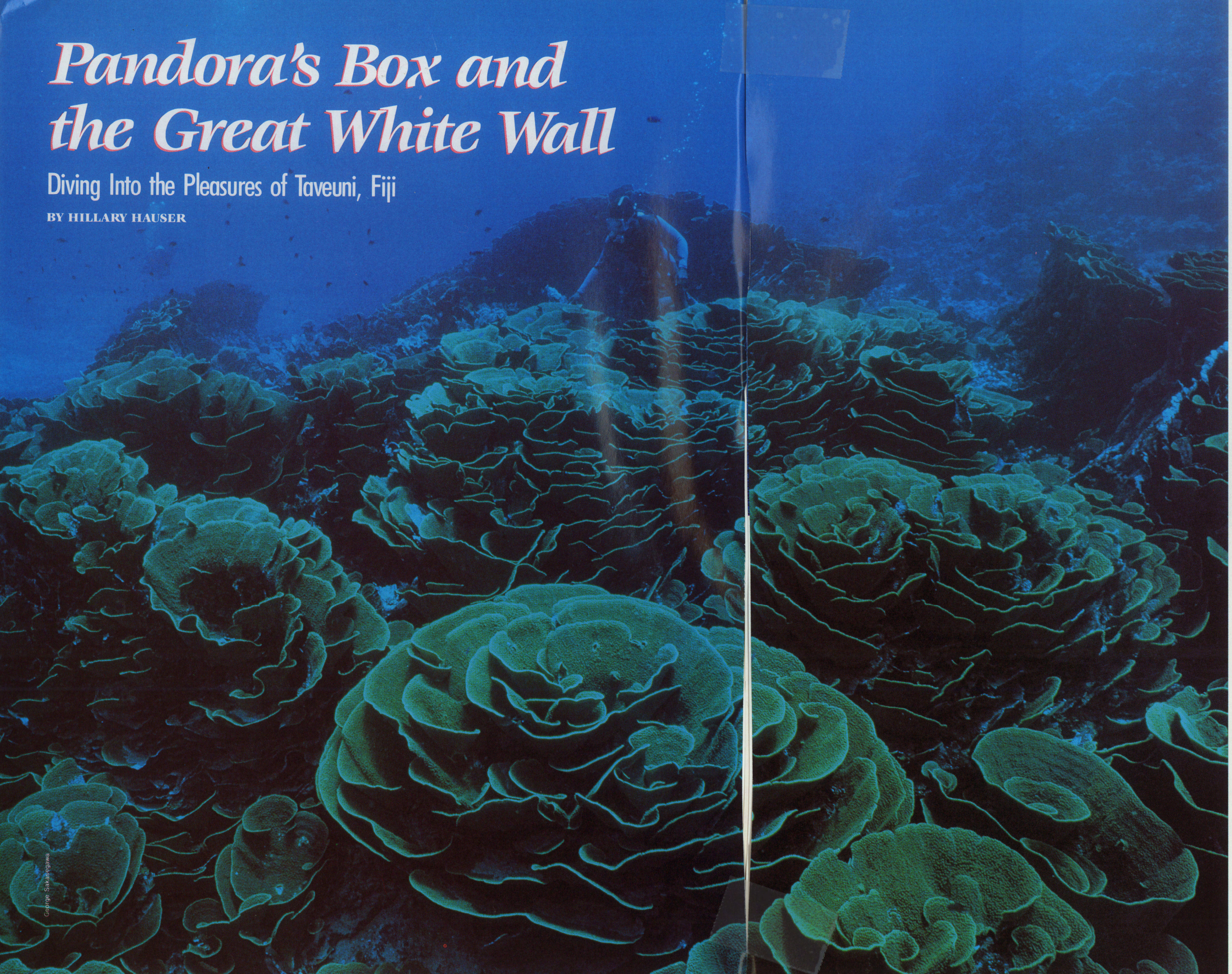
Pandora's Box and the Great White Wall

Diving Into the Pleasures of Taveuni, Fiji

BY HILLARY HAUSER



George Sakkestgawa

THERE WE WERE on our honeymoon, holding hands across Time. My husband was standing in Yesterday, and I was standing in Today. We were on Taveuni, an island of Fiji, where the 180th meridian – the international dateline – cuts the island in half. In front of the marker Jim and I clowned around for a picture taken by Sukh Lal, our Indian driver.

The dateline was actually moved out to sea long ago, so that islanders don't have to travel back and forth between Yesterday and Today to visit their friends. But no matter. We were standing on opposite sides of the real thing and feeling very expansive.

The gray, soggy sky had started to weep by the time we passed the coffee plantation near Somosomo. The coffee plants, in full white bloom, smelled strong – a combination of plumeria, gardenia, and ginger. As we drove, we passed groves of magnificent banyan, rubber, and mango trees; straight rows of cocoa and coffee, hibiscus and ginger bushes; brilliant bougainvillea; and everywhere acres of coconut trees.

This was Taveuni, third largest island in the Fijian archipelago. About 28 miles long and 6 miles wide, it is a fraction of the size of Fiji's major islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

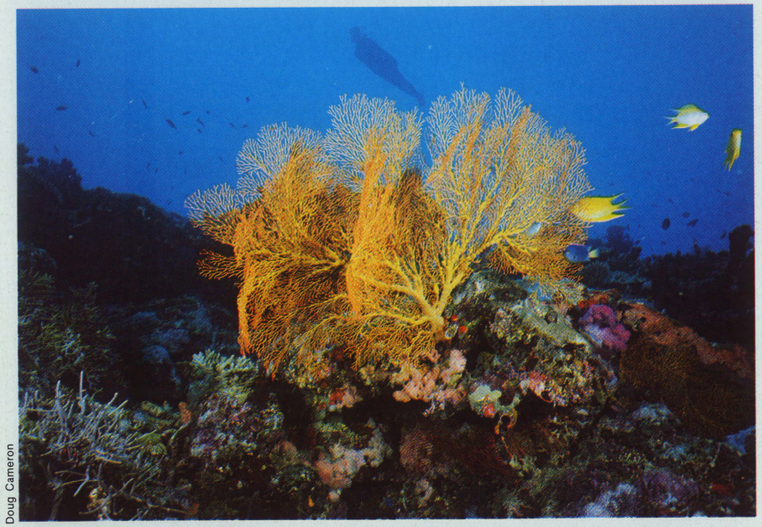
The 9,200 people of Taveuni (nearly 73 percent Fijian, the rest pretty much split between Indian and European) live in neat little villages along the single main road that circles nearly the whole island. The bigger towns of Somosomo, Waiyevo, and Wairiki are hubs of activity, where islanders can shop, pick up the news, or go to church.

The ocean surrounding Taveuni matches the land: Waters on the southern, more volcanic side of the island are

A coral wonderland guaranteed to whet a diver's appetite: Taveuni's "Cabbage Patch."

The photograph that hung in our cottage seemed to include every living sea thing. I called it a Sea Life Salad.

wilder, lashed with dark blue, often angry seas that roll in from the Tropic of Capricorn. The more populated, tamed areas in the north face the Somosomo Strait, which is often so glassy calm you can make out the reefs. It was here we had come to scuba dive.



Doug Cameron

ABOUT AN HOUR after we'd left the harbor aboard the 38-foot *Lelewai*, we were swimming at 90 feet along the "Ledge." Brilliant fishes milled around the colored sponges, and everywhere we looked were the soft corals that Fijian waters are famous for – miniature white-stemmed, squishy-looking trees with magenta and purple frills.

As I looked around me, I laughed into my regulator. Jim and I had poked fun at the absolute hodge-podge of underwater stuff in a photograph that hung in our *vale* (cottage) at the Dive Taveuni resort. This picture seemed to include every living sea thing. I called it a Sea Life Salad. And now we were looking at a scene that was just as riotous as that photograph.

It seemed that all the waters were full of life and color. Later that afternoon, at a place called "Pandora's Box," I saw, in an area about three feet square, soft corals, hard corals, a lionfish, a swarm of the goldfishlike *anthias*, sponges, and a puffer that blew itself up into a slow-moving ball. At the bottom of the reef a small whitetip reef shark lay on the bottom, sleeping in the sand.

When we got back to the resort, the owner, Ric Cammick, was waiting for us. Ric is a tall, lanky, storytelling New Zealander who wears a sarong and a T-shirt and talks so fast it's a strain to keep up. He is also one of the few outsiders who have created a successful business here on the island.

Many visitors to Taveuni come simply to dive, but Ric was thrilled that Jim and I were interested in exploring the island as well as the reefs. "Diving is all well and good," he said, "but isn't there more to a place than a reef or spectacular corals? Here people can meander about the island."

The next day Jim and I meandered with Sukh to Lavena, a small village on the northeast side of Taveuni, just past Bouma Falls. Sukh had with him the *sevusevu* for our visit – a bundle of kava root, which he gave to the son of the chief. Sevusevu is a polite token that gains visitors friendly permission to walk about a village. Not offering this would be like walking around someone's yard and looking in the windows – very rude.

A young woman took me through the village – a settlement of thatched houses mixed with crude tin shacks and more elegant concrete homes. It was midday, and in each house children and elders sat on the floor, visiting and playing. We arrived at the Catholic church in the center of the settlement. Native Fijians are intensely Christian, and the churches in the poorest places are often among the handsomest of buildings. Most of the villagers in Lavena spoke English well, though few would ever leave. Sukh told us many Fijians learn English, thinking they can get jobs on Vanua Levu. "They can't get," Sukh said. "They come back and farm."

The following day Tyrone Valentine, our dive guide, had his own observation about life here: "If it were any slower," he said, "it'd stop!"

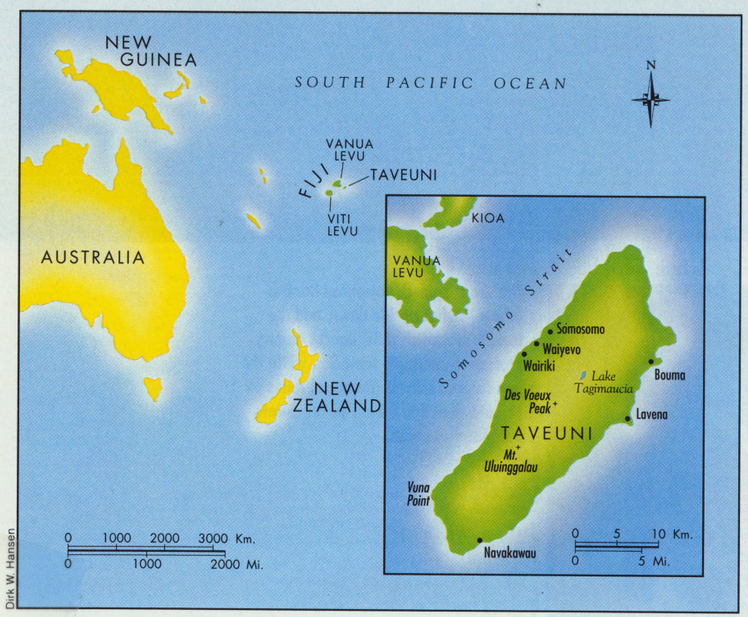
He was at the wheel of a jeep, driving us again to the harbor and giving us his typical patter: "Don't call me Ty-ROAN, call me Ty-RON."

For this day's dive trip Ric captained the *Lelewai*. On the way out he talked about the dive sites he had located along "Rainbow Reef," which stretches for 19 miles beneath Somosomo Strait. The currents here put diving out of reach for "rank novices," Ric said. But these currents are also responsible for a riotous profusion of soft corals. The corals feed on the plankton that is carried in these underwater streams.

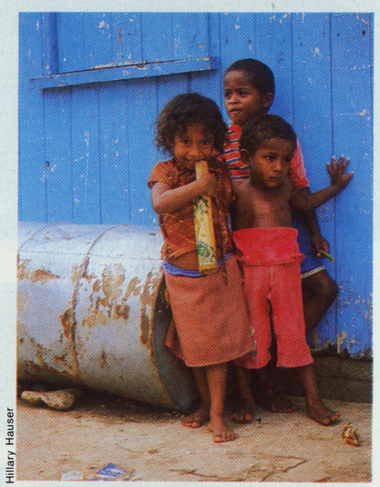
What we truly wanted to see was Taveuni's own Mount Everest of reefs – the "Great White Wall." But today we dived at gentler places. At "Blue-Ribbon Eel Reef," we swam along a slope and found



Stan Barr

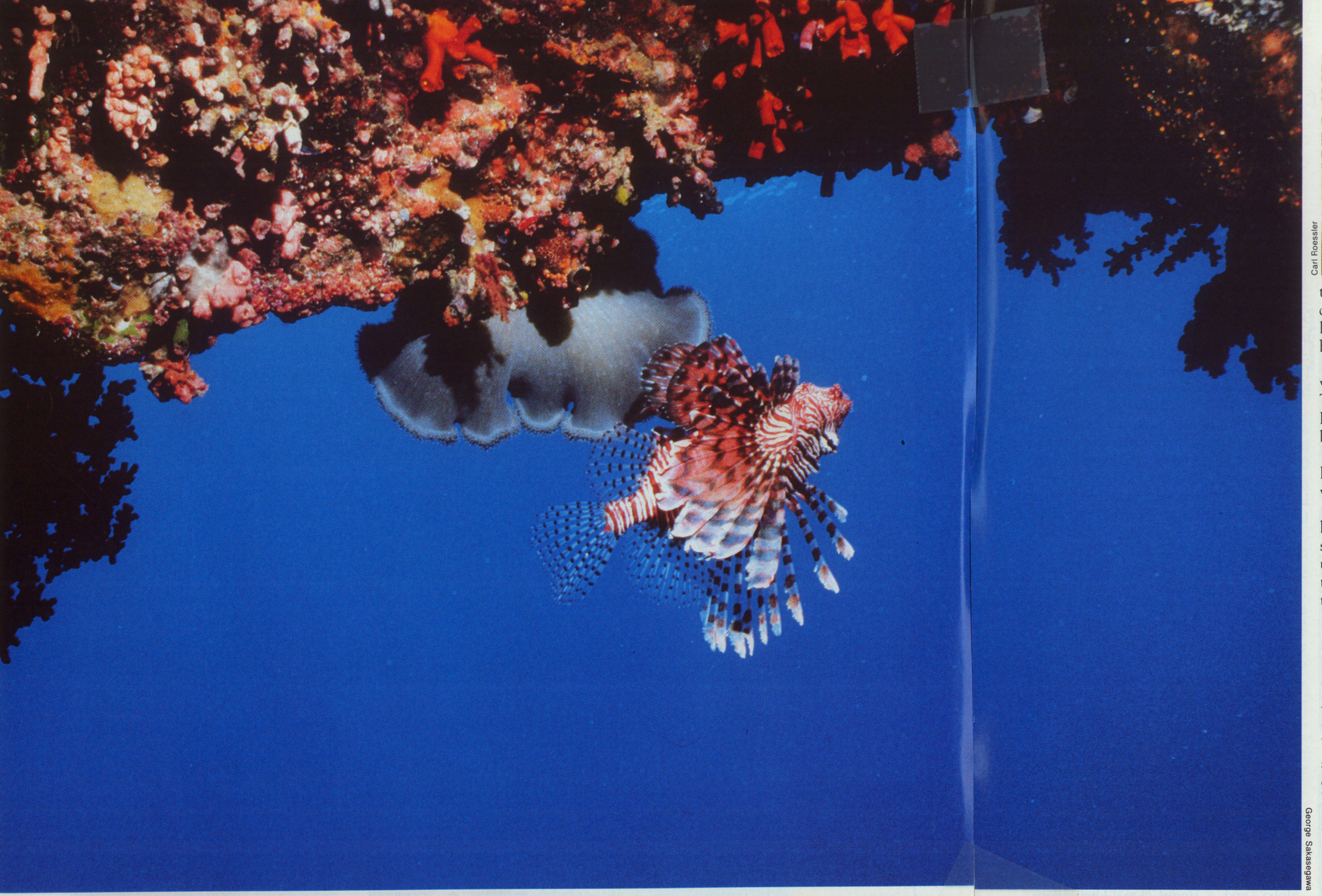


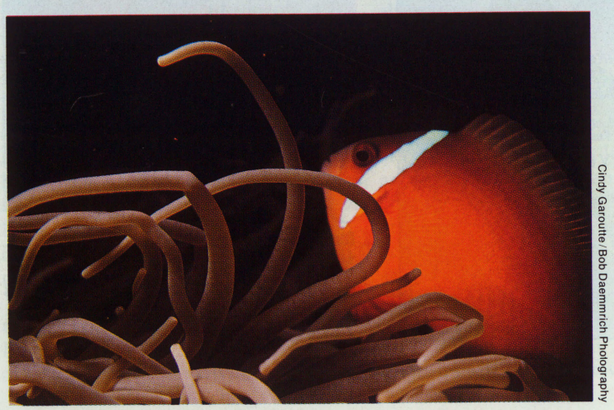
Dirk W. Hansen



Hillary Hauser

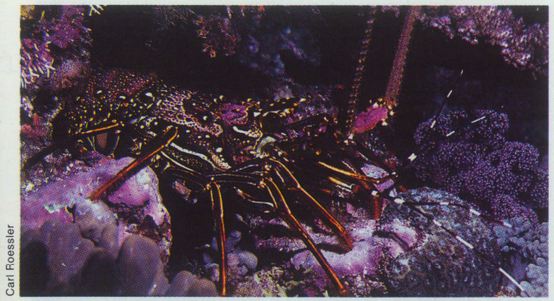
Blue water meets island greenery along the Taveuni shoreline (top), an everyday view for the children of Lavena (above). A diver explores a less familiar landscape of gorgonian coral (opposite) among the island's reefs.





Cindy Garoutte / Bob Daemmrich Photography

The sharp-spined, poisonous lionfish (above) swims upside down, and the tomato clownfish (left) dances among protective anemone tentacles, while the less colorful lobster (opposite) relies on its hard shell and a hard-to-reach-into hole for protection.



Carl Roessler

George Sakasegawa

two ribbon eels midway in our 90-foot dive. They were tucked in a hole, and I laughed at the thought that an entire reef had been named in their honor.

For lunch the *Lelewai* anchored off a white-sand beach on Vanua Levu. Tyrone and our other dive guide, Mesake Levaci, launched the skiff for the shore, but I swam in.

On the beach Mesake showed me wild lemons, and we picked an armload. "Now we make a bag for them," Mesake said.

Climbing up a nearby coconut palm, he hacked off a leaf and dropped it to the sand. From each side of the leaf he lifted up alternate fronds and interlaced them to make the sides of the basket – a traditional Fijian craft.

ONE DAY Jim and I took off with Sukh for the village of Navakawau. We cut through miles of copra plantations, where thick philodendrons climb the trees along the side of the road. At the Vuna blowhole we pulled the car to the side of the road. The rough, deep, and dark blue ocean was stirred and pushing hard against the black lava crevices along the shore to create powerful white, airborne geysers.

We arrived at Navakawau unannounced and with no sevusevu, but the children ran out to greet us. One proudly wore a floor-length bathrobe, and they all posed for pictures, saying *vinaka* – thanks – each time I took one. A man played a guitar in the doorway of his blue house while his wife sat on the floor inside, weaving a pandanus mat. Jim talked with the young men of the village, who seemed in no rush to get out of the village and see the world.

I couldn't help thinking of a conversation I'd had with Ormond Eyre, a Fijian who owns a resort on the island. He had traveled abroad for a long time and lived in Italy off and on for several years.

"I had become Italian," Ormond said. "I spoke Italian, ate Italian, slept Italian. I'd been a gypsy. And I thought to myself I'd been trying to be something else, but I am really Fijian. I'd been pushing it aside."

He returned to Taveuni in 1984. "Taveuni draws you back," Ormond said. "This island has a commanding influence over Fijians. You have a sense of pride when you tell people you're from this island. My roots are here."

TO EXPLORE ANOTHER aspect of the island, we boarded a truck driven by Abraham Dayaram, bound for a mountain lookout. There, we hoped to see Lake Tagimaucia and the rare tagimaucia flower. With Jim and me in the back of the truck were three men from New Zealand. Two women sat in the cab.

It wasn't long before we had a spectacular view of the Somosomo Strait below, with the enormous white cross of the Catholic Mission in Wairiki standing sentinel over the sea. At 2,000 feet we began to see delicate little orchids along the side of the road, then the foliage became more forestlike. Soon a chilly mist formed.

The mountains of Taveuni are among the highest mountains in all of Fiji. Along a ridge of volcanic cones stand major peaks like Uluinggalau, 4,070 feet high, and Des Voeux Peak at 3,600. Because the ridge lies directly in the path of the prevailing winds, it intercepts moisture, and much of the time the mountains lie hidden in clouds. On the windward side the higher slopes may receive as much as 30 feet of rain a year.

The mist became a drizzle, and those of us in the back of the truck crawled under a tarp. We were bounced around like bags of coffee beans, as the truck twisted and turned up the mountainside.

Abruptly Abraham stopped at a curve in the road and pointed to a tree. About five feet above our heads hung a tiny red flower. This was the tagimaucia flower.

I had heard a legend that explains its name: When Taveuni was first settled, a

The water was a clear, deep blue, and I could easily see the light at the other end of the cavern.



Doug Cameron



Jim Marshall

In Taveuni's lush interior (above), the elusive tagimaucia flower (right) hints at both passion and dark legend. Offshore (opposite) a rich mural of corals along a vertical reef wall reflects the vast undersea palette.

ten-year-old girl lived at the shore. Maucia was hard working, but her lazy stepmother, Ciri, never treated her well. One day Ciri slapped Maucia severely for catching only one fish, and the poor girl ran as far as she could toward the interior. There she became tangled up in thick ropey vines that hung from huge trees. As she tried to free herself, she cried and cried – until blood rolled down her cheeks and she died. The blood on the soil turned into little red flowers called tagimaucia, "Cry Maucia."

As we continued our curving way up the mountain, the drizzle turned to rain, and water dripped down our noses just as it dripped from the green ferns at the side of the black lava road. The lookout was marked by a big radio tower, but the lake was hidden somewhere in clouds.

THAT NIGHT, WE ate dinner with Ormond at the Maravu Plantation. We arrived before the other diners, but there were four Fijian men sitting on a pandanus mat around a bowl and singing. We joined them, and they extended the *bilo*, a half-coconut shell, filled with the muddy drink known as kava. One at a time, we drank it, accepting the kava with a *bula* – the Fijian equivalent of aloha – and a single clap. The Fijians played and sang, and their guitars, ukelele, and tambourine provided a spirited accompaniment. Before long we heard the "Isa Lei," a good-bye song written about World War I.

Isa Lei, all my wanting
Is because you'll be leaving tomorrow
I think that with your going
We will not be happy
But in Fiji, I'll be waiting here for you.

THE SUN ROSE on our last day on Taveuni, and the winds and the currents were finally right for a dive on the "Great White Wall." Jim and I put on our gear and swam with Tyrone to a depth of 40 feet, where we entered a coral-encrusted tunnel that sloped down 50 feet more. The water was a clear, deep blue, and I could easily see the light at the other end of the cavern.

When we emerged from the tunnel, we turned left. Here the bottom dropped clean away to a wide sand ledge at 250 feet. We were on the side of the wall, a reef so perfectly perpendicular it seemed like the side of a building. It was carpeted top to bottom with soft white corals.

Scheduling a dive here is tricky business: The corals emerge only when there is a current, to feed on passing plankton, but if the current is too strong, diving becomes impossible. I looked at several divers hanging onto the green, ropelike hard corals growing on the wall to keep themselves from drifting away and realized why Ric takes only experienced divers to this spot.

The water was so clear that the 250-foot deep ledge seemed far shallower than that. Here it would be easy to dive too deep, too long. Below the ledge the reef dropped into an oceanic abyss.

Jim and Tyrone descended to 160 feet and disappeared behind an overhang. I stayed just above them, inspecting little caves. In one of them, a grouper had wedged itself tightly into a crack, trying to hide from me. In another a bright yellow butterflyfish swam upside down.

Then Jim, Tyrone, and I returned to the surface. As I stopped at ten feet to decompress, I held onto a coral branch at the top of the reef, and watched colorful fish zip by, picking at algae, picking at my fingers, investigating me through my faceplate. From underwater I could see the surf breaking on the edge of the reef in the distance.

As I took all this in, the "Isa Lei" ran through my mind. We were leaving Fiji the following day, but I knew we'd be back, and that Taveuni would always be waiting here for me. ◆



Carl Roessler / Tom Stack & Associates