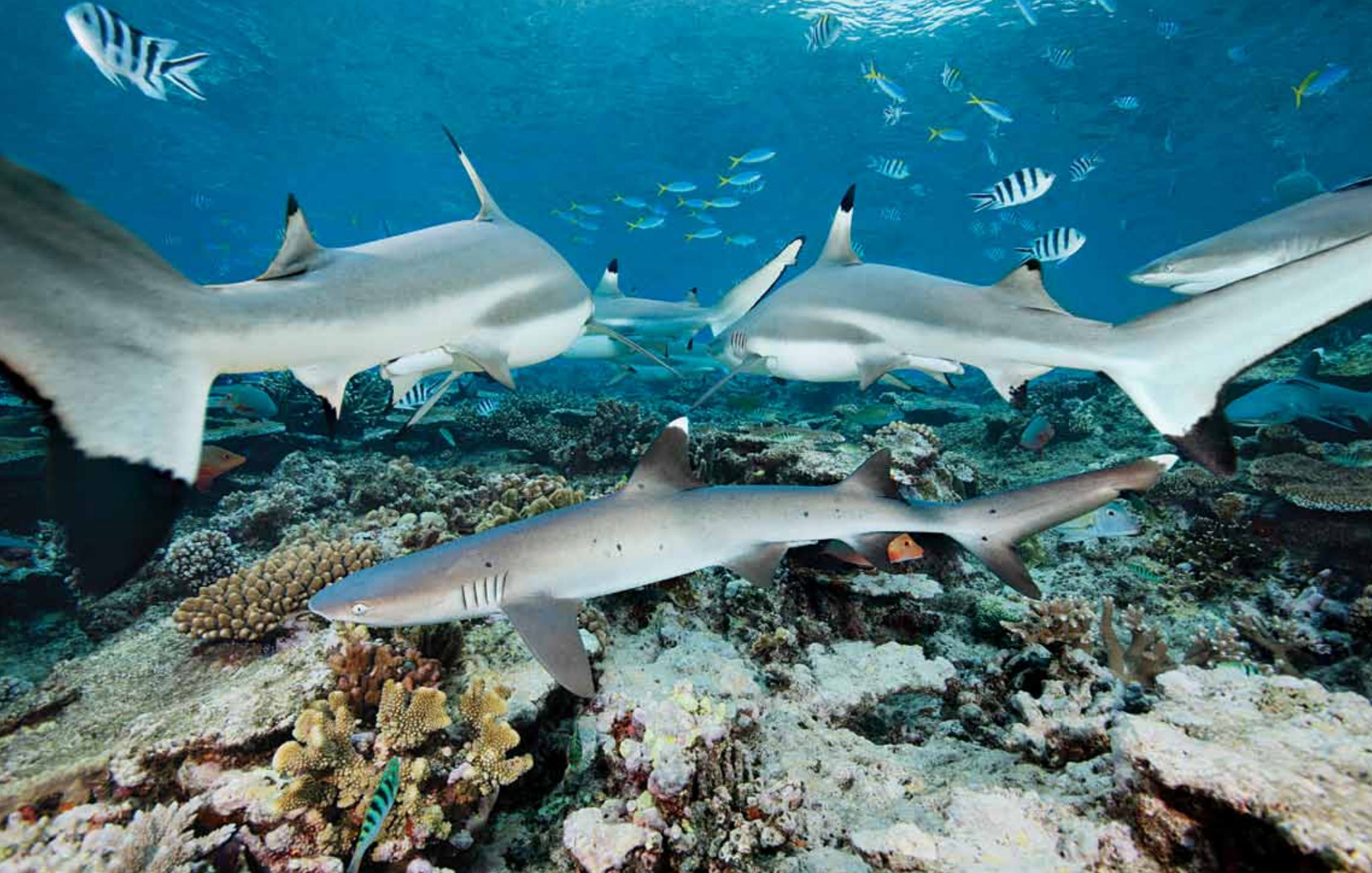


WILD AT HEART

*FROM SEDUCTIVE REEFS COVERED IN RAINBOW-COLORED SOFT CORALS
TO HEART-RACING ENCOUNTERS WITH BLACKTIP AND TIGER SHARKS,
IT'S NO WONDER DIVERS ARE SMITTEN WITH FIJI.*

BY TARA BRADLEY

ANDREY NARCHUK



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A whitetip and a group of blacktip reef sharks glide over a shallow coral reef; a hawksbill turtle at the Namena Marine Reserve; the infinity pool at Paradise Taveuni.

Where to Stay:

The 320-plus islands here beg to be explored, so while you might consider hanging up that Do Not Disturb sign once you settle into your room, these three spots are reason enough to make it a point to move around.

foot massage. Needless to say, air conditioning and TV will be the last thing on your mind.

Lalati Resort and Spa

This all-inclusive spot is hidden along the serenity of the cobalt Malumu Bay, where you might find mantas leaping out of the water at sunset. Meals (and happy hour) come by the beat of the kitchen drum. Private bungalows feature front porches that open up to the sea. What you'll love most: Tin roofs offer the occasional rainstorm lullaby.



Paradise Taveuni

Boasting the closest access to the soft corals of Rainbow Wall, these open-air *bures* let the sea breeze flow in through the front door and out back to the private garden (outdoor rain shower and Jacuzzi included). Upon check-in you're greeted with coconut water while enjoying your coconut

Royal Davui

This exclusive adults-only property sits on its own island and is accessible via private boat from Beqa Lagoon. Upon approach, get excited. Those individual huts nestled into the hillside are set to spoil with expansive glass doors that open up to the vast views of the ocean and, if you're lucky, a plunge pool.

ON SOME DIVES, THE EYES SAY IT ALL,

and we're all a bit wild-eyed as a silky joins the shark-feeding frenzy in Beqa Lagoon, sweeping in close, almost mischievously, before swimming off. Just when I think we've experienced our dive climax, a 16-foot tiger shark slips into the scene. The hungry tornado of whitetip, blacktip, nurse, bull, lemon and reef sharks, plus a bundle of 800-pound grouper, clear the way for her entrance. Her imperial demeanor commands a respect that both fish and divers honor. She has the faded stripes of a mature *Galeocerdo cuvier* and a mangled dorsal fin — a scar from mating and a telltale sign she's female. She glides over our heads and disappears as seamlessly as she came in. Now that's how a lady makes an entrance.

For 14 years, Aqua-Trek has been hosting the Ultimate Shark Encounter in Beqa Lagoon, south of the main island of Viti Levu, and boasts a 100 percent no-accident rate. And the staff knows what they're doing. Three times a week they chum the waters and hand-feed a dancing cloud of up to eight species of sharks, while an audience of divers kneels on the sand bottom ringed by an auditorium of coral. What's even more impressive is how hard the dive operation has worked to protect these threatened apex predators.

In addition to conducting shark research and fish counts, Aqua-Trek helped create the Shark Reef Marine Reserve and Fiji Shark Corridor — a protected area that covers almost

30 nautical miles along the main island of Viti Levu's southern coastline. The goal: to stop illegal fishing and finning. The conservation efforts here have been so successful that the marine reserve has become an inspiration and a model for shark conservation efforts in other parts of the world too.

Protecting the natural beauty of these islands is not only paramount for dive operators and resorts, but also the Fiji government and the people who call these islands home. Known for their fire-walking tradition and kind demeanor, islanders respect the land and everything on and around it. They cherish the native palm trees, used for everything from thatched roofing to baskets. Meals (and surface intervals) are blessed with

BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: REINHARD DIRSCHERL; COURTESY PARADISE TAVEUNI

fresh coconut meat, while the shell finds its place as a dish on the dinner table or as a cup for partaking of the evening kava — a hypnotic drink made from the local kava root that helps with sleep and is believed to clear the mind. (Personal note: It tastes like chalk, but your sleep will be sound.)

With more than 320 islands sprinkled among the clear-water reefs lined with seductive private resorts and bungalows, there's a long list of places to explore. Fiji Airways offers daily flights from Los Angeles (LAX) to Viti Levu's Nadi International Airport. From there, puddle-jumpers and boats transport guests to their destination.

When it comes to diving, Aqua-Trek's shark dive isn't the only big ticket in these parts. Beqa Lagoon's reefs offer picturesque spots to find surgeonfish,

triggerfish, snapper and even the spot-me-if-you-can frogfish. At spots like Seven Sisters and Golden Arches (the latter named for the massive coral swim-throughs), divers find themselves mesmerized by dramatically lit caverns offering cover to gliding trumpetfish, coupled-up butterflyfish and even the occasional curious resident reef shark.

Then there's the iconic drift diving. The private island of Wakaya, a 40-minute flight from Nadi, excites with refreshing drift dives like Homestead Pass, Lion's Den and Sunset Wall. Give yourself up to the current, and fall into the freedom of being escorted along the sheer cliff with views of an underwater parade with hammerheads, turtles and manta ray flybys. And while the waters are so full of life that it's tempting

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: Fire walkers; a local sipping kava from a coconut shell; the ceremonial kava ceremony; an anemonefish stands guard over its home in Beqa Lagoon.

JON WHITTLE; OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: JON WHITTLE (2); SCOTT JOHNSON

Fiji-Speak:

While English is spoken everywhere, it's always fun to learn a few new words. If all else fails, just say *sega na lega* (no worries), smile, and you should be just fine.

BULA!

Hello

KEREKERE

Please

VINAKA

Thank you and you're welcome



DIVERS GUIDE TO FIJI

Average water temp 80 degrees F » **What to wear** 5 mm full wetsuit or shorty » **Average viz** 100 to 200 feet » **When to go** March to December » **More info** sportdiver.com/fiji

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

Great White Wall
One of Rainbow Reef's prized sites for its gardens of soft white corals.

The Shark Dive at the Bistro
Two back-to-back dives with clouds of eight species of sharks, including bulls, silkies, nurses and tigers.

Lion's Den
An underwater parade of turtles, hammerheads and colorful corals.

DIVE OPERATORS

Blue Starfish Dive Centre
lalatifiji.com

Paradise Taveuni
paradiseinfiji.com

Royal Davui
royaldavui.com

The Wakaya Club & Spa
wakaya.com





to consider hovering in one spot and waiting for the show to unfold before you, make the choice to let yourself go. It's at that moment when you'll discover that your dive just got even better.

But there's more. The archipelago is renowned as the soft-coral capital of the world. And the best place to witness these corals is along the reefs near Taveuni, about a 90-minute flight from Nadi. The cigar-shaped tip of an underwater shield volcano, Taveuni is located northeast in the marine-rich waters of Somosomo Strait. The walls

ABOVE: It's not just about Fiji's big critters. Namena Marine Reserve is favored for its vibrant coral reefs and photo-worthy vistas topped with colorful clouds of damselfish, chromis and wrasse.

here start shallow, meaning that one-for-the-books experiences aren't hard to come by for both diving and hybrid couples.

Once there, sites along the legendary Vuna and Rainbow reef systems — such as the Great White, Purple and Yellow walls — are decked out with blooming soft corals that match the reefs' color-coded names. Anemonefish weave in and out of their come-hither homes, while green moray eels peek out from mysterious chambers. And of course, the occasional glance into the big blue is the

REINHARD DIRSCHHEL; OPPOSITE: CARRIE GARCIA (4)

best way to flirt with finding the beloved silhouettes of turtles, rays and sharks. No matter what your speed, underwater scenes welcome all styles of wild. From the silent lure of the swaying soft corals to the heart-pounding passion of shark dives to the careless freedom of drift diving, it's hard not to be seduced by the romance lingering in Fiji's waters.

Special thanks to Tourism Fiji, Fiji Airways, Pacific Airways, Lalati Resort & Spa, Paradise Taveuni, Royal Davui, The Wakaya Club & Spa, and Aqua-Trek.

Pack Right

This is the gear to grab before making some of the best dives of your life



Zeagle Covert BC
The Covert weighs in at just 4 pounds and folds into a tight package for easy packing, but it still delivers features like ditchable weights and 32 pounds of buoyancy.
CONTACT: zeagle.com
MSRP: \$429.95

Aeris Accel fins

Powerful for its size and light weight, the Accel offers good speed and acceleration without leg strain, and at less than 22 inches long, it still fits easily in your suitcase.
CONTACT: diveaeris.com
MSRP: \$99.95



Oris Aquis depth gauge

Combining elegant design with practical function, this timepiece indicates depth to 328 feet and features automatic winding with 38 hours of reserve power.
CONTACT: oris.ch
MSRP: \$3,500



Cressi 145L cargo bag

If you're taking all your gear, you'll need a big bag — and they don't get much bigger than Cressi's jumbo roller, which has a huge, easy-access main compartment with compression straps.
CONTACT: cressi.com
MSRP: \$229.95

