

MINERVA REEF

The best detour.....(ever)



A drone panorama of Minerva Reef looking east over the pass

Situated 245 miles SW of Tonga and 360 miles SE of Fiji, Minerva Reef is not exactly on our rum-line from Tonga to Fiji but the possibility of great diving made us decide to take the little 2 day detour. We left Tonga with a following breeze and arrived at the pass in Minerva at 1pm on the second day after approximately 36 hours of sailing and perfect timing for good lighting to navigate the entrance.

After entering the pass we proceeded up to the east side of the lagoon which promised a calmer anchorage with the stiff north easterly that was now blowing out side and dropped the hook near 19 other boats.

This may be an isolated reef but it is a favorite stop off spot for vessels sailing down to New Zealand for the southern summer to avoid the Pacific cyclone season.

Once settled, Ofelia and I jumped in our dingy and made our way over the coral bed all the way up the surf line .We entered the water with our face masks on and drifted back towards the fleet of yachts finding a flat coral bed with not too many interesting features. I thought to myself "It had better get better than this",

The next day was miserable with lots of rain keeping us locked up inside the O2 and things were not looking good for our little adventure to Minerva but like the good Ocean Soldiers we are we amused ourselves and waited for better weather to arrive.

The next day arrived cloudy but with little wind so we decided to move the O2 down to the north side of the pass positioning us for diving outside the reef. I saw on our predict wind weather App that the wind was going to swing northerly offering us a good lee at our new location and sure enough it did just that.



A fan coral as we swim across the drop off



A drone shot directly above one of our dive sights.



Ofelia and a large fan coral



Lots of different corals on the wall

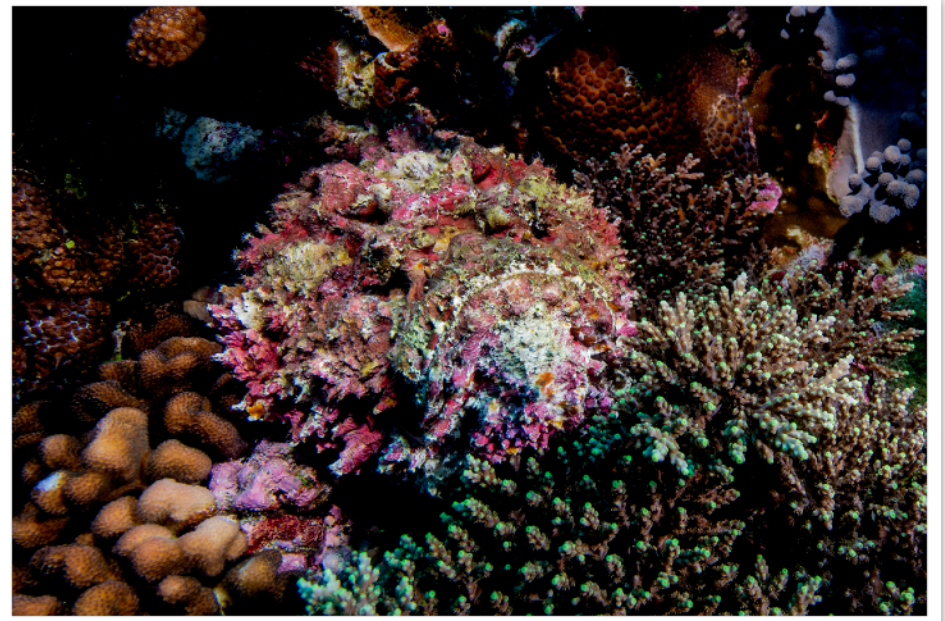
Now comfortably anchored, Kenny, Ofelia and I went for our first dive outside the reef. In our little 12 foot inflatable dingy we sped through the pass into the open ocean with the surf breaking to our right. About 1/10 of a mile to the north we dropped anchor in about 35 foot of water and with my favorite toy "my Nikon D850 camera in an Aquatica Housing" I descended with Ofelia and Kenny to the coral below. We swam west and soon came to the drop off where the vertical wall fell to the blue blue depths below. Swimming over the edge we descended to about 80 feet before leveling off and continuing along the wall passing several large caves which inviting further investigation. It was magnificent diving and the only thing missing were the large critters but Im sure they are out there somewhere in the deep blue lurking just beyond our vision.



Ofelia swims through the entrance of a cave 80 feet "27meters" down the vertical wall.



Ofelia about to ascend over the wall.



A highly venomous stone fish virtually invisible with its coral like camouflage.



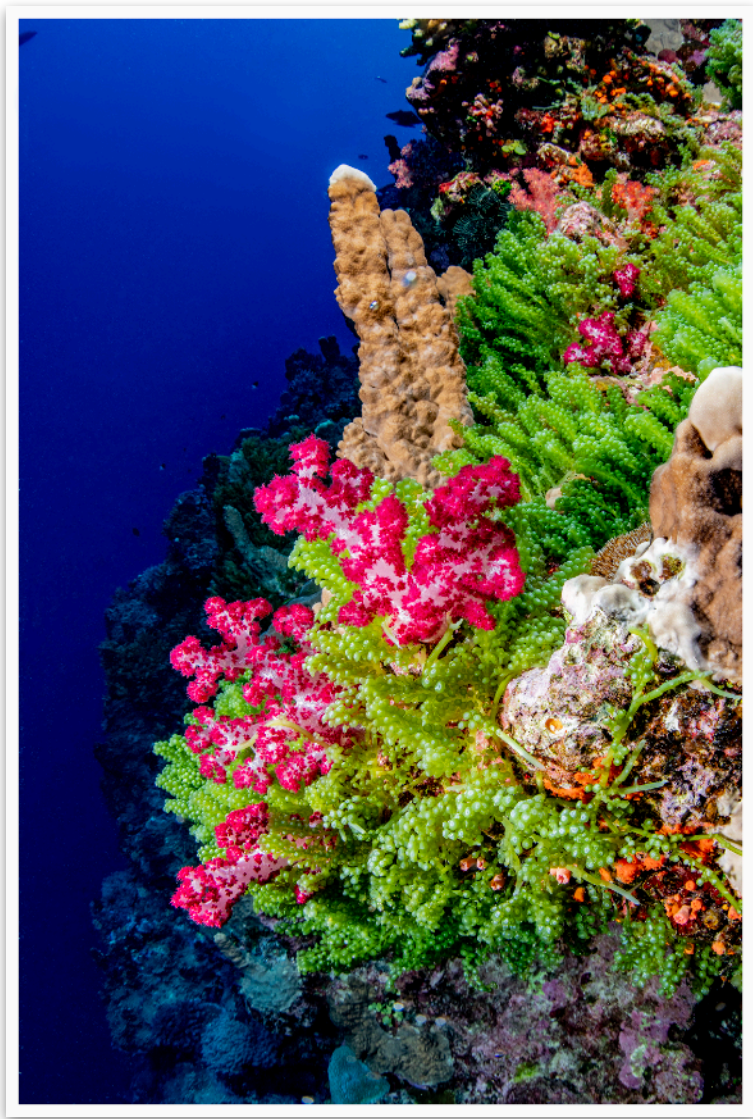
Many different kinds of coral all fighting for space



This green zone was stunning.



A healthy coral garden.



Soft corals and sea grasses on a wall in Minerva Reef



One of my favorite subjects. Large fan corals



Coral detail on a very rough 4th day of diving



Strong surges made photography quite a challenge but I still managed to pop off a couple of reef scenes

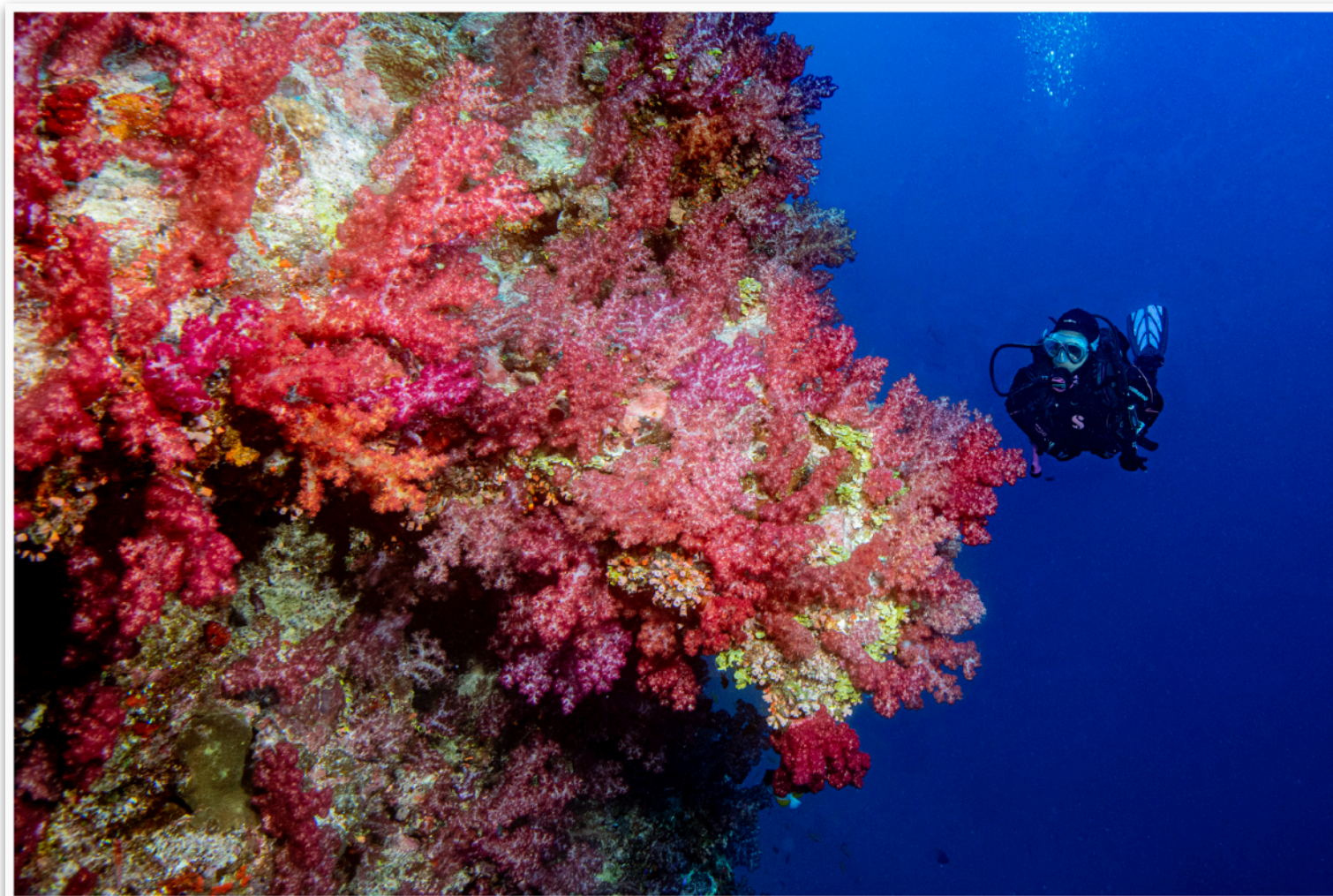
On day 4 we woke to a choppy anchorage with a good 18 knot wind stirring up even the protected interior of the reef. We waited until 11am and then set out through the pass on another dive. The ocean was in upheaval and there were huge waves rolling in from the SW building as they reached the shallow water and exploding on the outer reef with a thunderous roar. We anchored over the wall and as we descended it was apparent that this was going to be a difficult dive. Strong surge first pushed us towards the reef and then sucked us back towards the open ocean, needless to say this made the taking of photo's quite challenging. I did manage to get a couple of reef shots as I flew past, stopping to compose was impossible.



The O2 anchored next to Dies Natalis inside Minerva Reef

On day 6 "afternoon dive" we decided to dive right in the pass normally swept by strong tidal currents as the water rushed to either fill or empty the lagoon. We picked a time just before the turn of the tide and managed to enter the water with very little current. Down on the wall at 80 feet we came across a garden of unbelievably colorful soft corals, colonies of anemones and a forrest of fan corals. All of these corals rely on strong currents to filter feed from the passing water so we had better not linger here or we'd end up being swept away with the next stop New Caledonia 500 miles to the west. This was the best dive so far.





At 85 feet (27 meters) down a vertical wall in the pass, without lights these corals appear black or dark purple but when hit with my big flashes the true story is revealed. Here Ofelia swims past a soft coral garden that defies description.

As we continued along the wall a deep fissure appeared and this was where we would make our ascent. In the middle of this fissure was a large rock shooting vertically from below and it was absolutely covered with soft corals. I took several photo's and looking at my screen as the pictures appeared I saw a blaze of color. "Well no one will believe this" was my immediate thought. There were orange corals, magenta corals and red corals all positioned to filter nutrients from the water as it flowed in and out of the atoll making ideal conditions for these filter feeders. Ofelia also spotted several beautiful nudibranchs so we will definitely return with the macro lens.



This big rock was just covered in soft corals



More soft corals adorned a small ledge on the wall.



Clown fish hide amongst the huge colony of anemones



A splendid soft coral where I positioned one light slightly behind to get the light passing through its glass like stem.



A beautiful magenta soft coral photographed with a 105mm macro lens to get in really close.



Really strong ocean surge make macro photography really very challenging. With macro your focus is extremely critical and the tiniest movement after you focus completely ruins the shot. Holding on to a rock does not help as the surge would just rip my grip asunder and sweep me away, at times so far that I would lose sight of my subject amongst all the coral. The trick is to time the shot between the in and out surge but you have to be very quick and a little luck doesn't hurt either. I was determined though to bring back at least one usable shot. Against all the odds I finally managed to click of a few I think. I'll let you be the judge if I was successful or not.



The arms of a green feather star.



A brain coral deep on the wall showing its bioluminescence.



A tiny crab peers out from deep within the branches of a hard coral.



*A nudibranch about 1 centimeter long in about 15 meters of water.
(Phyllidiella Annulata)*

Its day 7, I think! One day is blending into another. We have had such great weather here in Minerva for the last few days and the diving has been epic. Provisions are running low and we are delving into the canned foods. Soon we will have to depart for Fiji and leave this beautiful place. Its a matter of waiting for favorable winds and we will set sail.



Day 7 morning dive a Tambja Morosa nudibranch

Kenny and I went out this morning in search of a dark blue nudibranch Ofelia had seen on the wall at the pass 2 days before. Its called Tambja Morosa and is said to inhabit steep slopes or walls. Armed with my Aquatica housing set up for macro we went deep, 80 feet and finally found several at the end of the dive.

According to my dive computer my bottom time was almost expired by the time we found them and we needed to ascend to begin our safety stop of 6 minutes, my air was already down to 600psi. I rushed a few quick shots and took note of their position. Hopefully in the afternoon I can drop right onto the location for more images.



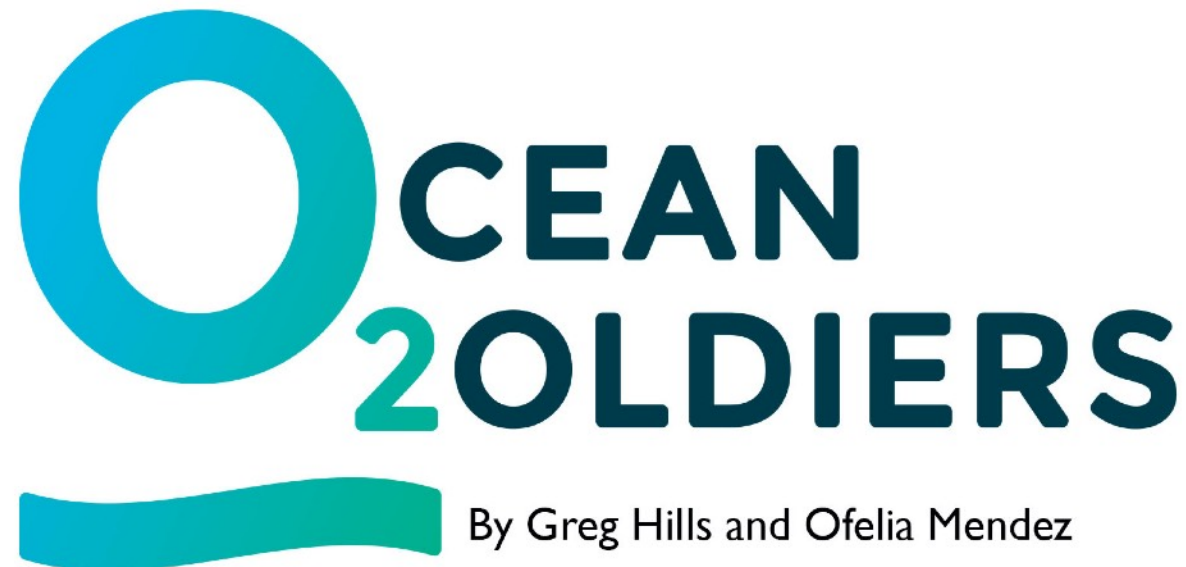
Day 7 afternoon dive. Kenny (who is fast becoming the nudibranch whisperer) found a white nudibranch with red rinophores and gills. Around the skirt a thin purple line. Isn't nature amazing?
Hypselodoris Lacteola Rudman.



*Photo credit Rasmus
S/V Dies Natalis*

A parting shot. Photo of S/V O₂ basking in the light of a beautiful sunset.

*On the 8th day there was a good breeze from the SE and we decided to set sail for Fiji 360 miles NE. After a Stirling breakfast of pancakes and bacon prepared by Ofelia we bid our fair-wells to our new friends Tove and Rasmus from the sloop Dies Natalis, lifted our anchor, raised the mainsail and headed out the pass. Once on course for Fiji we settled into a steady 7 knot of boat speed which will put us into Fiji in about 36 hours. (if the breeze holds).
What a magnificent 7 days of diving and Ofelia, Kenny and myself all feel a pang of regret to be leaving this special place but more adventures await in far off distant lands.*



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