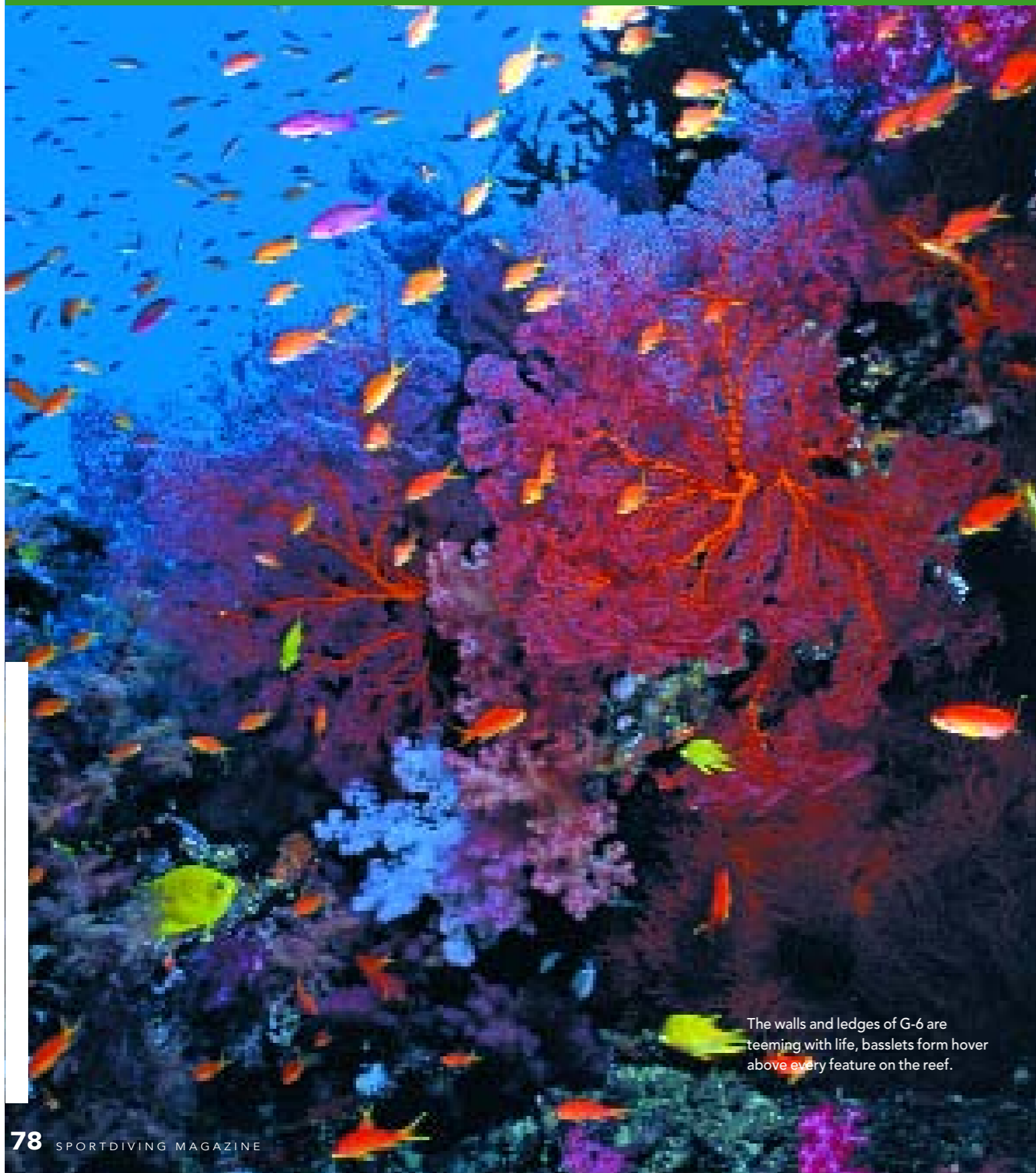


+ WE BEGAN DESCENDING TO A SHALLOW REEFTOP EIGHT METRES DOWN WHICH WAS THE TOP OF A HUGE CORAL-ENCRUSTED PINNACLE RISING VERTICALLY OUT OF MUCH DEEPER WATER. AS WE ARRIVED A PAIR OF MACKEREL SWOOPED IN TO ATTACK A HUGE MASS OF FUSILIERS SHELTERING AROUND THE TOP OF THE PINNACLE, SCATTERING THEM ALL IN NERVOUS FRIGHT.



The walls and ledges of G-6 are teeming with life, basslets form hover above every feature on the reef.

RAKI RAKI

FIJI'S SOFT CORAL PARADISE

We began exploring the shallow edge of the reef and quickly realised how rich this pinnacle was. A riot of coloured soft corals in bright pink, fiery-orange and blood-red lined the edge. Orange basslet fish danced above the soft corals and a big grand-daddy lionfish hovered gracefully along the edge. All this and we'd only just left the surface! This dive at Golden Dreams became one of our favourites and it's just one of dozens of sites dotted around the offshore reefs of Viti Levu's north coast.

We chose to dive off the northern coast around the district of Raki Raki as we'd heard these reefs had pristine soft corals and marine life, plus its only a two and a half hour drive from Nadi's International Airport. Raki Raki is a rural area with cane farming as its main industry, though many native Fijians are fishermen. Within a few kilometres of shore are a handful of islands surrounded by a maze of coral reefs eroded with caves and swimthroughs. Further offshore in the Vatu-I-Ra Passage are reefs and pinnacles that offer world class diving. The offshore reefs have traditionally been accessible only by a few dive liveboards that ply these waters, but now day trips operate from Raki Raki.

The largest offshore island is Nananu-I-Ra with a few chalet accommodations located right on the beaches. The really good news here is that diving is still in its infancy, new sites are still being discovered, so the area hasn't been dived to death! Among the



dozen or so dive sites the inshore area has to offer, all had interesting and varied reef profiles. Huge rocky reefs with vertical walls and eroded with caves, holes and ledges gives a feeling of exploring rather than just finning above the reef. Among our favourites were -

Dream-Maker is a collection of huge bommies sitting very close to each other, some reaching up from 25 to only 6 metres below the surface. Many of the bommies have swimthroughs, small caves and big ledges that are lined with gorgonian fans, soft corals and sea whips. Fish life consists mostly of smaller colourful species, though we did see white-tip reef sharks and a huge puffer fish here.

Golden Dreams is a large area of connected bommies, with varying depths from nine to

25 metres. It soon becomes apparent where the name comes from; the sides of three big bommies are covered in golden soft corals. The balance of the bommies, plus the ridges and reefs that interconnect them, are coated in stunning soft corals in the deeper areas and huge plate corals in the shallower sections. We saw Lionfish on every dive here (including one tiny pale-yellow coloured juvenile) and hordes of basslet fish in the shallows. Coral Trout, sweetlips and snappers were always around.

The Maze is just that, a virtual maze of big reefs and bommies that have a mixture of gullies, caves, holes, canyons and ledges. Depths varied from eight to 23 metres and it could be easy to get lost here - but what a place to get lost! Some of Fiji's best soft corals line the walls and ledges and it seemed the prettiest corals were just below the boat

“ Depths varied from eight down to 23 metres and it could be easy to get lost here - but what a place to get lost! ”

mooring. We saw a large school of sweetlips, lobsters and some terrific nudibranchs here.

Breathaker is adjacent to Golden Dreams and is a group of bommies reaching up from a long ridge of reef that finishes abruptly at a steep wall falling to beyond 100 metres. This wall is the best place to see sharks around Raki Raki; whitetips are always found here, along with almost guaranteed sightings of whalers and blacktips. We also saw moray eels, schooling snapper, barracuda, mackerel and some great anemone fish.

Marama Totoka (Beautiful Lady) has some shallow reefs with stunning soft corals and swarms of anthias covering the tops of most bommies in only six to eight metres. The bommies come out of 12 to 15 metres of water, though there is some deeper water on the outer extremities of the bommies where we explored ledges and small caves.

The reefs further offshore in the Vatu-I-Ra Passage offer some beautiful dive sites. These are all open ocean dives on pinnacles that rise from phenomenal depths, we visited in a period of strong south-easterly winds but were still able to dive some of the best sites in fantastic underwater conditions. The best we saw were -

Black Magic Mountain is a solitary pinnacle starting at seven metres with almost vertical walls. One side has a ridge leading away at 27 metres, but around the rest of the small pinnacle, the bottom was out of sight. The entire reef was covered in soft corals and gorgonian fans, pelagic fish action was non-stop, a huge school of surgeonfish and fusiliers hung just off the reef. Trevally arrived in bursts, sending the fusiliers into panic on each pass. A school of barracuda hovered at the edge of the ridge, and on the reef were coral cod, sweetlips, plus thousands of basslets surrounded the soft corals - what a dive!

G-6 was a heart pounding drift around a double-topped pinnacle with a shallow channel through the middle. The current here keeps the fish life very active. Grey reef sharks hover over the sand beyond 30 metres, while big schools of fish paraded past. The reef has a series of ledges from eight metres down to 25 metres on one face and vertical to 40 metres on another side. Soft corals were everywhere and one big overhang was 'dripping' with bright yellow Siphonogorgia soft coral.

Garden of Eden had a reef just a metre below the surface, this dropped vertically to between 10-18 metres where the bottom sloped out to deeper water. The wall has a series of large crevices running into the reef face, these can be entered carefully to view huge gorgonian fans and soft corals. The deeper slope has beautiful small bommies where soft corals are surrounded by thousands of basslets. We also saw parrotfish, scorpion fish and a group of waloo that cruised past checking us over.

Mellow Yellow is a shallow bommie connected at about 18 metres to a deeper bommie, both of them coated with a bright yellow soft coral. This reef had lots of interesting macro life; dragon nudibranchs, a small anemone with a dozen anemone fish darting around, scorpion fish, painted oysters, angelfish, leaf fish and lots of coral cod in the crevices.

Pot Luck is adjacent to Garden of Eden and is the corner of the same reef. We loved this place as it had very little current, but buzzed with life. Lots of ledges and mini caves to explore, and

ridges loaded with gorgonians and soft corals all in full bloom. We swam around the corner into a howling current, turned around and just hung-back around the area where all the action was - without the current. Finds here included ghost pipefish, big sweetlips being cleaned, a turtle, beautiful gobies, nudibranchs, leaf fish plus all the usual reef fish meandering around.

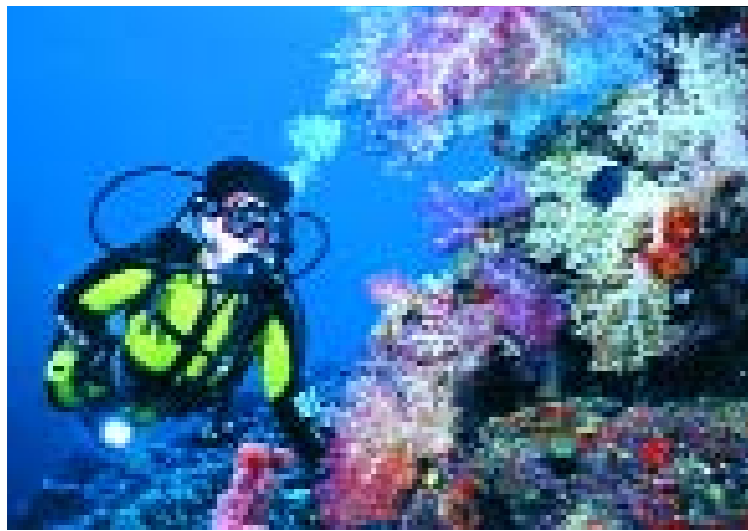
On our non-diving days we went beachcombing and exploring mangroves along the shore or just walked around the island. Day trips are available to the mainland to visit waterfalls; traditional Fijian villages or the once-a-week market on Saturday's at Raki Raki township is highly recommended.

One of the greatest attractions we found in Fiji was the native Fijians themselves. We had heard many accounts from visitors to Fiji before our inaugural dive trip. Yet one comment in particular stood out, because everyone we spoke to told us the same thing - The Fijian people are great, you'll find them so warm and friendly. Well we certainly weren't disappointed, after two trips here we concluded that the Fijian people were the friendliest we had ever met, most of them treating us like old friends after only meeting them for a few days or even hours.

Two dive operators service the area, offering day trips out to the reefs. Ra Divers visit only the inshore sites within 30 minutes of Nananu-I-Ra Island. While Bamboo Reef Divers travel out to the open water reefs in Vatu-I-Ra Passage around one hour's boat journey from the island - plus the inshore sites as well. The best time of year to visit is from May through to November, when rainfall is least and sunny days prevail. Underwater visibility is often over 30 metres on the offshore sites, while inshore is between 10-20 metres. Diving is possible in the rainy season (December to April), but underwater visibility can be restricted, particularly on the inshore sites.

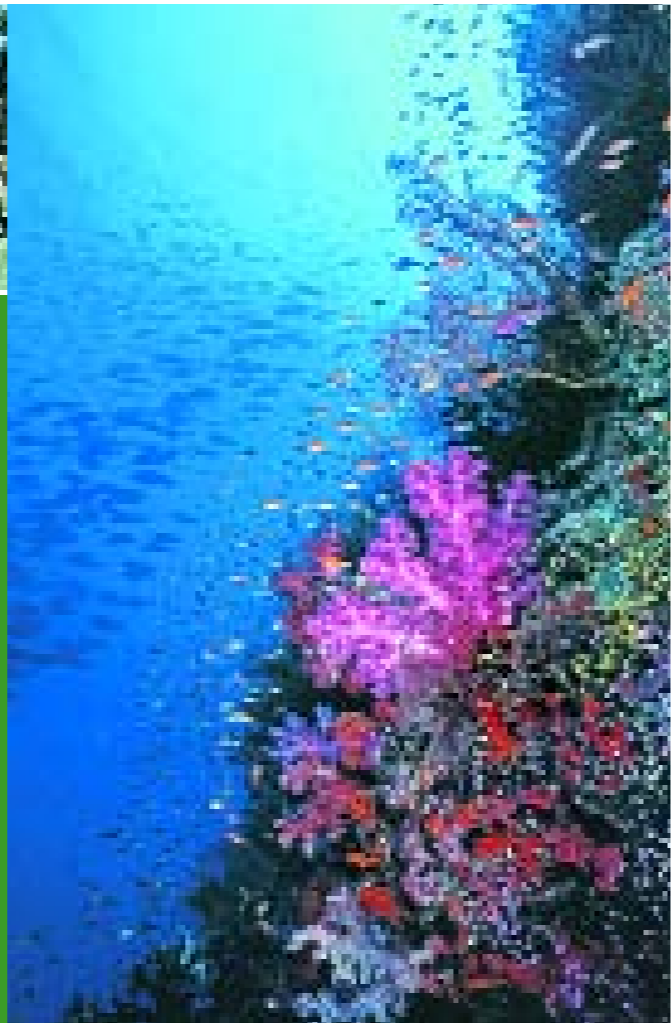
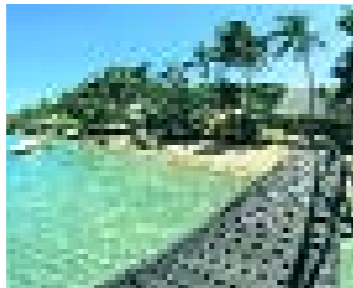


Left, top to bottom: A group of four anemone fish crowd around an anemone at Mellow Yellow • Dawn Mullins explores the soft coral ledges of the Garden of Eden. Right, top to bottom: Beautiful nudibranchs are found on the inshore and offshore reefs. • Schools of surgeonfish and fusiliers hang off the walls of Black Magic Mountain. • This thorny oyster reminded us of the infamous Cookie Monster of Sesame Street. Complete with ascidian eye, algae beard and soft coral hair.



RAKI RAKI

FIJI'S SOFT CORAL
PARADISE



SERVICE SAMPLER FOR THE RAKI RAKI AREA

DIVE OPERATORS

Bamboo Reef Divers - based at Bamboo Beach Resort on Nananu-I-Ra Island.
info@bambooreefdivers.com www.bambooreefdivers.com

Ra Divers - located at Wananavu Beach Resort. radivers@is.com.fj www.radivers.com

Ka Viti Divers - have several boats and service several resorts in the area.
info@kaivitidivers.com <http://kaivitidivers.com>

PLACES TO STAY

ON NANANU-I-RA ISLAND Bethams Beach Cottages www.bethams.com.fj
and McDonalds Nananu Beach Cottages are both self-contained chalet
accommodations, right on a beautiful beach. Both have a small restaurant and shop
to purchase food and essentials, plus they arrange boat transfers to and from the
mainland. They also have back-packer dormitories.

A resort high on the island's hilltop was being refurbished during our last visit,
Bamboo Beach Resort (formerly Mokusigas Island Resort) opened in March 2004
under new American ownership with its own dive operation (see above).

ON THE MAINLAND Wananavu Beach Resort is on the mainland on a peninsula
just across the water from Nananu-I-Ra Island. The resort has full facilities with nice
rooms, great food and a pool. <http://wananavu.com> wananavuresort@connect.com.fj
More reference on the RakiRaki area is available via the Fiji Visitors Bureau website
www.fiji.islands.com

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