Fiji??.... Where the hell is Fiji??.....Well, if you were to go around the World, it would be the farthest point away… before you would start coming back....(Jim Carey in The Truman Show)

Good things come to those who wait and after six years I was more than ready to dive in Fijian waters again! Of course pristine soft corals and blue water filled with a kaleidoscope of colors doesn't come without pain, mainly 15 plus hours of commercial flight time and a time zone that is totally against your biological clock....*but worth every moment*!!

We would be diving the famed Bligh Water, the passage between the main Fijian Islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, and named after the famous Mutiny on the Bounty's ill fated captain. These islands are part of the largest reef systems in the world, roughly 844 high islands, cays, and islets that comprise this chain of islands. Further, this archipelago has over a thousand reefs and, even

more importantly, one of the largest mangrove systems in the South Pacific. Mangroves are the nursery for marine life.

This trip is brought to you by my friends Brandon & Melissa Cole who put this deal together over a year ago and boy was I glad to be able to accompany them. With several well published photographers, there presents itself an excellent learning environment. . Most people don't know that I have been clawing my way back into the "Circle of Trust".....after the well documented Galapagos Adventure and the epic Tiger Shark Shoot Out; I had to pass on the Komodo Island Indonesia trip. It was then that I began the cascading free fall to the "Square of Acceptance" then, sadly, into the dreaded "Triangle of Tolerance".

One of the reasons I was invited was the fact that I had previously been to Fiji and speak fluent Fijian, as well as several other languages. It is very important to have a qualified linguist onboard when traveling in a foreign country! Further, because of my innate ability to interact with any culture, my services were most certainly an asset.
This particular trip has me reunited with old friends from previous dive expeditions and some new folks that were certainly a pleasure to meet. One of the highlights was my friend Carson Ganci was on board. Quickly dubbed "The Brothers Grimm", we continued our "High Seas High Jinxes" and I think, actually raised the bar on the mayhem that we created. Brandon coined the phrase," Human Backscatter", tragic but true.

After the never-ending flight from Hell, we land in Nadi,(pronounced..Nandi), Fiji at around 8:00AM we proceed to the baggage claim area and PRAY that our gear arrives at the same time we do. That might seem obvious to most, but for the professional photographers who are boarding a charter vessel for the next ten days, it is imperative! That is why we arrived two days prior to boarding, just in case a bag got misplaced, not to mention the horrendous jet lag!

Now after the initial settle in, Carson, Wade and I decide we need a drink! Of course I chose a Fiji Bitter, cold beer of choice, and because Joe, the local bartender suggested Carson and Wade have a delicious Tropical Rum Punch, that is what they chose. They really were enjoying

those drinks to until the check arrived and they found out they were TWENTY BUCKS!! Believe you me; they were mighty leery of Joe from then on, especially when he suggested he show them "The Sleeping Giant".

Finally, the bus takes us to the docks in Suva, the capital of Fiji, to board the Nai'a, a live aboard diving vessel that is consistently in the top ten of dive platforms in the World! Wow, what a great boat! This boat is a wonderful masterpiece of engineering and stocked with some of the most component people to virtually, take care of your every whim.
We were greeted by the staff as we walked up the aluminum gangplank, festooned with every camera, strobe light, dive gear and" widget" known to man.

The crew is hollering...Bula!! At the top of their lungs! Because of my command of the Fijian language, I immediately understand that means," Hello and Welcome, you pasty white camera geeks!!" If you only learn one word in Fiji, Bula is it, it is hello/goodbye, I'm hungry, virtually everything! I love this simple life, so idyllic; man it is so neat to be finally onboard!

Like a previous cruise, I will be sharing a cabin with good friend Scott or as I have aptly named him "West Side" because of the fact that he resides in California.
After stowing the gear we start the never ending process of "futzing" with our cameras. Professional underwater photographers are an interesting sort, very cerebral, often unassuming, rarely understood by mere mortals. But if you hang around them long enough, you are either drawn into their blue world or not.

Diving in Fiji is like no other place in the World and diving on a live aboard like the Nai'a is like Heaven! For the next ten days the schedule is the following: 6:00AM get up and have a cup of

coffee and some cereal w/fruit….DIVE…….hot breakfast…….DIVE……..."Futz" with cameras…..lunch…….DIVE……snack……DIVE……..dinner……..decide whether or not to do a night dive……..or smoke one of my high dollar Dominicans., and have a "Fiji Baby" (local name for a Fiji Bitter Beer). The neat thing about diving with the Nai'a, you can do what you want!!

We traverse the waters between Vita Levu and Vanna Levu and if seeing the most eyes popping reefs anywhere is not your gig, then this is NOT the trip for you……..call me,

I will take your place on the boat…especially if it is the Nai'a. Starting in the Bligh Waters, moving north to Gau then to Wakaya and Namena Marine Park and the back south to the Bligh Waters.

Sea conditions were nothing short of awesome, with actually flat conditions in the Bligh Waters for the first few days of diving. We were treated to "no worries" diving day in and day out. Groups were split up into two and cameras were shuttled from dive deck to inflatable pangas or skiffs by the crew. Once we had set up our dive gear, the crew handled it and transferred it from staging platform to the inflatable before each sortie into the water.

The boat not only had a wonderful room for our cameras but they had *never ending* warm showers on deck to rinse off after your dive! One of the true pleasures in diving, my friend, is being able to rinse the salt water off with a warm shower! I had packed some biodegradable soap that I used at the end of the day and even though, some of the gests were appalled by it, I chose to shower on deck in fresh air instead of the cabin.

Nitrox was offered and was used by the majority. For the uninformed, Oxygen Enriched Nitrox or EAN was developed for longer bottom times and a safety margin when used correctly. Affectionately called "Geezer Gas", the higher the Oxygen content, the less Nitrogen absorbs ion occurs while breathing compressed air underwater.
Water temperature was in the 72-73 degree range and currents were moderate to ripping

depending on the site. I had purchased some new fins and they were just the ticket! I could fly!

It wasn't long before Carson & I were invited to the rear fantail to sample the local drink. Kava.

Carson shares his joke about Roo Roo and the fellows damn near fall off the back of the boat laughing! From then on, we were accepted as on of them. We played guitar, sang and drank Kava almost every night! We decided to be the fellows managers and while trying to get them to sign a lucrative contract, we named the group, 'Big Moe and the Three Joe's'. Fijians have just wonderful voices because they start singing as children and continue through out there entire life. Moe, was one of the dive masters and the lead singer, he handled both tasks like the pro that he is.

Fiji is governed by a central government, but on most of the islands, it is the local chief that is the final answer in the village! Fijian tribal roots still are important to the village and its inhabitances and Kava is a very big part of it. Depending on whom you ask or how long you have been drinking it, varying effects can be produced. Numbness of the lips to mild euphoria, and finally sleepiness. Produced by the grinding of the root of the yaqona tree (pepper plant) and wrapped in cheesecloth and dipped into and bowl of water. Once ready, the liquid looks similar to muddy water. The ceremony is a simple one. The bowl is filled to various degrees; little bit is "low tide" and to the brim is "high tide". When offered the concoction, you are to clap your hands once, drink it fully, hand the shell back and clap twice.

One of the new aquatisences was a fellow from St. Petersburg Russia.....Dimetry. Nice guy, smiled all the time, and could not speak a lick of English. I kept telling him to stop that incessant jabbering and speak plain English.....he would just laugh and smile. For some reason, he would get Suli, the ships crew only woman to give him extra food and at one point during the trip, got a whole fish from a local village and cooked it for him! Carson and I were convinced that the dude would squirrel food to his cabin and probably in his wet suit for snacks while diving!

Another notable couple new to me but long time friends of Brandon & Melissa were Eva & Hedrick Rivero from Florida. Eva, once tasting the Kava, never looked back and was dubbed "Kava Queen". She loved that Kava! Is there such a thing as Kava Anonymous?

This was the second trip that I shared the ocean with the great David Hall. He told me that he

had been taking underwater photographs for over FORTY YEARS!!
Always the last one up from the dive...I swear, after forty years he has probably figure out how to extract oxygen from the coral whilst underwater! Dude does know what he is doing though! He brought his wife, Gale, along this trip and although she was a pleasure to be around she kept bothering me about the election....reminding me that I was the only Conservative on the Boat! Mainly because nobody believed that I was a doctor, David was asked to perform some "doctoring" to Wally, good thing for Wally, I would have required a nurse before I could proceed!

We also enjoyed the company of a couple from California; Paul and Sandy and the folks from Greece Franz & Poldi, both enjoyable couples with cool stories to tell.

Not to be left out from the action.....SHAARRKS!!

We steamed to Gua Island and Nigali Pass for some shark images. We would park ourselves into the cracks and crevices called "the bleachers" and wait for the show!! (no popcorn is served, but we do get a treat never the less).The pass has some pretty good current when the tide is coming in so Jamie explained in the dive briefing very clear.....don't get caught in the shallow sand area otherwise you will go from 60' to 15' in rapid fashion! What did I do.....got caught in the shallow sand area!! I was literally digging my camera dome port into the sand like a plow to slow me down!! *Note to self.....Always pay attention to the Dive Briefing!!*

Nevertheless, we got some opportunity to see all ages of Sharks, from very young to old. Much of the females were very pregnant! Wouldn't that be cool... to deliver a bouncing baby Shark!! I just love Sharks of all kinds! They fascinate me more than any other marine animal, always have. Unfortunely if we don't collectively do something about it...these janitors of the sea will be added to the long list of endangered or worse yet, extinct animals of the ocean. Please make a note to investigate this noble cause IT IS IMPORTANT!!

While I am on my serious kick, we lost a dear friend and fellow diver right before I left on this trip and I was not able to attend his memorial but did ask everyone to remember Mr. James Brucia. He was one of those rare individuals that you are very fortunate to meet in your lifetime. He would always say, while he was taking pictures, that he was "getting one for the wall". We sure are going to miss him.

After a wonderful "shark adventure", we were treated to a "Kava Party" on the boat. This would require us to don our gay appeal! In other words, the ship dress code for the night would be the Sulu that was given to us upon boarding. For those of you who are not familiar with the standard dress in Fiji, the Sulu is a wrap of sorts that is worn not only by the women but also the men.
Jamie, for some reason, figured I would be wearing mine sans undergarments, or as they say…"commando", and threatened me within an inch of my life, not to! Anyway, we had a great time with the crew, who could sing very well, and play guitars, until they ran out of songs! I was delegated to the rain stick which was a supplement to the bongos. That was alright except someone put a rubber skull cap on me that made me look ridiculous! It wasn't half as bad as the badge that said; "Scuba Divers for Obama"!

Speaking of Jamie, our lustrous dive master, she worked hard to make sure that critters, especially the small varietals were found and identified. She conducted a series of seminars during the day on the sea life that can be found while diving these wonderful waters. She gave me fits the whole cruise…I might have deserved it though….

I made it my personal goal to cause her distress at every turn, mainly because she had decreed that Carson and I were to smoke our "foul" cigars on the BACK of the BOAT ONLY!! She obviously had no appreciation to the finer things in life, let alone any idea how much those things cost!!

While we were in the area, the Nai'a had arranged a visit to a local village. Very Cool! If you have an opportunity to visit a local village, DO IT! It is absolutely a must do while in Fiji. This particular village visit was neat because we were met by the ladies of the village and they personally took us thru the village and explained life for them as well as the kids. The children were actually home for a change instead of school and preformed a dance for us. It was special because Wally, one of the crew actually is in line to be chief one day and it was his village that we visited.

We sat in the village "convention hall" and witnessed the Savu Savu, a ceremony where they offer the chief a gift of Kava root and thank him for letting us into his village and special reverence to his position within the village. It is after that, the guests get to partake of the Kava already prepared. Next is the dancing, and of course because I have special skills on the dance floor, I was one of the "chosen" to accompany the girls on the floor.
We danced and carried on while one of the girls fanned my buddy Scott with a homemade fan. Once we told the ladies that he was "available" he was certainly "made over" the rest of the time he was there!
There was rumor that, because of his apparent masculine characteristics, that a place for him was certainly available within the village ladies.

Back on board we set about our endless task of setting up cameras for the next day of fabulous diving on E-36 and Mount Mutiny……Wow and double Wow!! If you can't get a rush diving those places, you need to hang up your fins!
Undoubtedly, the finest couple of open ocean pinnacles available to the sport diver, anywhere in

the World! Everything from soft coral formations to macro life all in one place. Don't be surprised to see a Hammerhead or two either.

As most always on these trips, you get to show off the results of your hard work through a slide show at the end of the week. I am always stunned at the images that my professional friends capture. For the "newbie", it is a wonderful opportunity to learn from the, Pros and they are ever so grateful to help. I made some advancements in my technique and received some praise from my peers…it makes it all the effort worthwhile.

Just like every dive trip I've taken with my friends, it always ends too soon. After circumnavigating the Bligh Waters for ten days, it's time to get back to business and save my money for the next adventure.

If this story stirs your soul, there is a gal that runs a travel agency called; Armadillo Travel…give her a call @ 281-734-3592..her name is Julie, she can put you on the fast track to Paradise.

If you are lucky you just might be speaking Fijian in a day or two…Bula, Bula Vinaka!!