Al Hornsby’s first trip to Fiji proved to be a real eye-opener, and during a week with Kids Sea Camp, he found out why the island nation is such a hotspot for scuba divers.
This was my first dive trip to Fiji, and despite a lot of research, I hadn’t been able to form a clear expectation. I had heard of long-famous sites (like soft coral-covered White Wall (actually also in Namena Reserve) and Fiji’s famous tiger shark dive in Bega Lagoon. However, given the huge spread of Fiji’s hundreds of islands, the diving described was quite varied. Our destination on the island of Vanua Levu turned out to have been one of Fiji’s most-famed areas. Perhaps the most-remarkable aspects of the dive sites there were the water-quality and the amazing richness of the hard and soft corals. Fiji doesn’t have a large population, heavy coastal development, shipping, manufacturing or much commercial farming. As a result, there is little run-off, silting, fertilizer-produced algae, chemical pollution and so on – among the chief negative influences on coral health.

Also, the island group is located farther south than most Asia-Pacific dive destinations, nearer to the cooling waters of Antarctica. While certainly warm enough to support massive coral communities and comfortable diving (I was fine wearing a full-length skin with a long-sleeved rash guard underneath), it appeared that ocean global-warming, which has affected most areas of the oceans in recent times, had not had a noticeable effect on the reefs where we dived. In clear, sparkling waters that hovered around 25 degrees C, with lots of life-sustaining currents, the soft and hard coral life was as thick, unspoilt and vibrant as I have seen anywhere.

While this particular trip, to the Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort to attend Kids Sea Camp (www.familydivers.com), was already special enough – my 12-year-old daughter, Juliet, would be completing her PADI Junior Open Water Diver certification, and my wife, Christine, would be doing a refresher after some time away from diving – the diving itself was world-class, with unique photographic opportunities.

But, before writing more about the diving, I will explain this article’s strange-sounding ‘bula bula’ title a bit. Fiji is off-described as ‘the friendliest place on Earth’, and for good reasons. The local people are openly welcoming of visitors, and without exception, everyone you pass will give you a smile and the local greeting – ‘bula bula’ - which means, roughly, ‘wishing you continued health and life’. The big smile and greeting are quickly habit-forming, and one can’t help but respond in kind, with all the emotional rewards brought on by such simple kindnesses and personal interactions.

Also, evenings at the resort were full of local music, song and traditional dances performed by nearby village groups, along with ceremonies featuring the local pastime, imbibing the mildly-sedating, local drink known as kava.

Now, back to the really fun stuff – the diving. With a lot to choose from, my other favourites were...

Not far from the resort, we dropped into flat, calm water, under a late-afternoon sky, on a site called The Corner. Beneath the surface, all seemed golden-light and quiet, revealing a long, complex, sloping coral wall, cut through with narrow channels, gullies and crevices. The sheer density and variety of hard corals was remarkable, with numerous acropora, pillar, star, table and other stony coral species crowded together in the soft light, muted colors in yellow-browns, pinks and lavender seemed to almost glow all-round us, and large soft corals, most in pink-tipped white, sprouted...
here and there. At one point, as I paused to photograph a female tomato anemonefish with juveniles, a large eagle ray swooped past, giving us a quick look-over. At dive’s end, riding the gentle current up in the shallows, we spent a long, long safety stop gliding into a warm, setting sun...

For our first night dive, we visited a lovely offshore reef known as Golden Nugget, a meandering collection of live coral mounds rising up from a brilliant, white-sand bottom at 20m. Besides being a lovely dive with beautiful corals and schooling fish, it is also quiet, with protected water around the reef, with lots of life - perfect for night diving. We saw and photographed lionfish, lizardfish, surgeonfish and numerous live shells leaving long trails across the sand bottom. A favourite image was of a long, fimbriated moray, which boldly hunted across the reef, seemingly completely unconcerned over us and my flashing strobes.

Another favourite was my very last dive of the trip, on another pinnacle called Dreadlocks, which rises up to near the surface from an 18m, hard-coral bottom. The entire pinnacle was basically bright yellow – it was near completely-covered by yellow soft corals. Along the sides, there were crevices and large overhangs, home to a large number of many-spotted sweetlips who were surprisingly calm and unafraid of being closely photographed. The water was very clear, with practically no current, making for both a beautiful and relaxing dive – a perfect ending for an extraordinary trip. Bula bula!

**KSC AT THE JEAN MICHEL COUSTEAU RESORT, FIJI**

Beyond being one of the most-beautiful resorts you’ll ever see, the resort was a model of luxury and Cousteau-infused environmental ethic, planning and community involvement, with the effects on the local environment, the local population and its guests – especially the children – obvious.

Moreover, for those unfamiliar with Kids Sea Camp, the concept is a collection of families-only, all-inclusive dive events conducted every year in many of the dive world’s top locations (there were 27 events on the 2020 schedule, last time I looked). It has solved the problem divers with families know all too well – how to continue diving actively once having children. Instead of the usual remedy (i.e. the diver doesn’t get to dive as often as he or she likes), KSC is designed to take care of every member of the family. Young children have kids’ group activities, including supervision, snorkelling and games; slightly older kids have PADI
Bubblemaker and PADI Seal Team added to the mix. Children ten or older can also take PADI Junior Open Water or Open Water certification courses, and those already certified can take PADI Advanced Open Water, etc, or refresher if they haven’t dived for a while (and adults have similar options). While all this is going on, the dive boats are operating at full schedule, typically with separate boats available for young teens, older teens, and adults, as may be desired. Uncertified adults can snorkel, take Open Water certification courses or participate in non-diving activities such as sight-seeing tours.

And, it works – everyone is happy (especially the suddenly guilt-free divers in the family!). And, given that these events typically have 50 or more attendees, and dinners and evening entertainments (every night) are as a group, long-lasting friendships and new dive buddies quickly develop, at all ages. This aspect was especially impressive – while this was our second event, most attendees had attended multiple times. The veterans at KSC Fiji went back generations... one college-aged grandson there with his grandparents told us this was his 11th KSC, having begun as a child.

Surrounded by lots of young, adept divers was very interesting, and their skills were impressive. A common thread among most of them, I quickly realized, was PADI Seal Team – PADI’s course for kids beginning at age eight. Basically, Seal Team is an introduction to scuba for kids. Conducted in a pool, kids learn the basic dive academic information and scuba skills through a series of fun, game-like Aqua Missions.

Juliet, then already a good freediver, had taken Seal Team two years ago at our first KSC, and wanted to wait until our next one to become Junior Open Water Diver-certified. Well, the time finally came, and in preparation for our Fiji trip, she took PADI e-Learning, so her first day at KSC could be in the pool, academics completed.

As a PADI instructor, I have always appreciated Seal Team. But until I saw the real, long-term effects on my own child, I had never appreciated it enough. The idea of dive academics is often a bit daunting, but to Juliet’s surprise, it was clear immediately that she understood practically everything, finishing the programme rapidly, with very high scores. When I asked her how she could learn it so quickly, she replied that ‘she remembered most of it from Seal Team,’ or at least enough to figure it out, as ‘it seemed to all make sense’.

At the resort, she confidently went into the pool, also remembering all her confined water skills from her Seal Team experience. More than anything, what I saw throughout was that she had no fear of or discomfort with the unknowns of learning to scuba dive - the normal, underlying impediments most people face as new dive students. Seal Team had simply taken care of all of that for her. Armed with these insights, I watched her and the other kids all week-long – careful, inspired divers and learners, already - like their older siblings who had attended typically five to ten previous Kids Sea Camps – lovers of the ocean and serious, motivated marine environmentalists, all.

It was all very easy to enjoy... guilt-free diving, learn-to-dive or luxury vacation. And, when Juliet asked her mom and me to dive with her and her new friends on the kids’ boat, it was the greatest diver’s gift one could ever ask for... Salud!