

FIJI'S PARADISE

By Kelvin Aitken

If you made up a bucket list of 10 tropical dive destinations, chances are that you would name areas like The Great Barrier Reef, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Galapagos. The list would be of general destinations.

But a specific dive location? Well, that would have to be pretty special. One that would be on my list is Rainbow Reef, Fiji. Or to be even more specific, The Great White Wall. Known internationally as one of the world's best dives, it had better live up to it's reputation. And it does.

When the dive boat from Paradise resort drops anchor, you know you are in for a treat. Off the side of the boat you will see bommies and sand patches shimmering with that special blue that means "clear water". A short dive brief and you are off the back, slipping down the mooring line.

Now, if you want the best colour on a tropical reef, it's not hard corals you look for. Yes, they can be colourful but they usually display muted tones or just plain grey or brown. The real brilliant colours come from soft corals, and if you want to see them at their spectacular best, you have to have current. Lots of it.

That's why you will descend on the mooring line, tucking in behind a wall of hard corals which shelter you from the persistent current. If your dive guide knows their job well, they will have chosen the exact right time to get you into the water. This is based on the scientific principles of moon phase, tide charts, wind direction, wind speed and having a good long look over the side of the boat. They will probably even toss in one of the guides to swim around and get a feel for the right moment.

Without the current, soft corals look like stunted knobs of broccoli. They are filter feeders so when the current jacks up, they inflate their bodies with sea water and expand into brilliant branching trees in colours to shock the most ardent artist.



Below the sheltering wall you will find a tunnel, drilled down through the coral at a steep angle. Don't worry, while it is sort of dark in the middle, it's not a tight, narrow, squeeze. It's broad and light enough to see what's growing on the walls plus you can see the entry and exit at all times. After a short gliding descent you emerge at the top of the main wall with a mild to moderate current in your face. Hang left and prepare to be amazed.

The Great White Wall is two of those monikers; "Great" and "Wall". It's massive, impressive, inspiring. Starting at about 20m and dropping down in a "heart in throat" plummet way beyond diving range. For someone like myself, who is absolutely terrified of heights, it can make your toes tingle. Looking down, the wall merges into the



black depths in a sheer plummet.

“White”, it’s not. Well, it may look white as it’s covered in a mass of small to medium sized pale soft corals. They appear white with a cyan or blue tinge. But put a light on them and they are all a most delicate mauve. But let’s not be pedantic. It’s beautiful, stunning and a total rush.

After a decent drift, the guides will draw you up and into the shallows to blow off some excess nitrogen and to see the other half of the wall experience. On top, a flat sandy plain is dotted with bommies festooned in brilliant purple, red and orange soft corals. No wonder this area is called Rainbow Reef. All the colours are there.

The current will still be blowing strong, which is exactly what you want. Just tuck in behind a bommie and watch the multi-coloured Anthias fish dart about to feed on the passing buffet. Gangs of Trevally toughs zip through, picking up any bogons that swim out too far. It keeps the population healthy.

It’s a swim into the current to get back onto the boat but there are a few ways to handle that. You can do short swimming bursts between bommies, hug the low reef as it seems to give you some sort of hydroplane effect to make the swim easier, claw along the sand if need be. Keep an eye on the surface as you may be under one of the trailing float lines set out from the boat, or just get to a mooring line, do your safety stop there and the boat will pick you up. Not that much fuss at all for a high current dive.

One of my favourite spots is Annie’s Bommie. It can be hit very hard by the current which means that it is not only covered with soft corals but there will be lots of pelagic action in the area around and above this very pretty bommie. If the currents are dropping, or you hit it on slack water, the surrounding area has lots to discover. Octopus, anemones with their cheeky commensal namesakes, scorpionfish, grumpy gobies, schools of algae peckers and much more.

After one of the world’s best dives, there is nothing like a bit of luxury to top the day off. Paradise, once a backpacker’s refuge, has been transformed into, well, Paradise. The most common way to get there is to fly into Taveuni to the Matai air strip where a resort transport will drive you down the west shore of the island.

It’s a longish ride, smooth to start with but getting rougher and more jiggly as you go. But the passing scenery is stunning with views out over the Somo Somo strait, driving through thick tropical forest and meander through villages or slip past some rather expensive looking real estate.

On arrival you are greeted at the gravel turn-in, walk through a short alley between tree ferns, bures and bird cages to emerge out into a stunning vista. Manicured lawns edged by gardens made up of exotic plants, trees and shrubs. Flowers are everywhere and all backed by a flat ocean priming itself for another tropical sunset. The main restaurant and surrounding bures all look out onto the ocean past the





infinity pool. Stepping onto one of the sea edge platforms gives you views from south to Vanu Reef and north back towards Rainbow Reef and Vanua Levu, the northern of the two main islands of Fiji.

A brief greeting and within a few minutes you are sitting outside your bure, green coconut drink in hand, receiving an “I can’t believe this is happening” foot massage. All part of the Paradise welcome.

You can slip into something much less formal and slide into the pool, collapse on one of the deck chairs

while you ponder which cocktail you should try first or, for the fanatic, grab some snorkel gear and get straight into the water. It’s right there, waiting for you. Or you might want to get your evaluation dive out of the way. Just wander over to the dive hut and one of the staff will put a set of gear together for you. It’s all included, although you can also bring anything special you prefer such as your own optically corrected mask or Nitrox dive computer.

Walk down the ramp and slip into the water. Don’t worry if you are immediately mobbed by brilliantly coloured fish. They are hoping for a handout. Some guests prefer to eat right on the water’s edge and tend to toss out food scraps. The word has gone around so it’s a flash mob on every entry.

Rainbow reef is a boat ride north but if you prefer to dive locally, Vanu Reef is just a few minutes to the south plus some excellent critter dives right on shore. Vanu has some spectacular walls with panoramic scenery but I preferred to fuss along with my macro lens. Fish life is prolific, especially in flat areas jutting out from the main reef, or in some of the wide swim-throughs.

But the big attraction is Rainbow Reef. Packing tanks, dive gear, lunch and drinks into the boat heralds a day of fantastic diving. While some resorts are physically closer, the boat trip up from Paradise gives you a greater chance of seeing Spinner Dolphins and Pilot Whales. We saw both on more than one trip. A real crowd pleaser.

Rainbow Reef covers a large area so the White Wall is just one of many dive sites there. If you have limited time, “do” the White Wall then add in as many other sites as possible on the following days. Paradise does not automatically head up to Rainbow Reef every day. It also divides up the week with visits to the local reefs. But if you and the other divers prefer consecutive days in the Somo Somo strait bottleneck of Rainbow Reef, just organise it either at the beginning of your trip or the day prior.