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*Nai'a* - the ultimate Live Aboard?

Pete Atkinson

I used to think *Nai'a* was a wonderful live-aboard dive boat. Compared with my own boat, where I have to do the cooking, washing-up, fill the tanks, the cleaning, even model for myself with a self-timer - for Christ's sakes, how pitiful is that? - anything would be an improvement. But since my last trip on *Nai'a* I went on another live-aboard, one of a fleet of clones, a bit like McDonald's. Unfortunately the comparison didn't end there.

So now I *know* that *Nai'a* is a wonderful dive boat. Everything about it; the management, the staff, the food, the briefings, the way the dives are organised, the air-conditioned accommodation is fabulous. And the singing; it was worth the money just to hear the crew sing the beautiful song of farewell, *Isa Lei*. Even this, they do better than anywhere else that I heard in Fiji. This is more than attention to detail, it's a whole philosophy. Or a compulsive obsessive disorder!

I wish I knew how they did it, because the owner and cruise director Rob Barrell, wanders around for all the world like a guest with his coffee. I have never seen him manage anything; but it all works like clockwork. I'd like to think of him yelling at the crew when all the guests have gone, but it's hardly credible, it just doesn't fit.

How Rob bought the 40m ship derelict in the Caribbean, got it to Fiji, borrowed a pile of money and converted the W. de Vries Lentsch design into *Nai'a* is the kind of story that once heard needs a bucket of Valium and 24 hours sleep to recover from.

The diving is carried out from huge Naiad rigid inflatables which are fast and comfortable. You simply need to carry your camera gear from the dive deck to the stern platform, your tank and BC and reg are where you left them in the RIB, but mysteriously full of air or nitrox again. The boat whisks you to precisely the right spot, drops you off and picks you up wherever you choose to surface, so long as you're still in the Pacific. Since there are two RIBs there's no hanging around waiting for photographers; they ferry the divers back to *Nai'a* as they surface.

Other live-aboards make a big fuss about putting eco-friendly moorings on the dive site reefs. But reefs change, so what was good last year may not be this year. And on this *McBoat* as we'll call it, you dived directly from the boat "to save messing around in inflatables". Which means by the time you have hauled yourself the length of the boat against the current, across the reef without touching anything (there was 80% corallimorpharian cover to encourage this) to the G-spot of the reef, you barely had half your air left, and were completely knackered if you're as fit as me.

Diving on *Nai'a* starts at 0730 (far more civilised than 0630 on some boats). After the substantial breakfast there is more diving before lunch. At some sites you can simply come and go as you please, changing tanks and cameras at will. Rob is realistic about solo diving. Their guests are competent and it is not a problem to dive alone, without a BC if you wish. Coming back is a condition of this freedom though. Same as going up the mast; fine, but falling off is discouraged.

The meals are fantastic with complimentary wine with no decline in fresh salads late in the trip. How they maintain the same standard with different chefs I have no idea; it's not as though I have ever seen Rob in the galley.

We started the trip in Lautoka, half an hour from Nadi international airport. The first dive that afternoon was on Samu Reef just to get our bearings and cobwebs out of the camera gear.

This is macro territory, not Fiji's best diving since it is influenced by the turbid Nadi Bay water.

Overnight we motored to Mount Mutiny, a stunning sea-mount in Bligh Water between the big islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. It got its name when Rob tried to do a single dive there and the guests had other ideas. And although there are 12 crew, there can be 18 guests! So this was democracy at work.

Although this trip was in summer the water was oceanic blue with 50m visibility. The walls drop way away and you wish for a moment you were wearing a rebreather to go and look at clouds of scalloped hammerheads of which only a few outriders make it up to the warmer shallower levels. Mount Mutiny is remarkable for the *Chironephthya* soft corals which adorn the cliffs, like weeping willows on LSD. And there's lots of *Dendronephthya* soft corals too.

From there we motored to E-6, another sea-mount in the funnel of reefs in Bligh Water. Both Mount Mutiny and E-6 have moorings on them and the trade wind is the only thing that keeps *Nai'a* off the reef. We stayed after dark to do a night dive, but at 45 minutes it seemed too short to me, but then it wasn't my boat within spitting distance of the reef.

Dawn saw *Nai'a* entering the Vanua Levu reef system at South Save-a-Tack passage, so called because sailing vessels would use this and North Save-a-Tack passage to save some distance on the long slog against the trade wind to Savu Savu.

We dived first at UndeNai'able which had good hard coral on top, then at Cat's Meow, named after Cat Holloway, Rob's partner and former editor of Scuba Diver Australia. Though

the visibility was poor (poor in Fiji is 20m) because of the ripping current, the action was great. Another huge disadvantage of diving from a *McBoat* style live-aboard is that drift dives are difficult and seldom done. And you can be hanging around on the surface for a considerable time while the big boat manoeuvres around the reef to pick up the divers. And you have to swim well away from the reef carrying two cameras before they'll come and pick you up. At the base of one of these pinnacles at Cat's Meow was a large area of big mushroom corals, like someone had just emptied their pockets of change.

The last dive here was at Humann Nature, named after Paul Humann the photographer where there was an obliging lionfish hovering over the sea whips.

North Save-a-Tack is perhaps the second best dive I have done in Fiji. Where the pass opens to the sea there is a lip like the edge of a bath, from 30m to very deep. Here cameraman Howard Hall and fish biologist Richard Pyle saw processions of thresher sharks at 100m. In the pass you see grey reef sharks, schools of barracuda, big-eye jacks and dog-tooth tuna. One thing I hadn't seen before was the orange and white banded splendid garden eel. Just try getting near them though!

The incoming current at North Save-a-Tack sends you through a huge natural archway like a gateway to an ancient city. With judicious use of a compass and a lot of luck you can swim across the current and end up at Kansas, a huge coral-head with the top completely covered with wafting fields of *Sinularia* leather corals. There's a piece of railway track sticking out of the reef from an old marker if you need a support for slow shutter speed shots. On the sides of the coral head there are sea fans, soft corals, sea whips - the usual stuff! The two Save-a-Tacks are tide dependent so we returned to the south-west side of the reef to dive Tetons and Twin Thumbs which used to have a less polite name. We also dived Fantasea, another current dive. I was interested to see the changes to a coral archway which I had photographed years before. There was quite a change in the reef but still the fish life and action were breathtaking

and the vertical wall clotted with soft-corals. I hung back as the other divers were blasted away by the current so I could savour the spectacle on my own. Fijians can spot marijuana in a plantation of cassava, so finding a lone diver when they pop up is no problem at all.

Sometimes *Nai'a* will go to Wakaya from here which has hammerheads and a manta cleaning station, but on this trip we headed overnight to the island of Gau (which is pronounced like “now” with a really bad cold) which has my favourite dive in all the Pacific at Nigali Passage.

First we dived at Jim’s Alley (named after photographer Jim Church) but the tops of the pinnacles have really suffered from coral bleaching, being a poor shadow of their former glory. I thought they weren’t worth diving with Nigali passage so near.

Nigali is best dived on the ebb when the clear ocean water is coming *in* the pass. Weird huh!

When you dive there with an outgoing current, then known as the Ilagin Flush, the less clear lagoon water upsets the generally crystal clear water. But it still a great dive in those conditions.

One of my most memorable dives ever was on my own in Nigali, when my sailing companion/underwater model dropped me at the entrance to the pass very early in the morning. The sun had just risen over the rolling green hills of Gau, backlighting the fans, soft corals and huge shoals of black snapper, barracuda and big-eye jacks. It was as close as atheists get to a religious experience.

There are moves afoot to make Nigali a marine park and I can’t think of a more deserving place, although I guess that means I won’t be able to feed the huge brown-marbled grouper any more. A small price to pay.

*Nai'a* do a small shark feed at Nigali if the guests want to (and many don’t - what’s wrong with them?!) with a bunch of tuna heads which get shredded by the red snappers and grey reef sharks. I always feel sorry for the sharks since the heads are mostly bone and they get little

sustenance from them; which is the idea. After the Aquatrek 3D shark feed near Beqa with half a tonne of real food, this seems a bit mean!

But it's a great opportunity for photography. This was our last dive and overnight *Nai'a* motored to Suva, the rainy capital, for the bus-ride to Nadi. The convenient thing about this arrangement is that it's easy to stop at the Centra Hotel at Pacific Harbour to do the Aquatrek 3D shark feed the next day, probably the best no-cage feed in the world.

So if you have to suffer the indignity of four or more dives a day in a great location, and want great service in every respect, try *Nai'a* in Fiji. Formulas and franchises may work for fast food, but my experience of a dive boat clone was less than ecstatic.

Take a look at [www.naia.com.fj](http://www.naia.com.fj) to see what else *Nai'a* has to offer; humpback whales in Tonga, expeditions to the remote Phoenix Islands in Kiribati etc.

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#### CAPTIONS

1. The 40m luxury live-aboard dive vessel, *Nai'a*, designed by William de Vries Lentsch and built in Holland.
2. *Chironephthya* soft coral adorns the walls at Mount Mutiny looking like willows on LSD.
3. Decorator crab, *Naxoides* sp. Rostrum decorated with hydroids. On soft coral *Dendronephthya* sp.
4. *Xenocarcinus* sp. on wire coral *Cirripathes* sp.

5. Long-jawed squirrelfish, *Sargocentron spiniferum*.
6. Rob Barrell with dental hygienist shrimp, *Lysmata amboinensis*. Tetons dive site.
7. Big-eye trevally, *Caranx sexfasciatus*, Nigali Passage.
8. Sea fans, *Subergorgia mollis*, and red snapper, *Lutjanus bohar*, Nigali passage.
9. Sea whips, *Ctenocella sp.* and black snapper, *Macolor niger*. Nigali passage.
10. Grey reef shark, *Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos* feeding. Nigali Passage.

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