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Paradise Found

The Fijian Island of Kadavu Enchants a World-Wearied Fisherman

By Bill Boyce

ANYONE WHO TRAVELS THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF FINE fishing locations eventually has what I like to call, "The Century 21 Moment." You finally find one of those places that you barely dreamed could exist: one full of insane adventures, gorgeous blue water and friendly locals eager to share their little slice of heaven. When you leave, you vow to return as soon as you can possibly make the trip.

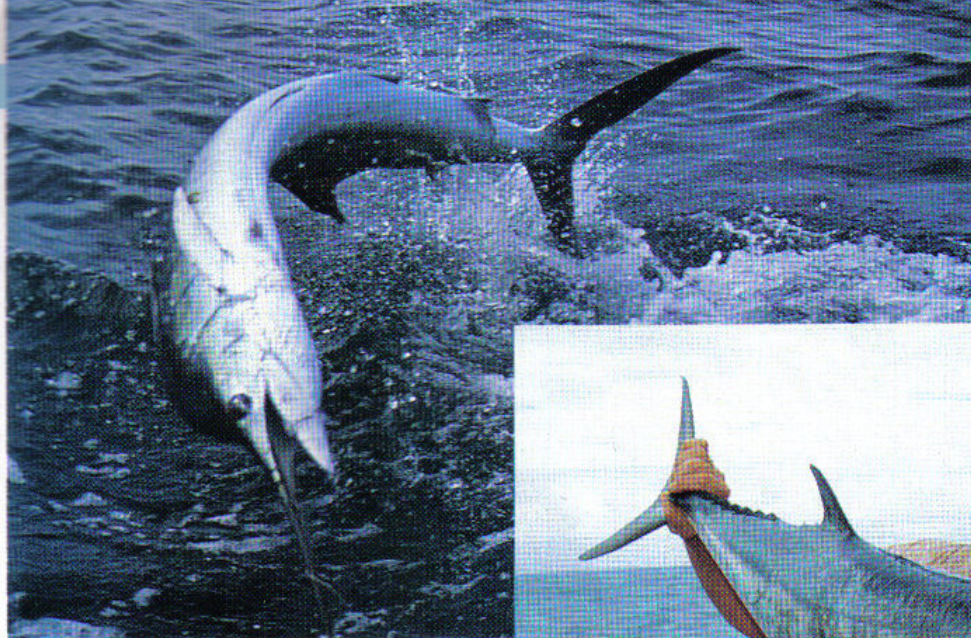
But when you do make that much-anticipated pilgrimage back to paradise, the first thing you see as your vehicle leaves the airport is a gold, Century 21 sign. That's the moment you know that your paradise is lost.

You know the scenario; we fishy types in our baggy shorts and tournament T-shirts are soon outnumbered by the dreaded "suit and tie on the beach" look. Or worse yet, the large, pale fellow clad in Bermuda shorts, white socks, black polished wing tips and a big, obnoxious woven hat with MEXICO stitched across the front. All of these telltale signs scream out that your "secret spot" is a little less secret and on track

to be the hottest new time-share destination.

Thankfully for those of us who like to get off the beaten path a bit, you can still find places on earth that haven't been soiled by the presence of a Taco Bell. I recently returned from filming a new travel/fishing television series called *IGFA Angler's Digest TV* on the remote Fijian island of Kadavu, and from the moment my Top-Siders touched the ground, I knew I had found a special place.





During the Fijian winter (our summer months) sails and toothy critters like barred Spanish mackerel and wahoo push up against the reef in good numbers.

Island Nirvana

The 40-minute skiff ride from the small airstrip that services Kadavu turned into an adventure in itself. We navigated through stunningly clear waters as pristine coral reefs rose to just a few feet below our flat-bottomed hull. Swift currents poured through passages cut in the reef, and I could envision the schools of giant and bluefin trevally lining up to intercept any baitfish swept out with the tide.

As I daydreamed about the fishing possibilities, my eyes suddenly focused on the verdant rainforested slopes that cover the north side of Kadavu and a large group of colorful parrots shooting through the coconut palms. The secluded white-sand beaches we passed looked like they came right out of a Hawaiian Tropic ad — and some of them probably did.

The only signs of human life we saw were a few small villages where native Fijians reside in communities no larger than a few hundred people. They turned out to be an amazingly friendly and hospitable people. Their continuous laughter and the perpetual smiles plastered on their faces made me wonder what I could do to bring a little bit of this sunshine back home.

Our final destination, the remote Matava Resort, consisted of several stilted, thatched-roof cottages clinging to the hillside overlooking a scenic little bay. Each cottage came with an inspirational ocean view and the distant sound of waves ending their oceanic journey on the Astrolabe Barrier Reef.

Little was known about what type of fishing to expect other than a smattering of yellowfin tuna, wahoo, dolphin, sails, and perhaps a marlin of various colors and stripes. But since we never really hear much about Fiji's offshore



fishery, I assumed it wouldn't be the place to spend much time, money or effort in pursuit of the ultimate blue-water experience. I was wrong.

From my first glance at the British navigation charts shown to me by Capt. Adrian "Mega" Watts, I knew we were in fishy territory. The Astrolabe Reef runs over 125 miles around the northern edge of Kadavu Island. Plenty of openings, channels and inlets dot the length of the reef, allowing a good mixing of inshore reef forage and deep-blue water. Another beautiful thing about the geography of the reef and the surrounding islands is that you can always seem to find a lee side to fish in relatively calm waters.

The Fijian island group consists of 310 islands and is located 19 degrees south of the equator. Though not considered the rainy season, wintertime brings north-westerly trade winds that can blow for several days at a time, which makes fishing the front side of the Astrolabe a bumpy affair. We experienced some of those winds, but all were less than 20 knots and seas never rose above 4 feet — baby stuff for veterans of the North Atlantic or Caribbean.

We fished aboard the *Bite Me*, a 31-foot twin diesel under Watts' skillful guidance. His knowledge of the reef is legendary and the boat currently holds 19 Fijian line-class records. Watts' soulful mate Joe Tuku joined us for the trip

and turned out to be great fun in the pit.

Since we made the trip in July, during the Fijian winter, water temps ranged from 74 to 76 degrees, drawing in good numbers of wahoo and sails to the reef edge. Since these two species were most prevalent, we mostly fished with 16- or 20-pound tackle, but also spent a great day playing around on 8-pound.

Hoo's Next

The run to the drop-off takes less than 20 minutes, and in route you cruise by a number of amazing tropical islands, virgin reefs and quality-surf breaks. (Retired Kiwi surf pro Ian Thompson calls Kadavu home and runs surf and dive charters from his beautiful sailboat and bayside homestead.)

We set out the lines just after clearing the reef, still within earshot of the breakers. Watts constantly monitored the sounder, and every time we passed over a bait ball he'd alert everyone in the pit. Usually, within seconds of his warning, two leaping wahoo would rocket 12 feet in the air and come crashing down on our skipping ballyhoo baits. Line peeled from the reels as the two 40-plus-pound scissor-heads raced for the horizon. These speedsters are just two members of the local "wolf pack" and Watts smiled with the confidence of a field general as he muttered, "We found the enemy."

For the next two hours, skying wahoo covered us up, providing an aer-



for the wahoo, I wanted to strike immediately on the bite to keep from gut hooking the sail. A second after grabbing the rod I pulled back and the line came tight.

The sailfish took off for a back flip or two, and I stepped back a little to keep it all tight. Just at that second, the other line on the left side snapped from the clip and I did what any other rod hog would do in that situation. I grabbed that stick with my left arm and set up hard on it, too.

"Yahoo! We got two!" I screamed as both sails crisscrossed the horizon. It wasn't rocket science to now realize I can't even turn a handle with two rods bent over in my hands, so Joe wasted no time coming to my rescue. His became a Palm Beach release while mine was tagged and set free for the show. We saw three more sails that day.

In fact, we raised sails every day. Sometimes just one, other times multiples. Nice fish, 80 to 100 pounds, that fought with more vigor than the typical Central American variety. More like Florida sails — only bigger.

The sails chewed up our lures, too — a black, purple and silver Star Lure got crushed all week long. Our biggest fear quickly became losing the precious jewel to one of the toothy wahoo, barracuda or huge barred Spanish mackerel in the vicinity.

The sails offered up our only billfish action since we were off the peak marlin season that runs from March to August. During this period, blue marlin move in with the huge schools of small

ial show the likes of which I have never witnessed. The smallest wahoo we caught weighed around 25 pounds, with the largest pushing well over 80. My guest angler for the show, world-renowned fly angler Cam Sigler Jr., felt compelled to target these speedsters on light-tippets hoping to set an IGFA record. After watching several stupefying aerial attacks, he knew he had his hands full. He did successfully land one wahoo on 20-pound tippet, but the speedy strikes and toothy scissors proved tough going for his 6-pound attempts.

Sails Too

Although boats catch sailfish here all year, they prefer the cooler waters of the Fijian winters. As the tide came off high, Watts had a sneaky suspicion that the sails would come up for us. We worked a few bait marks on the sounder and just like clockwork — up they came.

"Long left ... Long left ... Sailfish on the skip bait," cried Watts, and I grabbed the rod as the sail pumped its tail to get on the bait. Since I knew we had double "J" hook rigs in the spread

Getting There

Air New Zealand, Qantas Airways, and Pacific Airways offer daily flights from Los Angeles to Nadi, Fiji. Flights typically leave from LAX in the late evening, and this allows for plenty of time for connections within the U.S. A direct, 10-hour flight lands in the early morning in Nadi. Inter-island connections are available via Pacific Sun or Fiji Air, and both run daily flights to Kadavu. Once on Kadavu, the Matava Resort will have a truck ready to pick you up at the airport and take you to a calm beach where a skiff will bring you to the resort.

The Matava Resort is an all-inclusive resort and all meals are included in the vacation package. Several package options are available, starting as low as \$450 for a five-night, non-diver package, up to a seven-night, five-day diving package with 2 tank dives per day for \$900.

Fishing charters vary as to the total number of days fishing and if you want the 31-foot *Bite Me* offshore boat or the smaller skiff for fishing poppers inshore. A combo of these boat trips is also available upon request. Just go to www.matava.com for more information. They can handle the booking of all your flights from the U.S. as well as the Fiji inter-island transfers.



Fishing Seasons

Species	Season	Best Months
Black marlin	July – Nov	Aug / Sep
Blue marlin	All year-round	Oct / Nov
Striped marlin	June – Aug	July
Sailfish	May – Sep	July / Aug
Wahoo	May – Sep	July / Aug
Yellowfin tuna	All year-round	June / Jan
Dogtooth tuna	June – Oct	July
Mahimahi	All year-round	Oct / Nov
Barred Spanish mackerel	Oct – March	Nov
Giant trevally	Oct – March	Feb / March



Capt. Adrian Watts on the 31-foot *Bite Me* plies the waters off Astrolabe Reef year-round, chasing marlin and tuna during the winter and wahoo and sails in the summer.

yellowfin tuna they love to snack on.

The blues here usually run between 150 and 600 pounds and most are caught within 10 miles of the reef along the 1,000-fathom curve. There is a very fishy bank about 35 miles from Matava Resort that holds great numbers of pelagics at times, too, but Watts explained that the fishing is so good off the usual local spots that the 35-mile run is often not warranted.

Black marlin cruise through here from July to November, and the occasional striped marlin pops up from June to August.

Other Fish, Other Games

Yellowfin tuna frequent these waters year-round, but the majority push through between April and August. Schoolie-sized fish averaging between 15 and 30 pounds make up the bulk of the catch, but the resort's "bragging board" sports several recent photos of

yellowfin over the 100-pound mark.

Another brute tuna species found in Fiji that is sure to thrill anglers in search of exotic quarry is the fearsome dogtooth tuna. These insane fighters sport a set of chompers that would make a Doberman pinscher proud. They migrate through Kadavu waters from June through October.

Another fish with a dentally enhanced mouth is the barred Spanish mackerel. Not any resemblance to a Spanish mackerel we might find in U.S. waters, these "mackies" look more similar to our kingfish, with their steely blue coloration. But these fish have more pronounced vertical banding prevalent along their sides. They can reach upwards of 50-plus pounds and their teeth make a wahoo's look like flat gums! They are a highly prized food fish and few, if any, are ever released.

While these pelagics can keep you busy for an entire vacation, don't cut

yourself short on the inshore experience of surface plugging for giant trevally (GTs). We spent less than an hour plugging for these hard-fighting jacks one day and caught two respectable 30-pounders. A 70-pounder exploded on one of our plugs but didn't hook up and then followed the plug all the way up to the boat's exhaust. In hindsight, I'm glad we didn't hook it on our puny tackle as it would have no doubt found the coral below and been stuck with a treble hook hood ornament on its face for quite awhile. You could, however, come prepared with the right tackle to handle these bruisers and spend countless hours pursuing these reef warriors.

The best time to target GTs is between October and March when the weather calms on the front side of the reef, allowing boats to fish in tighter to the reef.

Records Fall

On the last day of our trip we felt that we had honed the wahoo fishery down to the point where we could take a shot at some light-tackle world records. Watts found the wolf pack farther off the reef than on previous days, which would be to our advantage.

We rigged up the 8-pound rod to IGFA specs and went looking for a fight. We needed a 57-pound wahoo to break the current 8-pound line-class record, and although we were fairly certain finding one that big wouldn't be a problem, catching it on light string would be another story.

Not 30 minutes into our quest, I got a nice 25-pounder as a warm-up. Then it hit. A wahoo as thick as a log came up on the short bait, and I hung on as the fish, easily 60 pounds, came tight on the line. About an hour and twenty minutes into the fight, the fish finally started working up. Just about the time I could see deep color with the fish about 50 feet down, I felt a sudden headshake and then slack line. My heart stopped — my next few words unprintable. The line, knots and tackle never failed; the fish just came unbuttoned.

Not to be stopped, we put lines out once again as the sun started to fade into the horizon and immediately hooked another sizable wahoo. And although this fish didn't break a world record, the 38.25-pound wahoo did set the 8-pound wahoo mark for Fiji. Capt. Watts got his 19th Fijian record and I got to fish in paradise — definitely a win-win for everyone.