

An underwater photograph showing a coral reef with large, flat, greenish-brown coral structures. Several divers are visible in the blue water, some swimming and others appearing to be part of a school of fish. The scene is lit from above, creating a bright, clear environment.

# Sport Diver Real World FIJI & THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Teens travel through time on Broadreach's  
South Pacific expedition

BY NATALIE TUKE  
Sport Diver Teen Editor

**B**right orange sea fans cover steep coral walls. From above, the sun pierces the surface and lights up the fans like colored light bulbs, making me think the dive site's name, Golden Chimney, fits perfectly. Two whitetip reef sharks unexpectedly cruise by. Our instructor then shows us a dead man's finger. The name of this little invertebrate is scary, but it is anything but. When you create motion around it, in less than a second its color changes from dark maroon to bright white. I had never known that something like this existed! Then grass eels, clownfish, a school of barracuda, lionfish and even a leaf scorpionfish sneak out to say hi. I have already peeked at our day's itinerary, and not only has an awesome dive already been checked off the list, but we still have an action-packed agenda to cruise through. I can't decide which part of the day I'm looking forward to most.

**FIJI FINE** Broadreach divers drift over fields of cabbage coral during a dive in Naiqoro Passage, off the island of Kadavu. The passage, a marine sanctuary, is commonly heralded as some of the best diving in Fiji.



Here I am, halfway across the globe and far from anything similar to my world — not to mention I'm underwater. I'm a thousand miles away from my friends, my trusty Volkswagen Bug Turbo and my Sidekick. I am in Fiji and on my way to the Solomon Islands with Broadreach. It is my third trip, so I secretly consider myself a veteran.

My last trip with Broadreach was to the Red Sea, and I came home with a list of names, e-mail addresses and phone numbers instantly linking me to my newfound friends. After last year, I sort of knew what to expect: I was going to fill my logbook with dives that I would undoubtedly star and underline as my new favorites, try exotic foods, and experience cultures and places that no geography or history class at school could compare to. But most importantly, I knew this year would be another trip that would leave me anything but friendless. Fortunately, I am in for a surprise.

#### SWEPT AWAY

We take a group of dinghies to our new home for the next five days, Matava Resort on Fiji's small island of Kadavu. Our eyes get bigger as the coastline comes into view. Native bamboo huts or *bures* seem to float in a lush sea of leaves with sandy beaches and mangroves extending out from either side. A tiny island is in the not-so-far distance — close enough to easily reach by swimming. When I look back to the shore of Kadavu, I see a man in a flamboyant *sulu*, or brightly colored tunic, with a semi-large Afro and a welcoming smile, waving at us. I can't wait to get acquainted with the place, and when I hesitate to step into the shallow water that lies between the



**ROUNDABOUT** Clockwise from above: A barcheek-trevally cyclone; Broachreachers under full sail; a halimeda ghost pipefish. Opposite: Fresh fruits and vegetables arrive at a floating market in the Solomon Islands.

without being underwater at all. If the hike is this awesome, I can't imagine what the day's diving will be like.

#### A PRIVATE PATH

It seems as if, all of a sudden, we've been here a week. With each boat ride, I take in another remarkable view. The day started with a rare dark and rainy morning, making the island look even more exotic. As the rainfall makes its way through the rainforest the sky weaves a pattern of clouds. I feel the energy in the air as dolphins playfully jump alongside — and nearly over — our boat. And just like Fiji topside, the underwater energy at Cabbage Patch is buzzing. Swarms of color and life pop out from everywhere. Schools of Pacific barracuda pass as they make room for the whitetip reef sharks to glide by. Turtles munch on sponges, and stingrays attempt to bury themselves in the sand. I don't want to leave the excitement down here, but I know we have to. Just like we have to leave Fiji the next day. I think that nothing could be as beautiful, and no people as kind. Then they show me more.

We pack up early that morning and gather in the main hut to say goodbye to our new friends at the Matava Resort

boat and dock — as most visitors do — the man, who I soon learn is called Maddy, a Matava employee, comes to my rescue and carries me to the dock. It's not even my first step onto the island, and I've already made a buddy. Not bad.

I drop off my bags at the hut where I meet my hut mate, Caitlin. I instantly know we are going to have a fun time. First on our agenda: changing clothes. We have been asked to leave behind our backpacks, sunglasses and hats in favor of the colorful *sulus* that lay neatly on our bunks. Now we are ready for an hour-long hike through the villages and to the local school. The people are so friendly. Little boys and girls run around in tiny Fijian outfits saying "bull-laa!" (Fijian for "hello"), and before I know it, two little boys have grabbed our hands to lead our group through the forest. A small hidden cavern leads us to a large pool of water. Above, small cracks in the ceiling let in little light beams that illuminate the water. It is like diving in a beautiful cavern

#### MUST DO

**Kava-time**  
Spend the night experiencing a traditional Kava ceremony at Matava Resort by indulging in dancing to the local bands jams and bonding with the friendly locals.

- 1. Hot Spot
- 2. Toa Maru
- 3. JFK Wall
- 4. Cabbage Patch
- 5. PT-109 (night dive)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: CHRIS CROWLEY (3), COURTESY BROADREACH

and, sadly, to Maddy, whom I will miss the most. We hug and he says, “Good-bye, Natty” for the last time as we leave to begin the hike to our next stop. We head around the island to the top of a hill covered with huge trees. A perfectly groomed path that extends for miles through the lush landscape seems to magically appear. It makes no sense. I turn to the guide for answers and he says, “The Fijians were so excited to have you stay with them that they spent all of yesterday walking up and down this path cleaning the way for you all.” The path confirms everything that my family has told me about the Fijian people: They are the nicest humans you will ever meet. And with each step I take, I begin

to believe it even more.

### BACK IN TIME

We have now flown 1,500 miles to the west of Fiji to reach the small city of Munda in the Solomon Islands, which I’ve been told are like Fiji 20 years ago. Those words start to resonate as our tiny plane touches down on the old, World War II grass landing strip. As the Solomon people greet us with handmade flower necklaces, I can already tell that they are completely different from Fijians. It is less developed here and inhabited by people seemingly from a different time. I can feel the friendly curiosity between the Solomon people and our group.

Here at the Munda Resort, the morning starts with loud clapping from Pleet,

### CONTINUING EDUCATION



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the day’s chosen *Raa* — a person assigned to wake everybody up. Our daily ritual of breakfast and diving has made waking up seem a ton easier than at home for school. And also unlike school, our days have flown by. I realize our stay at Munda is almost over as we gather around the dining-room table to have our last breakfast with the Munda chefs before our departure. Our next stop: Gizo, on the Island of Ghizo, the second-largest town in the Solomon Islands. And as with the theme of this trip, we are sad

to leave our new friends but excited to meet the newer ones that wait on the next shore.

### BEWARE THE SKULLS

On our way to Gizo, we stop at a small island surrounded by what seems like a shallow “baby pool,” right in the middle of the ocean. After we pass the bright, shallow waters and make our way to the shore, what is waiting for us is anything but smiling faces in sulus.

There are stacks of skulls. We have stopped at Skull Island. Used for rituals and burials, skulls were set up in shrine positions and worshiped among the chief’s most valuable possessions. The Solomon people believed that a higher number of heads meant a higher rank in the society and possibly even a holy place in the afterworld.

After our impromptu his-

**PRIMITIVE** Clockwise from left: **Scenery en route to Matava; bright sea fans; a note-taking Nato.** Opposite: **A curious churchgoer greets Broadreachers on Nacamoto.**



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: CHRIS CROWLEY; KRISTA HEIDE (2)

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tory/ghost story, we move on to Lola Island for lunch and are anxious to make our first dive of the day. We descend onto a sandy floor with patches of sea grass. Eventually, a metal object appears in the distance: a one-person, World War II fighter plane — seemingly untouched. We take turns posing in the cockpit, complete with gauges and original gun turrets. Just when we’re really getting into it, our time is up and we head to the surface to continue to Ghizo, the island that will provide the final week of adventure. As we get closer to the shore, I don’t know what to expect: beaches, mangroves, natives with big smiles wearing sulus or maybe even some skulls. But instead, I see a long stretch of huts up and down the tiny coast lined with tiny fishing boats.

“Dat is da market were they sell da best fish in da Solomons,” the guide says while pointing ahead to the dark-skinned people waving enormous leaves. Little outrigger canoes filled with men wearing straw hats crowd the shore. I watch as the people mingle and conduct their daily business in this “big city” of the Solomon Islands.

And if Gizo is the big city of the Solomon Islands topside, the underwater world keeps up the pace below. Here we dive Hot Spot, a dive site which I will describe to everyone back home as the most ethereal underwater world that I could ever dream of. Hundreds of fish weave around each other

### FOR MORE INFORMATION



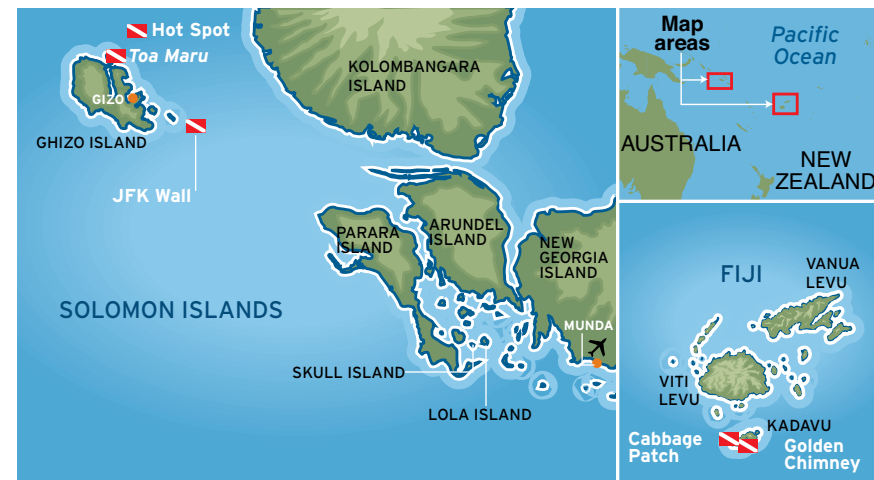
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creating a vision of wild colors. Sponge and coral cascade over a steep drop-off where dark blue becomes the backdrop of an underwater riot of color. Whitetip reef sharks suddenly appear out of the darkness in quick pursuit of their prey as eagle rays glide in and out of the dark blue. With each turn they seem to swim closer. Turtles pass in search of the perfect sponge snack while an exotic sea snake slithers on the ocean’s surface. Hot Spot instantly becomes my favorite dive site in the world.

### CORAL CRUSADERS

These islands and their people have shown us so much. So when our Scottish divemaster explains how we can help protect their reefs, we jump at the chance. Our quest: to preserve the reef by removing the harmful crown of

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## Deco Stops Broadreach

In **Fiji**, wake up early for some **hot tea** and freshly baked cookies at **Matava Resort**. Then pack up a **sulu** and some sunscreen, and backpack through the villages. Don’t forget to stop for a swim in the waterfalls. And before you go, pick up a baked treat from the **market** to enjoy as you relax by the beautiful coast.

In the **Solomon Islands**, head out to **Hot Spot** for a dive filled with all types of fish and critters. For lunch, stop by **Skull Island** for a historical experience of an island full of ... well ... skulls! However, don’t forget

to pay the keeper of the island! Make sure to tell the boat driver to stop by **Lola Island** for a nice buffet lunch and a great canoeing spot! See if you can find some **betel nuts** to try for lunch too! Head back to **Gizo** and stop by the **Dive Gizo** dive shop to check out the incredible carvings that local artists have made. Hope you’re rested up because a must-do is to have a delicious dinner at the **PT-109** and stick around for a crazy night of dancing with the locals!

### DESTINATION PRIMER

**AVERAGE WATER TEMP:** 77-81°F **WHAT TO WEAR:** A 3-5 mm fullsuit **AVERAGE VIZ:** 80 feet **WHEN TO GO:** Year-round

thorns starfish from its waters. Crowns of thorns eat and quickly kill coral. We dive Kennedy Pinnacle prepared with charts to note their location and what they are eating along with rulers to record their size. And then comes the fun part — the spears we use to remove them from the reef. Armed and ready, we are off to defeat the coral-munching crowns of thorns! Whitetip reef sharks and a blue spotted stingray soon join our mission. Two hundred crown of thorns later, we are on Kennedy Island with piles of crowns of thorns, which will be quarantined far from the shore. Apparently if placed too close to the ocean, the sneaky starfish find their way back.

The crowns of thorns defeated for now, we are off to *Toa Maru*, a 446-foot-long Japanese cargo ship conscripted by the Japanese army during World War II. Run aground after suffering an American attack, the wreck is remarkably well-preserved, housing now-artifacts of sake bottles, a telephone and dishes. The ship is also home to crocodile fish, scorpionfish, anemones and clownfish. The new inhabitants light up the vessel as if they are the ship’s stashed treasure — a treasure that, unfortunately, we can’t take with us. It is our last dive of the day and time to return to our bunks at Paradise Lodge.

(Continued on page 105)

## BROADREACH *(Continued from page 61)*

After dark, the whole world becomes a new place. I feel my mind define things differently; the senses kick it up a notch and things really change — especially underwater. We decide to go for our last night dive right outside the *PT-109* restaurant. Caitlin and I set off into the dark with the rest of the group. First stop: a huge car filled with lionfish. I have never seen so many lionfish in one spot. We count 12. Just then a stingray passes, and leads us to another car. Inside we find the strangest creature I have ever seen: Time gets away from me as I stare at a 13-foot, slug-like thing sucking its body in and out of itself. I feel the goose bumps tingle on my arms as I watch this creepy creature. (I later searched the fish ID books and still couldn't identify it. So if you know, please fill me in.) As we start to head back to *PT-109*, we come across two of the largest clams I have ever seen — three feet by three feet — so big they look completely fake. Seeing them shine in vibrant colors of green, purple, bright orange and yellow, I can't help but ask myself how big a pearl would come out of one of these babies.

## SACRED LETTERS

I wake up early the next morning to birds chirping and the ocean rumbling in the distance. All of a sudden, a mixture of sadness and accomplishment passes through my soul. I wake up Caitlin, and we head to the top porch overlooking the ocean and have our last coffee together. We are in the spot of our a.m. ritual of deep conversations with the horizon as our backdrop, getting ready to start the day.

Packed and ready to return home, we stand on the now-familiar, World War II airfield we arrived on only weeks earlier. The tiny plane that will carry us on our long journey waits on the grass. Then comes the Broadreach tradition — exchanging short letters written on note cards not to be read until all goodbyes have been said. I take my seat on the little plane and reflect on the Fijians and their dive sites, Maddy, the Solomon Islands and her tribes, late nights of dancing, new friends and unforgettable bonds. And as I feel the crinkled notecards in my pocket, I watch the islands slowly slip from view.

*Special thanks to Broadreach (gobroadreach.com), Matava Resort (matava.com), Dive Gizo (divegizo.com), Dive Munda (munda.dive.com), Nacamoto Village, Fiji Saeraghi Village, Solomon Islands, and the staff, students and counselors.*



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