. We ran out of no-deco time long before we ran out of air, so we surfaced and went to a beach with white sands and warm shallow water for our lunch interval. I had a bean and cheese sandwich (about as bland as it sounds) and went to play in the water. I discovered a tiny little puffer who seemed enthralled with my toes which made me a little nervous knowing that they have a nasty bite and like to eat squid. Do my toes look like squid? I don't know, but I kept my eye on the little sucker. What finally drove me out of the water were all the little jellyfish. I got a couple stings and decided I'd had enough.

Our 3rd dive was right around the corner and we were down for nearly an hour in the 50 to 20ft reef with 87 degree temps. We were pretty beat upon our return, but we showered and changed and about 10 of us joined the dive shop owner for dinner at El Taste Restaurant for some good steak. Needless to say, we slept pretty well that night.



## Saturday, 6:45am

Much to my dismay, my morning knocks were getting earlier. I arrived at breakfast and ordered the fruit and granola plate. The thing we discovered about the hotel restaurant is that no matter what you order, it will come out whenever they feel like bringing it. Chorizo and eggs takes a mere 15 minutes but you could wait an hour for some toast. We could find no rhyme nor reason for it, but then discovered that the server was also the COOK! They had one guy taking orders, making the food, serving it and writing up our checks! We gave him a break after that.

Our first dive of the day was a sea mount (!) A total Blue Water descent to a pinnacle that begins around 60 feet and (reportedly) goes down several hundred feet. Perhaps it was a multi-level pinnacle, because I found a bottom (of sorts) at 120 feet. It was covered in this chartreuse colored sea grass looking stuff that we would later find out was actually black coral. Yeah. The endangered kind. So why is it yellowish green at 120 feet? This was the first dive that Bruce did with us (the other dives he was teaching)



and he was swimming near my buddy and me when I saw his hand dart under a rock after a Unicorn Triggerfish. I was mortified that he would catch fish in a “no take” marine sanctuary (on the surface he had mentioned how good triggerfish taste) so I swam away. When I looked back, he was following me, with the fish IN HIS HANDS. At least he hadn’t killed it like I feared, he had just brought it out to show it to us up close. I took a photo and swam away hoping he would let the

poor thing go, but he held onto it till my buddy got a pic as well. Later on I saw him holding a pufferfish. I spoke to him about it after we surfaced, saying I appreciated that he wanted me to get the best pictures, but that was not how I preferred to do it.

Our surface interval was at a rocky cove below a towering cliff where we all climbed over the interesting structures and everyone but 3 of us ate tuna ceviché. I don’t eat fish, Tracy doesn’t eat any meat and Kyle doesn’t eat mayonnaise. So we had some breakfast bars and tried to pretend we weren’t hungry. There had been a sign up sheet at the beginning of the trip where you could put any special meal requirements, but apparently they had chucked it and were going by memory because there was a second bin of ceviché that didn’t have tomatoes (the other item I had listed as “don’t eat”) but, alas, still had fish.

The last dive was a virtual aquarium with a large quantity and diversity

of fish from 15 to 60 feet. My buddy and I had both gone down with only 24 exposures and were through our film before the dive was half over. Of course, on a 62 minute dive, that's not hard to do. Since that was our last dive of the trip, I asked the boat captain to drop us off at our hotel instead of the dive shop so we wouldn't have to lug our gear. Everyone else on my boat thought that was a great idea, but we didn't have a chance to inform the other boats so they all went to the harbor and walked to the dive shop.

After rinsing our gear, taking a shower and dressing we met at the front desk to catch a cab to town. We were having lunch/dinner at La Terraza and then doing a little shopping. Lunch was great and soon we were off to comb the original cobblestone streets for deals.

Around 7pm, we decided to take Bruce up on his offer to come have drinks at his house and caught a cab to Nopoló, a development a few miles south of town. He has a beautiful home, but a couple drinks later we realized how tired we were and headed back to the hotel. Then a couple of the guys decided that we should all have a soak in the hot tub. After stepping into it, we decided it really needed a new name since it was so far from hot it was ridiculous. We made up a new name for Mexican hot, since we'd had the same trouble in our showers. It is now Mexican luke cold. And you get the same temperature out of the hot faucet as you do the cold. In fact, sometimes the cold is warmer.

We decided we wanted some beer around 10pm and a few of the guys set

out to the Tecate store. Unfortunately, it was closed so they asked a street taco vendadora where they could get some. She points and tells Jose (the only one among us who is fluent in Spanish) to go to a house down the street (that incidentally has no lights on). They went, and knocked on the door. All the lights come on, and a guy answers. Jose explains that they were sent by the taco lady and soon after they return with 12 beers and a pack of cigarettes. What a country.

### **Sunday, 11:15am**

Finally got to sleep in, packed up my stuff and went to get lunch. A few people sat with me to keep me company (since they had all had breakfast) and soon we were off to the airport. Another trip through security revealed that they didn't know any more than than their counterparts on the American side about batteries and dive lights and we ended up at another airport bar. Suffice to say we all got back ok and look forward to returning soon.