



Rediscover Fiji's Pristine Reefs

By Gareth Bellamy.

Fiji's Ra Province got hammered by Cyclone Winston, the second-largest storm recorded in history with winds in excess of 375km/h.

The last of the New Zealand long weekends was a wash out, diving canned due to a combined 30 knot northerly and an easterly swell. The inevitable plunge into a forecasted cold El Niño wet winter had begun. An escape to the tropics was on the cards!

Fiji's a short hop from New Zealand and Volivoli Beach Resort on the Suncoast near Rakiraki is a firm favourite. This is not just because of its close proximity to the Bligh Strait and its world-class reefs, but the wonderful hospitality, chilled vibe and accommodating divers from beginners to techies.

Soft corals come in many shapes and colours.

Images from my last trip are full of blue skies, sunshine, palm trees, azure seas, multi-coloured soft corals, smiles and diving. This really is the 'Soft Coral Capital of the World'! My Goodness, 2013! Had it been three years? Well overdue a trip, but how was Fiji post-Cyclone Winston?

Volivoli Beach Resort got hit, staff and guests took refuge in the Deluxe and Ocean View Rooms which luckily received only minor damage, but the Premium Ocean View Villas were wrecked, as was the main restaurant/bar. Luckily family and staff were uninjured; others weren't so lucky – 44 people throughout the islands lost their lives and more than 35,000 were made homeless.

Volivoli Beach Resort is closed at this time for repair, and the Darling Family are taking the opportunity to undertake improvements. They will re-open its doors officially on 1 November. The new works include: a brand new Nuku Bar and Restaurant, chill area with charging points, an exciting menu with a strong emphasis on using local produce, swim-up pool bar, and the Ra Bar for those wishing to have a bite or a beer on the beach. Over 18 months they plan to take the Resort to a four-star level, with an additional 10 Luxury Villas with private infinity swimming pools and outdoor showers. Wow, exciting stuff!

A pre-cyclone group booking for June was honoured and I was able to get a place. Bonus – we had the Resort to ourselves!

I decided to take my rebreather this trip, and despite being in the middle of major rebuild, staff at Volivoli Beach Resort organised a O₂ booster and O₂ gas supply from their *Siren* liveaboard (helium is also available if pre-booked).

Travelling with a rebreather is challenging, and those who know our kind, we're a messy, gear-hungry lot, taking up most of the space on boats. This trip was going to be no different!

Rocking up to check in with 60kg of luggage including 3L tanks and 20kg of white granules ('Sorb' for my CO₂ scrubber), means the expectation of being interrogated and potential for rejection is high, including a star appearance on a future episode of TV's *Border Patrol*. Luckily I had all the right paperwork. We arrived in Fiji to 28°

*the privilege of being there
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Sea anemone and clownfish taking care of each other.

and blue skies.

I wasn't sure what to expect at the Resort, or the condition of the reefs post-cyclone, and was prepared for the worst. Arriving at Volivoli Beach Resort I was pleasantly surprised. The gardens still bloomed with bougainvillea and the sweet smell of Frangipani wafted.

The cyclone's visit was visible though. Builders were hard at work and staff apologetic. There was no need, as the privilege of being there made our comfort pale in comparison to their hard work. Any concerns we may have had vanished – our accommodation in the Deluxe Ocean View rooms was fantastic and the familiar 180° reef vistas from each room, as before, was still magical.

With the main restaurant closed, the Resort served meals and drinks from the Beach Ra Bar. Staff greeted us like old friends and remembered our names from past visits. I haven't experienced that during all my years of travel, that's special.

The Ra Divers Centre at the Resort provides air and Nitrox and a full range of hire equipment. The new compressor room – meticulous to a point that you could serve food in there!

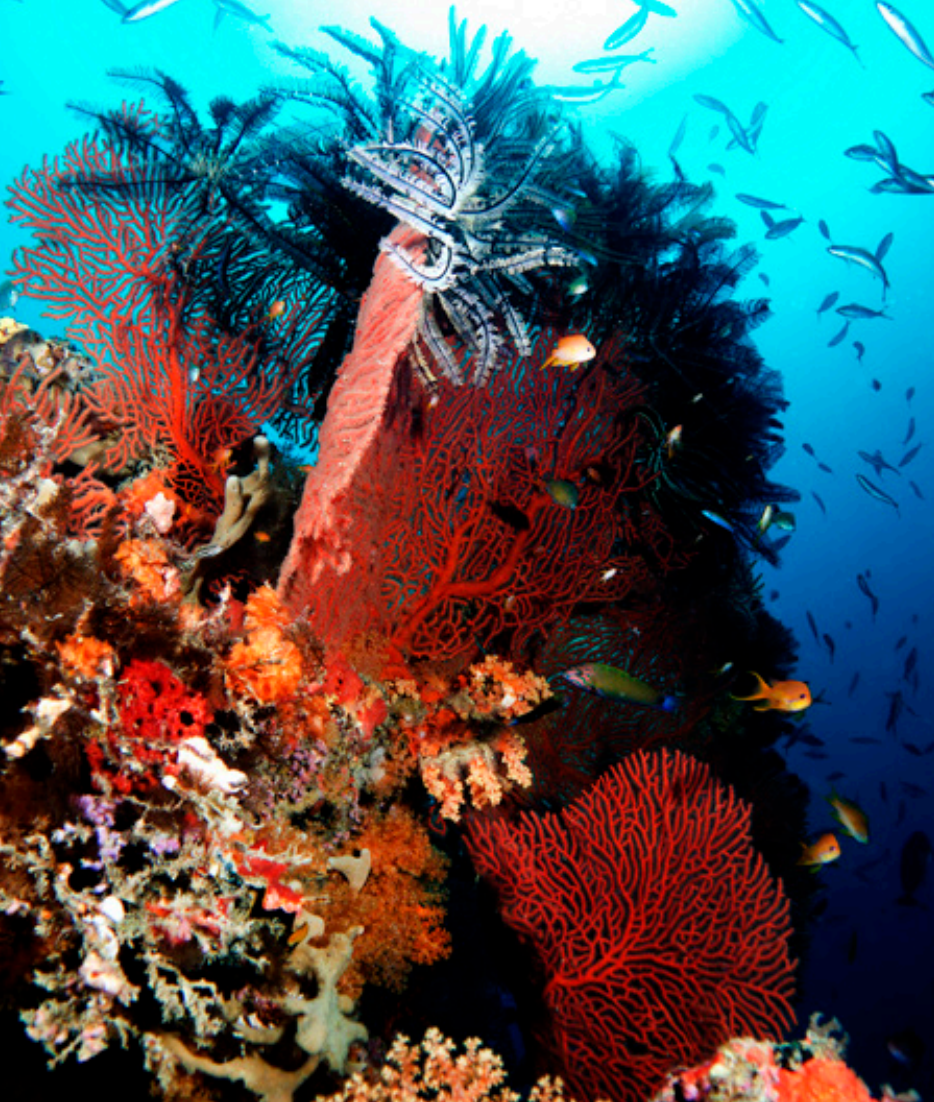
Dive planning is weather-dependent and sites are decided each morning. After a leisurely breakfast, the boats leave at 8:30 for the two dives of the day and return around 1pm in time for lunch,

Wrecked.



The new build well underway.





Sea fans all in great shape.

leaving the rest of the day to lounge by the pool, have a beer and grab some rays.

Skipper Seci provided site briefs delivered with true Fijian humour, his customary ending: "The pool is open!" Ra Divers cater for all, and we had options to dive with our wonderful guides (Joe, Wilo and Solo) or do our own buddy thing.

'Neptune's Rhapsody' – a myriad of swim-throughs, clownfish and anemones, schooling fish, white-tip and grey reef sharks. 'Golden Dreams' – ablaze with hanging yellow soft corals, gorgonian fans, swim-throughs and black coral, to name a few. At the safety stop of every dive was a finale of climactic colour explosion by the millions of anthias crowning the tops of the reefs.

The reefs were incredible: pristine, with no damage from the cyclone, the viz 20–30m+, schooling fish in abundance, beautiful soft corals, nudibranchs abounding and sharks every dive.

We dived sites such as 'Instant Replay' – an aptly named drift dive which was over before it began! 'Purple Haze' – walls of black coral and gorgonian fans, 'Heartbreak Ridge' with its amazing swim-throughs and massive gorgonian fans, and my favourite, 'Mellow Yellow' – a coral stack 30m in diameter, walls down to 60m covered in every kind of soft coral and colour you can imagine. A photographer's dream both wide-angle and macro – just amazing.

The walls are teeming with life.



After a no dive day of chilling it was time to head home to winter brrr. The question: is there life after Winston? The answer: you bet there is, in abundance and with bells on! I look forward to returning in November when the Resort re-opens.

About the Author:

Gareth Bellamy's passion for diving spans 33 years; being underwater is home to him. He likens the experience to starring in *The Matrix* – connected, as one, with everything in the ocean. He is privileged to have dived at some of the world's most beautiful places, including the Poor Knights Islands. He is based in Raglan, New Zealand.



INFO-SNIPPET

Location: South Pacific

Temperature: 22–32°C February/August

Water temperature: 24–30°C February/August

Language: Fijian, English and Fiji Hindi

Currency: Fijian Dollar

Fiji Airways, Fiji's national carrier, has regular flights from many international destinations (Auckland, Christchurch, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Hong Kong). There are no shortage of other airlines that also fly regularly to Fiji. Nadi International Airport is the main gateway for most, though there are several domestic airports on the islands.



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