



# DIVING THE SOFT CORAL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Words and images by PADDY RYAN

Fiji is so much more than sun, sand and coconut trees. Beneath those warm South Pacific waters lies a rich, vibrant ecosystem that has sustained coastal Fijians for millennia. In fact, those lovely beaches stem almost entirely from the organisms that live on the nearby reefs. Coral polyps utilise symbiotic algae to provide them with food. In return the coral gives the algae a place to live and much of the carbon dioxide needed by the algae for photosynthesis. Fish, such as parrotfish, eat the coral, and later pass the ground up coral as sand. One of the reasons

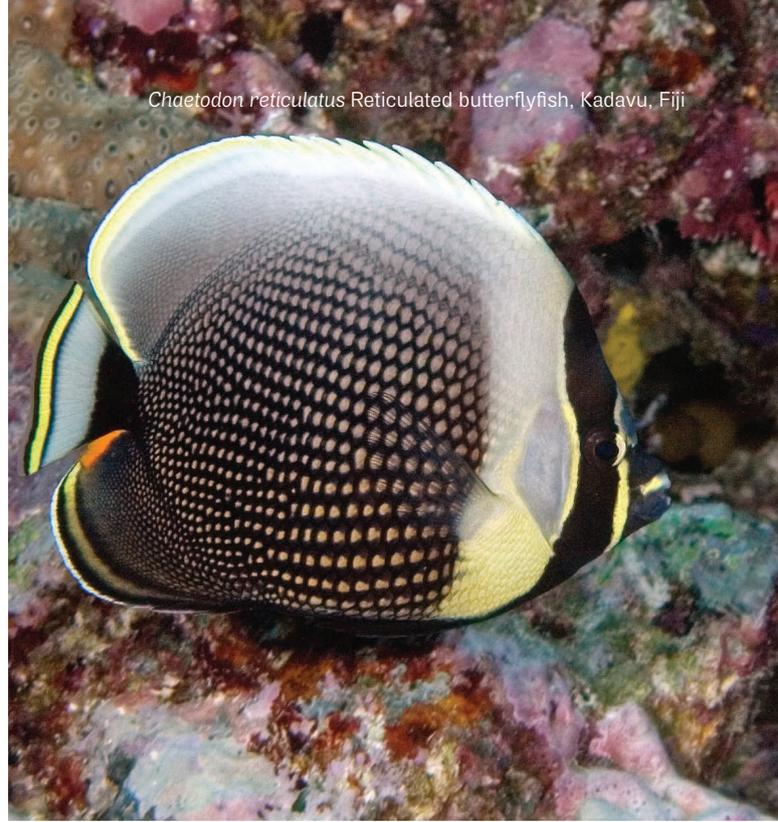
the water is so clear is the result of millions of sponges filtering the water every day. So when you next lounge on a beautiful Fijian beach, spare a thought for the animals that made it so. You can check out the vibrancy of Fijian reefs by snorkeling but this lets you see only part of the reef, and typically from above. You literally need to take the plunge and become a SCUBA diver to appreciate the extraordinary diversity of Fiji's reefs. Almost all major resorts in Fiji have a dive operation associated with them and you can easily become qualified within a week. So is diving in Fiji really so special? The short answer is yes. Fiji is considered the soft

coral capital of the world, and from my diving experiences elsewhere I believe this is correct. Many folk have the idea that all coral reefs are the same ... but this simply isn't true. In some places the reef is dominated by sponges, in others hard corals take centre stage; in many places in Fiji, particularly on drop-offs, soft corals predominate. One of Fiji's best-known dive sites, the Great White Wall in Taveuni, is made up almost entirely of soft corals (although they are really pink – they just look white from a distance). Another site, on the south coast of Kadavu, Fiji's fourth biggest island, hosts the Purple Wall, an extraordinary riot of soft corals.

*Colobometra perspinosa* Very spiny feather star, Beqa, Fiji.



*Chaetodon reticulatus* Reticulated butterflyfish, Kadavu, Fiji



*Amphiprion perideraion* Pink anemonefish in purple-tipped anemone, Kadavu, Fiji



Soft corals don't possess the hard limestone skeletons of their hard coral relatives. Instead they use hydraulic pressure and small limestone spicules called sclerites to keep themselves erect in the current. When there is no current they deflate and when the tide starts to run they pump themselves full of water. This allows them to photosynthesise and to trap their small animal prey. You can see hard corals at any time but to appreciate the full glory of soft corals you have to dive when the tide is flowing. Because it is difficult to swim into a current, most soft coral dives are drift dives. These are a lot of fun and allow you to cover a lot of reef

in a very short time. The current brings out other animals. Schools of damselfish and fairy basslets swarm in astonishing numbers, darting out from the reef to grab small items as they pass by. Schooling triggerfish make sweeps into the water column while masses of fusiliers provide flashes of astonishing blue and yellow. On healthy reefs, jacks and tuna of various kinds patrol just out from the drop-off and if you are lucky you'll see a grey reef shark or a white tip. If the lagoon is your preferred dive site there is much to offer here too. Small coral heads host hundreds of damselfishes and you will almost certainly see stunning blue starfish.

There are several places in Fiji where you are guaranteed to see sharks and none more so than on Beqa lagoon shark dives. What you will see depends in part on the season but you are pretty much guaranteed to spot nurse sharks, black-tips, white-tips and grey reef sharks. The bull sharks are there regularly and other sharks such as silver tips and tiger sharks visit on occasion. Be prepared for an amazing adrenalin rush. Some people object to shark feeding operations like this on the grounds that it alters shark behavior, but there is no evidence of that and the money it generates helps assure the safety and health of the shark populations.

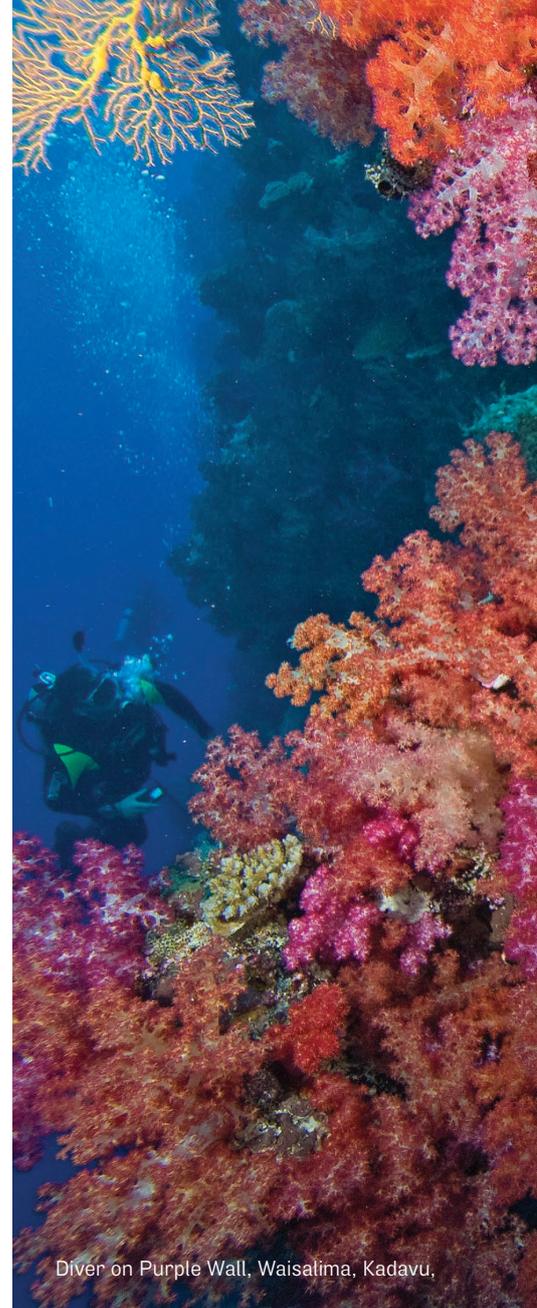
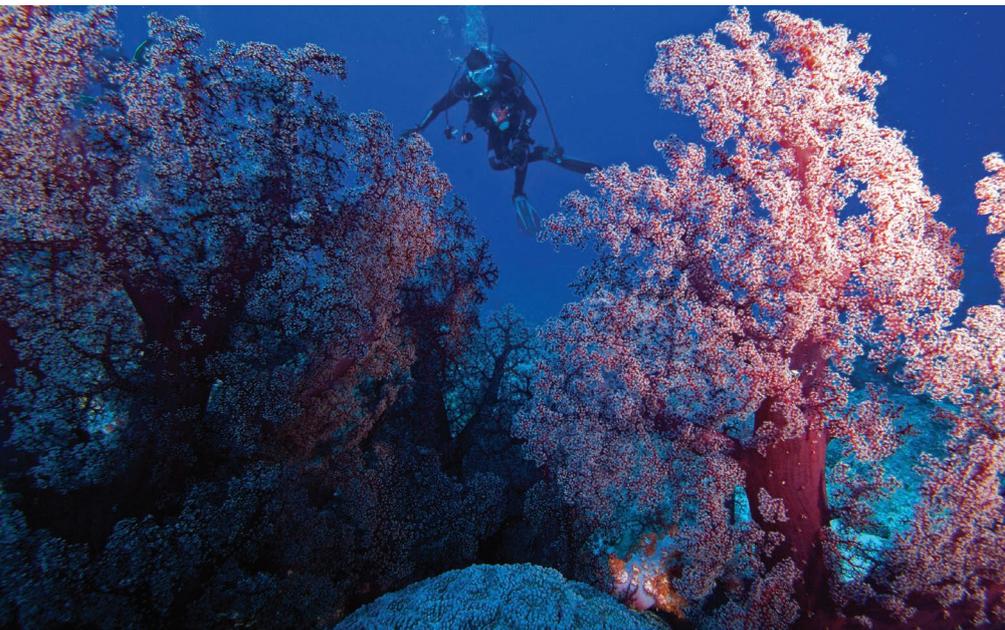
DIVE





Three Alleys, Kadavu, Fiji

Diver and soft coral, Kadavu



Diver on Purple Wall, Waisalima, Kadavu,

There are several places in Fiji where you can swim with mantas. These include the Yasawas, Wakaya Island, and the Astrolabe Reef. Encounters can never be guaranteed but a sighting is memorable.

Fiji diving is always spectacular, but how you decide to dive will depend on your budget and what you want to do with your time. If you want to do a few dives a day and also enjoy the culture and the nightlife, then a shore-based operation is the way to go. If you are a hard-core diver then a live-aboard should be your choice. You can dive as often as your dive computer will let you and you'll visit sites that are often beyond the range of shore-based dive operations. There are several of these sites in Bligh Water, the passage between Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Here, underwater peaks rise to within a few meters of the surface and their distance from the mainland guarantees clear water and a thriving fish population.

So why is Fiji such a spectacular dive destination? The answer is complex. The many islands in the group and the way the currents

flow between them create varied and unique environments. The currents bring nutrients from the deep seas so there is a constant supply. The main islands are big enough to support a number of rivers and these cut passages in the barrier reefs, dividing them into distinct units and somewhat separating them from each other. Also, Fiji is close enough to the

centre of coral reef diversity in Southeast Asia to boast a large number of coral reef species. Whatever the reasons, Fiji remains one of the world's top dive destinations and as long as the reefs are preserved, should remain so into the foreseeable future. You are coming to Fiji. Now is your opportunity. Go diving!

#### FOR BOOKINGS

##### **Beqa Adventure Divers**

Lagoon Resort, Fairway Place, Pacific Harbour  
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##### **Scuba Bula Fiji**

Seashell Momi Resort, Momi bay  
+679 628 0190  
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##### **Diveaway Fiji**

Coral coast, Sigatoka  
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##### **Adrenalin Fiji**

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##### **Koro Sun Dive**

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