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Top photo shows soft coral detail on a reef in the Rabi Channel of Matagi, Northern Fiji. Above, the "Midway" off Taveuni, Northern Fiji.

Pristine Pleasures:

Colorful Corals And Currents Highlight Fiji's Northern Islands — Ellen Sarbone

To say Fiji has great diving in The North that's sure to please everyone is a gross understatement. With two distinct dive regions — Savusavu and Taveuni — The North offers some of the best diving in the world.

Divers will find everything — from the renowned soft corals to healthy hard corals; from shallow, calm coral gardens to dramatic drop-offs and coursing currents on the outer edges of the barrier reefs; from large plentiful pelagics to minuscule reef fish and nudibranchs. The North's pristine waters are so vast that some reefs have never seen a diver.

The Savusavu area, on the south coast of Fiji's second largest island, Vanua Levu, includes a 30-mile long barrier reef, as well as Namenalala Island 20 miles southwest, which is surrounded by Namena Reef.

Taveuni, Fiji's Garden Isle, with its smaller islands, Matagi, Gamea and Laucala, plus nearby Lau and Ringold Island groups, has so many dive sites that only the smallest fraction of the reefs have ever been dived.

Most northern diving is done from boats which usually go out in the morning, spend a serene surface interval in the cove of a lush, deserted island, and return early to mid-afternoon. Some differences among operators relate to the type of boat, how long they take to get from the resort to the dive site, the number of divers per boat, and the kind of lunch served.

Savusavu Bay affords gentle diving among golden-colored sea fans. Hard coral gardens of every type are sprinkled here and there with some soft corals and thriving tropical reef fish. More adventurous diving is found along the challenging walls, caves and overhangs of the barrier reef that runs up the coast. Hole in the Wall is a steep sheer drop dappled with variegated sea fans and lots of fish. Passing pelagics like barracudas, sharks and jacks are attracted to the seamount at Dream House.

Namenalala Island features strong currents that bring nutrients to feed the magnificent soft corals, as well as big fish that swim through the passageways in the reef.

At Grand Central Station divers will find an unusual combination of conditions conducive to the growth of soft coral gardens in relatively shallow water.

The Somosomo Straits separate Vanua Levu from Taveuni. That relatively narrow strip of water is home to the legendary Rainbow Reef and Great White Wall, where some of the greatest diving on earth can be accessed from Taveuni.

Diving here is very different from diving elsewhere, because the famed soft coral is more than something to just be observed.

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It's part of the integral experience.

The reef is perpendicular to the island, so it is constantly swept by the nutrient-rich currents which feed the stunning soft corals and result in their luxuriant growth. Vibrant colors from deepest burgundy red to opalescent white command attention. As the tides rise and fall, the water funneled through the narrow passage provokes strong currents. However, at other times, conditions can be lake-calm.

The Rainbow Reef is a riot of color from both the unequaled variety of tropical fish and the sensational soft coral in every hue. Depending on the tide, current can be fairly strong across the top of the reef at the same time it isn't too bad at depth. Some of the world's

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Blue Ribbon Eel Reef is a favorite because of the small, shy eels with their bright yellow faces and eyes

and bold blue bodies.

A multitude of tiny nudibranchs and luscious lionfish will vie for attention.

Another favorite is Cabbage Patch, a large area covered with enormous green hard coral formations

that look like concentric cabbage leaves.

Massive anemones inhabited by protective clownfish can account for rolls of film. Barracuda Point is another of those "something for everyone" sites. It's visited by sharks and other big fish, and filled with plentiful soft corals and large sea fans, as well as schools of unicornfish, jacks and groupers.

The Great White Wall is a "do-

not-miss" site. It can be ripped by Mach 2 currents or be calm as a dream, so check conditions before leaving the dock if you're not a strong swimmer.

The Great White Wall starts at about 40 feet. At the edge of the drop, swim down into a soft coral-festooned tunnel exiting at 120 feet. There, divers are almost assaulted by the brilliant, ethereal white soft corals covering the sheer wall. If the current is strong, this is definitely a drift dive and divers have to be sure to get back up to the top of the wall at the right spot.

Another site, the Yellow Grotto, is a large coral head that looks like a table top with a hole in its base. The hole is a swim-through covered in yellow soft corals.

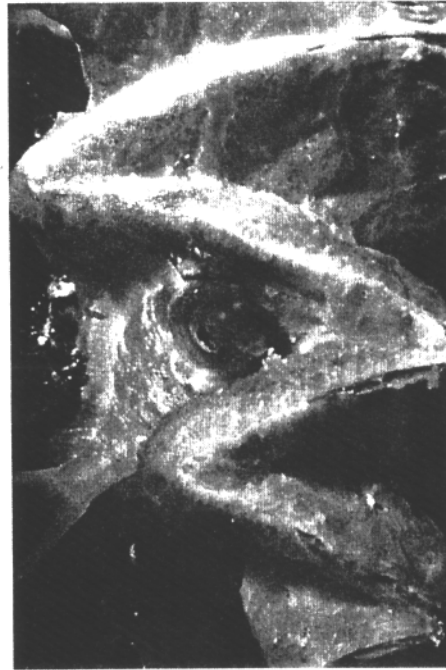
Some of the sites visited from Matigi and Laucala islands like

Purple Wall, Noel's Wall and Moriah's Cove, include drop-offs decorated in a thick, striking soft

coral rainbow ranging from bright yellows to deep reds and purples. Dives where hard corals dominate, like Shark City and Frank's Place, attract hammerheads, bull sharks, white- and black-tips, as well as coral trout, groupers and cod in abundance. With more international flights and increased tourism, most of Fiji seems less remote than it used to. Most dive operators in The North will be able to provide missing gear and wetsuits

and make repairs. Still, it's always wise to bring back-ups.

About the only negative aspect of diving Fiji's "Northern Jewels" is the possibility that it will make it very difficult for other places to live up to visitors' new expectation levels.



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Juvenile fish on an oyster by Forbe's Pier, Laucala Jetty, Northern Fiji.