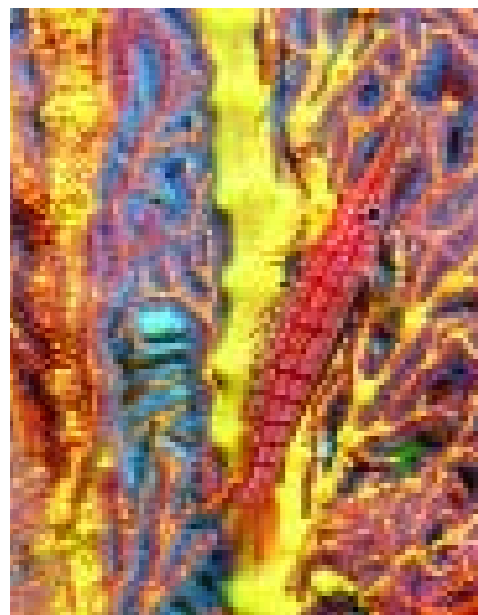


+ THERE ARE VIRTUALLY NO ROADS AND FEW SIGNS OF CIVILIZATION – HERE THE FAMILY SEDAN IS THE YAMAHA LONGBOAT AND THE M1 IS THE BEACH AT LOW TIDE. AT SUNSET SMILING KIDS STROLL ALONG THE BEACH WITH ARMFULS OF COCONUTS AND BANANAS, THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO VILLAGE LIFE. ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS HERE IS THE VILLAGE – IT’S THEIR WORLD; THEIR HOME; THEIR IDENTITY. AND CENTRAL TO VILLAGE LIFE IS THE CHURCH AND, OF COURSE, RUGBY!

KADAVU

: ALAN WIGGS

PERFECT BALANCE



Kadavu offers the Fiji experience we all dream of. Perfect white sand beaches surround the sinuous volcanic ridge that winds down from the heights of King Kong Mountain in the west to the endless coral of the legendary Astrolabe reef in the east. Small traditional villages on grassy clifftops overlook the clear Pacific waters or hug the shore under slender coconut palms.

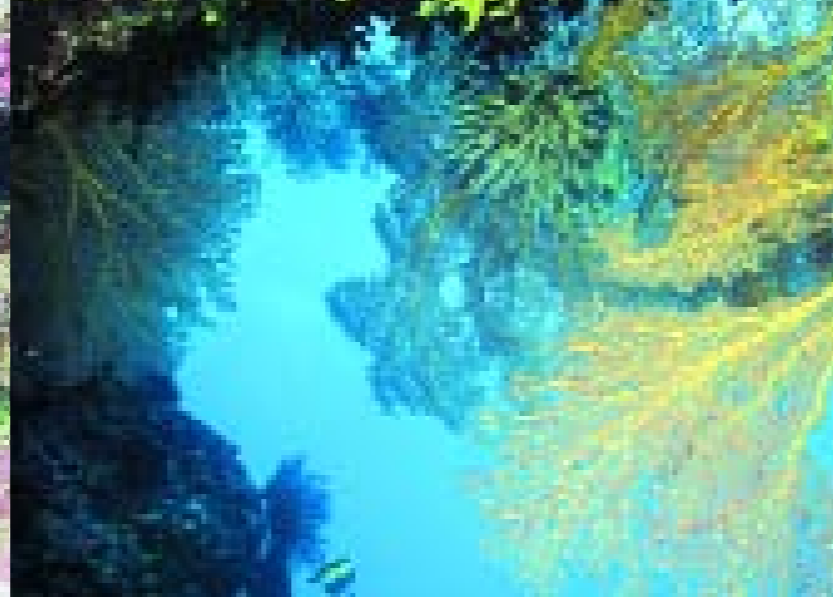
The pace of life has changed little on Kadavu since our first visit to Matana Resort in 1990. Then the grass runway saw more chickens than tourists as very few travellers ever reached this unknown outpost – despite being the fourth largest island in Fiji it had remained well off the tourist trails. The airstrip now sports a new coating of bitumen and tourist development has gained some pace – but you’re still likely to feel challenged by the

isolation and quietness here. Once at your resort, there’s really nowhere to go but the sea or the jungle and nightlife consists of watching the brightest star show on the planet. This is the real Fiji – nothing like the mainland with its kava dens, reproduction masi paper, and its 24/7 electricity. Drink your kava in a beachside bure on Kadavu and you’ll get the flavour of the culture and appreciate the warmth of these amiable people. I once read that an early missionary, with a rather black sense of humour, noted that Fijians were always particularly friendly with people “they didn’t intend to eat”!

The outer reef slope is blessed with incredibly clear water – the home of hawksbill turtles, great solitary barracuda and scalloped hammerhead sharks. Mahi mahi cleave the surface, fast moving electric rainbow schools that chase flying



Above - This is my favourite shot. I was shooting the red squirrel fish and admiring the red on yellow contrast when this large trumpetfish nosed into frame, keen to show his best angle
Centre - Snorkelling trips around the point from Matana Resort were a popular option for sunny afternoons
Left - The elusive long snout hawkfish. Blending beautifully with their gorgonian host, these delicate creatures tend to nose through the fan to reappear on the other side the moment one gets focus set.



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THE SHARKS SELF-SERVE IN A PRETTY HECTIC DISPLAY OF MUSCLE – THESE WERE THE BIGGEST, CHUNKIEST GREY REEFIES I’VE EVER SEEN. ADDING TO THIS WAS A SCHOOL OF BANNERFISH FLITTING IN AND OUT OF THE ACTION.

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fish – they leap from the swells in panic only to become the prey of top gun gannets diving from above. I dived here in 2003 with Isaac from Dive Kadavu and was anxious to return to this largely undived location.

Matana Resort is only 10 minutes from Vunisea, the only town on this otherwise rural island, and is on the leeward side of Kadavu with magnificent views over Namalata reef. The resort’s dive operation, Dive Kadavu, has no less than five dive boats and is extremely well equipped and efficient – arguably the most professional dive operation in the area. Super-fast plate aluminium V-hulls take divers to The Astrolabe at the eastern end of the island, or to exciting reef wall dives at Nagigia Island at the foot of Nabakelevu. And when the weather allows, mantas are on the menu over near Galoa on the southern side where incredibly healthy reefs attract schooling mantas in plankton-rich passes.

At Matana Resort some things had changed topside – a new dining deck area has been constructed, plus a couple of new garden bures with elevated views across the reef. The coconut palms have got even taller, and the beach is just as stunning as I remembered it. And Bob Forster, the manager, can be found each evening at the new ‘Beach Jar Bar’ where huge cocktails are served in pasta sauce jars! It took a while to get used to it, but it is part of the homely charm of the place!

But would the diving live up to our memories from the early 90s? Dive Kadavu have all their sites moored and

were one of the first operators in Fiji to do so. They also rotate their dive sites and periodically rest areas from divers. After revisiting sites such as Evil Trench and The Aquarium the benefits of this were clear – the intact reef is supremely healthy and fish life is as good as it ever was, with superb soft corals including large fans of red and yellow gorgonians.

The Aquarium had all the usual butterfly and angelfish species in quantity, but with a backdrop of crimson soft corals and seawhips. The safety stop was spent on the bommie crest, watching piano and sabretooth blennies curiously circling the divers, who were in turn searching for leaf scorpionfish. Dive Kadavu’s divemaster Joeli was a brilliant resource – he carried one of those kid’s magna-

doodle slates and used it to identify all sorts of interesting critters, from popcorn shrimp to seawhip gobies – he pointed out an exquisite princess damselfish, a species I’ve never noticed before.

But my favourite dive here was Blue Tang where we followed a sinuous coral gully between towering pinnacle bommies. Drifting gently with a forgiving current we literally dodged around avenues of seawhips and gorgonians, some with long nose hawkfish teasing photographers with their party tricks – the moment composition and focus merged they’d casually nose through to the other side of the fan. Schools of barracuda wheeled overhead while a dense cloud of bigeye trevally appeared to orbit the sun. And as promised, Joeli delivered – blue and black ribbon eels made to order – what crazy looking animals! But while we

were watching them, we were in turn being watched by goggle-eyed grubfish, their turret eyes twisting and turning while they checked out every inch of the strange rubber-clad aliens. Banded sea kraits, grey reef whalers and, of course, flocks of gorgeous powder-blue tangs added to a ‘very comprehensive’ dive as one seasoned veteran observed!

In fact, we saw grey reefies or whitetips on all but one dive, and Dive Kadavu has also developed a very exciting shark experience. Joeli takes down a PVC pipe filled with fish frames, assembles divers on the reef floor and removes the caps, allowing the sharks to self serve in a pretty hectic display of muscle – these were the biggest, chunkiest grey reefies I’ve ever seen. Adding to this was a

school of bannerfish flitting in and out of the action. About a dozen well behaved grey reefies kept us entertained and at no stage did we feel at all threatened.

Probably one of the most famous sites here is Evil Trench – a unique, adrenalin-pumping deep dive. A long gash in the coral slope opens up at around 30 metres, irresistibly attractive. Divers descend through the opening into a huge cavern, roughly the size and shape of an aircraft hangar, but sloping down towards the mouth-shaped exit at over 50 metres. Sunlight is reflected off the white sandy bottom, bathing the roof of the cavern and divers’ faces in an eerie blue light that challenges nitrogen-tinged senses. After a brief seven minutes in the trench, we returned to saner depths, where large

marble cod, whitetips and bird wrasse escorted us back up the reef wall.

Between dives we played coconut bocce during surface interval or snorkelled in crystalline shallows. Most afternoons we strolled into nearby Navuatu village, where we played softball, touch rugby and ‘duck-duck-geese’ with the local school children – I don’t think I’ve ever heard kids laugh so much! A visit to church reminds one of the true joy in singing, and watching women weave grass floor mats makes one realise just how rushed our lives really are. Kadavu offers so much cultural interaction. The resort has a very supportive relationship with the villagers – apart from employment, it provides a generator and contributes to the Navuatu school fund. A chat with the chief’s son Cava left no doubt that the resort has been very good for the village.

Kadavu is the total Fijian experience – not something conjured up for tourists but a real glimpse of the daily life of people who live simply. They’re so generous with their time, because they have so much of it. And with Dive Kadavu’s sustainable approach to reef management, we can be confident of continued superb diving.

Top - I’ve seen many morays, but none larger than this beast at Canyons, Namalata Reef. This is what Fiji is famous for – delicate and abundant soft corals and Crinoid Featherstars line the coral clefts at The Aquarium. Yellow gorgonians; Crinoid featherstars; damsels and blennies thrive in the nutrient rich currents that flow through Blue Tang. Left - Ben Hall, a Peninsula School student dives amongst the soft corals of Evil Trench bommie. Centre - Clownfish peer out at the parade of divers meandering past at The Aquarium.



