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# An Aunt-Niece Trip to Fiji Feels Like a Passing of the Adventure Torch

Scuba diving excursion solidifies bonds, experiences



The Rainbow Reef in Fiji is known for its vibrant colors and healthy corals.

JAY CLUE/PADI

By Terry Ward, AARP

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I was there to hold her hand when she first went snorkeling off a catamaran in the Florida Keys. She was 4, a little towhead squealing through her snorkel with joy at her first look through a mask into the wondrous world of the ocean around her.

A year later, when she was 5, my first-born niece, Maddy, was the first off the boat to go snorkeling with reef sharks when she visited me in the [Bahamas](#) when I was living there.



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A Florida girl through and through, Maddy was born with fins for feet, already treading water in her backyard pool as a toddler. By the time she was a teenager, she was a certified diver, and we'd explored shipwrecks together off Key Largo.

When Maddy turned 18 earlier this year, she decided to take a gap year before starting college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I not only endorsed this idea but encouraged it. Wanting to squeeze in as much time with her as I could before her wings fully unfurled, I suggested that we kick it off with a [dive trip](#) to the place that first cemented my own wanderlust when I was close to her age.

## Travel as teacher

As I approach mid-life and the mid-century mark (in 2025, I'll turn the big [5-0](#)), I've become more keenly aware of how my early travels shaped me as an adult — and how they've shaped me as an aunt and a parent. Those travels made me curious, resilient and open in a way I'm not sure would have happened had I not spent my formative years traveling the world and meeting so many different people.

I like to think some of my wanderlust rubbed off on my four nieces and even my young children already, too. And when I mentioned to Maddy that we could go diving in Fiji together as the send-off for her [gap year](#), I was thrilled she was onboard.





*The writer and her niece can be seen underwater while scuba diving in Fiji.*

COURTESY TERRY WARD

In my early 20s, the nation of more than 300 islands in the South Pacific had been my first stop on a round-the-world trip I took with my surfer boyfriend. It was a grand adventure that saw us chasing waves and wonder for more than a year (I quit my office job and joked to my parents that I was [retiring early](#), much to their chagrin). That Florida surfer boy and I went everywhere, from Australia and New Zealand to Southeast Asia and Europe.

Despite no longer being of budget backpacker age and preferring hotels to hostels, I hardly feel past my prime for [big adventures](#). And I'm not alone.





*Maddy, left, was ready to snorkel when visiting Terry Ward in the Bahamas.*



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An advertisement banner for AARP Member Benefits. On the left, there is a small image of a woman and a dog. To the right of the image, the text reads "MEMBERSHIP IS FOR ME." in large, bold, red letters. Below this, in smaller black text, it says "With a whole world of exciting benefits to explore." On the far right, there is a red button with white text that says "EXPLORE MY BENEFITS". A small "X" icon is in the top right corner of the banner.

Kelly Kimple, CEO of Colorado-based small-group tour operator for women, Adventures in Good Company, told me the average age of her company's guests rose to 62 years old in 2023 compared with 58 in pre-pandemic times. She also told me her company regularly hosts guests in their late 70s and even into their 80s on some of its more challenging trips, giving me lots of hope for a long life of adventuring.

When Maddy and I arrived at our dive resort, Paradise Taveuni, on the island of Taveuni, we felt like the youngsters in the bunch as we enjoyed our first dinner with a father-son-uncle group of divers from California (the older men were in their 60s) and a 55-year-old uncle traveling with his nephew from Colorado.



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Diving in the [Caribbean](#) and our home waters in [Florida](#) can be very beautiful. But for anyone who gets seriously into scuba diving, traveling to the South Pacific or Indo-Pacific is almost always on the [wish list](#) thanks to the sheer diversity of species and coral in this part of the world.

### Building confidence through diving

I'd chosen Taveuni, which is known as the Garden Island, because of its surface-level lushness and renowned dive sites that are famed as the "soft coral capital of the world." It was a great chance to show Maddy the storied Rainbow Reef, known for its vibrant colors and healthy corals.

On our first shore dive we entered the water right from the resort's dock into what felt like the most spectacular [aquarium](#). Maddy and I spotted anemone fish (Nemo!), boldly striped Picasso triggerfish and blue and yellow ribbon eels swaying hypnotically in the current. Maddy spent the first few dives with a beloved dive instructor from the resort, Fijian Christine Riley. She told me Maddy nailed her PADI Advanced Open Water Certification and was a great diver. Underwater together, I found myself admiring the confidence and technique my niece had gained nearly as much as I was admiring the layers of cascading table corals and clouds of fish around us.

Our next stop on Vanua Levu, was just a boat ride away at Sau Bay Resort & Spa, an intimate dive resort with a collection of beachfront *bures* (bungalows). I'd chosen it after learning it was Fiji's first PADI Eco Center. The certification is awarded to dive centers that promote things such as [citizen science](#), conservation, community resilience and dive industry sustainability.



*Maddy and Fijian children participated in a beach cleanup organized by the resort.*

COURTESY TERRY WARD

## Making connections

After dinner around a bonfire on the beach, we'd chat with an entertaining Australian couple, divers in their 60s who reconnected at their 40th high school reunion, about what we saw and heard. Humpback [whale](#) song was the soundtrack for most of our dives (they migrate through these waters from August to October), and we spotted them multiple times from the dive boat,



if not underwater, showing off their flukes. Before I knew it, Maddy had made plans to visit the Australians during her gap year.

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One day, the resort organized a beach cleanup in a neighboring village. The local kids followed my niece across the sand as if she was the pied piper. They alternated between thrusting pieces of plastic and other ocean trash into rubbish bags and gifting Maddy with shells, to which she'd exclaim "Vinaka!" (Thank you!), as if they were the most precious presents in the world.

As for gifts, I'd already received mine many times over.



*For Terry Ward, this aunt-niece trip to Fiji provided an opportunity to witness her niece's confidence grow in real time.*

COURTESY TERRY WARD

I'd gazed at my beautiful niece, like a daughter to me, in all those moments of our special trip. I'd listened to her laugh while strolling beneath the palms with the kids, watched her share stories with new friends over dinners and seen her wide-eyed through her dive mask, looking at something she'd never seen before in the ocean.

It felt like I could see her confidence and curiosity growing in real time.

When we finally parted ways at the airport on Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest island – Maddy bound west for Australia as I headed east, back home – our hurried goodbye felt like something more profound. I had always been the one coming and going, in and out of her life with my busy travel schedule. But now it was me with the tears in my eyes and her setting boldly off into the world, not looking back.

It felt like a passing of the adventure torch, and like maybe we’d been training for this moment since she first made me an aunt all those many years ago.

I was happy knowing that the best was still yet to come.

*Terry Ward is a longtime travel writer who has lived in Australia, New Zealand and France. She’s now based in Tampa, Florida, and has cruised to the Bahamas with her family from Miami and Port Canaveral.*

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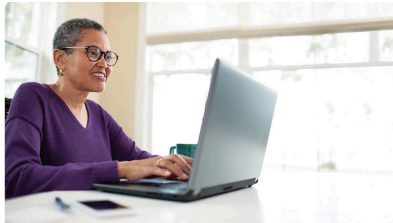
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