

FIJI

MARCH 17-29, 2016

Anacortes Diving Adventure Team



Lori, Kristi, Peggy, Dale, Robin, Toli, Scott

Chris, Kelley, Bob, Jim M, Eiljah, Jim R, Gene, Crystal

Fiji

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Route: Bellingham—Seattle—Los Angeles—Fiji Carrier: Alaska Airlines & Fiji Airways

Departure day

Our journey begins in the afternoon of St. Patrick's Day. Many of us are flying out of Bellingham and meeting up with the rest of the crew in Los Angeles. We are loaded down with donations for Fiji relief as 3 weeks prior to our trip the 2nd strongest cyclones in history rolled right over the top of the Northern part of Viti Levu. We held our breath and waited to hear if anything was left standing. Unfortunately, our resort Volivoli did not fare well and the resort had to close because of extensive damage. I was just getting ready to cancel the trip when we received word that they had worked out a deal with another resort and moved us all to Wananavu Beach Resort. We were very familiar with this resort as we had stayed here several times in the past. Once again, luck was on our side as we reconfigured the rooming situation and everyone had a place to sleep. I am still amazed that we are sitting here waiting for our flight as I write this. Alaska Airlines was amazing as they never charged us for any of our bags because of all the relief supplies we were bringing for the Fijian people. Our flight was delayed out of Bellingham but we had no problem catching our flight to LA. Once in LA we made our way to the international terminal and went to the gate. The only problem we had now was that we had no boarding passes and no Fiji Airways people anywhere in the terminal. We tried everything to not go out of security but eventually we had to go the front counter to pick up boarding passes and then go back through security. Fiji Airways is known for being very strict with carry-on luggage and that it cannot exceed 15lbs. No one on the trip had any of their carry-on weighed, even though most of us were really close to the limit anyway. Our flight to Fiji was a little over 11 hours and we landed at 6:00 am in the morning. Before you exit customs there are duty free places to buy alcohol if you need any for your destination hotel. Also, when exchanging money we had exited customs and there is a bank just to the left but be careful because they charge a fee to do it. If you walk directly ahead you will see a sign that says Western Union and here it is the same exchange rate but no fee. Once everyone was through we loaded on the bus and headed out. Once we made it to Lautoka we made a pit stop at



the store for Bhuja snack mix, beer and road sodas. It is about 3 hours to the resort so we needed to get this party started. One more stop for local bananas and we were finally on our way. The farther North we drove the more you could see the destruction of houses and the trees were bare. Once we reached Raki Raki the town had been devastated. We finally reached the resort, unloaded the bags and sat down to enjoy a nice meal before heading out to our rooms. The resort is much bigger now and we are pretty spread out from the beach to the mountain top. The rest of the day we spend

unpacking and just winding down. We are toast by the time dinner rolls around so we pretty much eat and head off for bed excited for the diving tomorrow.

Day 1

The sun is out and it is going to be a hot one. Last night we experienced the generator's shutting off at 4:00 am and then turning back on at 5:00 am. Once all our fans and air conditioning stopped it turned into a pretty hot sauna box in our room. This was just one small part of the adventure as I had gotten up to use the bathroom and something caught my eye as I was headed back to bed and it had to be one of the biggest spiders I had ever seen



running across the bathroom wall. I screamed silently to myself as I didn't want to wake anyone and then I promptly ran to wake up Bob so he could kill it. With bug killer in one hand and a flip-flop in the other we made our way back in the bathroom only to find that it was gone. No way am I sleeping now! No worries, it was just hiding out on a towel and quickly skirted across the wall where Bob went into full combat mode and made short work of that T-Rex of spiders. Now I have the heebie jeebies! I'm pretty sure sleep is over rated as I jumped back in bed before anything else crawled on me. With very little sleep it is time to go as we have a 8:00 am boat to catch. Down the hill for breakfast and then down to the beach. Once we have analyzed our Nitrox and have all our gear set-up we are on our way for our first dive. Everyone is nervous since they have never been to the South Pacific



before, which they do pretty good and we even saw a couple of sharks. The 2nd dive went much better and even flat Stanley came for a swim. After that, we raced back to the resort for lunch. With full bellies we climb to the top of the mountain where our Villa is located and spent the rest of the day relaxing by the pool. Back down the hill for dinner and then one more climb up the hill to call it a night.

Day 2

The sound of thunder woke us up during the night and when the generator shut down at 4:00 am it was so hot we had to actually go outside to find a cooler spot. As we lay outside the skies suddenly lit up with lightening spider webbing across the clouds. It was amazing to see and then the loud clap of thunder following was booming. Finally, the power is back on and we make our way back to bed for another 1 ½ hours of sleep before having to get up. It has been raining hard all night and is still raining this morning. Time to break out the rain coats. The descent from the mountain to breakfast was a little slick along the path but the rain was letting up and it looked like we might get some sun. Our group patiently waits at the dock for our 8:00 am departure but we have no dive boat...Fiji Time says Sethey our boat captain. It finally arrives and we motor out to the local



reefs for another 2 tank dive today. We are diving Golden Dreams which is covered in yellow soft corals. As we tie up at the mooring the skies are as black as night and the rain is coming down hard. We even had 1 flash of lightening and thank goodness there were no more. The visibility is better than yesterday and the dive site is beautiful as we bob and weave our way around the coral heads. Everyone is doing even better today with their buoyancy and air consumption. It is pretty calm out as we bob around on the boat



waiting for dive 2. The skies are brighter now so we should have more light down below so it doesn't seem to be such a night dive. We move to the Pinnacles for dive 2 and the visibility is even better down below, I would say



80 feet probably. Lots of Nudibranchs and the Fish life is amazing here, schooling all around the pinnacle. Our time is up as we go back to the resort for lunch. The rain has subsided and the winds have died so it is now just a steamy day. After lunch, a local named Avalone, who runs the activities office is giving a talk on local herbal medicine. He shows us all the jungle plants they use for medicine in the village. They usually consult the local medicine man or woman to find out what mix of plants and how much to use for what might be ailing you. Not every village has a medicine person so you may have to travel to the next village to seek advice. Very interesting talk. After that we take a tour of where the rest of the group is staying down by the beach. We gather over at Jim, Toli's, Kristi and Robins place for a few afternoon drinks before heading up to dinner. It was a really relaxing afternoon just kicking back. Tomorrow is a 3 tank dive out in the Bligh waters so we make our last ascent to the Mountain retreat to call it a night.

Day 3

We woke up to the sound of rain and it had to be the loudest rain storm I have ever been in. I don't think I have ever heard it rain so much and so loud. It has literally poured rain all night long and as we woke up it is still coming down hard. I don't think there is a water shortage around here at this time. Still raining hard as we go to breakfast, but seems to finally be tapering off. Seci (Sethey) is waiting for us today promptly at 8:00 am, so we quickly analyze and away we go. It is a 45 minute boat ride out to the Bligh Waters and it is a bit choppy since there is a tropical depression this morning. Our first dive is Black Magic Mountain which is known for all its black



coral. Current is really mild but we have good schooling fish, Trevally, Rainbow runners and so many Fusiliers they are blocking the sky. We hide behind the reef to get out of the rough water and take a break. Second dive is Mellow Yellow which has amazing soft coral and schooling fish galore. One small Turtle makes a pass, cool little Nudibranchs and 2 Leaf Scorpionfish. Bob actually found an Ornate Ghost Pipefish, so he gained high points with

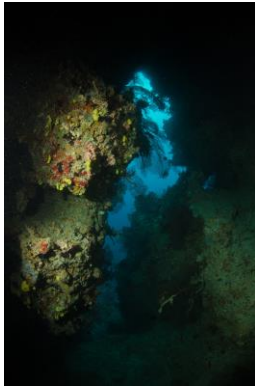


the dive guides once he showed them. At the end of the dive you can hear Dolphins squealing and we look out into the blue and they are just off the pinnacle. They are so fast! On the boat we head behind the reef and the Dolphins are all around us, so amazing! A little lunch and then we are diving Gee-Six, which we have to do as a live drop since the current has started to run. Bob and I hang out in front of the pinnacles and enjoy several Gray Reef Sharks at a cleaning station, some Nurse Sharks laying on the bottom and a nice school of Trevally. We hang out for about 30 minutes in the slip stream and then do the drift around the side and catch up with the rest of the group. Lots of Anemonefish and a small little Turtle trying to hide from us. At the top of the reef is where we really notice the first Cyclone damage. The top is literally scrubbed clean

which is a sad sight but the rest of the dive is still really good. Time to head back to the resort and we finally make it back around 4:00 pm. Long day on the boat but certainly worth it to get out to do these awesome dives. The sun isn't shining but at least it isn't raining anymore so we enjoy a few cocktails out on the patio before going to dinner.

Day 4

Had a good night sleep since it wasn't pounding rain in the middle of the night. We woke up to partial blue sky and flat calm waters today. This is great news for Gene! Today we are doing our dives midway to the Bligh Water since we are only doing 2 tanks today. Our first dive was Heartbreak Ridge which was a nice pinnacle with a ridge running out into the deep. There are 2 swim thru's in the ridge and nice hard corals everywhere.



Flat calm out on the water and for the first time I think we see Gene smiling as he has actually kept his breakfast down. 2nd dive is Wheat fields which has yellow soft coral on the top of the pinnacle. Congratulations to Dale as he hits his 700th dive, woohoo! The fish life here is so amazing and several Gray Reef Sharks circling as well. Simi finds a nice Stone Fish hiding in a crevice along with tiny Nudibranchs. The sun is out and we are flying on glass water all the way back to the resort. After lunch we are taking a tour with Avalone to his village. We load up with



some supplies to leave behind like paper, pencil, pens, coloring books, toothpaste, toothbrushes and eye glasses. Robin is the hit with the group as she helps them find glasses that will work for them. I see a few kids

with some and I'm not sure if they need them but they are more than happy to wear them. After the village we stop at the oldest sugar mill which has sustained terrible damage in the storm. It has been running since 1880



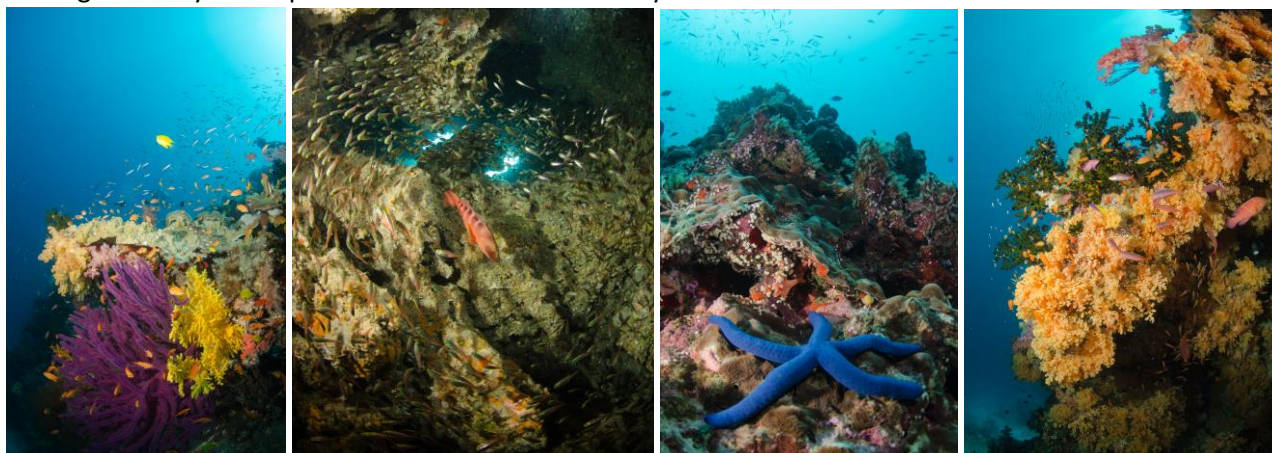
and it will now take over 20 million dollars to get it back up and running. Next stop is Rakiraki town to see the local market, we are running late and most of the shops are closing up for the night. Our last stop is to the grave of the last Cannibal Chief, it is unsure how many people he actually ate over his lifetime. Some say 99, others 999, but no one really knows. Back to the resort for another shower and dinner. I have never showered so many times in a day, but it is sweltering outside. Tonight with no breeze it is like an oven at dinner. The boys in the band brought us a bag full of Kava that we paid them for the night before. This is the good stuff, so we will take



home a kilo to have at our after trip party. Tomorrow is a 3 tank dive so back to the room to shower one more time before heading to bed. It has been a great day.

Day 5

Looks like sunshine again today and barely a breeze. Back out to the Bligh Waters for our first dive on Instant replay. This dive site has beautiful soft corals, Sharks and loads of fish. It is a nice drift down to the corner and when we round the corner everything is fine and then out of the blue the current switches and blows us into the wall. A quick recovery and we swim through the cut back to the other side to hang out at the top of the reef to end the dive. Our 2nd dive today we can't remember the name but a lot of current on it. Last night was a full moon so the tide cycles are going to be big. Our last dive was Purple Haze known for its purple soft coral which we saw as we raced past drifting in the current. The current on this dive can be a bit squirrely with up and down welling's. Once you are passed the wall there is literally no current as we bob and weave around the coral heads.





Gene was one happy camper today as he was able to keep both breakfast and lunch down. I think he was smiling the entire day. The water out here today was nice, with just a slight breeze to help

keep everything cool but not so much to make it rough. Back at the resort we shower and head down to happy hour and a little more kava drinking. The boys in the band have broken out the good stuff and the funny part is that we can actually tell the difference. Another wonderful meal and a hike up the mountain and just one more cold shower before the day ends.

Day 6

We woke up to black skies, calm seas and rain this morning. We loaded up and our first dive was Mellow Yellow. The current is not very strong so we do get a good show of fish life hunting and swirling on the front side. We try and locate to the Ornate Ghost Pipefish we found the other day but it is elusive. The yellow soft corals on this dive along with the swarming Anthias are just amazing. Our second dive was Black Magic Mountain where we are on the hunt for the elusive Peacock Nudibranch. The last time I had a picture of one was at this very dive site only I think I was shooting film at the time, if that tells you how long ago it was. At first the current is mild and then it really picks up and the fish life is hunting in full force. We have a Gray reef Shark that cruises right past us several times riding the current back and forth. We finally have to give up and hide behind the pinnacle for protection from the current. Wouldn't you know it, Joe signals us to follow him and he has found a Peacock



Nudibranch! He said it has been 2 years since he had found one. Lucky us! It is a little guy but all the same they are such an amazing Nudibranch with all the colors. We hit the surface and it is calm as can be and Gene is smiling all day long. Back to the resort for lunch and then some of us decide to do a 3rd dive so the guys pick us back up at 3:00 pm to run to a local reef. We dive New World which is just a maze of small bommies as we look for Nudibranchs, Whip Coral Shrimp and several swim thru's. We are having a problem with one engine so we have to go back on just one.

The water is like glass now and there are a million Jellyfish in the water. Not just moon jellies, but a large purple colored one as well. Time for a shower and dinner. There is another group leaving so it is a big lovo night (Fijian pit BBQ) and of course the traditional good-by song. A couple bowls of kava and another hike up the hill. Cold shower once more before calling it a night.

Day 7



Finally a breeze is blowing this morning to make it a bit cooler outside. Today is just a 2 tank dive so we are going to be doing some of the local reefs. Once we leave the resort we do a drive by the Volivoli Resort and finally are able to see some of the damage. The restaurant area has no roof and many of the villas are completely destroyed. Just down the road we find out that our boat driver Pola's house is completely gone as we see the rubble left behind. Many of the staff are living at the resort in the rooms that are still standing. You just don't understand until you see the devastation first hand and actually meet the people who have nothing left. Our first dive is Golden Dreams which has beautiful yellow soft corals in one area and in the swim thru's.



We bob and weave our way around the coral heads dodging the current as it sweeps around us. The second dive is Dream Maker, again just like the last dive, bobbing and weaving around the coral heads hiding from the current. Several more swim thru's that make this area pretty interesting. Back to the resort for lunch and then we are meeting back up with the Volivoli crew to give them all the donations we brought with us. They pick us up as we load the car and the boat and then go to the resort to walk around and see it first-hand. We see Soni,

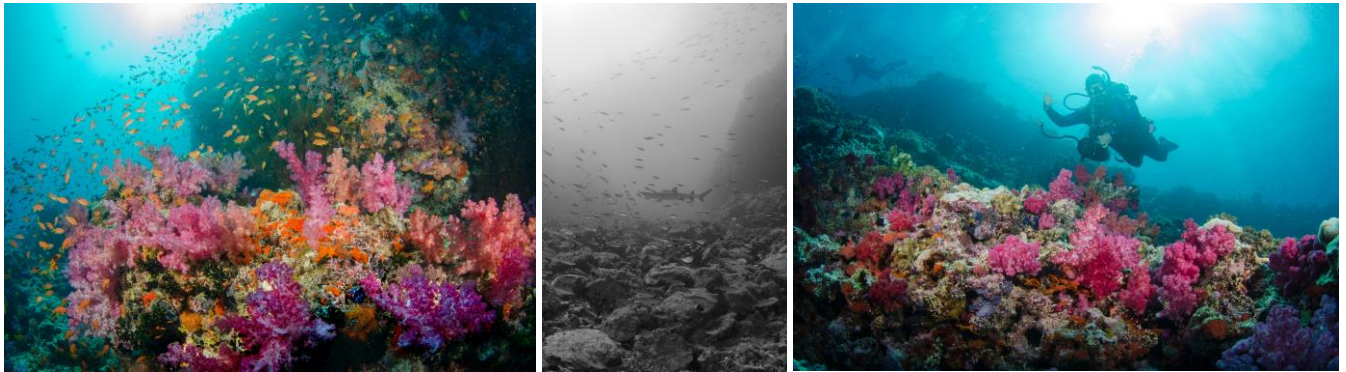


who used to be the bartender from Wananavu from our first time out here. He fixes everyone up with something to drink and then Steve takes us on a tour of the resort. It is heartbreaking to see the damage and the struggles that they family will endure trying to get this place back up and running. They have set a re-opening date for April 2017. In the meantime the dive crew is still taking groups diving and like our group, they are staying at Wananavu Beach Resort. It is fantastic to see everyone working together to help each other in the

time of need. Anything to keep the staff working so they too can rebuild their own homes. Back to the resort for another hike up the hill for a shower and then some dinner. Tomorrow is a 3 tank dive so off to bed after just one more cold shower.

Day 8

Happy Easter! A little drizzle this morning but the sun will come out later. Out to the Bligh Waters for the last time on this trip. Our first dive is Vatu express as we do a live drop to the wall. I didn't think it was going to happen but I jumped in with no mask on. This has only happened to me in Fiji and on every trip we have taken here, I have entered the water at least once with no mask on. I must be thinking I am part fish. We thought we were going to drift it but we had to kick all the way except at the very end where we hit the pinnacle of beautiful purple soft corals and millions of Anthias. We quickly drift the wall around to the backside and watch the fish



swarm the top of the reef. Amazing dive site. Our second dive is Mary's Maytag which I'm surprised they are taking us to. This can be a very advanced dive really quick. We do a live drop and have to kick our way out to the pinnacle which everyone does make. The pinnacle is very small so it's pretty crowded as we all try and find a place to hide out of the current. The pinnacle is covered in soft corals and again swarming with fish. We can't stay long as the current is picking up and when you leave the pinnacle you have to really kick to get back to the



reef to hide from the current. Everyone did really well, except Crystal did say she heard a mermaid song in her head when she was down deep. We are pretty sure she was narc'ed. Last dive was Lost World which was an easy swim on the backside of the reef out of the current. There was a really nice tunnel up at the top of the reef with really nice color inside and a huge sea fan. Great day out on the water as we head back to the resort. Once again the wind has died at dinner time and it is like an oven. Back up the hill for our cold shower and try and get some sleep.

Day 9

Sunshine today. A few of us are doing a 2 tank dive out to a new area to check out how it fared in the cyclone. We have about an hour boat ride before we make it to Fishermans Rock. It is a small pinnacle for us to swim around and enjoy. We dive in and make our way into the current to catch all the action on the front side where the fish are schooling. We see several Gray Reef Shark riding the current wave, and the pinnacle is covered in yellow soft coral. There is a smaller pinnacle off to the side that we all swim for and see great schooling fish. A school of Longfin Spadefish come in and a small group of Barracuda. We swim back towards the main reef and



the top is really nice with so many anemone fish and clouds of Anthias. A short break and then we make our way back toward the resort for the last dive. We jump in and this is Kristi's 100th dive and she does it up right with a tiara and a tutu! She has now set the bar pretty high for anybody else. Since this dive site is not named, once we are back on board we name it "Bitter Reef" since we are all celebrating with a cold Fiji Bitter Beer. It has gotten a bit rough since we started out so back to the resort we go chugging ice cold beers along the way. We stop for



lunch before making the big trek up the hill. We are a little too late as we start our climb and end up walking all the way back up in pounding rain. In the meantime, come to find out that Crystal woke up with her eye halfway shut, so she and Gene were not diving. While we were out, they grabbed a cab and headed into the local hospital only to find out that there is a "pink eye" epidemic. It is super highly contagious and most of the staff has it and that's where we figured they picked it up. As soon as they see the doctor, they show them their eyes and yes they do have it. Now it is a national holiday so someone who knows someone called the pharmacy to open up so they could get their prescriptions filled. Luckily they were able to get medicine as the headlines of today's newspaper was that there was a pink eye outbreak and they have run out of medicine. Yikes! Don't touch your eyes! We planned to have a group pool party, but now it is torrential rain outside. I don't think anyone is going to want to venture up. There is a short lull between storms and then pretty soon everyone has arrived. We celebrate Kristi's 100th dive again as Bob is in charge of snorkel shots. Not to be outdone, Toli, Elijah and Chris also give it a try. Another squall is rolling through so we just stay inside, so much for the pool part



of it. Time for our last dinner so we trek down the mountain and enjoy an actual cooler evening outside. After dinner the staff gathers and sings us their farewell song "Iso lai". We hug and bid farewell until we meet again. Back up the mountain and I think this is the first night I did not have to take a cold shower before jumping into bed.

Day 10

This is going to be the longest day of your life. Since we passed the International Date Line on our way here, we will gain that day back on our way home. Up at 6:00 am to get to work packing since everything was soaking wet last night. Most of it has dried, but some stuff still damp but we have plenty of weight allowed in our luggage since we have left behind all the supplies we brought. After breakfast they will be by to pick up the luggage at 9:00 am and we will depart the resort at 10:00 am on our way to Nadi. We have a day room at Raffles until our departure tonight at 9:30 pm. Our bus ride back to Nadi was uneventful, we did notice that there were a lot more blue tents up as temporary housing for those who had lost their homes. We check into Raffles Hotel which is right across the street from the airport. We have a day room to relax and shower before our flight out tonight at 9:30 pm. We decided to head into town to do a little shopping this way we can finalize our packing and spend the rest of the day relaxing by the pool. A taxi into town should cost around 10 Fijian each way. We popped into Jacks, which used to be "the" place for shopping, but it has changed a lot since 4 years ago. They didn't have the selection of wood masks we were looking for, so we ambled down the street and found a local shop that carried a few more to choose from. The price has increased as well and the mask we were looking at was more than \$900 Fijian. Yikes, I think we paid \$100 US last time we were here. Well, with a little bartering we came to a



good agreement and found another mask for our collection. I have a feeling we won't be able to find these authentic Fijian masks in the near future. We enjoyed a nice lazy afternoon and then it was time to make our way to the airport. The hotel has a free shuttle and part of the group has already left. The van is not very big so they have to make several trips. Make sure to check in at least 3 hours before your flight as things do move a bit slowly. The group starts checking in and things seem to be going smoothly, when Crystal cries that they won't let her and Gene on the plane because they have pink eye. Oh boy, never had this happen before. We gather at the far end with a supervisor from Fiji Airways that tells us that Crystal, Gene & Jim M are not getting on the

plane. We try everything but there is no way they are going to fly tonight. Getting them back on the plane was vague at best and she just kept telling us that they could fly "when their eyes are clear". What? How many days is that going to be? As we stand there more and more people are being turned away, also not getting on tonight's flight. Well, this has never happened and it is a terrible feeling leaving 3 people standing there while the rest of us depart for home. We got them headed back to the hotel and they are going to try again the next night. As we walk away I feel sick to my stomach, in all the years of travel we have never had anything like this happen. The feeling was the same for them looking back at us. The rest of the group had already gone through security and are shocked to find out what happened. In hind sight it was a good thing they were not letting people on the plane with pink eye, it is so contagious that the entire plane might have ended up with it. Who knows where it might have gone to from there.

Day 11

After a 10 hour flight, we are now back in LA. Customs and immigration lines look long but are moving fairly quickly. Waiting for our last flight home to Seattle and then Bellingham. Flight was delayed leaving Seattle so it is going to be a late night getting home.

Summary

Back at work the next morning I am in touch with the group left in Fiji. Jim made it out the next night after we left and Gene and Crystal will be there for another week. Upon Jim's return he filled us in on a few things that the airline changed overnight. They were now requiring a doctor's release to let you fly. Jim ran to a clinic and was able to get a release to get on the flight as his eyes were clear. Gene and Crystal had to move hotels and spent the rest of the time touring and seeing the sights around the Nadi area. On Monday they were able to get

the doctors release to let them fly out that night. This is a really good lesson on why you have travel insurance! The other lesson here is that having an antibiotic eye drop would have been super helpful. I hope that we never have to leave people behind on another trip as long as we are doing group travel! All in all it was a great trip, the diving was as good as it always is and we were happy to take all the relief supplies to the locals. It is amazing to me that even though the people had lost everything they were always smiling and waving. That is just the Fijian way. Senga na lenga...no worries my friend.

Bula, Bob and I would like to thank all of you for traveling with us on what turned out to be a special relief effort trip. We valued the time we had with all of you and all the people we met and helped along the way. We wish the best to the Volivoli crew in rebuilding their resort and plan to come back and visit them again in the near future. We hope to travel with you all again in the near future.



Sota Tale!

Kelley & Bob