

101 DIVE DESTINATIONS

SCUBADIVER

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101 DIVE DESTINATIONS: THE BUCKET LIST

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THE BUCKET LIST

Small in Size, Large on Life • The Underwater Garden of Eden
The Underwater Wonders of Sabah • Discovering Hidden Gems
Treasure of the Indian Ocean • Diving Down Under
Soft Coral Capital of the World • Shark Paradise
A Decade of Diving Palau's Spawning Aggregations
Dive into the Wild Side • The Aloha Spirit, Always in Season
The Philippines' Best-Kept Secret • How Can We Usher in a New Era?





An underwater photograph showing a scuba diver in the lower right, swimming towards a massive, vertical wall of white soft coral that dominates the left side of the frame. The water is a deep, clear blue. The diver is equipped with a tank, regulator, and fins, and is holding a light. The coral wall is composed of numerous branching, white polyps, with some patches of orange and green coral visible at the base.

FIJI

Soft Coral Capital of the World

This world-famous holiday destination is not just popular for its pristine beaches and clear blue waters – it is also tops the class for scuba diving.

A diver enjoys the shallower depths of Fiji's Great White Wall

FIJI

Wonder Wall

Text Anita Verde

Images Anita Verde and Peter Marshall

As we peer out of the window of our tiny turbo-prop plane; it is clear we are about to arrive somewhere extra special. This is Fiji's third-largest island, Taveuni, one of the 332 islands and 522 islets that form the exotic Fijian Archipelago. A lush, elongated volcanic isle of emerald green, Taveuni looks like a giant volcano shield rising up from the ocean floor. Around 150 volcanic cones still pepper the island today, including Uluigalau – Fiji's second highest peak. It is here on Taveuni that towering mountains dotted with tall coconut trees cast their otherworldly shadow on the country's most enchanted sea – the Somosomo Strait.

Perfect Conditions for Soft Coral Blooms

Sandwiched between Taveuni and neighbouring Vanua Levu, the narrow channel of the Somosomo Strait provides the perfect conditions for a kaleidoscope of soft corals to bloom on its aptly named Rainbow Reef. At each change in tide, water funnels through the strait, racing by the reef and providing a deluge of nutrients. This oscillating flow of seawater (incoming from the north, outgoing from the south) creates flawless conditions for a profusion of unimaginable soft corals to bloom. Conditions like these are somewhat uncommon, and it is rare for such a large volume of nutrient-rich water to be coerced through a narrow, shallow passage suited to soft coral growth.

Colours of the Rainbow

Stretching out from the hard coral substrate from which they grow, *Dendronephthya* sp. soft coral polyps spare no effort capturing teeny morsels of planktonic food from the rich waters

racing by, while armies of cheerfully-coloured *Anthias* and other tiny fishes boogie in the current – all jostling for the same very treat. These energetic currents have created one of the most astoundingly vibrant labyrinths of soft coral gardens on our planet. In all of our dive travels, we have never seen anything that comes close to matching the profound colour and proliferation of soft corals found here on Rainbow Reef. However, there is one dive site here that both dazzled and confused us the most – the Great White Wall.

Magic of the Great White Wall

The word “great” doesn't really do this dive site much justice. When the currents here are at their most powerful, something incredibly magical takes place. As we back-roll into the blue, our dive guide, Lui, leads us to a tubular cave beginning at 15 metres, the access point to the famous Great White Wall. We come face-to-face with soldierfish and fairy basslets as we descend, and the insides of the cave are covered with hard and soft corals, vibrant sponges, and crinoids. We exit at 25 metres to a sheer wall of snow white *Dendronephthya* sp. plunging into the abyss below. It is not until we wander down towards about 40 metres that its beauty and immense scale really strike us. The wall shimmered too, as if it had just been swathed by a blizzard of snow. Within the whiteness we discovered splashes of pale pink, orange, green and red hues, but the overall vision to our naked eye was undoubtedly snow white. Without really any point of reference, the cascading snowy wall lured us deeper into the depths. We had to watch our depth gauges meticulously.

THE GREAT WHITE WALL

How big is it?

It is easy to be overwhelmed when you encounter the wall for the first time. At over 100 metres long and beginning at a depth of 25 metres, extending down to 60 metres, that's a whopping 3,500 square metres of striking white soft coral – and a formidable photographic challenge to say the least.

Is the coral really white?

Well, it depends on who you ask. Some divers say the coral is definitely white. Some say it has a bluish tinge. Others say it is a slight pale pink. As all divers and photographers know, red is the first colour we lose as we descend and all colours look slightly off when you dive at the depths where you find the Great White Wall (30 metres plus). When you photograph the wall, the colour temperature of your strobe lights also plays a part. We will leave it up to you to decide what colour you think it is!



Chemically Induced Protection and Defence

Little is known about the magical snow-white coral and why it blankets nearly every inch of wall space for several decades at least. Victor Bonito, Coral Reef Ecologist, Director, and Head Scientist at Reef Explorer (a Fijian-owned and operated research and development company established to support marine conservation efforts in Fiji) first dived the Great White Wall in 1996, and says it is likely to do with the chemicals *Dendronephthya* corals release. These chemicals (of which there are more than 170 types) serve various functions that include UV protection, and as a defence against competitors. “Soft corals

exude chemicals to help prevent other organisms from settling near them, thus, they can often come to dominate large patches of substrate,” he explains.

Soft Coral Capital of the World


Unlike most reef-building corals that contain photosynthetic algae called zooxanthellae (that provide essential nutrients and are also responsible for the corals’ incredibly vibrant colours), *Dendronephthya* is azooxanthellate – they cannot obtain their nourishment from the sun and are limited to capturing different forms of plankton. “*Dendronephthya* corals are not great competitors with zooxanthellate corals, so they tend to dominate

The epic proportions and shimmering whiteness of the Great White Wall are truly breathtaking


vertical benthic environments and at depths where light is limited, all the conditions you find at the Great White Wall. Fiji is known as the ‘Soft Coral Capital of the World’ not just because of the great diversity of soft corals, but also because of their abundance here,” Bonito says.

Coral Eye Candy


It’s not just about the colour white. The insane profusion of colour on the dive sites here is mindblowing. Dive sites like Rainbow Passage, Yellow Tunnel and Purple Wall are a kaleidoscopic assault on the senses. Yellow Tunnel showcases yellow, gold and orange soft corals as its trademark, and its counterpart Purple Wall makes you giddy for the entire dive – jam-packed full of crazy purples, pinks and reds.



A tiny glass-like shrimp clings to its whip coral home in an energetic current



The prolific yellow soft coral at Yellow Tunnel

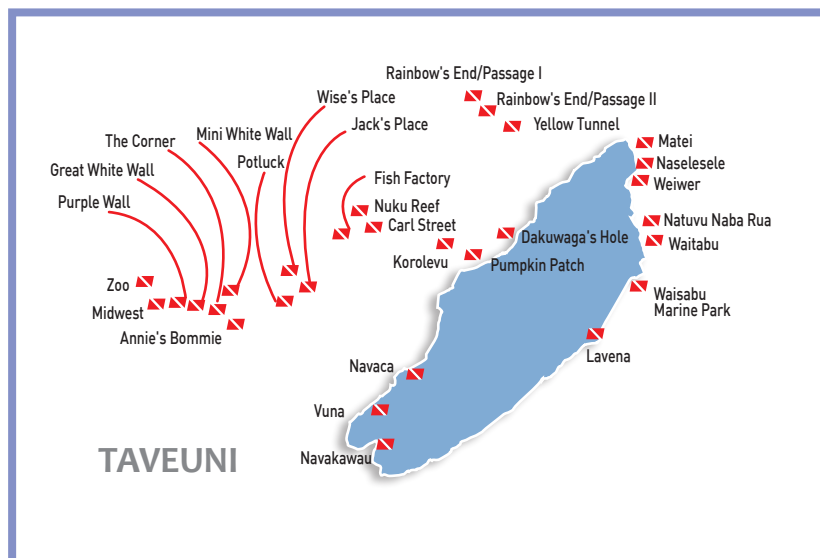


A diver explores the Rainbow Tunnel

Impressive Biodiversity

In addition, the underwater environment is so much more than its countless colourful soft corals. The waters are among the most pristine and diverse in the Pacific, with the reefs here showing great resilience from the ghostly bleaching found in many other dive destinations. Fiji also has impressive biodiversity, with 467 species of molluscs, more than 400 species of hard coral, and over 2,000 species of reef-associated fish. The waters in the Somosomo Strait are also rich with giant clams, groupers, tuna, barracuda, turtles, tiny critters, majestic manta rays and sharks. We even chanced upon a nursery for juvenile and baby hammerhead sharks, but we’re keeping this one a secret for good reason. [SDAA](#)





BEST TIME TO GO

The best visibility and nicest topside weather in Taveuni is from May to September. Diving is possible, however, all year round, so if you prefer warmer water temperatures and don't mind a little bit of rain, October to February is also great. Water temperatures are relatively consistent throughout the year, between 26°C and 29°C, with June to October being the coolest months at around 26°C. Air temperature remains consistent at around 30°C throughout the year.

Taveuni Dive Resort offers the best resort-to-reef experience on the island, getting you to the Somosomo Strait's famous dives sites within 15 to 35 minutes. You can even see the Great White Wall from the resort! The resort caters to 16 divers in eight delightful, eco-conscious, solar powered, Fijian bures (villas), and offers dives with their team of very experienced local guides who know how to navigate the often tricky currents, getting you to the reef at the optimal time to see the soft corals at their very best.

While Taveuni's magic lies underwater, its topside boasts prolific bird life, abundant flora, stunning waterfalls, and some exotic hikes.

Visit www.taveunidiveresort.com for more information.

GETTING THERE

Fiji Airways services Nadi International Airport with direct flights from the North American cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Honolulu. The Australian cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane also have direct flights.

Flights from Nadi to Taveuni Island are available multiple times daily on Fiji Airway's domestic flight network Fiji Link. This scenic flight takes 70 minutes.



A labyrinth of pink and purple dominates the substrate at the famous Purple Wall



Anita Verde and Peter Marshall

have a passion for the planet's wild places, and through their images and narratives hope to inspire better appreciation and protection of the natural world. Based in Melbourne, Australia, they have professional backgrounds in tourism strategy, environmental sustainability, and government relations. When they are not underwater or on a mountaintop, they also work professionally as strategic consultants, advising governments and industry on sustainable destination planning and development, investment attraction, government relations, brand strategy and marketing. www.summitstoseasphotography.com