
Lost at Sea in Fiji

A scary way to end a dive trip

“U.S. TOURIST RESCUED IN BEQA WATERS!!” I was the U.S. tourist in that front-page headline in the *Fiji Times* last April. The gist of the story was how lucky I was to have survived the rough seas, heavy rain, and strong currents that were taking me across hundreds of miles of open ocean from Beqa Lagoon to the Lomaviti Islands.

My desire to see the Great Astrolabe Reef of Fiji got me into this predicament. I was on Aqua-Trek’s first charter of the *Beqa*

Princess, a five-night trip from Kadavu to Pacific Harbor diving the Great Astrolabe Reef. Two couples and I were the passengers. I had left much of my gear in Nadi because I was told they had what I needed on the boat.

The Fijian divemaster was supposed to be my dive buddy. I had explained to him that although I was an experienced diver and underwater photographer, I was not a strong swimmer. Nevertheless, underwater he rarely looked back or waited for

me to catch up. I asked him more than once to stay close. On one dive I was alone for half an hour and didn’t meet the rest of the group until I was on my way back to the boat. On a night dive with three divers in the water, he swam off by himself at the beginning of the dive. None of us saw him again until we surfaced to find him sitting on the boat.

After disappointing dives on the unspectacular tail end of the reef in rough seas with poor visibility, we headed to Beqa Lagoon. We dropped anchor for a morning dive near Beqa Island, not far from Marlin Bay Resort. When I jumped in, I discovered I was too buoyant because I was wearing a wetsuit for the first time and didn’t have on enough weight. The current carried me away from the boat, so the deckhand jumped in and brought me another weight.

By the time I reached the bottom, no one was in sight. The visibility wasn’t good and the current was building, so I decided to abort the dive. I surfaced downwind from the boat but couldn’t get anyone’s attention. The current rapidly carried me further away. I tried waving my camera and strobe, then my bright green fin. Their BC didn’t have a whistle or any distress-signaling device, but I doubt that anything could have been heard over the loud noise of the boat’s compressor.

I floated alone for three hours in six- to eight-foot waves. It was pouring rain and each wave looked like Mount Everest. Luckily, fishermen saw me waving my fin and pulled me into their little panga, overfilled with supplies and six surprised Fijians. I had floated ten miles.

They took me to their village, where I made quite an impression as I was paraded to meet the chief. I called Marlin Bay Resort

Are You Standard, Choice, or Prime?

Fewer than ten confirmed shark-attack deaths have been logged in the U.S. since the 1950s. Fatalities are rare; most attacks are hit-and-run encounters. The shark bites once, lets go, and departs.

However, the number of attacks has been rising lately. Many experts believe this is because more people are hitting the surf on surfboards, sailboards, small boats, and water scooters, and that sharks mistake us for their favorite food — seals and sea lions.

But not everyone agrees. Peter Klimley, a shark researcher at Bodega Marine Laboratory north of San Francisco, thinks sharks simply have a bite-first, ask-questions-later attitude.

Territoriality, mistaken identity, or a bite-everything feeding strategy may explain why the sharks clamp down in the first place. But why don’t they finish off their human meals once they’ve attacked? Samuel Gruber of the University of Miami says sharks may just prefer the odor and taste of seafood. Klimley, however, has come up with an intriguing theory: People might not be fat enough.

“Fat has twice the energy value that muscle does,” he says. “Seals and sea lions have a layer of fat, unlike birds, humans, and sea otters. Sea otters often wash up with tooth fragments in them, but we never find them in the stomach of a shark.” By selectively hunting fatty animals that give more bang for the bite, the shark optimizes his own use of energy, especially in cold waters.

In trying to get sharks to ingest transmitters, Klimley found that they eagerly swallowed those inserted into dead seals. But when he ran short of seals and tried to use sheep carcasses, the sharks just weren’t interested.

If Klimley’s theory is correct, it’s unlikely that a victim of shark attack will be eaten. It would appear that, if you are bitten, your best strategy would be to wait calmly until the shark lets go. And, perhaps, stay thin.

and asked them to contact the *Bega Princess* to pick me up. A boat from Marlin Bay came and took me to the resort, where the *Bega Princess* was moored.

The divemaster never said a word, then avoided me the rest of the trip. Apparently the crew had searched around the dive site for about two hours, then notified Marlin Bay to get help. They missed me because the current was running in the opposite direction from where they searched.

The lessons are obvious. Carry and dive with your own safety gear, scuba sausage, flares, or a loud alarm.

If you're traveling alone, make sure that someone besides your assigned buddy knows your

limitations — someone who will wait for you on bottom if you're slow in descending, and who, if you're way behind, will realize you might not just be taking pictures.

If you think the operator is doing something wrong, speak up. If the divemaster ignores you, don't go in unless you're comfortable.

P.S.: I did receive a nice letter from my rescuer telling me how he thinks about saving my life every time he crosses that part of the sea. He asked me to please send him \$6,000 for a new engine for his boat.

Ellen Sarbone
San Francisco, California

In the real world, solo travelers get stuck with potluck, or, as Ellen

did, get assigned a divemaster who is also responsible for everybody else — although this dude didn't seem to think he was responsible for anyone. Speaking from experience, I'd rather dive solo than count on some of the loonies I've been paired up with (the one who clawed my face when he was out of air comes to mind). And, let's face it, photographers aren't the best of buddies, especially when they shoot macro and you long to see more than six square inches of the reef.

I do think, however, that it's unrealistic to expect an assigned buddy — or even more so, the entire group — to spend much time waiting for you in such situations. While that might be ideal, it doesn't happen and it becomes the diver's responsibility to join the group, not vice versa.

J. Q.

Random Scatterings

News from on line and on letters

Divers visiting **Belize's Rum Point** these days are complaining about an attitude problem — owner grouchiness, which puts a damper on the guests' good times. We noted in our October 1995 review that while it's a resort with interesting potential, it's family run and could use an infusion of people interested in turning it into the charming, friendly retreat it could be. . . . Divers continue to speak highly of the good vibes at **Fiji's Garden Isle Resort** on Taveuni; it's less expensive than Dive Taveuni and closer to the diving. . . . *In Depth* reader Guy Huse of Little, Massachusetts, warns about weight restrictions between **Grand Cayman and Little Cayman Beach Resort**. "Island Air delivers

baggage over 55 pounds 24 hours later, so we left our dive lights at home to stay under the limit. . . .

If you're one of the few owners of a pre-1988 Viking dry suit, it's been recalled — problems with the inflator hose, says the manufacturer. . . . **Force Fin** wearers take note: One voice on the net is offering to pay for your hotel and dive boat for three days if you can keep up with him and his buddies on a dive for 20 minutes at their spearfishing pace. They would be using freediving fins (the long blades). . . . Speaking of freediving, **Big Blue Divers in South Florida** offers PADI certified classes in apnea (breath-hold) diving. It is run by Jean-Jacques Mayol, the son of Jacques Mayol. Jacques Mayol is

the former world record holder and Jean-Jacques is a formidable freediver in his own right. He can be reached at 305-361-6558, fax 305-361-7678. The class instruction consists of pool, open water, classroom freediving-related physiology, and yoga. Once you've passed the class, you'll be ready for the **Casio Depth Meter** advertised in Cabela's catalog. The copy reads, "Measures up to six hours of dive time at one-second interval, and shows depth in one-foot increments up to 164 feet." Yet it states, "Not for scuba diving."

Suspicion confirmed: In October we printed a warning for those returning to the States through **Los Angeles International Airport** not to use the option of rechecking their bags for domestic U.S. connections at the conveyor belt just outside customs because dive bags were getting ripped off. This week six luggage handlers were arrested at LAX for stealing items from