

When we talk about E-6, we are usually referring to the processing of certain slide films. After a recent 10 day cruise aboard the *Nai'a*, E-6 now reminds us of the most incredible dive site in the world. This is just one of many great Fiji dives where you explore deep walls, swim with schools of Barracuda, watch sharks feed and record the world of macro on film.

Our trip on the *Nai'a* started when we hopped on a Qantas 747 in Los Angeles and flew nonstop to Nadi, Fiji. After a short bus ride to Lautoka, where the *Nai'a* is moored, we were on our way to a divers' paradise. The owner, Rob Barrel, greeted us and introduced passengers and crew. Instructions were given on setting up dive gear, while personal gear was stowed in our room by the crew. As the boat got underway, we were served lunch and in a few hours we were enjoying our first dive.

THE SHIP

The *Nai'a* was designed by W. de Vries Lentsch in the Camenga, Amsterdam shipyards in 1979. Originally a personal yacht, she was converted to a luxury live-aboard in 1993. The *Nai'a* is owned and managed by Rob Barrel and his sister and brother-in-law, Alex and Todd Edwards. There are accommodations for 18 passengers in nine large air-conditioned staterooms, eight with private bathrooms. Four staterooms have double beds, three have both a double bed and a single bunk and two have twin bunk beds. Each room has plenty of space to hang clothes and store personal gear. Staterooms are equipped with both 220 and 120 volt electricity.

The main salon, crafted out of local woods, is a spacious 625 square foot room that serves as lounge, theater, classroom and dining room. A cold breakfast of toast and cereal is served at sunrise before the first dive; there is a full breakfast afterward. Lunch is served after the second dive, snacks after the third and a white tablecloth and complimentary wine dinner is served after the dusk dive. The dress code for each meal is casual, with most guests wearing shorts and T-shirts. The meals are healthy and hearty, utilizing locally grown produce, meat and fresh fish.

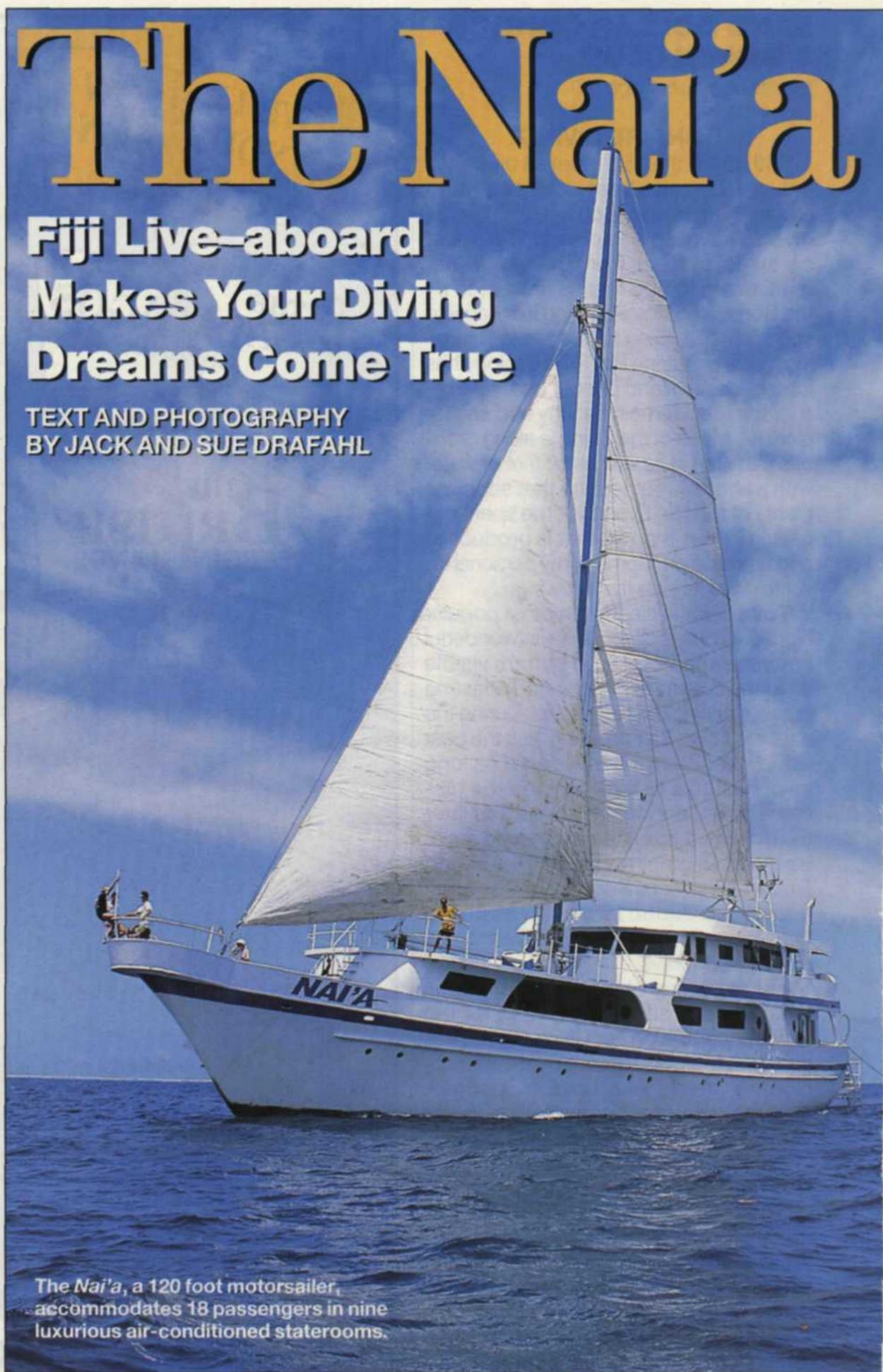
There is a large multimedia center on one side of the salon, with facilities for VHS and Hi-8 tapes in both PAL and NTSC formats, a slide projector and light box. A large music CD collection and paperback and reference book library are available for guests.

The *Nai'a* provides excellent photography facilities with a large camera room adjacent

The Nai'a

Fiji Live-aboard Makes Your Diving Dreams Come True

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JACK AND SUE DRAFAHL



The *Nai'a*, a 120 foot motorsailer, accommodates 18 passengers in nine luxurious air-conditioned staterooms.



the dive deck. There are storage shelves and workspace for a dozen photographers. Both 120 and 220 volt outlets are available to allow photographers to hook up a variety of chargers, lights and other electrical devices. If repairs are necessary, the on-board machinist can help you drill, cut or modify equipment. E-6 processing is available on a daily basis and processed slides are sleeved or can be hand mounted for preview in the slide projector.

The dive preparation and briefing area



Above: *Nai'a* owner Rob Barrel. Left: Rob and his top-notch native crew.

Right: The delicately beautiful Blue Ribbon Eel (*Rhinomuraena quaesita*), is frequently encountered by divers. Below: The abundance of soft corals in Fijian waters can overwhelm the senses.



is between the camera room and the dining hall. When you first arrive on the boat, you set up your gear the way you like it. The crew then takes it to the back of the boat where it stays for the rest of the trip. Only your mask, fins, snorkel and wetsuits return to the staging area. Wetsuits are hung to dry between dives.

The dive deck offers a lounging area sheltered from the midday sun. For those who want to work on a tan between dives, the roof over the dive and camera deck is a sundeck complete with recliners.



Above: Two Leaf Scorpionfish (*Taenianotus triacanthus*) use their perfect camouflage to prowl the reef undetected.

DIVE OPERATIONS

Diving on the *Nai'a* is extremely comfortable and flexible. The schedule is modified to accommodate most situations. If a pod of dolphins or whales comes by, then schedule be damned. If the passengers fall in love with one specific dive spot a new itinerary is designed to fit the divers' desires.

A typical day starts with dives at 7:30,

11:00, 2:00 and 6:30. Optional dives are offered at 4:00; several late night dives and unlimited diving are offered in between if surface intervals permit. This is definitely the trip for hardcore divers!

Most of the sites are steep walls that drop from two feet to the abyss. You start your dives deep and work your way up to the shallows. This way you waste no time making safety stops.

SKIFF DIVING

In most cases anchoring on the prime dive spots is next to impossible, so skiff diving is the best solution. Each dive is well orchestrated so comfort is a priority. While the divers are suiting up and being briefed, the crew is loading the skiff with gear. When the divers reach the back of the *Nai'a* the crew helps them into the skiffs and hands them their cameras. In most cases the dive sites are less than five minutes away.

The best part of skiff diving is that the two skiffs take turns picking up divers and returning them to the mother ship. One skiff is always on-site waiting for divers to surface.

When you return to the *Nai'a*, you are helped from the skiff and your cameras are set in one of two large freshwater tanks. The gracious Fijian trade winds will dry your suit for the next dive. Two hot, freshwater showers are in the dive preparation area and a stack of fresh hot towels is always available after each dive.

DIVE SITES

Most dive sites along the itinerary are far from land and include a variety of seamounts, submerged coral reef ridges and reef cuts. Over the last three years, Rob and his crew have collected extensive data on each site and plugged it into the *Nai'a*'s computer system. Relationships among tidal changes,

current direction and speed and location of animals are entered into the computer database. The result is an accurate, one of a kind understanding of the Fijian waters.

An excellent example of the type of diving found in the Fiji islands is a coral ridge jutting out from Nananu-i-ra, on the northern coast of Viti Levu. Dubbed **Sunset Ridge**, depths range from 10 to 100 feet. As you swim along the ridge, you will see

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NAI'A

Sharks and a macro wall that would run any photographer out of film in 30 minutes. This is definitely one of those spots where it is tough to decide what to put on the camera. At the top of the large coral heads, we found two very active fish cleaning stations that were sure to entertain any diver. Two types of dartfish were friendly enough to allow photographers a close look at their beautiful color variations.

Nigali Passage, near the island of



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GETTING THERE

Fiji can be conveniently reached via two international airlines:

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Qantas
(800) 227-4500

To access Fiji's outer islands, contact the following airline:

Air Fiji
(800) 677-4277
(310) 670-7302

Gau, hosts a variety of diverse dives. A narrow cut in the reef surrounding the island provides a channel of water where there are schools of sharks, Barracuda and a fish dubbed a Snapass (one reference book calls it a snapper, while another calls it a bass). Each dive is timed so divers follow the current through the cut toward the inside of the reef. The two skiffs drop the divers off so they can drift past schools of fish swimming the opposite direction. When you reach the end of the cut, you surface to find the skiffs ready to take you back.

After a couple of dives through the cut, Rob gives a briefing on a shark feeding and describes how each diver will place himself/herself during the dive. Once everyone is in place, Rob comes down with the bait on a line and ties it to a rock in the middle of the divers. At first Snapass attack the bait but eventually the sharks come in. This is the perfect time for photographers to get their shark close-ups.

If the current is not right or it is too late to dive in the cut, the *Nai'a* moves to **Jim's Alley** on another side of Gau.

