

Yap & Palau: April 14-28, 2013

Why does one go to Yap & Palau? In our case, Steve had gone to Palau back in 2006 for a week of live-aboard diving on the “Big Blue Explorer.” Upon his return, he said two things: 1) that live-aboard diving was a great way to dive and he thought I would enjoy it, and 2) that I needed to dive Palau as it was fantastic. Fast forward seven years and several live-aboard dive boats for both of us; we were both heading to Palau. Given the travel distance to Palau, it made sense to get some “acclimatization” days in instead of going directly from airport to dive boat in Palau (Palau is located in the far Western Pacific Ocean where it meets the Philippine Sea). As the island of Yap is just a short plane hop away from Palau and also known for its diving, we decided to spend four days there first.

We needed four flights (and countless hours) to get to Yap: Denver to San Francisco, San Francisco to Honolulu, Honolulu to Guam, and Guam to Yap. We left on Sunday, overnighed in San Francisco, headed west again on Monday and arrived in Yap in the wee hours of Wed. (so yes, we crossed the International Date Line). Yap is eight hours behind and one day ahead of Denver.

Yap

Part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Yap is made up of four small islands south-east of Guam. There are twice weekly flights into Yap from Guam – 737’s arrive on a very short runway – no gentle guides down and easy run-outs here, instead the plane is put down hard at the very beginning of the runway and then the brakes are slammed down until the plane comes to rest at nearly the end of the runway. After a quick stop at the customs/immigration booth, we were greeted with a beautiful flower leis being handed out by a lovely, young, and topless Yapese woman.



Island of Yap

With a total population about 6,500 and less than 5,000 visitors a year, Yap is certainly not overrun with people. With average hi/lo April temperatures of 88/67 and 79% humidity, you know you’re in the tropics while on Yap. Of course, the lush tropical landscape is another clue. A key number that concerns me as a diver is the water temperature – with temps in the 84-85 range, I was a happy diver.

We stayed at the *Manta Ray Bay Resort*, which is self-billed as “Micronesia’s Finest Dedicated Dive Resort.” For all we know, it may also be Micronesia’s ONLY dedicated dive resort. Regardless, we were very pleased with the accommodations and service. The Yapese people are very friendly and welcoming. The resort was started and is currently operated by a Texan who came to Yap in the 70’s as a Peace Corps volunteer and then fell in love with a Yapese woman. One unusual component of the resort: an over 100-year-old Indonesia sloop is anchored next to the hotel building and it serves as the resort’s dining/bar facilities - buffet breakfasts are served on the entry deck, served lunches & dinners on the next deck up, and the open air bar is on the top deck (the kitchen is below decks and a dummy waiter system is used to move things between decks).



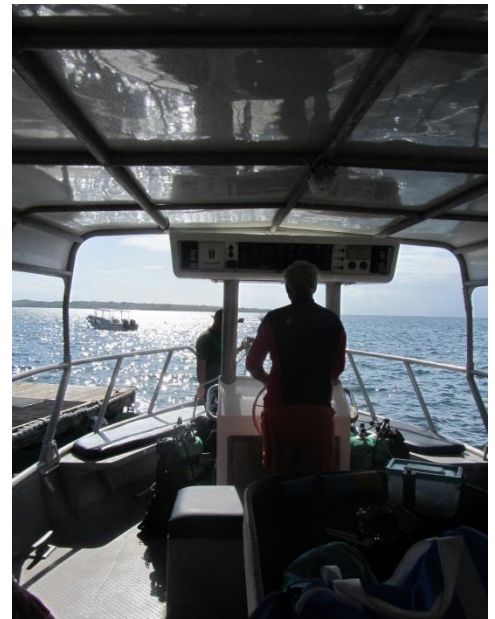
Dining facilities at Manta Ray Bay



One of the things Yap is known for in terms of diving is the manta rays. These majestic creatures are beautiful to watch. We saw some while diving the Great Barrier Reef this past December and were excited to see more. There is a board at the resort where known manta are “named” and shown with their identifying marks.

Our first dive on Yap was in hopes of seeing mantas – the dive involved a small boat ride through the mangrove canal cut through the middle of the island to the northern tip, and then a short swim to a manta ray “cleaning station.” Cleaning stations are where the mantas come to have parasites on their bodies removed by cleaning fish, usually small wrasses. As they approach the cleaning station, they open their mouths and the cleaner fish swim in/out through the mouth and gills and eat the parasites – quite the sight. This particular cleaning station was over a large coral outcropping so we positioned ourselves in a semi-circle at a depth of about 15 ft and waited for the mantas to appear. We waited, and we waited ... in the meantime we became the cleaning subjects of the wrasses – they would nip at our exposed ear lobes, and these were not gentle nips. We attempted to cover both ears while holding camera/video gear and enjoy the sights of the multitudes of other small fish who call that coral outcropping home. After about an hour and no mantas, we headed back to the boat for refreshments of hot tea and homemade banana bread. We came back to this same spot a couple of days later and this time our patience was rewarded: a manta sighting! A beauty ended up swimming right over my head! (And this time, I wore my hooded top under my wet suit so I didn’t have to get “cleaned” myself!)

We were fortunate to be able to dive the south end of Yap on our second day there – usually the swell conditions this time of year are too rough in that area but conditions were so calm that we had a 3-dive day guided by Captain Bill himself, the gentleman who started/runs Manta Ray Bay Resort & Yap Divers. We dove some lovely caverns and walls and enjoyed the bountiful tropical fish life. Over three days, I did 7 dives while Steve also took in an eighth – a shark feeding dive.



Heading to Yap's South Shore



Downed WWII Plane

Thanks to spending so much time underwater, traveling on boats with good sunshades, and otherwise avoiding the sun, we didn’t get sunburns. Anyone who has ever put on a wetsuit knows that they and sunburns are not a good mix.

Yap relies heavily on ship-delivered goods for most of its needs (food, fuel, building materials, etc.) so when something runs out (as did the supply of Diet Coke while we were there), you must wait for the next shipment to arrive, then be unloaded and distributed (lucky for us, Yap was resupplied with Diet Coke within a day or so).

On our fourth and final day on the island, we took a ½ day island tour. Before and during the early parts of WWII, Yap was held by the Japanese; they basically enslaved the

Yapese during this time. While the US regularly bombed the island, no land battles were fought on it. Scattered throughout the island are the wrecks of downed US and Japanese airplanes (we visited some of these). Since the US liberated the islands during WWII, the Yapese have honored the downed US pilots by erecting memorials to them at the various wreckage sights. From the end of WWII until 1986, Yap was governed by the US as part of the “Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands,” thus the official language of Yap is English and its currency is the US Dollar – makes things easy for us US visitors.



Yapese Village Men's House

Our island tour also included visits to a couple of village “Community” and “Men’s” Houses and a village “Stone Money Bank.” Yap’s stone money consists of various-sized stone disks (up to 12ft across and weighing thousands of pounds) with a center hole. The disks are usually calcite and most of them were brought to Yap after being quarried & carved from the Rock Island of Palau (nearly 300 nautical miles away). Their value is based on both the stone's size and its history. For example, the older stone money pieces that were hand quarried/carved and then brought back to Yap via sail-powered canoes in ancient times have more value than larger pieces that were obtained/shipped using more “modern” capabilities such as large sailing ships and improved tools. The stone disks are still used for more traditional or ceremonial exchange. While the stone money may change ownership during marriages, transfers of land title, or as compensation for damages suffered by an aggrieved party, it is seldom actually moved.

Our Yap visit ended late Saturday night with a 1 hour flight to Palau.



Yap Stone Money

Palau

The Republic of Palau is a multiple-island country (roughly 250 islands) with a total population of around 22,000. In the last 150 years it has been under the control of various countries, including Spain, Germany, Japan, and the US. One of WWII’s fiercest battles was fought on the Palau island of Peleliu (over 6,000 American soldiers and 10,000 Japanese soldiers perished). After the war, Palau was part of the US-governed “Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands;” it gained full sovereignty in 1994. Like Yap, the English and the US Dollar are its official language and currency.

We arrived on Koror (Palau’s main island) in the wee hours of Sunday and after some shut-eye, headed to the “beach.” This one was actually on the property of a fancy resort (our more budget-friendly hotel had an agreement with the resort whereby we could “visit” for the day). We promptly commandeered two ocean-side chaise lounges and placed them under the shade of a large tree. There we enjoyed the view, caught a nap, and each enjoyed a \$12 Pina Colada. With latitude of just over 7 degrees north, we didn’t want to become victims of a Palauan sunburn!

Late Sunday afternoon we boarded the “Tropic Dancer,” our home for the next week. Since we had been on board this exact boat in 2007 when it served as the Fiji Aggressor live-aboard, we were quite familiar with it. Joining us for the week were 14 other divers from around the world:

- Kelli & Rick from Virginia
- Gary & Scott from Ft. Collins, Colorado
- Julie from Hilo, HI (formerly of Ft, Collins, CO)
- Laurie & her father Dan from Portland, OR
- Pilar from Madrid, Spain
- Yanti from London, England (though Italian by birth)
- Dorte from Geneva, Switzerland (though Danish by birth)
- Jose & Carlota and Jorge & Marta from Guatemala



Our Diving Group

Our crew was also an international bunch:

- Captain Ike from the Philippines
- Engineer/Launch Captain Jim from the Philippines (Ike's son)
- Photo Pro/Divemaster Ben from Stockton, California
- Video Pro/Divemaster Andy from England
- Instructor/Divemaster Sean from New Zealand
- Chef Mani from Nepal
- Stewardess Agnes from the Philippines

The Dancer fleet is now owned by the Aggressor Fleet. The Palau Aggressor was moored next to the Tropic Dancer and while they are operated under different names, they are run under basically the same concept. The Aggressor motto is "Eat, Sleep, Dive" while the Dancer motto is "Dream, Dive, Discover" – both aptly applied to our voyage and experience. Some examples:

- No one can go hungry onboard! Besides abundant & tasty breakfasts, lunches, and dinners we were treated to a sweet snack after each 1st morning dive (lunch followed the 2nd morning dive) and then a savory snack after the 1st afternoon dive (dinner followed the 2nd afternoon dive) and a hot beverage and the cookie jar greeted you after a night dive. Chef Mani cooked up a cornucopia of meals including a wide variety of cuisines: American, Asian, BBQ, Mexican, and Indian (I became an instant fan of his mango chutney). A stocked bar as well as wine & beer were also available on demand – though once you drank alcohol your diving was finished for the day. Constantly restocked supplies of soft drinks helped keep us well-hydrated, essential when diving.



On board the Tropic Dancer



A post dive snack

- Plush terrycloth robes, nightly turn-down service with chocolates on our pillows, post-dive on-deck hot water showers with shampoo & conditioner provided (showers also in our cabins), and post shower warm towels meant we were pampered before and after diving.
- The range of diving we enjoyed was tremendous – from coral gardens to wrecks to holes & tunnels to channels to walls to caves to a lake filled with 5 million jelly fish! For more dive details, our Palua dive log is included at the end of this write-up. Some especially memorable moments include:

- Manta ray encounters in the German Channel – especially when the current suddenly changed and we found ourselves “flying” in the opposite direction we had been swimming in just moments before
- Up close & personal encounters with large Napoleon Wrasse – one who has been hand fed by our Captain Ike for the last 12 years and lets herself be “held” by Ike
- Watching the brilliantly colored Mandarin Fish jerkily move about its home amongst the staghorn coral
- Enjoying the near neon nature & variety of colors of an anemone’s outer “skin” that shows while it is balled up & feeding – not to mention those oh, so cute anemone fish
- “Curtains” of pyramid butterfly fish that you swim through along the coral walls
- Swimming with 5 million jelly fish and not getting stung!



Reading and hydrating between dives



Swimming in Jelly Fish Lake



Ziping along the Rock Islands

Palau also has some spectacular sights above the water as well as below! The uninhabited “Rock Islands” are a definite tourist draw and quite beautiful. They appear to sit on giant pedestals -- they were formed by ancient coral reefs and their limestone bases have been slowly eroded over millennia into quirky mushroom shapes.

In addition to Steve taking lots of great still pictures with his large and complicated camera rig, I got to play with a new toy – a “Go Pro” video camera which is about the size of a deck of cards and just as simple to operate. While I’m definitely not planning a career in videography, it was fun to figure out what did and didn’t work – mostly what didn’t work so well! Once we returned home, Steve patiently went

through the various video clips and put together a medley of shots from both Yap and Palau, complete with an ad hoc voice over that he posted on You Tube.



Melissa w/ Go Pro (yellow handle floats)

After a final onboard cocktail party & photo viewing Sat. night, we were off to the airport to catch our first of four flights needed to return home. We left Palau about 1:30am Sunday morning and via the magic of the International Dateline arrived back in Denver about 9am Sunday morning despite the nearly 28 hours of travel time. After all the diving we did, our wet suits needed a multiple day “soak” to get them smelling fresh again. We too needed multiple days to get ourselves adjusted back to Denver time. Despite the long travel to & from and the resulting jet lag, we both thought the trip well worth these “inconveniences” – diving the Western Pacific was a special treat.

Palau Dive Log: The following is a write-up of our week’s diving aboard the Tropic Dancer provided by the ship’s crew:

The **Helmet Wreck** was our first dive of the charter and we explored this small cargo boat, which was sunk by bombs during World War II. The wreck is full of interesting artifacts like rifles, gas masks, depth charges and beer bottles. At the anchor wench on the bow of the boat we found two different pipefish and a couple of signal gobies. The colossal **Iro Maru** was next, which was another wreck sunk by a combination of bombs and torpedoes. During lunch we moved the *Tropic Dancer* to Ulong Island and after lunch we did a dive at the famous **Ulong Channel**. We saw plenty of grey reef and white tip sharks and the soldier fish were in high numbers in the pristine lettuce coral area. We saw the two twin giant clams and due to the size of these two clams, one can only estimate that they could possibly be over 70 years old. For the last dive on Monday we set out for **Sandy Paradise**. We did our giant strides and a great dive with plenty of macro critters followed. At a small coral formation two leaf scorpion fish were found and we were very lucky to find a thin ghost pipefish. The photographers especially loved the dive.



A skiff took us to the dive sites

Day two of diving began with a deep dive through **Siaes Tunnel**. This dive boasts stunning topography featuring a swim through tunnel in which we spotted banner fish, black corals, and some colorful dart fish guarding the exit to the tunnel. Outside, grey reef sharks cruised the blue water and nudibranchs were discovered along the wall. The second dive was **Siaes Corner**. Sometimes treated as a hook-in dive today we found mild currents so we dropped down the wall, photographed anemones and their resident fish, saw several more curious grey reef sharks, and a friendly green turtle. After a light lunch it was back in the water for a drift along **Big Drop Off**. This sheer wall begins just several feet from the island’s shoreline and plummets straight down to dizzying



Steve & his camera on reef hook

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depths. Oysters, flatworms, lionfish, and a hawksbill turtle came out to play, and a gentle current propelled us lazily down the wall encrusted with soft corals blowing in the underwater breeze. **Turtle Cove**, always a crowd pleaser, was selected as our next conquest. Beginning with a swim through, a disco clam was found near the back of the tunnel and inspired several creative underwater dive signs to be shared. Exiting and swimming along the wall, an orangutan crab was found crouched on a patch of bubble coral with long red hair swaying back and forth and more humorous dive signing ensued. Coming up and over the wall, the top of the plateau revealed huge schools of midnight snapper, pyramid butterfly fish, and jacks completely encompassing the group. Emerging from the water as the sun set, we returned to the ship for Chef Mani's delicious cooking before venturing out once more for the night dive at **Alexi's Coral Gardens**.



Steve w/ turtle 'model'

We woke up to a beautiful sunrise on Wednesday. For the first dive we went to **Blue Holes**. We dropped into the water and descended through the holes into the large cavern. The visibility was great. The ambient light filtered through the holes and filled the cavern. We exited the cavern and ended the dive off the hook in area at Blue Corner. The three napoleon wrasse soon joined the group as we drifted across the plateau. Dive two we headed to **New Drop Off**. We hooked in on the outgoing side and watched the show. Once we unhooked, we drifted across the plateau and found another thin ghost pipefish. Off in the blue was a large school of barracuda.

After lunch we went back to **Blue Corner**. Although it was slack tide and we didn't hook in it was a great dive. Again the three napoleon wrasse followed us around the whole dive and some of the anemones were feeding and made for great photos. We went back to the big boat for our surface interval and then headed to **German Channel** for dive number four. We did our entry and swam towards the first cleaning station. No mantas, but several grey reef sharks put on a good cleaning show. We kicked across the mouth of the channel towards the second cleaning station, again no mantas. Then as we started to drift into the channel a very large female manta came out of the channel, cruised past the whole group, and made her way into the blue. After dinner we went back to **Turtle Cove** for the night dive. We did this dive yesterday in the daytime, now we got to experience it at night. Along the wall we found a couple of turtles sleeping, the basket stars were out filter feeding and under most of the ledges. The cup coral was also out and feeding. We went back to the *Tropic Dancer* for some hot chocolate and everyone went to bed shortly after. It was a great day of diving.



Melissa descending from a hole

Thursday we began with some awe-inspiring topography. Plunging more than 80 feet down into a massive Blue Hole-like crater, we swam into the darkness with our torches leading the way until the welcoming tropical sun showed us the exit from the tunnel and the wall outside. **Blue Holes** was full of flatworms, pufferfish, and even a sleeping white tip shark. Deciding to relax on the second dive of the day, a slow drift down **Ngemelis Wall** was planned during which we found many colorful nudibranchs exploring the reef along with us. After lunch we again went for a wall drift dive and this time with slightly larger game as almost a



'Black Tape on Feet' Club Founders

dozen different turtles swam in and amongst us during our **Dexter's Wall** dive and our guests waved hands at their waving fins. Ending the diurnal diving with a bang, we returned to **German Channel** by popular demand and were not disappointed. Just twenty minutes into our dive excited tank clanging was heard from our Captain Ike as he spotted the first massive manta ray gracefully swooping overhead. Ascending to the surface, we watched awestruck as this massive ray swooped around and between us, surreal! Recharging stomachs and batteries back at the mothership, it was then time for one last foray into the dark as the night dive began at **Ngedebus Coral Gardens**. Here we found several crabs, lionfish, and a sleeping turtle wedged into a small nook in the reef.

We woke up early the next morning and started moving the *Tropic Dancer* to Peleliu where along the way we spotted spinner dolphins. We tied up the boat in south dock and went out to **Peleliu Corner** for our first dive. The current was incoming as we entered the water. The current was mild and we swam to the hook in area but did not hook in. Along the way there were grey reef sharks in the blue and plenty of turtles on the reef. For the second dive we went back to **Peleliu Corner** as we were hoping for stronger current, but again the current was mild. That's kind of strange considering it's full moon tomorrow. We dropped in the water closer to the corner and had a slow drift all the way to the corner. There were several bumphead parrotfish on the plateau. All the divers got to see the actual corner in Peleliu where the two oceans meet. As we were getting back on the skiff there was a blue marlin jumping about 40 yards from the skiff. Back at the big boat lunch was ready and a nice surface interval followed. For dive three we headed out to **West Wall**. This wall is one of the crew's favorite dives in Palau. The wall is covered in yellow soft coral and is a great macro dive. Nudi's and flatworms and scorpion fish were spotted. Before the next dive we moved *Tropic Dancer* out of south dock and did the next dive at **Barracks Point**. All of the guests enjoyed this beautiful coral garden. A total of seven turtles were found and posed nicely for the photographers. Also, we found two pairs of long nose filefish for a guest, and she was really excited to see these small fish for the first time. After the dive the skiff met back up with the big boat as it was already heading north. Chef Mani had an excellent dinner prepared that night of prime rib, mashed potatoes, shrimp, salad and soup. And for desert we enjoyed peanut butter ice cream pie, which is always a favorite.



Enjoying the deep blue together

The final day of diving is anything but a rest day here in Palau. Waking up surrounded by rock islands, birds chirping, and fish striking the surface is certainly an excellent way to begin one's day. After a quick breakfast, we hopped into the skiff for the scenic ride to the exotic **Jellyfish Lake**. Here we were surrounded by countless pink jellyfish suspended in the deep green waters of their inland lake home. One picturesque skiff ride and many poses with the iconic 'Rock Island Arch' later, we returned to the *Tropic Dancer* to prepare our dive gear for the last excursion. **Chandelier Caves** offered us pristine visibility and awe-inspiring stalactites. Outside, mandarin fish and razorfish were found hiding among the staghorn corals.



Rock Island Arch