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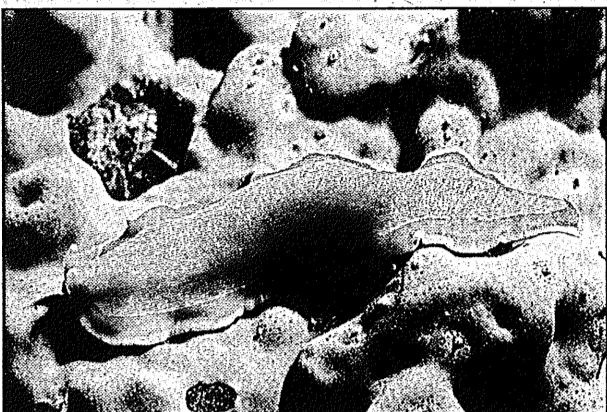
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TRAVEL

Los Angeles Times

Explored by a diver, the stunning underwater world of Taveuni opens up a wealth of startling colors and sights of soft coral and the eerie flatworm, below.



Reef Encounter

For Divers, Heaven Is the Clear Waters and Colorful Soft Corals Off Fiji's Taveuni Island.

By HILLARY HAUSER

TAVEUNI, Fiji—My husband Jim and I followed our Fijian dive guide, Tyrone, down 40 feet in the deep blue water of the Somosomo Strait. From there we entered a coral-encrusted tunnel that sloped down to 90 feet. At the other end of the cavern we came out at the Great White Wall, the Mt. Everest of Fijian diving.

Below us, at 250 feet, the bottom dropped away to a wide sand ledge. The wall is a reef so seemingly perpendicular that it's like swimming along the side of a building.

The sea currents were running just right so that the soft white corals, which carpet the wall from top to bottom, were in full bloom. The tiny coral animals stretch their colorful feelers to feed on the passing plankton, but withdraw into colorlessness when the seas are still.

Discover Diving

How to get started, what to fear and where to enjoy the beauty of "flying" underwater. L3

Tyrone doesn't take divers to the Great White Wall every day. His boss, Ric Cammick, who owns the Dive Taveuni resort on Taveuni Island, says that only experienced divers are ready for the dangerous currents.

As I watched several divers hanging onto the green, rope-like hard corals to keep themselves from being swept backward, I understood what Cammick meant.

Another danger is that the water is so clear here that the ledge at 250 feet appears to be shallower than it is. But below the ledge, the reef drops into an oceanic abyss. At this place it would be easy to dive too deep, too long.

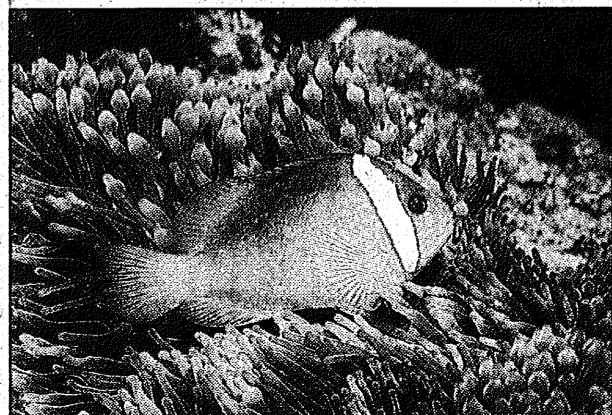
Jim and Tyrone descended to 160 feet and disappeared underneath an overhang. I stayed just above them, inspecting groupers and butterfly fishes that lived in the little caves above the overhang.

I was as happy as I've ever been underwater.

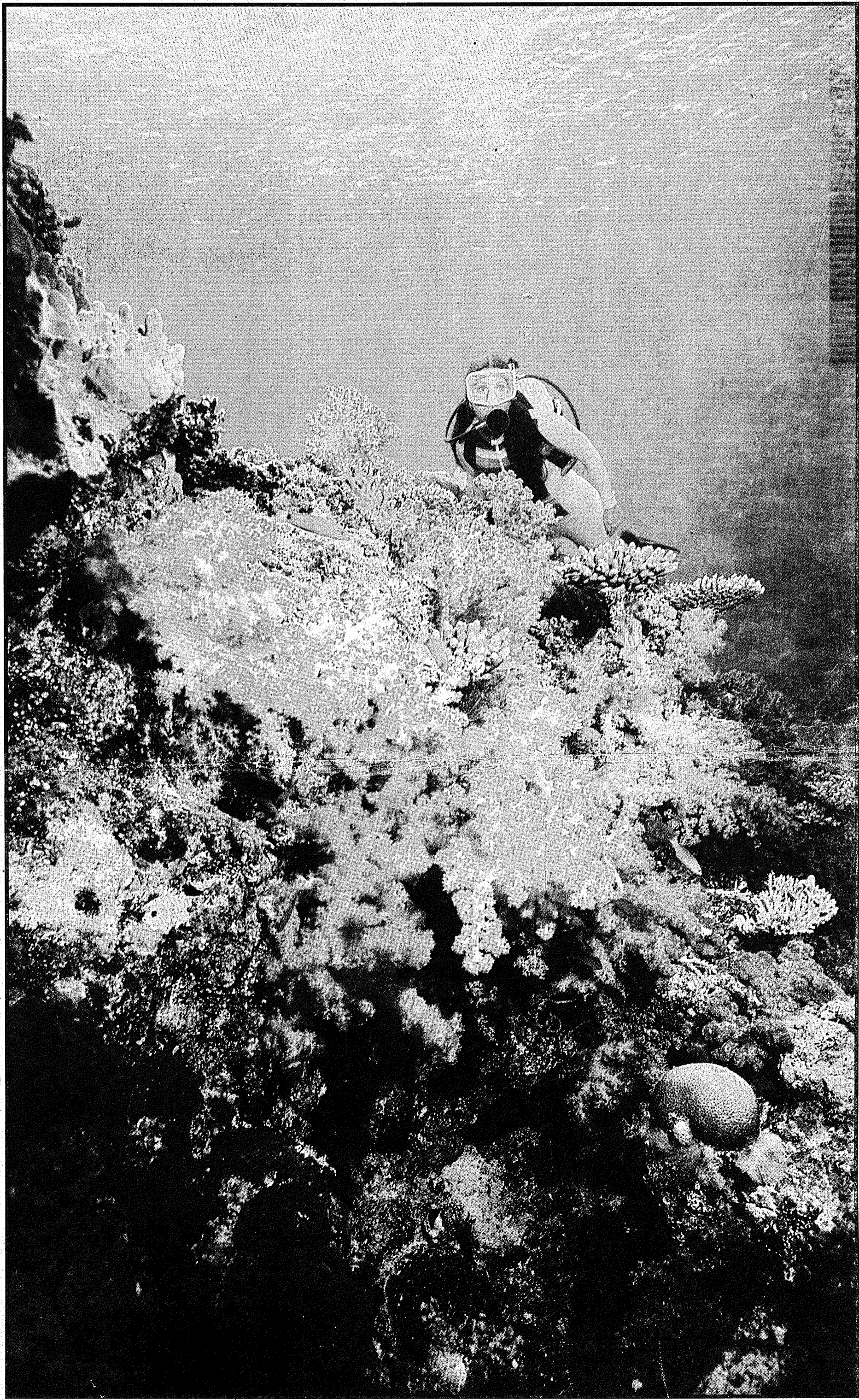
In a sense, that sums up just what Taveuni is—a happy place. There are a few islands in the world where you can become a child again. For me, so far, those islands have all been in Fiji, with a major one being Taveuni.

Maybe it's the friendly Fijians who encourage it.

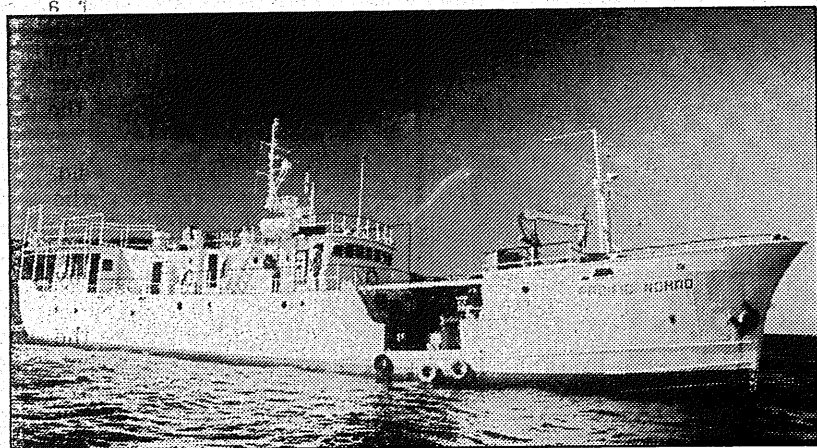
Please see FIJI, L28



The brilliant and graceful butterfly fish is only one of the fantastic varieties of sea life that scuba divers discover in the South Pacific waters of the Fiji islands.



Photos by CARL ROESSLER



CAROL ROESSLER

The Pacific Nomad carries divers to the world-famous Rainbow Reef.

FIJI: Taveuni Reef Dive

Continued from L1

They seem like children who never worry about tomorrow.

Maybe the life encourages it. Among other activities, you can rediscover the lost art of *moodling* (stringing shells onto monofilament line), chase crabs in the tide pools or put on a face mask and snorkel with brightly colored fishes that mill around offshore. Or you can play in the waterfalls and slide down slippery rocks by the seat of your pants.

The movie "Return to the Blue Lagoon," a sequel to 1980's "The Blue Lagoon," is now being filmed on Taveuni. Both movies are about children in paradise. That's the way you feel when you go to Taveuni. It's how I felt when Jim and I went there for our honeymoon a few months ago.

Taveuni Island is not a touristy isle, in that the beaches are not lined with hotels, restaurants and shops. It's a jungle—a primitive place, emerald green with a permanent gray cloud covering its mountaintop.

The one main road that almost circumnavigates the whole island is a dirt-and-gravel monster, paved in only a few places.

To explore the world-famous Rainbow Reef area of the Somosomo Strait, just off Taveuni, Jim and I booked into the Dive Taveuni resort on the northern part of the island. The reef was explored and mapped 16 years ago by Cammick, a wiry New Zealander.

After a rough, steamy flight from Nadi aboard a Sunflower Airlines plane, we landed at tiny Matai Airport on the north coast of

Taveuni. From the air you get a perspective of the island—the third-largest in the Fijian archipelago. About 26 miles long and seven miles wide, it is a fraction of the size of Fiji's major islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

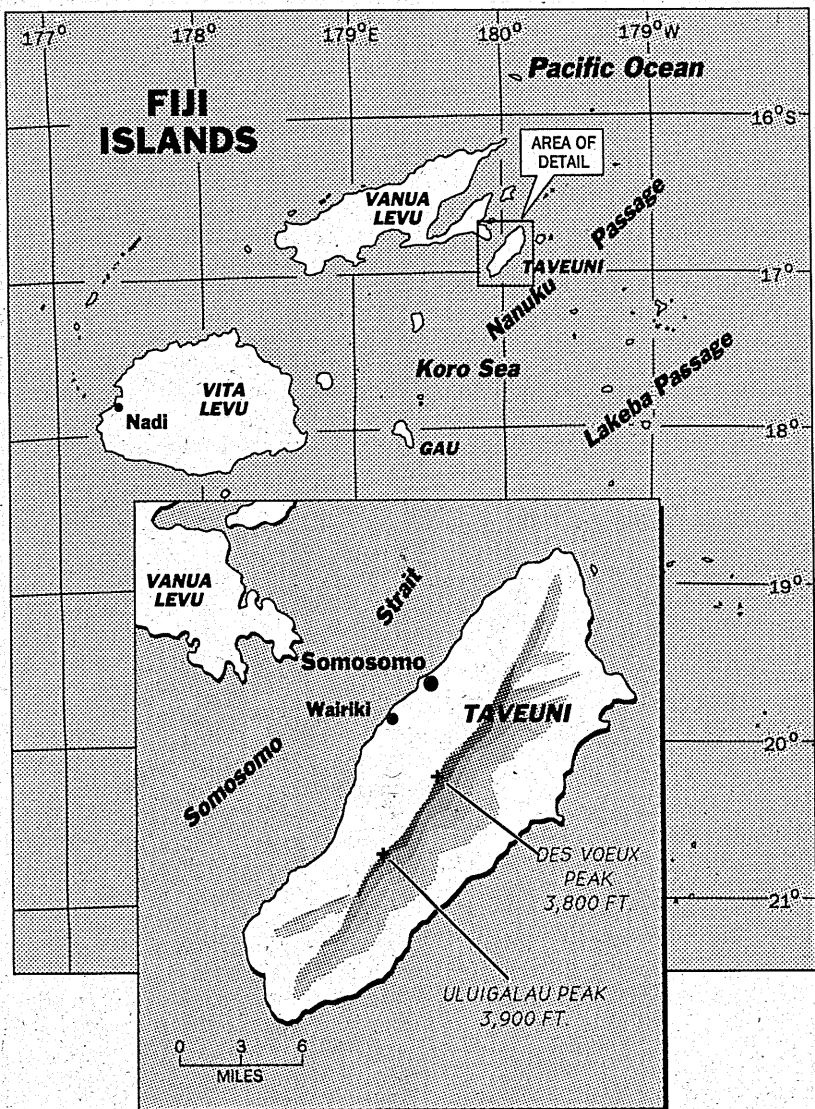
It is also far more green and lush than these bigger islands. The reverence many Fijians have for Taveuni is due to this productive fertility.

The island is bathed in groves of coconut trees, kasawa plants, pokey pandanus trees, plumeria and coffee plants that in full white bloom smell like plumeria, gardenia and ginger combined. Groves of magnificent banyan, rubber and mango trees alternate with rows of cocoa plants, hibiscus and ginger bushes.

Giant *vutu* trees grow along the shore, creating cool, shady spots in the hot Fijian sun. Here and there you'll see livestock ranches and farms. Taveuni is an important island to Fiji—a major producer of copra, kava, sugar cane, coffee, tropical fruit, cattle, sheep and poultry.

We were picked up at the airport by Do Cammick, Ric's high-energy wife. After a 10-minute ride, we were at the Dive Taveuni resort, moving our things into an elegant, private *vale*, a tile-floored octagonal house with magnificent windows overlooking the Somosomo Strait.

The first thing Jim and I did to cool off and acclimate ourselves was to walk down a small hill to the beach. The only other people around were a couple of Indian fishermen casting their lines from a rock into shallow tide pools.



DON CLEMENT / Los Angeles Times

We wanted to get the feel of the island before going out to sea for a dive, so the next day we engaged a driver to take us around. Our driver, Sukh Lal, spoke English fairly well and gave us some of the most rollicking rides of our life. As we bumped along the main road, he called out the names of the little villages we passed by.

Taveuni's 10,000 people are about 80% Fijian, with the rest a nearly equal split between Indian and European.

The biggest towns of Somosomo, Waiyevo and Wairiki are hubs of activity—places where islanders shop, attend town meetings and go to church. The northern part of the island, where our resort and the beautiful Maravu Plantation resort across the street are located, is more populated than the southern side, which is wilder, more volcanic and more remote.

We went to Lavena, a small village on the northeast side of the

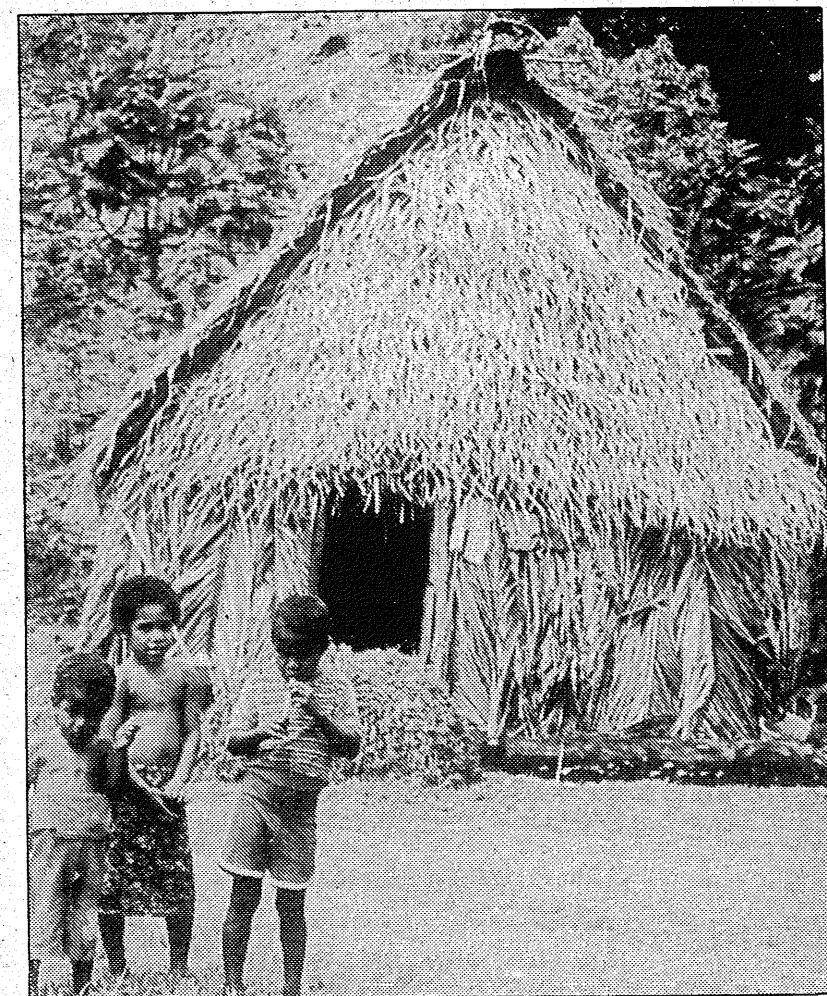
island, just past Bouma Falls, where we stopped for a swim.

Sukh brought with him some *sevu sevu* for our visit—a bundle of kava root, which he gave to Fernando, son of Chief Leone Sorolau. The *sevu sevu* is a polite token that gains friendly permission to walk about a village freely. Without this formality, it is like walking around someone's yard and looking in their windows—very rude.

A young woman, Sophia, took me through the village and showed me the Catholic church, Sanito Mikaele, in the center.

Fijians are devoted Christians, and the churches in the poorest villages are among the handsomest of buildings. Every Fijian in the village wanted pictures taken of themselves, saying *vanaka* (thank you) each time we took pictures. In Fiji, the camera is an important tool of goodwill.

One afternoon we met up with
Please see FIJI, L29



HILLARY HAUSER

Fijian children and adults enjoy being photographed by island visitors.

FIJI: Happy Adventure

Continued from L28

Abraham Dayaram, whose Meridian Transport in Wairiki takes visitors up one of Taveuni's steep mountains to a lookout at 3,900 feet. From there we hoped to see Lake Tagamaucia (pronounced Tang-a-moth-ia), and on the way up, the rare, legendary, blood-red tagamaucia flower.

The first part of this trip is a breeze; it isn't long before you have a spectacular view of the Somosomo Strait below, with the enormous white cross of the Catholic Mission in Wairiki standing sentinel over the sea.

Jim and I, riding with three New Zealanders in the back of Abra-

ham's truck, put our cameras under a tarp he had given us. We had begun to realize what it means to ascend into a cloud.

The mountains of Taveuni are among the highest in Fiji. Along a ridge of volcanic cones there are major peaks—the 3,900-foot Ului-galau, at the south end of the island, and Des Voeux Peak, 3,800 feet high in the center of the island.

As the truck twisted and turned up the muddy lava mountainside, we became drenched by the drizzle. From the lookout at 3,900 feet, where the view was to be a panoramic one of the lake, we never saw anything but gray fog. But we did get to see the tiny red

tagamaucia flower, which grows nowhere else in the world.

For our first dive day, Jim and I were driven to the Nalele Harbor in a Dive Taveuni Jeep, which stopped along the road to pick up other divers staying elsewhere on the island.

About an hour out of the harbor aboard the 36-foot dive boat Lela-wai, we were swimming at 90 feet along a reef at a place called the Ledge. Brilliant fishes milled around brightly colored corals and sponges, and everywhere we looked were the soft corals Fijian waters are famous for—those miniature white-stemmed, squishy-looking trees with magenta and purple frills.

Later that afternoon, at a place called Pandora's Box, I saw—in an underwater area about three feet square—soft corals, hard corals, a lion fish, a swarm of the goldfish-like anthias, sponges and a blowfish that blew itself up into a spiny ball.

There are 14 outstanding dive spots along the Rainbow Reef, which stretches for 19 miles beneath the Somosomo Strait between Taveuni and Vanua Levu.

We dived at Blue-Ribbon Eel reef, where we swam along a gentle slope to find two ribbon eels tucked in a hole. We explored the Corner, a busy reef full of fire corals and lion fish. The Great White Wall, king of all the reefs in this area, was not right for diving until our last day on the island. But it was well worth the wait.

The ocean surrounding Taveuni matches the land—the more populated, tamed areas face the Somosomo Strait, which is often so glassy calm you can make out the reefs from a mountainside. The southern tip and backside of the island are lashed with dark blue, often angry seas that roll in from the Tropic of Capricorn.

One afternoon we asked Sukh to take us to the southern tip of the island.

On the way, we stopped at a sign by the side of the road that indicates where the 180th meridian of the international dateline cuts Taveuni in half. Jim and I clowned around for a picture that Sukh

took, with Jim standing in "yesterday" and me standing in "today"—holding hands across time.

The dateline was actually moved out to sea long ago, so that islanders don't have to travel back and forth between "yesterday" and "today," but you can always pretend.

Later we passed the driveway leading to the home of the president of Fiji, Ratu Sir Penia Ganalau, and Sukh told us how many descendants of Fiji's big colonial families live on the island. He said many of the people born on Taveuni have never left, and many of those who do leave get homesick and come back.

We arrived at the village at the end of the road, Navakawau, unannounced and with no *sevu sevu*. But the children ran out to greet us, one proudly wearing a floor-length bathrobe.

A man played a guitar in the doorway of his blue house while his wife sat on the floor inside, weav-

ing a pandanus mat. Jim talked with the young men of the village, who seemed in no rush to leave the village and see the world.

On our way back home, we stopped at the Waitavala Estate, a copra plantation about a mile south of Somosomo. It was here that members of a New Zealand expedition to Fiji which included Sir Edmund Hillary had zoomed down a water slide by the seat of their pants. I wanted to try this for myself.

Climbing up the river bank from the plantation's waterfall canyon, we ran into four Fijian boys who were warming themselves by a fire. It was late in the day and dark in the canyon, and they had been playing in the river all day.

We smiled, said *bula* (hello) and continued up the side of the river, slipping and sliding over the narrow trail as mud oozed between our toes. One of the boys offered to show us the water slide.

When we got there, the boy sat

in a pool that empties over a miniature slope of stone so smooth that it's like marble. Pushing off in a sitting position, he zoomed over the slope into a deep pool at the bottom.

Jim watched what the boy did, then followed him. The boy, who said his dream was to be a "U.S.A. soldier," yelled up at me to keep my arms flat and folded over my body.

Away I went, twisting down the slide like a balsa chip in a torrent, keeping my arms folded and praying that I wouldn't land in Samoa. It worked. What a laugh I had at the end.

And that's the idea of Taveuni—to throw yourself into everything new, like a child, to have adventures you know you'll have nowhere else in the world.

Hauser is a free-lance writer living in Summerland, Calif.