

Legendary Palau
By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



"On the island of Ngibtal lived a lonely old woman. Her only son, Mangidabrutkoel, was often away. Every day villagers would pass by her carrying their catches of fish. Sadly no-one ever offered her any, even though she had no means of catching her own. After one



particularly long period away, her son returned to find his mother most unhappy."

Nan, our taxi driver and self appointed tour guide, is a storyteller of note. He has brought us to the oldest traditional bai (meeting house) in Palau. The wooden roof beams inside the bai are boldly painted with traditional art depicting Palau's legends. Nan points to a painting of a tree bearing fish, not fruit and continues....

"Before leaving on his next trip the son wandered to his mother's back yard where a large breadfruit tree was growing at the water's edge. He chopped off one of the branches. Water immediately gushed from the open cut flowing to the rhythm of the ocean and with each gush of water a fish leapt out. Envious of the old woman's constant fish supply, villagers hacked down the tree. As they did, waters burst out in torrents, flooding the whole island."



*".. and that is why Palau's oceans are filled with fish"
Nan finishes with a huge grin.*



Lying south east of Philippines and 7 degrees north of the equator, the Republic of Palau consists of more than 343 islands. Located inside an atoll just south of Babelthuap, the biggest island in Palau, are Palau's icons, a collection of over 200 islands known as the Rock Islands. Years of wear and tear by currents and crustaceans is eroding



the limestone rock-face to form these unique mushroom shaped islands topped with dense green jungle. The outer reef of this atoll faces the big North Pacific Equatorial Current. Exposed directly to this current is the southern island of Peleliu. Since the currents form an endless conveyor belt of fast food for fish, Nan suggests that Peleliu is the best place to observe the legend of Ngibtal. He drops us off at Neco Marine dock where we will join the Aggressor liveaboard for a week of exploring reefs.

"When you get back I must tell you the legend of Chaub the giant". The big man waves goodbye.

Peleliu is approximately 1 ½ hours boat ride from Babelthup. On route the ocean is a mosaic of cobalt blues and aquamarines, indicative of the varying depths. It appears calm and restful but we are assured that there are strong currents below.



Marcel, Aggressor's divemaster instructs us firmly before our first dive.

"Go with the flow. If you don't see reef, surface immediately". As the current nudges us along the 'Yellow Wall', Marcel's words of advice soon slip from my mind. I admire the wall carpeted in buttercup-yellow soft corals. The perpetual rush of water restricts the soft corals growth but not that of the stronger black coral sea-whips which extend far into the current, bending, twisting and curling as they get longer. I spot a green turtle intent on nibbling sponges. Distracted by my noisy bubbles he glares at me. Realizing that I am no threat, he takes another mouthful and nonchalantly swims off in search of more delicacies.

Further down the coast I discover the rationale behind the naming of the dive site - 'Peleliu Express.' This is an exhilarating roller-coaster experience as we soar alongside the reef in crystal clear water. Using giant reef hooks we stop to watch the passing marine parade. Blacktip, grey reef and white tip reef sharks swim effortlessly against the current





making us feel, well, human! Schools of tuna and travally congregate in shallower



water forming constantly moving twisters. Spotted eagle rays and mantas glide past with their wingtips upturned as they enjoy the lift created by the current. Thousands of pyramid butterflyfish maintain close proximity to the reef. They are feasting on the plankton borne by the current. As we release our reef hooks we momentarily join the rush of fish heading south but we have to surface as they continue

on their journey. Nan was correct, Palau is full of fish.

We continue our expedition diving the reefs of Peleliu before heading up the west coast of the atoll. Ngedebus Drop Off, Big Drop Off and New Drop Off are all wall dives reflective of the adjacent ocean depths. But there is no need to dive deep as we find plenty of fish life in the shallows. The reef plateaus are littered with stony hard corals, sponges, damsels, chromis and anemonefish. The reef walls are frequented by pelagics, sharks and turtles. At 'Blue Corner' I again contemplate the legend Ngibtal -



did it emanate from the imagination of a villager fishing here? 'Blue Corner' is a shallow plateau that elbows into the deep Philippine Sea. No matter the time of day, or the strength of the current, fish congregate in numbers on the reef edge. Chevron barracuda and big-eye jacks assemble in a large swirling mass above the reef while giant barracuda swim from one corner of the reef to the other. A variety of sharks constantly patrol a few meters below the reef edge. Green and loggerhead turtles, devil and eagle rays, are frequent visitors too. Schools of bumphead parrotfish meander haphazardly over the reef, crunching sporadically on hard corals. The reef is constantly abuzz.





A short swim away from busy 'Blue Corner' is the peaceful 'Blue Holes.' Four



vertical tunnels drop from the reef plateau into a giant chamber. Flickering rays of sunlight filter down these shafts creating champagne sparkles from our air bubbles. At the very bottom of the giant chamber is a small opening leading into the forbidden 'Temple of Doom', a series of inter-leading caverns. Inside it is so dark that torch light appears to be sucked in reminding me of that big black hole somewhere in space. A stray beam from my torch settles on a turtle skeleton. The sight sends shivers down my spine - if the turtles can get lost in this black hole and die, then so can I! The water suddenly feels icy cold. I say a prayer for the turtle's soul and another for my safe return to the surface as I rapidly retrace my path out.

On an incoming tide fish congregate at the channel entrances of the atoll. Nan also recommended these as being an ideal spots to observe fish. At German Channel we shelter from the current behind a large coral head and wait patiently. Within minutes a huge manta ray emerges from the distance gliding gracefully towards a nearby coral bommie. On cue, a school of blue cleaner wrasse spring into super preening mode - pecking and nibbling the wings and belly of this gentle giant. The mantas wings shudder slightly. Was it ticklish or pure pleasure? Apparently satisfied, the manta soars gracefully away and the wrasses loiter while waiting for their next patron. A scalloped hammerhead shark makes a brief appearance but doesn't stop for the free cleaning service. More mantas arrive and leave keeping the wrasse busy.



At the entrance to Ulong Channel we watch blacktip and grey reef sharks patrolling before we emerge from our sheltered position and allow the current to carry us up the channel at full speed. It is the mating season for yellow-margin triggerfish who resent our presence. These aggressive fish continually



charge at us baring menacingly large front teeth, luckily only finding contact



with our fins and not our limbs. We retreat to the shallower centre ridge where we find large green coral trees, giant clams and blooming soft corals basking in the current. A giant moray eel peeks out from beneath a plate coral. I remember Nan telling us a legend about a snake with two heads or was it an eel? I forget. Instead I let the current carry me into the still waters within the atoll.

High up amongst the Rock Islands inside the atoll are a number of lakes that were once part of the ocean. Millions of jellyfish trapped in these lakes have not only lost their ability to sting but have evolved from being fish eating creatures to passive photosynthesizers of light. It is the last day on board and Marcel gives us our final briefing for an exclusive snorkeling experience in Jellyfish Lake, the only such lake open to tourism.



"Start swimming toward the sun in the middle of the lake. At first you will see one jellyfish and then another. Swim a bit further and you will see more. Swim further until you are at one with the jellyfish'.

With that we head up and over the steep hill to the lake. As I start finning I spot one jellyfish, then another, then more. I swim further. Eventually I feel as if I am the crouton in a jellyfish soup. Jellies of all sizes are bobbing along in all directions clamouring for sunlight. I take a big breathe and swim a few meters below. I feel a tingle on my lips as I brush past some tentacles. Apparently 1:1000 people are allergic to the stings. I am not one of them. I slowly surface through the pulsating mass of jellyfish. This certainly is a freaky



experience; it just needs some weird movie sound effects. I take note to ask Nan if he knows of a legend about the jellyfish.



Our faithful taxi driver is waiting on the docks for us. Nan gives a huge grin. "Welcome back. Did you see all the breadfruit tree fish? Today I take you to see a traditional war canoe and then this afternoon you can go canoeing Rock Islands. Yes? Lets go."



Travel info:

Location: Micronesia, 7 degrees north of equator, SE of Philippines

Language: Palauan; English widely spoken

Visas: US required for transit via Guam

Getting there: Fly on Continental Airlines via Guam or Manila

Currency: US Dollar.

Best time to go: Excellent diving conditions all year with December to April being the drier months. From June to August the rainfalls can offer respite from the heat but also cause rougher seas.

Water temp: 28 degrees throughout year

Contact:

Liveaboard: <http://www.aggressor.com>

Land: <http://www.necomarine.com>

Nan the taxidriver! 7792015

For a gallery of Palau visit:

<http://www.peterpinnock.com/gallery.asp?galleryname=palau>



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