

Vurolevu and Buliya islands



Anchorage at Vurolevu Island

Some people are just born lucky and while the rest of the world was on lock down due to the covid-19 we on the sailing catamaran O2 found ourselves in the Kadavu region of Fiji.

We came here as a stop over for our journey towards the Lau Group in the very remote eastern region of Fiji but due to weather we were caught here for more time than was predicted.

Not to worry though as we found it to be an absolutely amazing place to pass the time.



Vunicea, the regions primary village

Our first anchorage in the region of Kadavu was Vunicea and it was here we first heard about the possibility with swimming with manta rays up north on the island of Vurolevu.

We quickly did a little provisioning in the village “which acts as the regions capital” and headed up island sailing in the lee of the Great Astrolabe Reef.

We arrived at Vurolevu in the afternoon, perfect timing to work our way into a comfortable anchorage.

The island is covered on all sides by coral reefs but we did manage to find a tiny dingy pass into the beach and Ofelia went off on her eternal hunt for the perfect shell.



Approach to the beaches is difficult due to coral



An ideal palm for sunset silhouettes



Ofelia enjoying a sunset from the beach



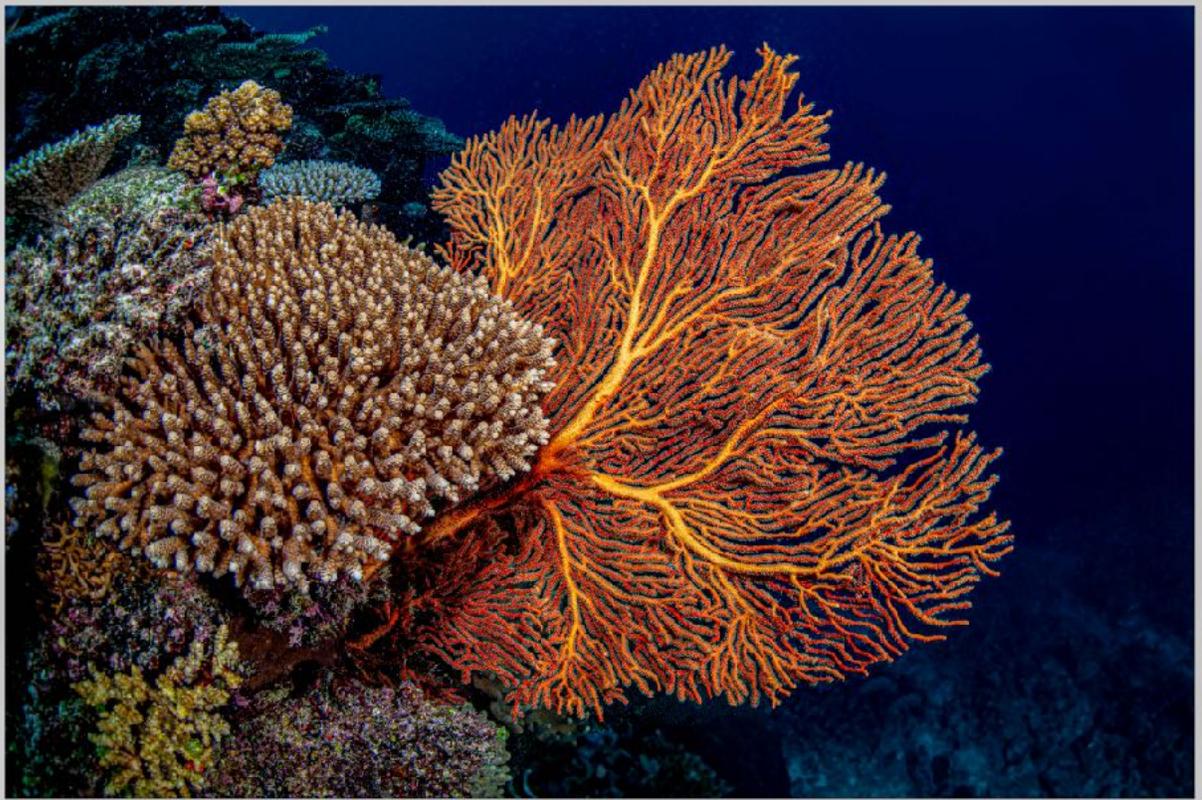
Natural rock sculptures on the beaches of Vuolevu

Up bright and early the next morning Ofelia and I set off for a dive hoping to see some of the promised manta rays. Unfortunately this was the day that they had decided to play hooky and not a manta was in sight, we did however find some nice soft corals and gorgonian corals a little further along the reef.



A nice gorgonian coral eastern side of Vurolevu

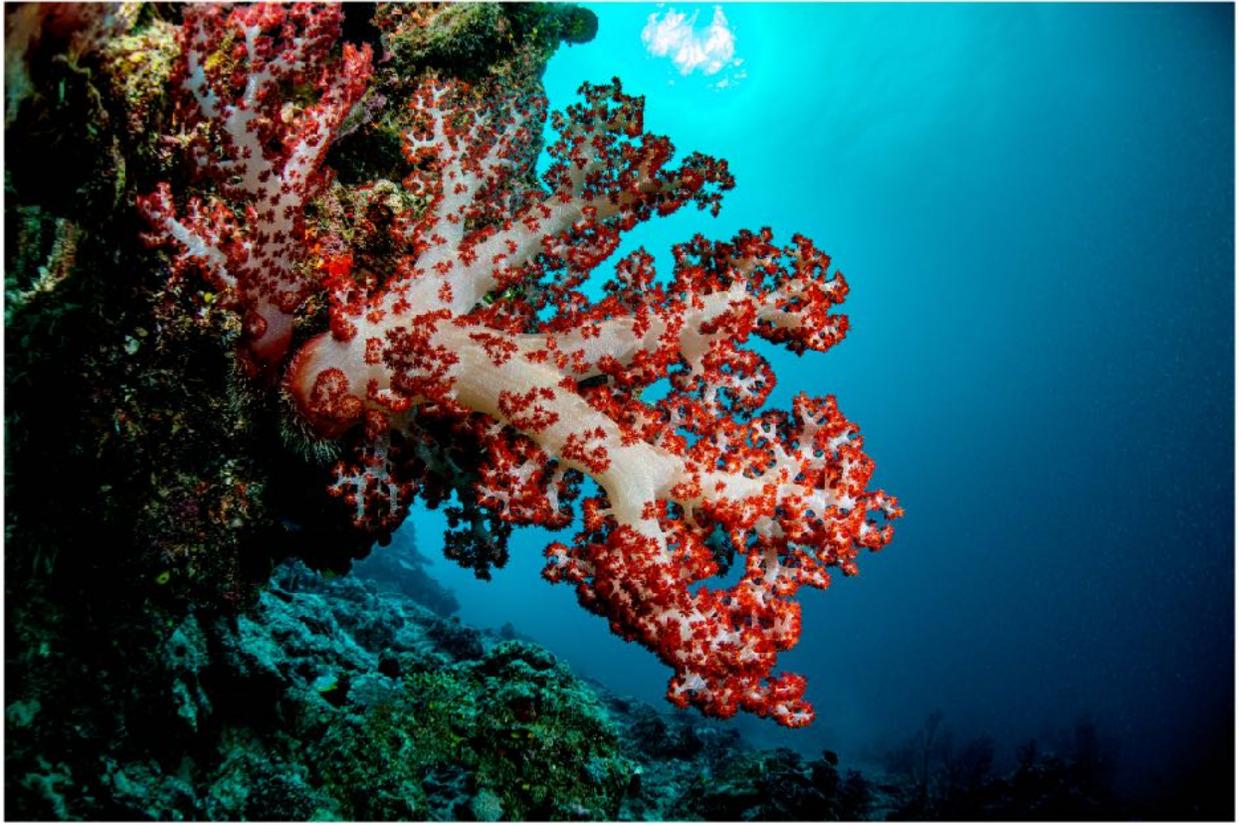
This was turning out to be quite an enjoyable dive despite the absence of the promised manta's. Aaah! but nature has its own schedule and if we are persistent surely we would get our chance to spot one in a future dive.



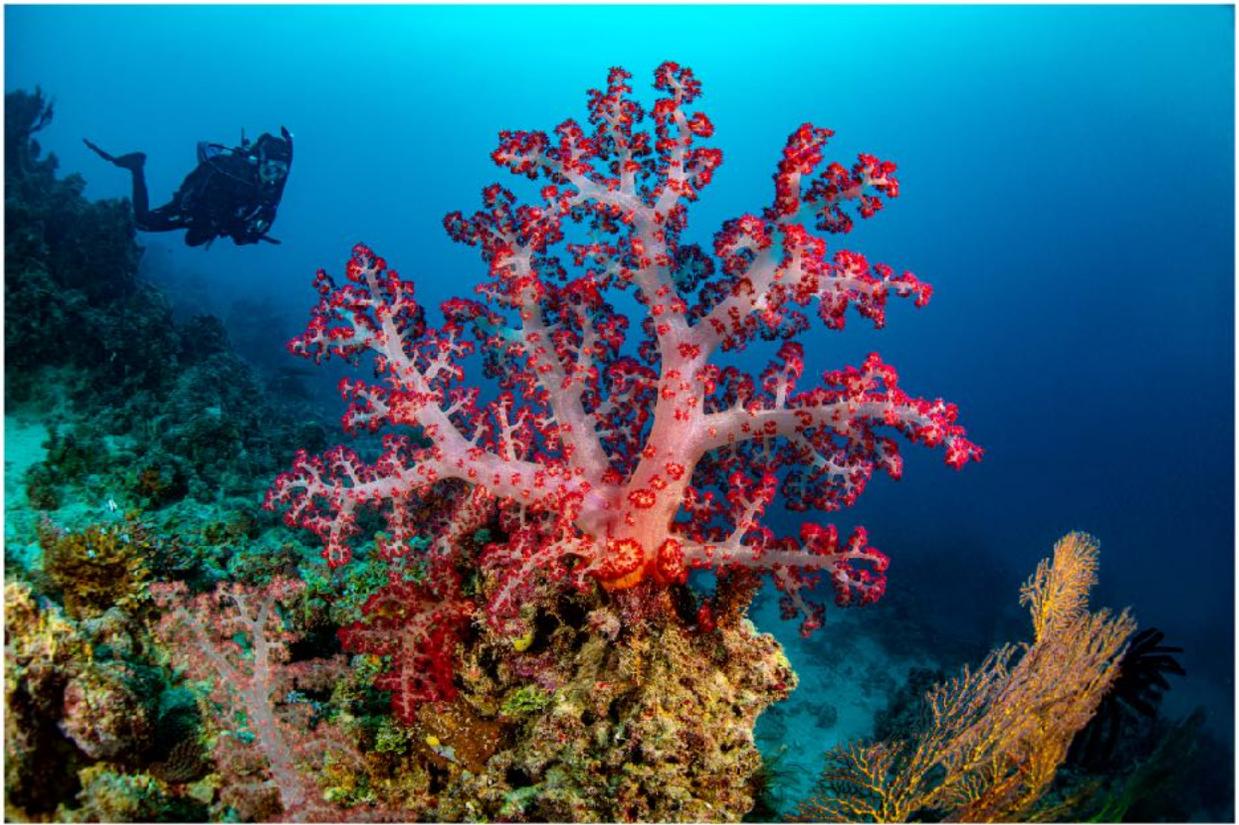
Gorgonian and hard corals



Beautiful soft coral



Magenta soft coral



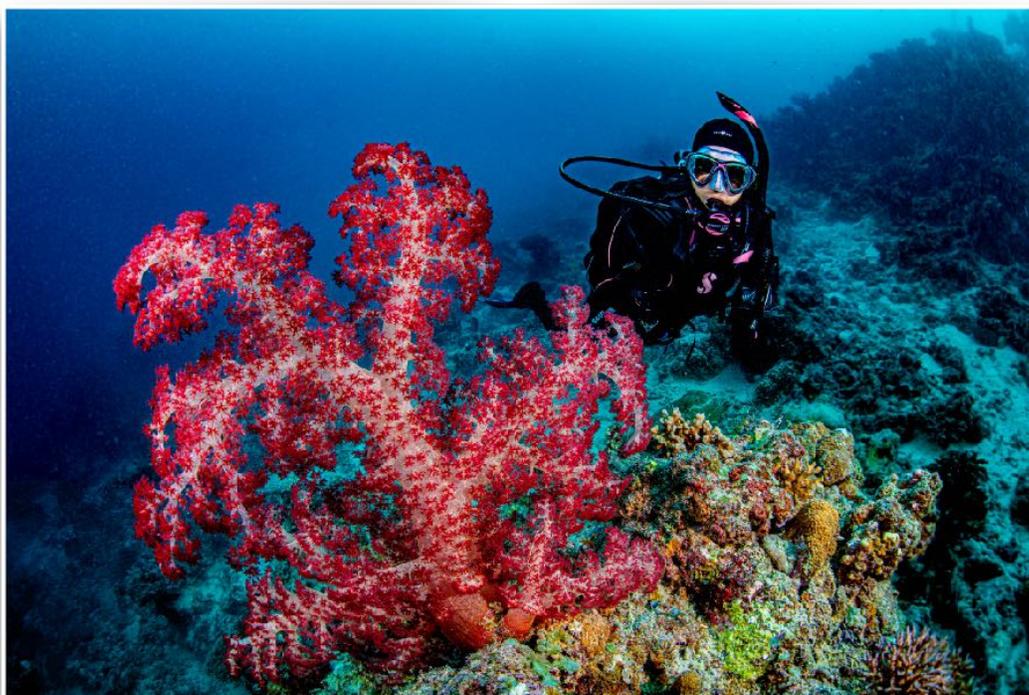
Ofelia approaches a beautiful soft coral



Gorgonian coral



Crown of Thorns starfish



Ofelia and soft coral

After lunch on our first day on the island a local panga pulled up at the rear of our boat and informed us that we were to perform Sevusevu in the village of Buliya on the island of the same name just a mile further north.

SevuSevu is a ceremony performed when first arriving at a new village. The visiting crew will present **Kava** to the chief.

You perform this ritual while sitting cross legged on the floor of the chiefs hut and on receiving the **Kava** the chief will give a little speech welcoming you to his island, it's quite formal in an island kind of way and the Fijians take it seriously.

After the ceremony you are free to move around the village “women properly dressed of course” which means they need to wear a sulu which is a wrap around kind of sarong. For men its easier but no hats are permitted in the village and shirts must be worn.

Note : Kava is a root plant that is ground into a powder and mixed with water. It has a very earthy taste and numbs the mouth and tongue. When you receive your half coconut shell with Kava the people around will clap twice and you drain the shell in one gulp after which everyone claps again, twice. This process follows the circle of all those present.

No gathering is complete without a Kava ceremony.

On our visit to do SevuSevu in Buliya the chief was away so the Kava was accepted by Semi his brother who was a warm welcoming host and soon became a very good friend

Fijian people are the nicest people on the planet and accept you into their home and family without hesitation.



Semi receiving Kava in Buliya

The next day Semi arrived at our boat with his nephew Iliesa, a local dive guide and after loading our gear into his panga we set off to the outer reef about 2 miles west of our anchorage.

Ile (Iliesa) explained that we were going to dive several huge coral pinnacles with lots of canyons and caves to swim through.



Ofelia descends through clear water

Sinking below a very choppy ocean we looked down to see the sea floor at about 30 meters and huge mountains of coral reaching towards the surface.

Descending down a sheer wall to the bottom we began to navigate huge canyons and caves making the dive quite dramatic,

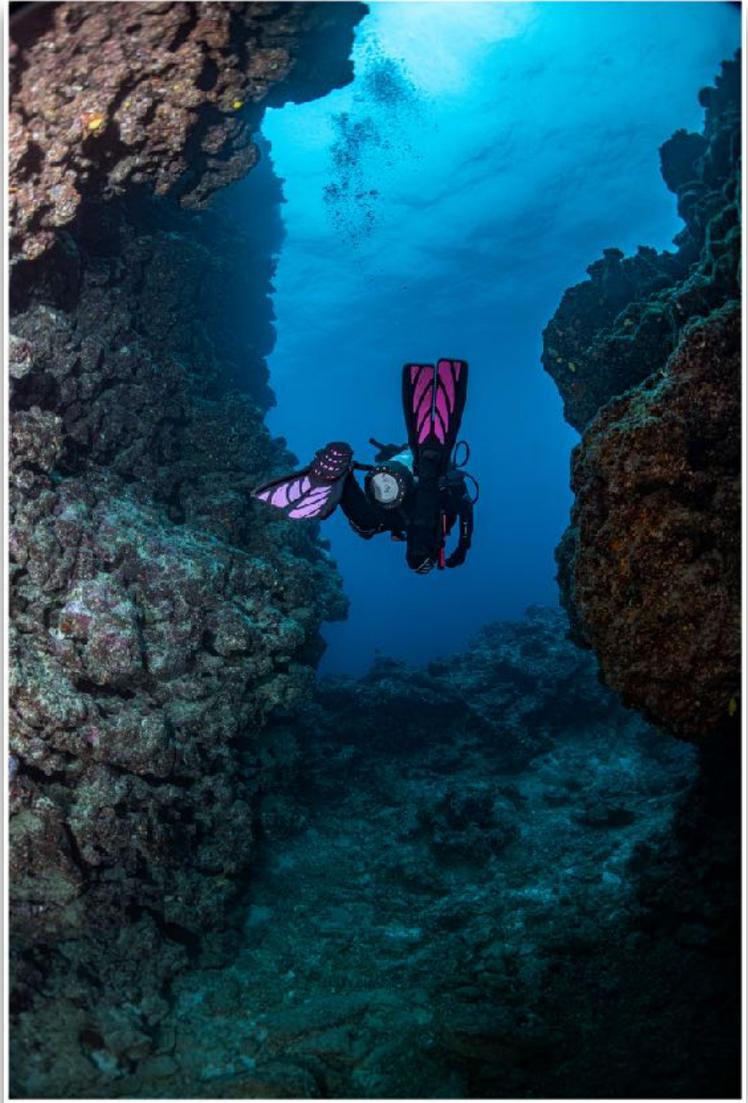
The seascape was magnificently enhanced by the incredibly clear water but what was immediately apparent was the absence of any kind of fish and very few corals which was surprising to me as coral had built these magnificent structures.



Ofelia at the entrance of an underwater canyon



Swimming across the face of a deep cave



We swam through, under and around an unreal landscape following our dive guide and hoping he knew where he was going because early into the dive I had completely lost my bearings, very unusual for me but I had left that responsibility to Ili trusting that he knew the way.

We continued our underwater tour for an hour then at one point late in the dive we ascended a canyon wall coming to the top of a pinnacle that was amazingly, completely covered with anemones and more clownfish than I had ever seen in one place in my 50 years of diving. This almost made up for the lack of other fish on the pinnacles.

Well, finally the dive was over and in the back of my mind I was wondering if Semi “our boat driver” had managed to keep up with our progress.



A huge colony of anemones and clownfish completely cover the top of one pinnacle

As our heads broke the surface I did a quick 360 degree scan for our boat and saw nothing. Well its going to be a long swim back to the O2 I thought and I was about to question Ili on the whereabouts of his uncle Semi when miraculously he appeared out of no where speeding across the wave tops and stopped right beside us.



Back to the S/VO2, a hot cup of tea “dans cookies of course” we further cemented our friendship with Semi and Ili. We showed them the photo’s we had taken on their reef here at Vurolevu and offered them the images for their web page, they in turn invited us to name the dive sight there on the east side of Vurolevu and so after some deliberation it became Ofelias Garden

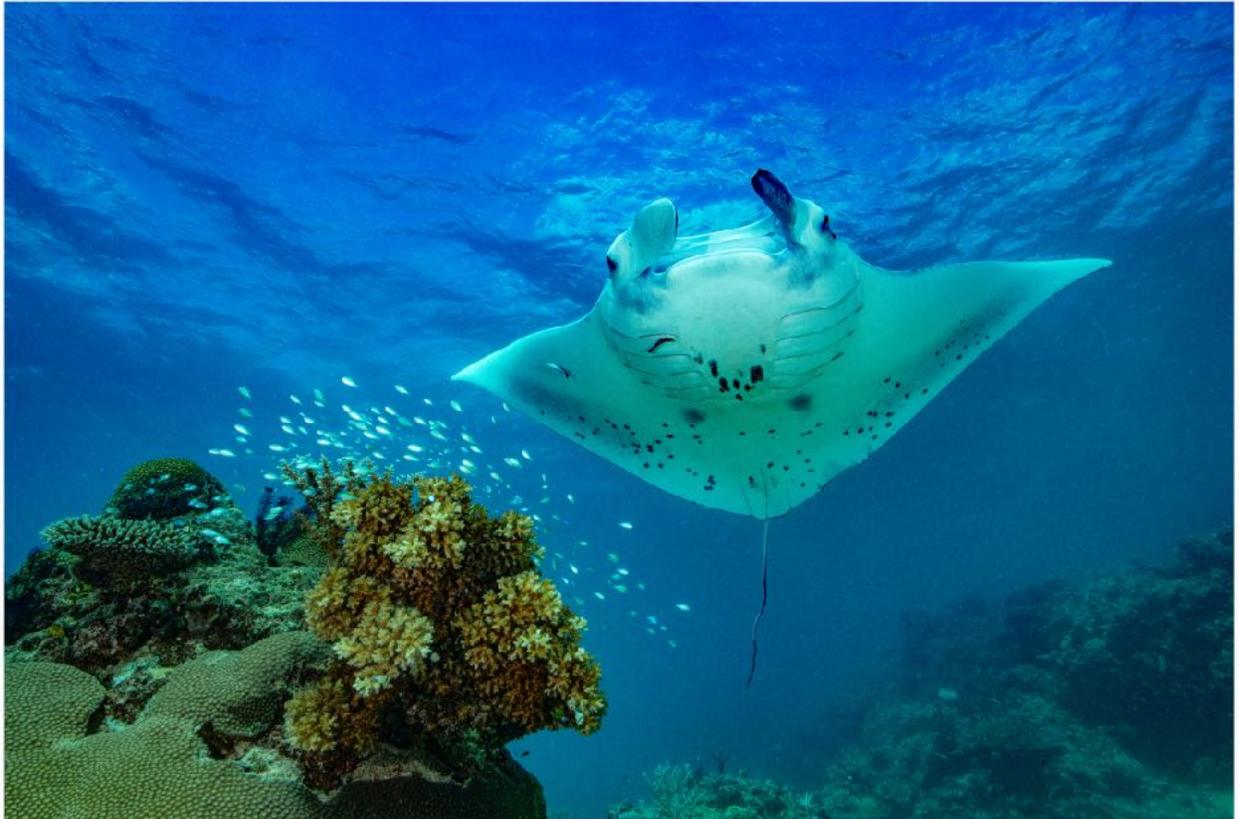


Vurolevu with Ofelia's Garden Marked in red

The next morning I was up early and decided to send my drone over to the spot the mantas were supposed to be and sure enough from the air I spotted several dark shapes cruising just below the surface.

Immediately we launched our tender and loaded our dive gear for the quick 5 minute run to their location. Slipping quietly into the water we approached stealthily as possible considering we were blowing copias quantities of bubbles due to the adrenalin pumping through our bodies.

There they were, huge magnificent creatures gliding gracefully through the water, they seemed completely unperturbed with our presence.



Each Manta can be identified by its unique underbody markings





A beautiful manta swims overhead and blocks out the sun.

From this day forward we had mantas every day and on one occasion I spent almost an hour with an individual as he cruised over the cleaning station where small wrasse would come out to feed on parasites that cling to the mantas body.

He seemed to almost enjoy my company approaching to within inches on several occasions.

These gentle giants are plankton eaters and totally non aggressive to divers



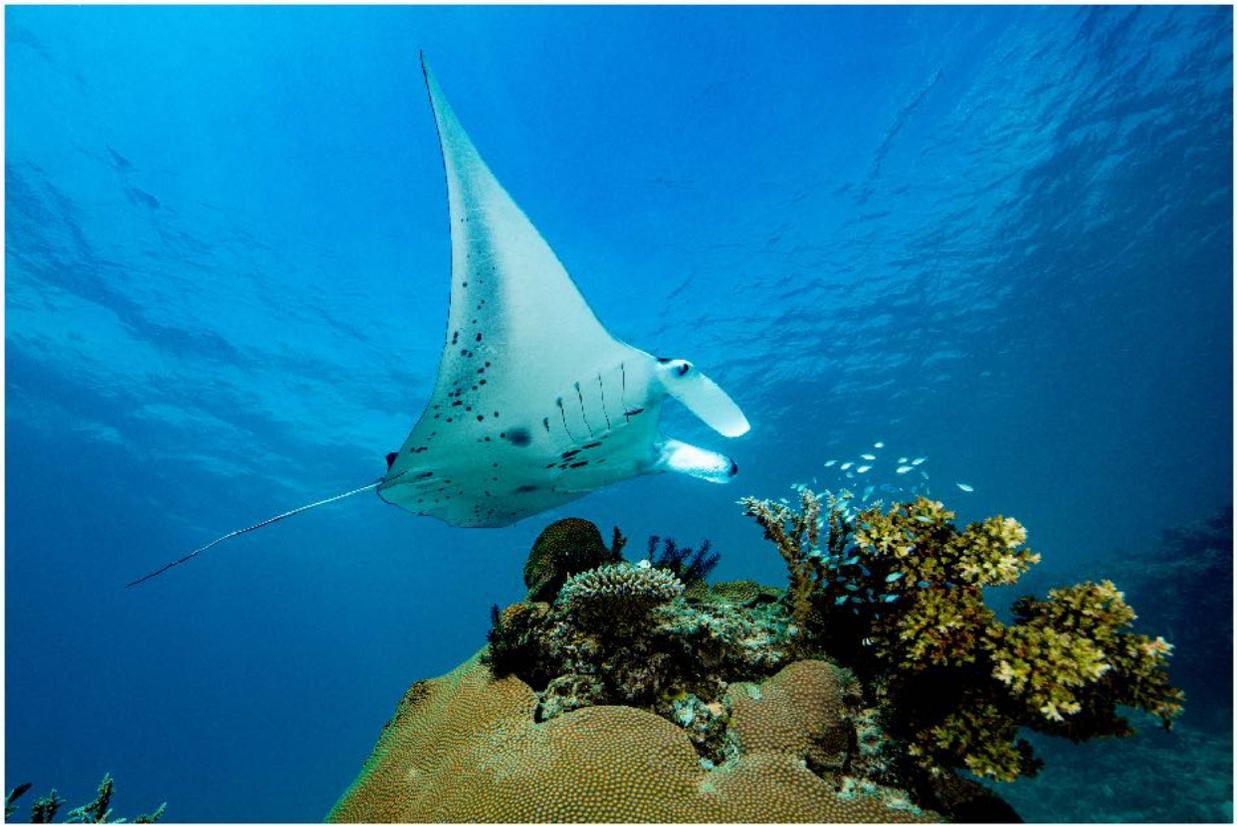
Ofelia with manta ray



Powerful yet so graceful



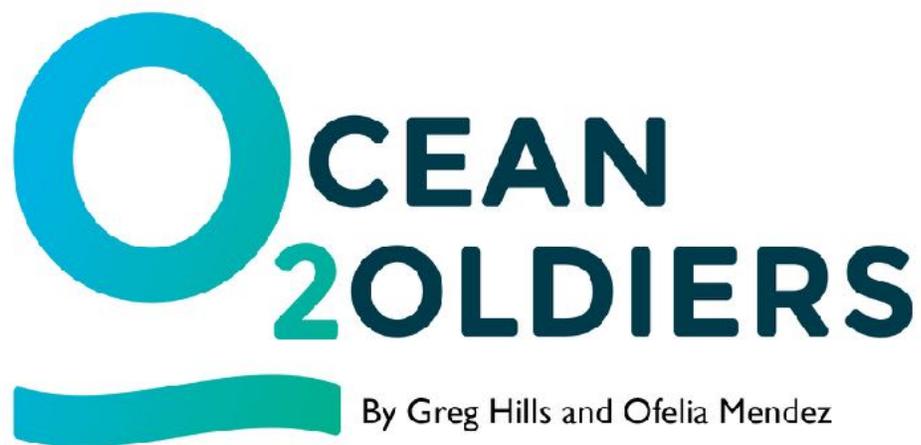
A huge manta swims above at “Ofelia’s Garden”



Manta over cleaning station

End of part 1 Vurolevu and Buliya

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