

Moala Island

September 22nd 2020

After a long stay in Matuku Island the weather report for the 22nd looked good for a move towards the east so we lifted anchor and proceeded to the pass. Once clear we turned north in gusting wind but still protected by Matuku's reef.

As we moved from the lee of the island it became apparent that the weather report from Predict Wind was quite a bit off and instead of the forecasted 17 knots of wind from the SE we had 25 to 30 knots from the east. We quickly changed plans and decided to sail to Moala about 35 nm to the north. With 1 reef in the main and a reefed genoa we aimed for a position slightly east of Moala as huge sea's were trying to push us to the west.



Lowering the dagger boards on our Catana 521 helped prevent too much lee way and we watched our boat speed range from 10 to 15 knots as we fairly flew up to our new destination.

31/2 Hours later we found ourselves in a position just outside Cakova Passage $18^{\circ} 38.522' S$ and $179^{\circ} 49.960' E$ where we stowed the sails for our approach.



Cakova Passage

It was a dark foreboding day with grey skies threatening to dump a bucket full of rain on us at any moment.

The wind was fairly whistling past my ears making it impossible to hear my engines and the instructions yelled from the bow but slowly we made our way towards the passage with Ofelia giving instructions from the Motion-X app on her iPhone and Kenny's sharp eyes watching for color changes in the water.

As far as passages go I would say on a scale of 1 to 10 for difficulty "10 being the most difficult" this was an easy 4.

With far from ideal conditions we managed to navigate a left hand dog leg and soon we were in calmer although wind torn waters inside the reef.

We found a reasonable lee for anchorage about ½ a mile south of Cakova Village in 80' of water over coral. Not perfect but we had tested the sea gods enough today and this is where we will stay until conditions improved.



Our anchorage
18°38.045' S 179°51.858 E

September 23rd was again an overcast rainy day but I picked a little break in the weather and headed into Cakova Village looking to do our SevuSevu. Unfortunately the day before an elderly woman in the village had died so our SevuSevu ceremony was brief and very informal never the less we were welcomed with open arms as with everywhere we have ever been in Fiji.

An un eventful rainy day ended with a game of cards and early to bed.

September 24th Now I am really suffering from diving withdrawal and it's time to go blow some bubbles. I went into the village and organized one of the local boats to take us to the passage and at 11.30 Vanaisa “our boat driver arrived at the stern of our catamaran.

We quickly loaded our gear into his boat and took off for our first dive in Moala.

On the first attempt he dropped us off was in the middle of the pass and too far out and dark blue water surrounded us. We descended to 20 meters and still couldn't see the bottom. I signaled to Ofelia to surface and we returned to the boat.

I explained to Vanaisa that we wanted to dive on the reef or the wall to see corals. A quick 5 minute ride got us to a new position where looking down I could now see the passage floor. Back in the water again Ofelia and I descended onto a sand patch amidst lots of beautiful coral heads. We tied our dive flag to a rock and proceeded to explore.



Nice corals surrounded us in all directions

We swam to the reef wall and looked down into the depths. There were large fish everywhere. Wrasse, grouper, Saber squirrelfish, the biggest parrotfish I'd ever seen. A white tipped shark cruised on by. The water was still a little cloudy from lots of rain from the previous days but we still had about 25 meters Viz. Not too shabby eh!



On the wall looking into the depths



Hard corals

O felia pointed out a nice grouper hiding under a coral. I know we have to eat and we are running low on food but I am really getting soft in my old age.

I 'd hate to harm this beautiful fish. What a dilemma.



Now I know he would make a great meal “but come on”
Look at that cute face!

Back on the O2, Ofelia made lunch. “Yes, I’m spoiled”
After which I decided to take a little siesta and was off in LaLa land when all of a sudden I heard a lot of high pitched voices.

I came up on deck to find that our boat driver “Vanaisa” had returned from Cakova Village with a bunch of kids and they were all pretty excited about being aboard the O2.

No siesta for me today.

We showed them around the boat and their favorite part “being kids” were the trampolines.

Then someone came up with the idea that jumping into the water from the bow would be pretty neat so the competition for the perfect summersault began. The kids were a delight to pass some time with and we had lots of fun.



The village kids enjoying the bow of O2



Kids being kids. It's a full time job.



The style needs some work but the heart is all there.



Kenny giving tips for the perfect execution of a summersault

September 25th

Back into the passage on an incoming tide. There was a lot of sun today so this would help my photography some. This time we went in our own tender to a point further west than yesterdays dive and dropped the anchor.



Ofelia swims past beautiful fan corals

Looking down from the boat the water seemed very clear but it wasn't until we were descending did we realize just how clear it was, we had at least 50 meters visibility.

I could see the floor of the pass some 35 meters below and huge grouper where swimming everywhere. Unfortunately for me they are very shy and I cant get close enough for a good photo.



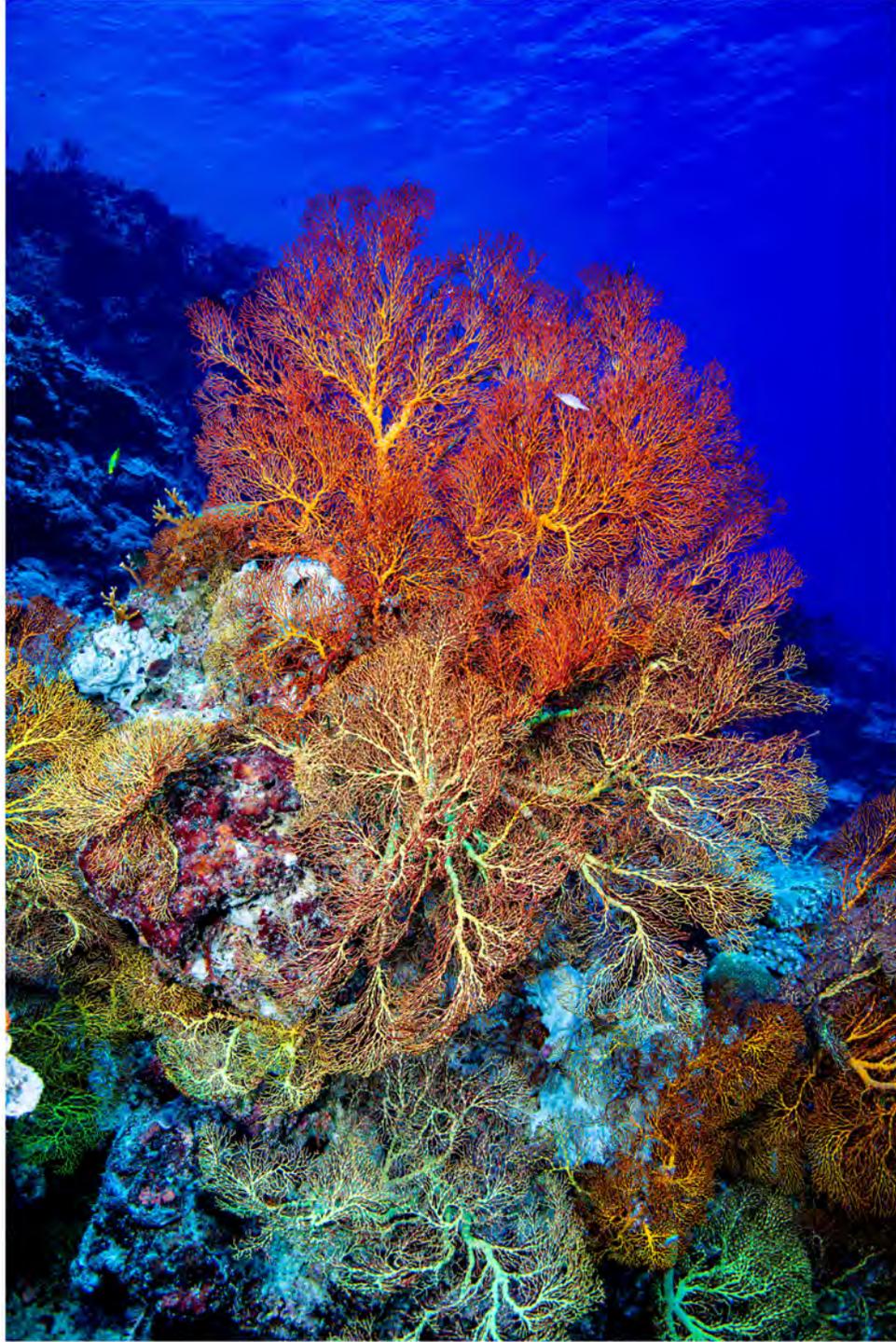
Gorgeous Gorgonian corals



We had found coral heaven

This dive was truly epic in so many ways.
Never had I seen such beautiful corals.

All along the pass beautiful big Gorgonian fan corals
could be seen reaching out into the current.

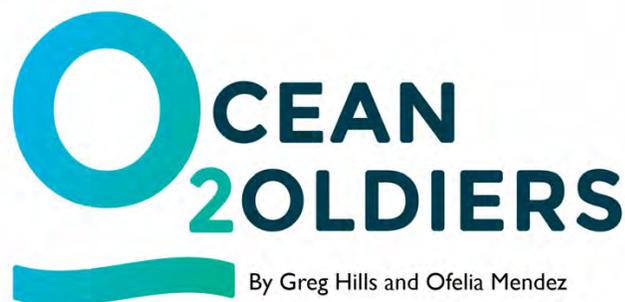


Not until lit by my strobes where the
true colors apparent

Seen without artificial light underwater Gorgonian corals appear dull and uninteresting but when lit up with my big strobes their true color becomes apparent. They ranged from red to orange and yellow and every shade in between

What a dive and we all exited the water with big smiles and a lot of stories.

Did you see that grouper? I asked,
Which one? was Ofelias's reply.
The big one! says I.
They are all huge! says Ofelia.
I saw 3 kinds of shark says Kenny,
I saw a big grey reef shark! says I, and the biggest
Moray eel ever! and so it was as we returned to the
O2 elated knowing that we had all had experienced
the dive of a lifetime.



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September 26th
Out to the reef again for another dive a little bit after high tide so the water was clouding up from the sediment from the lagoon.

Again lots of huge grouper harder to see now due to cloudy water and the current making it difficult to position myself for photo's also my own bubbles kept getting swept into the frame.

Ahhh the trials of an underwater photographer!

Never the less more memories were made and our dingy was still there when we returned. Hallelujah!



The pass from above is also pretty colorful



Lots of colors and textures

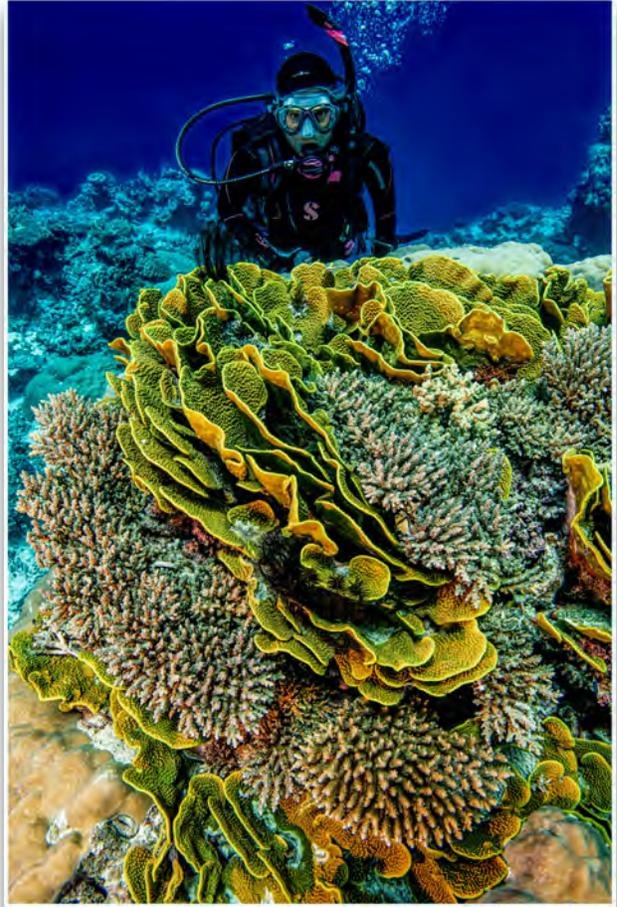
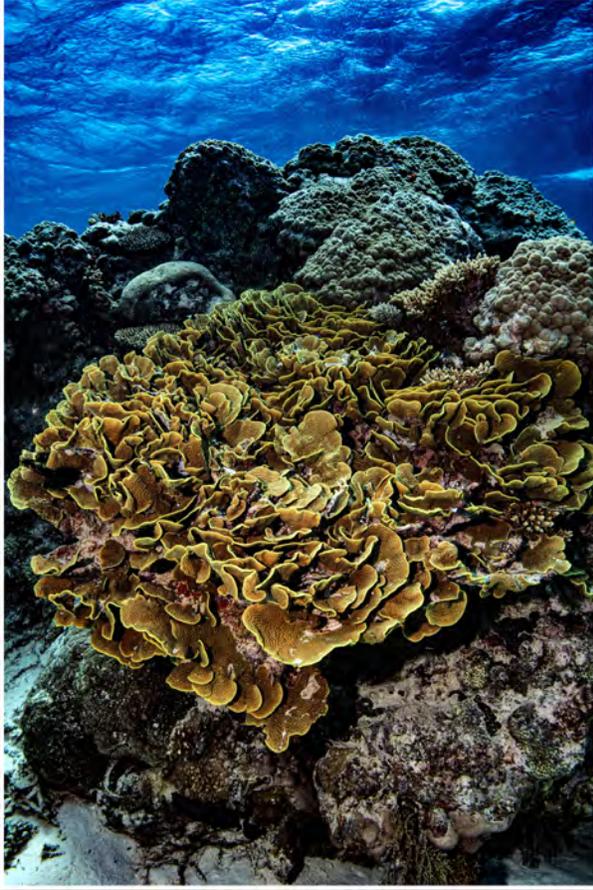


Ofelia swims over the deep blue of the passage where big critters are surely lurking

This is exactly why we had sailed the Pacific, to see these beautiful reefs but it is becoming sadly more and more difficult to witness a healthy corals.

At last on this remote island in Fiji we had found coral heaven.

Hard corals and soft corals challenge each other for real estate and beautiful white sand patches strategically placed so one could sit and enjoy the panorama.



A kaleidoscope of healthy coral



Beautiful healthy coral

It's hard to describe the feeling of swimming out over a reef wall and looking down into the abyss.

Dark shapes can be seen lurking around down there and then a shadow starts to emerge. As it nears it morphs into a reef shark that has come up to check you out.

He can see your silhouette quite easily from the depth and it leaves you to wonder what other critters are checking you out from down there in the blue.

September 27th

Sunday morning and it's dive time. We set out from the O2 at our planned time of 9am,,, go figure.

By 9:15 we were submerged on an in coming tide so the water was clear but it would soon get even clearer as the tide came in further.

We swam out to the wall and along it to the west for about 300 meters. Lots of big coral trout and grouper tempted me into deeper water for a photo opp but then they would just move away as I neared, "Bummer".

I really need some big animals for my photo library but nothing came close enough today. Maybe this afternoon. In the mean time I will continue my search for the perfect coral shot.



This fish never escaped my camera "Ofelia"



Flower arrangement



Amazing coral head

Afternoon dive off to the passage again. On the southern side there is an area of reef that could have been designed by a landscaper it was just so perfect. It consists of huge coral heads coming out of a sand bottom perched on the edge of a cliff. Clear ocean water clears away the silt from the island and visibility is amazing.

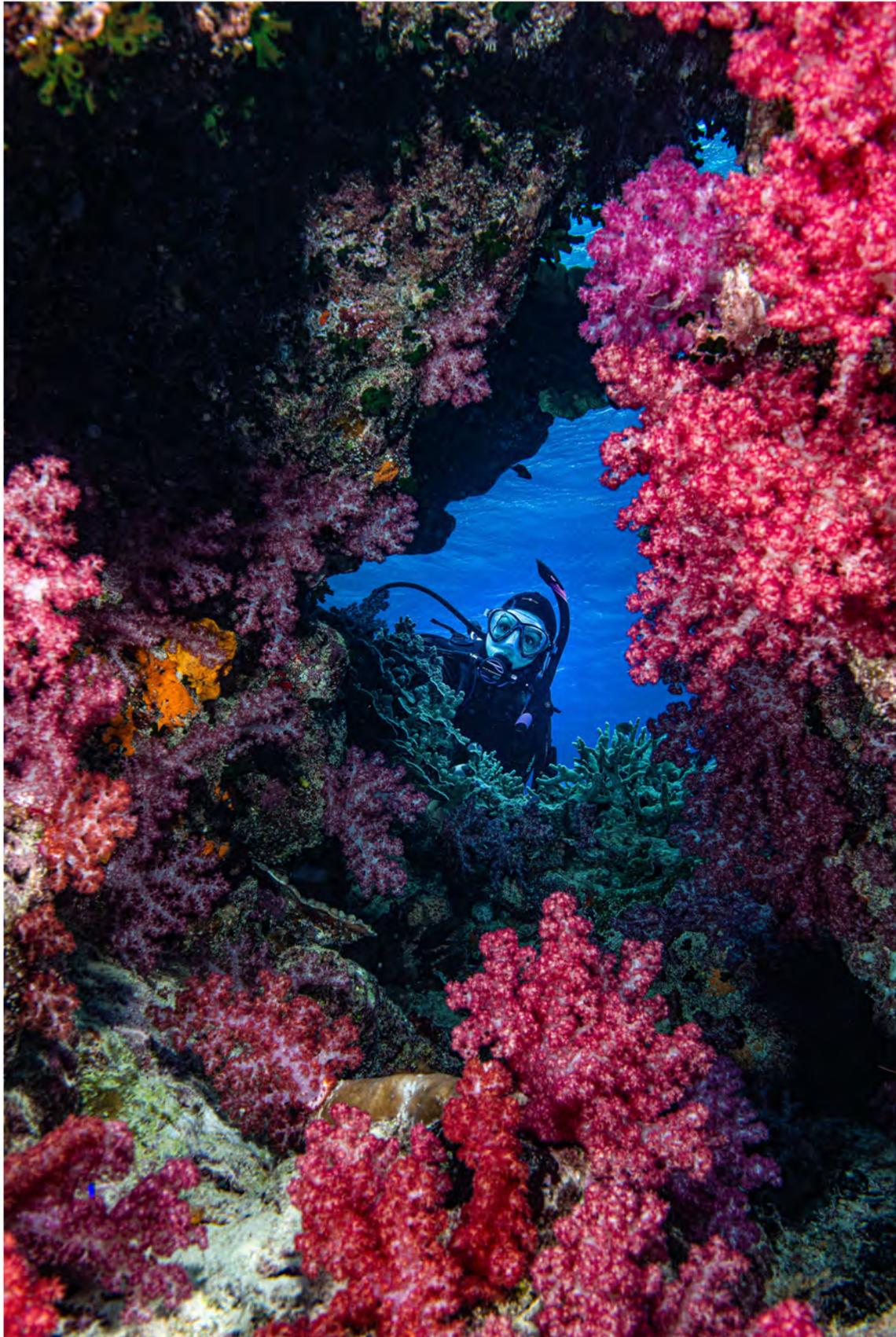
Thousands of fish swirl overhead and a school of tang are spawning. Wrasse, snapper, grouper, coral trout Moorish Idols, goatfish, butterflyfish go zapping by. A white tipped reef shark comes up to check out the action and to see if there is any food to be had.



Spawning Tang live up the reef



A Tomato anemone with its resident clown fish



Ofelia peeks through a hole in a coral head



White tipped shark of cabbage coral



Lettuce patch



Tomato Anemone



Tomato anemone

S eptember 28th

And it's another day in paradise. We had plans to dive twice again today but my dive equipment is badly needing some tender loving care so I spent most of the morning fixing mysterious holes in my BC and leaking inflator hoses.

After the work was done the crew of the S/V O2 once again loaded up our small tender and set out for the reef.

We decided this time to explore the north side of the pass as it has good opening to the open ocean, we could see anything here.

We now have the system down. Anchoring on what looks like a sand patch Ofelia dons her mask, gloves, face mask and fins then slides into the water and puts on her tank which I have lowered to her, down she goes and checks the anchor is secured on the bottom and not damaging coral.

I lower Arturo, "the underwater camera" into the water and check for leaks. All good I then tie it and lower it below the tender. Over goes my tank and I jump in after it and secure it to my my back, A quick systems check air pressure etc I then deflate my BC. As I sink passed Arturo I untie him and with camera in hand descend to join Ofelia on the bottom. Life surely is grand.

Wow what amazing water. We descended to 20 meters and swam north against a mild current. About 15 minutes after entering I looked up and saw a beautiful big manta coming towards us. He approached quite close and then turned at the last minute allowing me to get a beautiful photo.



A huge black manta cruises passed in open ocean

Note : We have been sending Manta photo's to the Fiji Data base to help them track the movements of these beauties.

This one was a new manta "now #367" in the data base and I got to name him Beau after my son.

Cakova Village Visit

September 29th.

We woke to a very rainy day so decided to delay our dive for a while, Instead we went to Cakova Village and found Moon who has a store there with a few fundamentals. I did find Milo and peanuts so i'm all set for another few weeks.



Moon keeping account of our purchases

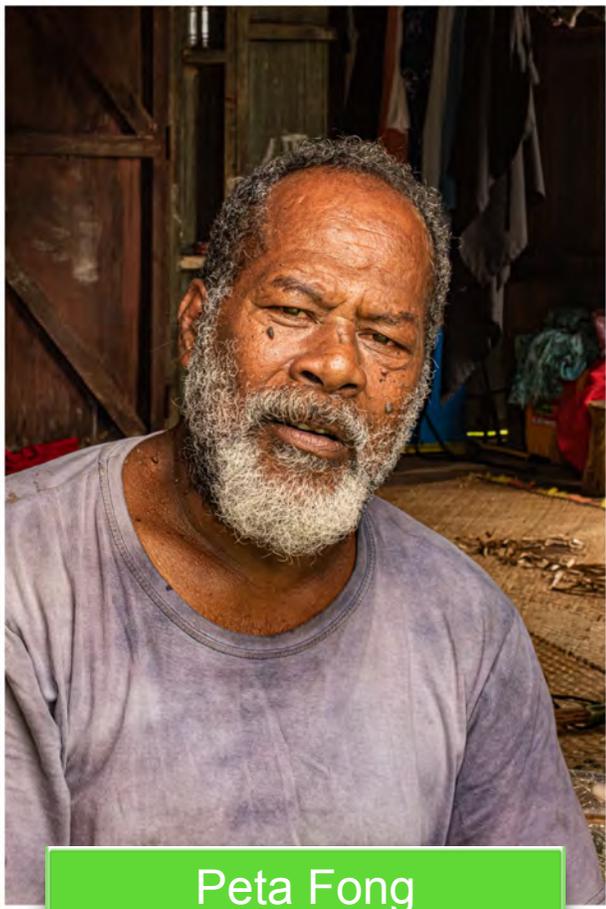
After shopping we went for a stroll through the village. You can't walk 10 paces without people coming out to say Bula. We were invited into several homes and in one home they were weaving a traditional mat.



Jicoz Junior



Talei and baby Susan



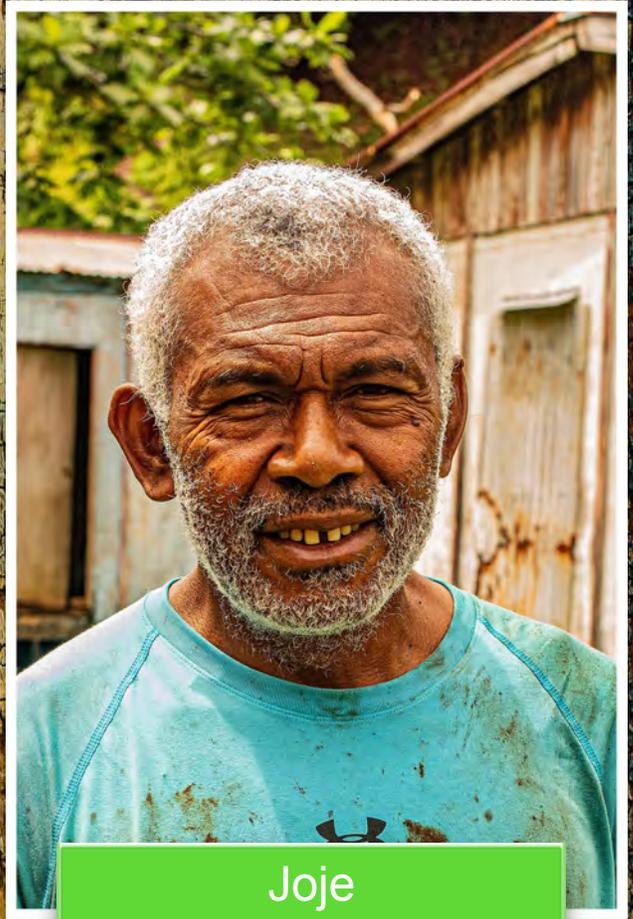
Peta Fong



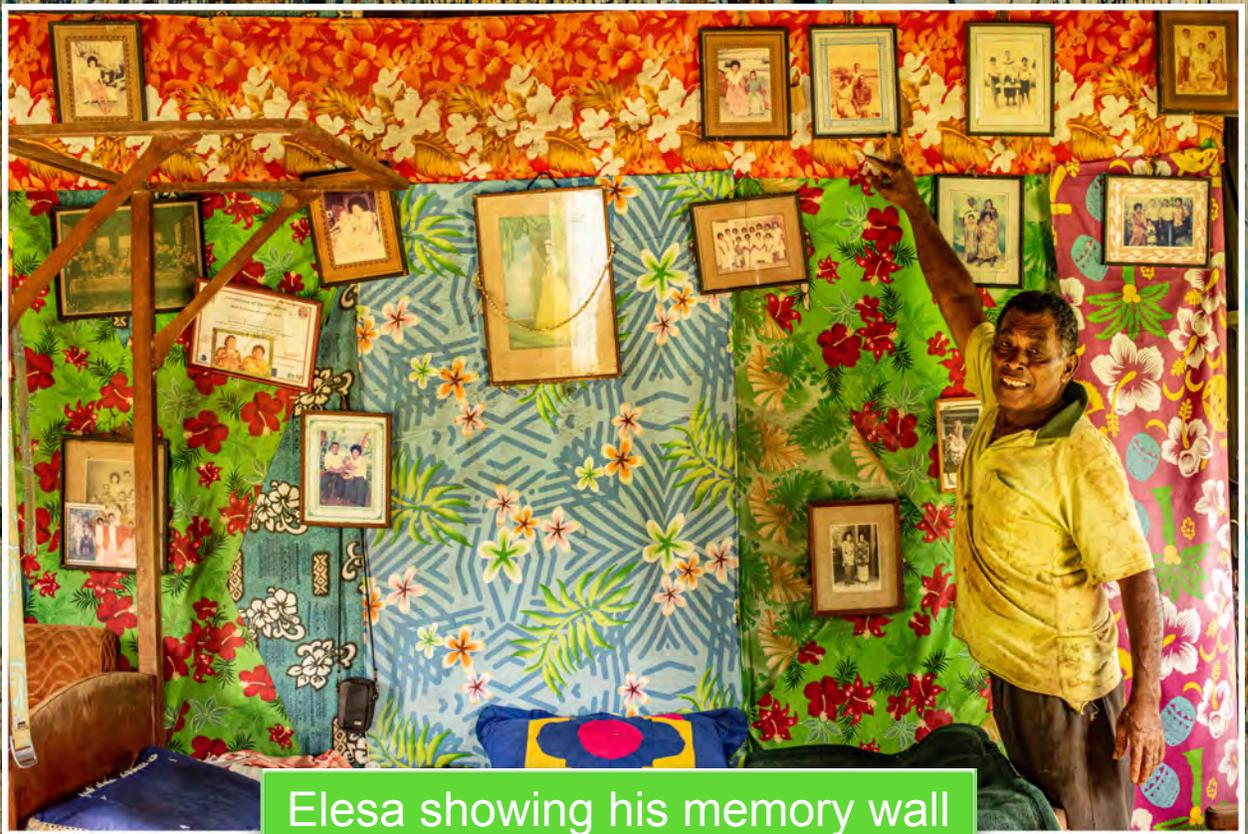
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Elesa



Joje



Elesa showing his memory wall



Joana



Inise



Weaving a mat. A 3 meter square mat takes about 3 days



Timoci

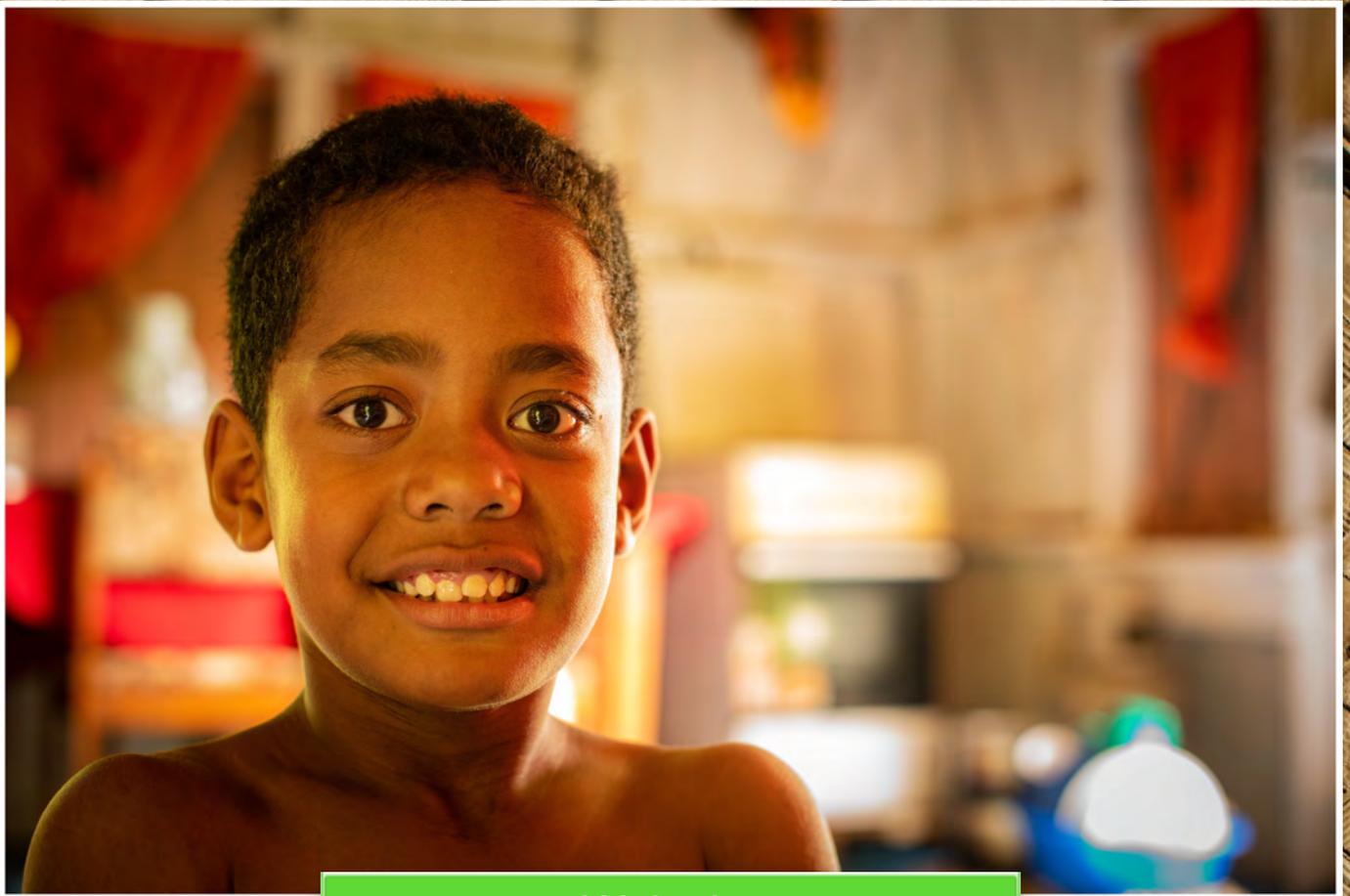


Hand rolling Suke

Suke is a hand rolled cigarette usually rolled very thin in old news Paper with a tiny bit of tobacco.



Amelia



Waisake



Inese



Views of Cakova Village

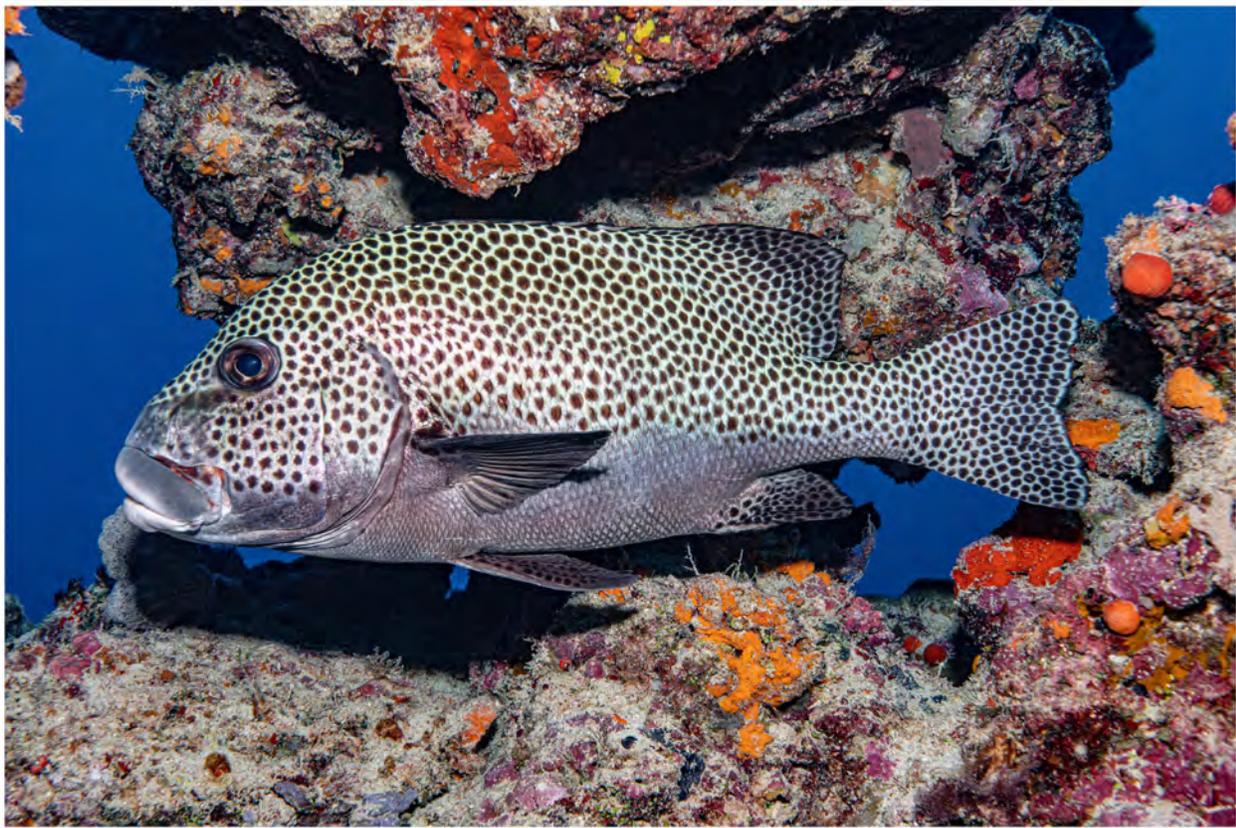


After return from the village I was working on this blog when Ofelia comes up from below.

Well, are we going for a dive or not? she asks. It seems I have created a monster. She's turning into a fanatic it seems but who can blame her with the diving we have here.

We quickly set out for the north side of the passage hoping to see more mantas.

Unfortunately no mantas this dive but some mighty big fish and quite enough to keep an avid diver entertained thank you.



The biggest sweetlip I have ever seen

This was to be our last dive in Moala as tomorrow weather looked good for heading east to Fulaga.

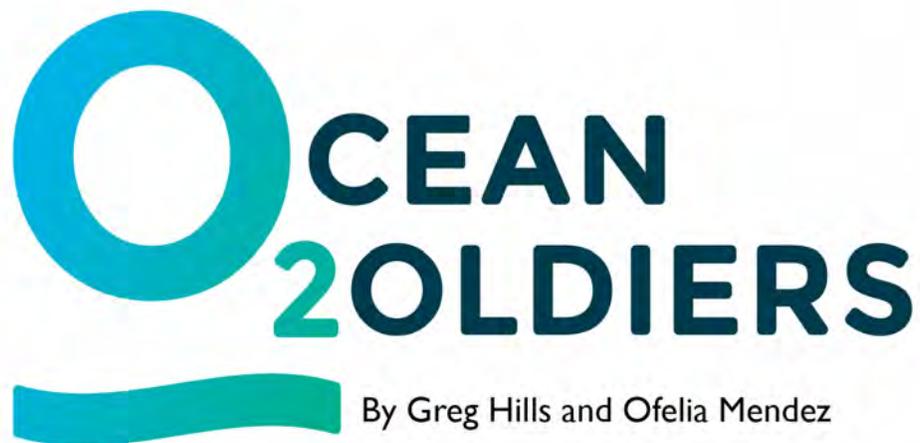
It was a fitting end to the Moala saga.



A Bat Fish



A huge wrasse stayed beyond flash range but I managed to pop off one shot due to incredibly clear water.



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