

Raki Raki

Fiji's Soft Coral Paradise

By Jeff Mullins

We began our descent from the dive boat to a shallow reef-top only eight metres below. This shallow reef was actually the top of a huge coral-encrusted pinnacle, rising vertically out of much deeper water. As we arrived, a pair of mackerel swooped in and began attacking a massive school of fusiliers that were sheltering around the top of the pinnacle, scattering the school in nervous fright.

Waiting for our dive companions to descend, we began exploring the shallow edge of the reef and quickly realised how rich this pinnacle was. A riot of coloured soft corals in bright pink, fiery-orange and blood-red lined the edge. Orange basslet fish danced above the soft corals and a big grand-daddy lionfish hovered gracefully along the edge. All this and we had only just left the surface!

This dive at 'Golden

Dreams' was to be one of our favourites and is just one of dozens of sites that are dotted around the reefs offshore from the north coast of Viti Levu in the Fiji Islands. Viti Levu is Fiji's largest island and is where the capital Suva is located. We decided to dive off the northern coast around the district of Raki Raki as we had heard that the reefs here had pristine soft corals and marine life. Plus the area is only a two and a half hour drive by car from the International Airport at Nadi.

Raki Raki is a rural area with cane farming as its main industry, though many of the native Fijians are fishermen. Within a few kilometres of shore are a handful of islands surrounded by a maze of coral reefs, eroded with caves and swim-throughs. Further offshore in the Vatu-I-Ra Passage are reefs and pinnacles that offer World class diving. The offshore reefs have traditionally been



The reef crest at 'Golden Dreams' is a riot of colours, here a lionfish meanders through a field of soft corals. Canon AE1P, Sigma 28mm, Tussey T300 dome port, AquaSea 140 strobe & Slave, Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th.

(Right) The Cookie Monster was found in a small cave at 'Mellow Yellow' No touch-ups here, this is exactly how I found it. Canon AE1P, Canon 50mm macro, Tussey T300 flat port, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Velvia, f13.5 @ 1/60th.





The jetty area on Nananu I Ra island has a nice beach with two accommodations nearby. Canon T-70, Sigma 15mm lens, in natural light, 50 Velvia f8@ 1/125th.

(Right) This tiny juvenile lionfish was found hovering among the shallows at 'Golden Dreams'. Canon AE1P, Canon 50mm macro, Tussey T300 flat port, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Velvia, f16 @1/60th.

accessible only from a few live-aboard dive vessels that ply these waters, but are now able to be dived from day trips operating from Raki Raki.

The largest of the offshore islands is Nananu-I-Ra; here a few chalet accommodations are located right on the beaches around the island. Two dive operators service the area, offering day trips out to the reefs. **Ra Divers** visit only the inshore sites within 30 minutes of Nananu-I-Ra

Island. While **Bamboo Reef Divers** travel out to the open water reefs in Vatu-I-Ra Passage, around one hours boat journey from the island - plus the inshore sites as well. The really good news here is that diving is still in its infancy, new sites are still being discovered, so the area hasn't been dived to death!

Among the dozen or so dive sites the inshore area has to offer, all had interesting and varied reef profiles. Huge rocky reefs with vertical walls



Oni Beach at Nananu I Ra Island is a kilometre of uninhabited tropical paradise.





and eroded with caves, holes and ledges gives a feeling of exploring rather than just finning above the reef. Among our favourites reefs were -

Dream-Maker a collection of huge bommies sitting very close to each other, some reaching up from 25m to only 6m below the surface. Many of the bommies have swim-throughs, small caves and big ledges that are lined with gorgonian fans, soft corals and sea whips. Fish life consists mostly of smaller colourful species, though we did see white-tip reef sharks and a huge puffer fish here.

Golden Dreams {where this

article begins} is a large area of interconnected bommies, with varying depths from 9m down to 25m. It soon becomes apparent where the name comes from; the sides of three big bommies are covered in golden soft corals. The balance of the bommies, plus the ridges and reefs that interconnect them, are coated in stunning soft corals in the deeper areas and huge plate corals in the shallower sections. We saw Lionfish on every dive here (including one tiny pale-yellow coloured juvenile) and hordes of basslet fish in the shallows. Coral Trout, sweetlips and snappers



(Left) The gorgonia ledge at a 'Dua Tali' a dive site everyone wanted to dive again, hence the Fijian name meaning 'Once More'. Nikonos III & 15mm, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Provia, f5.6 @ 1/60th.

(Above) The shallow reef-tops are often covered with anemones and Anemonefish. Canon AE1P, Sigma 90mm macro, Tussey T300 extended flat port, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Velvia, f16 @ 1/60th.

were always around.

The Maze is just that, a virtual maze of big reefs and bommies that have a mixture of gullies, caves, holes, canyons and ledges. Depths varied from 8m down to 23m and it could be easy to get lost here, but what a place to get lost! Some of Fiji's best soft corals line the walls and ledges and it seemed the prettiest corals were just below the boat mooring. We saw a large school of sweetlips, lobsters and some terrific nudibranchs here.

Breathmaker is located adjacent to **Golden Dreams**, and is a group of

bommies reaching up from a long ridge of reef that finishes abruptly at a steep wall falling to beyond 100m. This wall is the best place to see sharks around Raki Raki, white-tips are always found here, along with almost guaranteed sightings of whalers and black-tips. We also saw moray eels, schooling snapper, barracuda, mackerel and some great anemone fish.

Marama Totoka (Beautiful Lady) has some shallow reefs with stunning soft corals and swarms of anthias covering the tops of most bommies in only 6-8m deep. The



(Left) The shallow reef-crests are a mass of colourful soft corals surrounded by basslets. Nikonos III & 15mm, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Provia, f13.5 @ 1/60th.

(Right) Groups of Cling Gobies inhabited most gorgonia fans on the offshore reefs. Canon AE1P, Sigma 90mm macro, Tussey T300 extended flat port, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Velvia, f22 @ 1/60th.



bommies come out of 12-15m of water, though there is some deeper water on the outer extremities of the bommies, where we explored ledges and small caves.

The reefs further offshore from Raki Raki in the Vatu-I-Ra Passage offer some beautiful dive sites. These are all open ocean dives on pinnacles that rise from phenomenal depths, we visited in a period of strong south-easterly winds but were still able to dive some of the best sites in fantastic underwater conditions. The best that we saw were -

Black Magic Mountain is a solitary pinnacle starting at 7 metres with almost vertical walls. One side has a ridge leading away at 27 metres, but around the rest of the small pinnacle, the bottom was out of sight. The entire reef was covered in soft corals and gorgonian fans, pelagic fish action was non-stop, a huge school of surgeonfish and fusiliers hung just off the reef. Trevally arrived in bursts,

sending the fusiliers into panic on each pass. A school of barracuda hovered at the edge of the ridge, and on the reef were coral cod, sweetlips, plus thousands of basslets surrounded the soft corals - what a dive!

G-6 was a heart pounding drift around a double-topped pinnacle with a shallow channel through the middle. The current here keeps the fish life very active. Grey reef sharks hover over the sand beyond 30 metres, while big schools of fish paraded past. The reef has a series of ledges from 8 metres down to 25 metres on one face and vertical to 40 metres on another side. Soft corals were everywhere and one big overhang was 'dripping' with the bright yellow *Siphonogorgia* soft coral.

Garden of Eden had a reef just a meter below the surface, this dropped vertically to between 10-18 metres where the bottom sloped out to deeper water. The wall has a series of large crevices running into

the reef face, these can be entered carefully to view huge gorgonian fans and soft corals. The deeper slope has beautiful small bommies where soft corals are surrounded by thousands of basslets. We also saw parrotfish, scorpion fish and a group of waloo that cruised past checking us over.

Mellow Yellow is a shallow bommie connected at about 18 metres to a deeper bommie, both of them are coated with a bright yellow soft coral. This reef had lots of interesting macro life; dragon nudibranchs, a small anemone with a dozen anemone fish darting around, scorpion fish, painted oysters, angelfish, leaf fish and lots of coral cod in

the crevices.

Pot Luck is adjacent to **Garden of Eden** and is the corner of the same reef. We loved this place as it had very little current, but buzzed with life. Lots of ledges and mini caves to explore, and ridges loaded with gorgonians and soft corals all in full bloom. We swam around the corner into a howling current, turned around and just hung-back around the area where all the action was - without the current. Finds here included ghost pipefish, big sweetlips being cleaned, a turtle, beautiful gobies, nudibranchs, leaf fish plus all the usual reef fish meandering around.

On our non-diving days we went beachcombing and exploring mangroves along the shore or just walked around the island. Day trips are available to the mainland to visit waterfalls; traditional Fijian villages or the once-a-week market on Saturday's at Raki Raki township is highly recommended.

One of the greatest attractions we found in Fiji was the native Fijians themselves. We had heard many accounts from visitors to Fiji before our inaugural dive trip. Yet one comment in particular stood out, because everyone we spoke to told us the same thing - The Fijian people are great, you'll find them so warm and friendly. Well we certainly weren't disappointed, after two trips here we concluded that the Fijian people were



(Above) *The reef-top at the 'Pinnacles' has many varieties of anemonefish.* Canon AE1P, Sigma 90mm macro, Tussey T300 extended flat port, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Velvia, f19 @ 1/60th.

(Right) *The vertical walls of Black Magic Mountain are home to schooling surgeonfish, fusiliers and basslets.* Nikonos III & 15mm, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Provia, F5.6 @ 60th.

the friendliest we had ever met, most of them treating us like old friends after only meeting them for a few days or even hours.

The best time of year to visit is from May through to November, when rainfall is least and sunny days prevail. Underwater visibility is often over 30 metres on the offshore sites, while inshore is between 10-20 metres. Diving is possible in the rainy season (December to April), but

underwater visibility can be restricted, particularly on the inshore sites.

Dive Operators in the Raki Raki area are;

Bamboo Reef Divers - are based at Bamboo Beach Resort on Nananu-I-Ra Island. e-mail info@bambooreefdivers.com or web address is www.bambooreefdivers.com



Ra Divers - are located at Wananavu Beach Resort. e-mail radivers@is.com.fj or web address is www.radivers.com

Places to Stay;
On Nananu-I-Ra Island;
Bethams Beach Cottages and



The offshore reefs have been eroded by wave action, forming caves and ledges, where soft corals thrive. Nikonos III & 15mm, Aqua Sea 140 & Slave, Provia, f8 @ 1/60th.

McDonalds Nananu Beach Cottages are both self-contained chalet accommodations, right on a beautiful beach. Both have a small restaurant and shop to purchase food and essentials, plus they arrange boat transfers to and from the mainland. They also have back-packer dormitories. Web Address for Bethams is <http://www.bethams.com.fj/>.

A resort high on the island's hilltop was being refurbished during our last visit, **Bamboo Beach Resort** (formerly the Mokusig Island

Resort) opened in March 2004 under new American ownership with its own dive operation (see above).

On the Mainland;

Wananavu Beach Resort is located on the mainland, on a peninsula just across the water from Nananu-I-Ra Island. Though the resort has full facilities with nice rooms, great food and a pool - sadly the beach is unattractive mud.

Jeff Mullins



Jeff is a freelance photo-journalist residing in Perth, Western Australia. Jeff's first article was published in 1979, in *Skindiving* in Australia magazine. His works have since been published widely in other dive related magazines including; *Ocean Realm*, *Sportdiving*, *Asian Diver*, *Scuba Diver*, *Discover Diving*, *GEO*, *Dive Log Australasia*, plus various airline in-flight magazines, newspapers and travel publications.

Jeff self-published his first book *Dive Western Australia*, in 1993. His book credits include *Australia Down Under*, *Dive Australia*, *Atlas of Australian Dive Sites* & *Top Dive Sites of Australia*.

reefimages@hotmail.com

A full service
dive travel agency
specializing in
photography
trips

Travel with the Pros:
Clay Wiseman, Jack & Sue Drafa, Denise & Larry Tackett, Stuart & Michelle Westmoreland

Reef Rainforest
DIVE & ADVENTURE TRAVEL

or

Venture on your own to the premiere underwater landscapes of the world

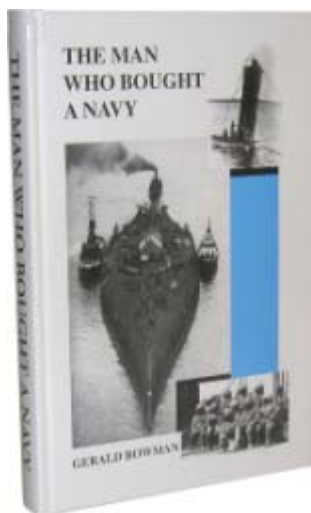
photos © Doug Richardson

Let our Experience be your Guide

Toll free(US & Canada) 1 800 794 9767
International +001 415 289 1760
California USA

photo@reefrainforest.com
www.ReefRainforest.com

The Man who bought a Navy



Pieced together after much research and told for the first time in this autobiography is the astounding story of what is regarded as the greatest achievement in the history of marine salvage - the raising of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow.

The Man who bought a Navy contains 249 pages and has over 100 photographs.

Copies cost £19.95 (+£3 UK postage) *To order your copies, contact* PR Productions. Tel 44 (0)20 8399 5709 or email peter@pr-productions.co.uk

www.pr-productions.co.uk

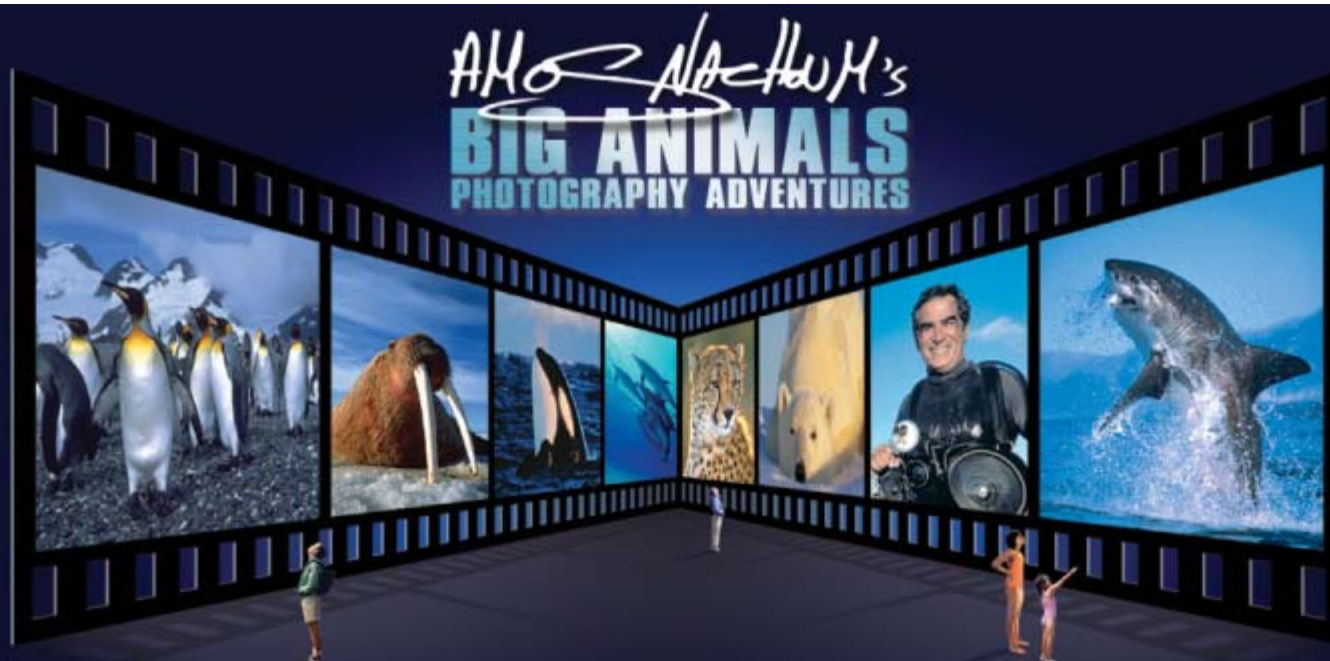
South Africa Sardine Run
June 10-20, '04

South Africa
Great White Shark
June 30-July 14, '04

Bikini Atoll
July 14-August 4, '04

Tonga, Humpback Whales
August 16-30, '04

The World:
001 (415) 923-9865
U.S.: (877) 229-4253



Norway, Orcas
November 5-13, '04

Ultimate Antarctica
January 22-February 12, '05

Mexico, Humboldt Squid
May 1-15, '05

High Arctic, Polar Bear,
Beluga & Narwhale
May 26-June 16, '05

Join world-renowned wildlife photographer Amos Nachoum
as he leads these inspiring photography and diving adventures

Visit us on the web at:
www.BigAnimals.com