

## Warming up in Fiji

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Okay, I have to admit it – these days I’m a fair weather diver. You know the kind, won’t hop out of bed for water temperatures under 18°C. It has come from one too many experiences of emerging from a dive the same shade of blue as the water. So with a New Zealand winter rapidly wrapping itself around me, the promise of diving somewhere warmer was just too good to pass up. First Light Travel expertly pointed me in exactly the direction I wanted to go... and so off I went to Fiji and 28°C on a bad day.

Landing in Nadi, we headed north along the coast for two hours. It was then just a matter of a short boat ride across to our destination, the magical Nananu-I-Ra Island and Ra Divers Lodge. Nananu-I-Ra is a tropical island cliché of the best kind. Sun, sea, endless white sand beaches, and coconut palms gently waving in the breeze – this was exactly what I needed. Nananu-I-Ra is found in the Bligh Waters, which lie between the two main islands of Fiji. Named after Captain William Bligh of Mutiny of ‘the Bounty’ fame, the Waters are renowned for their diving and are the favourite spot of dive liveaboards.

We weren’t made to wait long to check out the diving, unpacking then heading straight off on an afternoon and night dive at the ‘Dreammaker’. You can’t ask for a better named dive site just before you head to bed, and it certainly was what dreams are made of. Dreammaker was a section of the reef consisting of three enormous walls covered in soft coral, with canyons and swim throughs. Schools of incredibly cute and colourful tropical fish hung out around and over the top of us. My dive buddy took a distinct liking to ‘Nemo’ fish (don’t we all), and came back with a camera full of photos of Nemo after Nemo peeping out of pastel-coloured anemones.



The amazing shapes and colour of soft and hard coral we found at this site were typical of all the dives we did here. My particular favourites were brain coral, staghorn coral, cabbage coral, and of course gorgonians. The brain coral with its convoluted ridges and shapes really did look like a brain, even down to the colouring. The gorgonians stood out in intricately weaved designs, creating a maze in the swim throughs. Cabbage coral may be as common in these parts as cabbages are in NZ, but they're still in my list of favourites for their simple elegance. And the staghorn coral, with its mass of white tipped spikes, well it was just plain cool.

The next day we had a leisurely start to the day, one of the bonuses of having the dive shop onsite. With only a 15-20 minute boat ride out to most of the dive sites, you can easily fit two dives in a morning. This leaves the afternoon free to soak up some sun, splash around in the sea, snorkel, windsurf, socialise at a beachfront bar, have a kava ceremony, go on a village tour, or relax on a sunset cruise. An added bonus on our sunset cruise was having a demonstration of how to remove a broken champagne cork with a fish hook – done in true Fijian style courtesy of our inventive dive master extraordinaire Papu. An interesting process that nonetheless had the desired result!

A couple of other sites that stood out were The Pinnacles and Amazing Maze. The Pinnacles offers four different coral pinnacles dropping to 35 metres to work your way around. We had the unmissable experience of seeing a huge school of barracuda race overhead, framed by the blue of the ocean and backlit by the sun. This was definitely a Kodak moment. Their sleekness and speed is a sight to stop you in your dive tracks, sit back, and go 'wow'.

The Amazing Maze delivers with a labyrinth of swim throughs, canyons, and tunnels. While many of the tropical fish may be small, they make up for it in colour and attitude. A yellow butterfly fish insistently tried to block my path through a swim through, standing staunchly and eyeballing me as I tried to make my way past. It seemed to have had quite enough of divers passing through its patch for the time being, and wasn't afraid to say so.

There were plenty of swim throughs, crevices, and canyons at the dive sites for those who like their diving varied. Pinnacles and drop offs were smothered in hard and soft coral, crinoids, sea fans and sponges. Fish turned out en masse in full tropical technicolour. Bannerfish swam around lazily, clownfish darted into their anemones, angelfish patrolled around, alongside damsel fish, surgeonfish, and Moorish Idol. We also came across nudibranchs, lobster, and sea slugs, but that's about where my marine life identification skills reached their limit. Unfortunately the currents weren't right for reef sharks, which can often be spotted at some of the dive sites. Of course, I also managed to miss the two reef sharks that everyone else spotted – don't you just hate that. Time it right and you'll also get to see turtles and dolphins.

In between dives we were kept entertained by our talented Fijian crew, Papu and Mere, who had the typical Fijian love of a joke and a laugh. Lucky for Papu that he doesn't need to rely on his champagne uncorking skills!

Nananu-I-Ra and Ra Divers deliver great holiday diving for those who love their eye candy in the form of rich coral colours and tropical fish life. But best of all, I got to ditch 12mm of rubber for just 3mm. So as they say in Fiji 'sega na lega' – no worries, no problems.

Holiday provided by First Light Travel/Global Dive and Ra Divers

[www.firstlighttravel.com](http://www.firstlighttravel.com) (see dive worldwide)

[www.globaldive.net](http://www.globaldive.net) (see dive travel)

#### **Fact File**

Accommodation was at Ra Divers Lodge on Nananu I Ra Island. The lodge has three bedrooms. We stayed in the upper bedroom, which is very spacious, has an ensuite, lounge area, and large balcony with views over the water. Meals are provided on site. It was a fantastic place to stay for some peace and relaxation. All inclusive prices (including diving) start from FJ\$960 for five nights.