

> THE DARK BODY OF THE LEVIATHAN ROSE THROUGH THE SURFACE OF THE SEA. WITH WATER CASCADING DOWN ITS MASSIVE FLANK, THE ARCHED BACK AND DORSAL FIN OF THE HUMPBACK WHALE ROSE HIGHER THAN OUR HEADS AS WE MOTORED OUT THROUGH THE CHANNEL IN WHAT NOW FELT LIKE A SMALL AND FRAGILE INFLATABLE.

The ocean (Wasawasa) is an integral part of culture and life in Fiji and we were on the *Island Dancer II* to explore the 'wasawasa', both culturally and literally, northeast of Viti Levu. Our humpback whale's visit was fleeting but its dramatic appearance right beside our large 5.8m inflatable, was surely an indicator of the great things to come on this voyage. Besides the humpback, our mega-star cast included a large solo hammerhead shark, cruising manta rays, schooling barracuda, the appearance of a seven metre long whaleshark and, as a grand finalē, two dives with more than 40 grey reef sharks.

Incredible visibility underwater enhanced a reefscape at the edge of the huge dropoff – sheer vertical walls melted into

F I J I wasawasa

the deep blue far below. Drifting with the current revealed spectacular wide sandy reef passages at around 20m which ended abruptly at the reef edge. These passages appeared heavily swept by incoming and outgoing tides, but featured seemingly delicate and tiny creatures like the sand dwelling pygmy seahorse which is impossible to photograph with a wide angle lens.

Coral pinnacles rising from these sandy plains seemed more like blunt 'mesas' in the extended visibility and huge arches towering far above a desert, similar to the dramatic landscapes of the American badlands. Instead of birds of prey flying above, schooling barracuda, jacks and

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DANCER



cruising sharks or rays circled the pinnacles and hung off the cliff-like edge. From a distance the kaleidoscope of coral and tiny reef fish was invisible, but up close the splendour of the coral gardens came to life. Soft coral trees in all hues, massive gorgonians, profuse clumps of red seawhips, black corals and coiling solitary whip corals up to three metres long all shared the reef surface with scattered hard corals.

Feeding above the healthy coral in clouds of orange, pink and purple were anthias and tiny reef fish. Trevally and dogtooth tuna patrolled their perimeter, occasionally darting in to pick off a victim; the tiny fish instantly contracted into a mass of single colour and dropped in to the reef. Seconds later, they scattered and rose back into the water column to feed; this behaviour occurred over and over again.

The tidal flow here sustains the spectacular marine life – the corals and fish constantly feed in the powerful currents. These wonderful tidal passage seascapes are only easily accessible to divers during the small period of time before and just after the turn of each tide.

Much of this diving was wide angle or 'big picture', but inside the lagoons similar pinnacles had completely different

ecosystems. You can choose to shoot macro or 'look small' at longnose hawkfish nestled in high gorgonians, nudibranchs mating, ghost pipefish hiding and lionfish hunting. But on that same dive you could suddenly discover a whaleshark swimming towards you!

Fiji is also famous for its sharks and shark feeds. *Island Dancer II* anchors minutes from Gau Passage almost on top of a great shark site and you're able to dive the tide changes at the best times. Gau Passage could easily be called 'shark alley' – the second you enter the water the grey reef sharks are all around, even on a drift dive instead of a feed. Wonderfully we also discovered a nursery of about 30 miniature grey reef sharks schooling at the end of the passage. My initial estimate of shark numbers was around 20 adults running the passage but during the feed I'm sure there were over 40 sharks, some within a metre at times. Often when composing a shot, one or two sharks would swim straight into frame from above my head or just under my strobe.

Diving Fiji from the *Island Dancer II* takes you out among the more distant reefs like the beautifully protected Namena and Makogai Marine Parks. The Dancer Fleet motto is "Dream, Dive, Discover" and with the best diving more than seven



Top to bottom: A group of sharks in 'feed mode'; This hairy ghost pipefish was almost invisible; This octopus was flanked by two cod as it fed amongst the corals; Two tiny nudibranch prepare for courtship.

hours by boat from Suva, the journey is done in comfort. The *Island Dancer II* crew are all Fijians – without even realising, you are subtly discovering the culture of Fiji. Many an evening would be spent enjoying the balmy weather on the rear deck and on occasion, quietly in the background, one of the crew would pick up a guitar and start singing, then before long another crew member would softly join in. Lose a bit of that western inhibition and you may find yourself singing, smiling and laughing too.

Island Dancer food, as on all Dancer Fleet voyages, was excellent and plentiful. The cabins are very spacious and with a maximum of only nine other guests on board it's very relaxed and uncrowded. Most diving is done straight from the rear deck where your tank and BC is racked, then it is a quick gear-up and two steps into the water. Occasionally dives are from the rigid hull inflatable, usually in one direction and less than a five minute trip – either the start or end of the dive is directly from the dive deck. Post-dive there's freshly warmed towels to dry off, then its rest easy before your next step-entry.

A must-do is the Village Tour complete with a fascinating Kava Welcoming Ceremony. Drinking the kava is voluntary, and there's also vibrant and very physical traditional dancing plus singing. At the end of the ceremony the villagers eagerly ask you to join them in slightly less physical and great fun dances. Meanwhile all the food has been cooking over hot coals in a traditional 'Lovo' oven



FIJI INFO

Getting there: Travel and flights can be arranged directly through Dancer Fleet www.dancerfleet.com or via their agents in Australia, Diversion Dive Travel www.diversionoz.com or Dive Adventures www.diveadventures.com.au. Flights are via Air Pacific; check with the

airlines or agent for latest schedules and prices. **Taxes and Fees:** US\$15 per person for the cultural village visit and Kava Ceremony. **Health & Vaccinations:** Fiji is not considered to be a health risk for malaria but there is a very minor risk of dengue in the wetter months when on land so insect repellent is practical. Like all remote locations, tetanus, and hepatitis 'A' & 'B' could be considered. **Entry & Exit Requirements:** No visa is required for visitors with an Australian passport. **Climate:** Fiji is a year-round diving

destination with warm weather and high humidity. The winter or dry season is roughly April-October and features up to 50m visibility with cooler water around 24-25°C. The wet season or summer is November-March, with warmer water around 28°C but higher rainfall – though this can lower visibility, it also means it's more likely to see filter feeders like manta rays. During the cooler months I recommend a 5mm suit for multiple days diving, and for the rest of the year a 3mm wet suit should suffice.

Comprised of 333 magnificent islands with a total land area of 18,333sq km, Fiji sits on the 180° meridian and the



of leaves – a delicious feast when you get back on board.

international date line is bent around the nation to give it uniform time. One of the first nations to greet each new day, Fiji is considered the 'soft coral capital of the world'. I can verify this is a well-deserved reputation – and having dived the Asian and Papua New Guinea regions north of Australia plus the Micronesian Archipelago to the northeast, I found the reef systems of Fiji refreshingly unique. We'd jump at the chance to return to Fiji to voyage with *Island Dancer II*, its wonderful crew and immerse ourselves in Fiji.

Below left to right: The *Island Dancer II* at rest, as a luxury yacht she would be equally at home on the French Riviera; Sheer undersea walls and incredible oceanic visibility; The famous 'Window of Dreams'.



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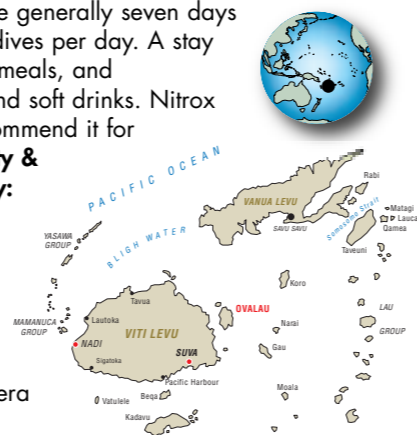


ISLAND DANCER II INFO

Yacht & Voyage Specifics: A luxury 30m steel mono-hull motor yacht, extremely comfortable, she accommodates 10 guests and is ideal for those wishing to dive amongst a smaller group. All staterooms feature en-suites, windows and a double and single bunk. Voyages are generally seven days in duration with four or five dives per day. A stay onboard includes all diving, meals, and refreshments of wine, beer and soft drinks. Nitrox is available and I highly recommend it for multiple-diving days. **Electricity &**

Camera Equipment Capability: 110v US and 250v – AUS style outlets. Ample room for camera setup on existing tables and a charge station at the rear of the main salon. A separate rinse tank is maintained purely for camera equipment. **Gratuity (Tips):**

Voluntary; if you wish to tip it is based on the quality of service you've received. **Airport Transfers:** Complimentary, the liveaboard arranges pick-up and returns you to either the airport or the Novotel Suva Lami Bay. If you arrive a day early you'll need to arrange pickup. A taxi from the airport should cost around F\$25.



Top: Jacks patrol the edge of the passage.
Bottom: Crinoids and gorgonians make the most of the currents.

>LINK: www.dancerfleet.com