

AUSTRALASIA SCUBADIVER

YOUR GUIDE TO THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Isles to Make You
Smile



Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei & Fiji
Battle of the Humpbacks
Sabre-Toothed Blennies
Shooting Nature's Mirror

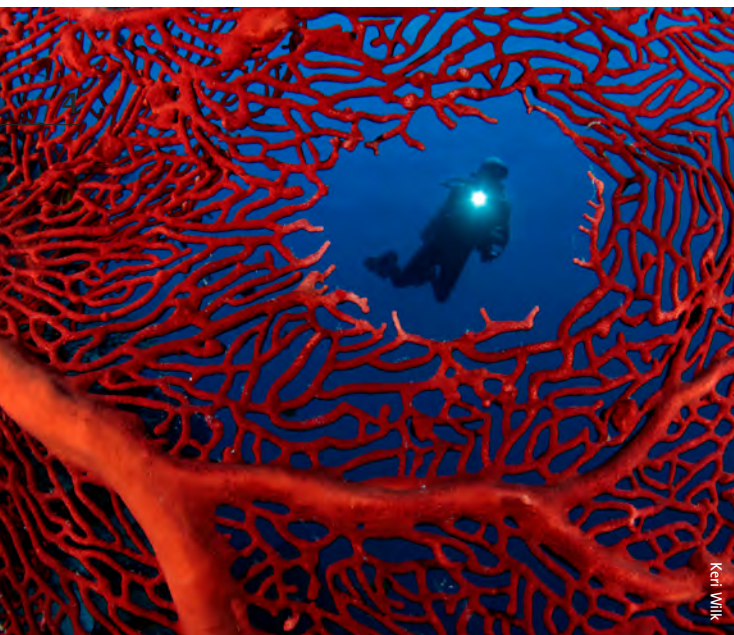
EXPEDITION DIVE WITH EXPERTS ON A MANTA RESEARCH TRIP, MALDIVES (PAGE 12)

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Keri Wilk

FROM THE EDITOR

Way off the beaten track, seducing the underwater adventurer from afar, the islands of the Pacific occupy a place all their own in scuba lore. The largest of all oceans, with areas that are furthest from land as it's possible to be, the vast Pacific harbours subsea marvels that only the most committed and fortunate divers will ever experience.

Underwater photographers Scott Johnson and Tim Rock are among these lucky few. In this issue of *Scuba Diver AustralAsia*, Scott shares with us his stunning images from Palau ("Rocking Palau" on page 32), while Tim blows us away with his distant travels to Hawaii ("Bluewater Dreaming" on page 42). More of their photography is also featured in Sue Crowe's rundown of other great destinations in "Window to the Pacific Isles" (page 66). All this plus Roger Munns' amazing story from his BBC shoot with humpbacks ("Filming a Mega-Battle" on page 58).

After reading these stories, I can't stop dreaming of the day that I too might sail away, into the biggest of the Big Blues, and become a diver of the Pacific Islands at last.

Diego A. Garcia
Senior Editor

The Splashdown

JUICY TIDBITS from the world of scuba



1 Check out my latest video online called "Scuba Diver Magazine's Guide to Bali". Go to facebook.com/scubadiveraa.

2 WINNER of the ADEX/uw3some lucky draw is Chen Dexiang of Singapore. He has won a **limited edition Underwater3some iPad2**.



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6 *Asian Diver's* collectible hard-cover edition of the annual *Big Blue Book* is on sale now. Check out this manta-rific book at uw3some.com > [Shop](#).





An aerial photograph of a tropical lagoon in Palau, featuring a vibrant rainbow arching over the water and surrounding green islands. The sky is filled with soft, grey clouds, and the water shows varying shades of blue and green, indicating different depths and reef structures.

Rocking Palau

I am hurtling off the reef towards the open ocean and have no clue how I am going to slow down. Lauren, my wife, is looking at me with eyes demanding I do something, anything, and do it now. I manage to smile and shrug as if to say "No worries!" then I quickly look away before she gives me a hand signal that is not found in any scuba instruction manual

By Scott Johnson

DURING A PRELIMINARY dive briefing, somewhere off the legendary Pacific Island of Palau, Marc Povey, Captain of the Palau Aggressor II (PAII), says: "The current will gently push you down Ulong channel, which will give you the chance to photograph giant clams at your leisure before we pick you up on the opposite side." Okay, Marc is a rugged South African bloke, so maybe a four-knot current is gentle to him. I am not ashamed to say it is a bit more challenging for me. The clams will need to be the size of elephants and flashing like neon signs for us to even recognise them in the passing blur of the seascape.

When I grab hold of a rock to try to swing behind it, the surging wall of water whips the rest of my body past and threatens to wrench my arm from its socket if I do not let go. I decide to call it a dive by motioning to Lauren to pull out her surface marker buoy and begin her ascent. She fills the bag with air from her regulator and then gradually allows the line to slide through her gloved left hand at a depth of eight metres. We are just beginning our safety stop when we shoot past the channel opening and out into the blue.

Three minutes pass like three hours. I begin to wonder how long it will take the crew to find us. When my head finally clears the surface, I see Marc waving and grinning like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat at a short distance away. He says, "How did you like that one?" Then it hits me. I had just taken a ride on the Palauan version of an underwater roller coaster – no more, no less. After all, Palau is nature's theme park for divers.

Bird's Eye View

The Republic of Palau is an exquisite collection of over 700 volcanic islands, coral atolls, raised limestone islands and islets in the Caroline Islands, approximately seven degrees north of the equator. This secluded archipelago, which defines the western edge of Micronesia, is bounded by the North Pacific Ocean to the southeast and the Philippine Sea to the northeast.

Known as Belau by Palauans, Palau looks like a tiny, haphazard mark on a map of Oceania. In reality, the island chain stretches over 700 kilometres and offers some of the most breath-taking vistas on the planet. The only way to truly appreciate the



IMAGINE A LIVING IMAX PRODUCTION GRANDLY DISPLAYED BEFORE YOU, WHILE YOU AND YOUR BUDDIES RESEMBLE WEIRD KITES FLUTTERING AT THE END OF THIN NYLON ROPES

fascinating, expansive beauty of Belau is to arrange a low-altitude, sightseeing flight with one of the Cessna or helicopter operators. I began to think of the archipelago as being separated into themed areas as if it were laid-out like an amusement park. Each distinct zone offers its own unique attractions and rides.

The Blues

Blue Holes and Blue Corner are Palau's most famous dives and also quite easy to spot from the air. Four large holes carved out of the top of the reef off the northwest end of Ngemelis Island clearly mark the openings to the Blue Holes. Likewise, the brilliant, cobalt blue, arrowhead-shaped point south of Blue Holes is Blue Corner. Though the sites are literally side-by-side and within swimming distance of one another on an outgoing tide, they are best experienced during separate, dedicated dives.

The descent into one of Blue Holes' shallow-water "mouths" can be disorienting. You literally plunge from bright sunlight into the darkness of a massive chamber that bottoms out at 40 metres. Bubbles streaming from divers' exhausts back toward the upper entrances add to the surreal, ethereal ambience. Once your eyes finally adjust to the limited light, you can see a small window in the side of the cavern at five metres and a much larger exit at 27 metres. I spent most of my time attempting to frame Lauren against the lighter water of the various openings as she explored the interior. This allowed me to highlight her form while maintaining the mysterious mood of the dark recesses.

Divers from all over the world come to Palau specifically to plant a reef hook at Blue Corner and watch sharks surf the currents, as thick schools of fish hover and rays cruise along the edge of the wall. Imagine a living IMAX production grandly displayed before you, while you and your buddies resemble weird kites fluttering at the end of thin nylon ropes. As long as you dive this site when the current is ripping, your senses will find it almost impossible to keep up with all the action and your coordination will certainly be challenged.

Blue Corner is not exactly camera friendly. The current and reef hooks do and yet do not help. Yes, the current brings the parade of animals, but it also dictates you use a reef hook to stay in one place and limit the damage to the surrounding habitat. But the reef hooks greatly restrict your mobility. You simply cannot perform intricate turns or twists while tethered to the reef in such current.

overleaf: A radiant rainbow over the Ngederrak Conservation Area, which is an important sanctuary for dugongs
opposite: An aerial view of Jellyfish Lake or Ongeim'l Tketau – notice the hill between the dock on the right and the lake on the left

PALAU

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Manta Mania

The “blues” may get the most publicity, but German Channel is every bit their equal for adrenaline-pumping action. This manmade cut through the western barrier reef was completed during the German occupation of the islands in the early 1900s in order to connect the inner lagoon with the open ocean. The resulting water movement through this passage attracts marine creatures of all shapes and sizes. Prodigious schools of red crescent-tail bigeyes sweep over the corals and energetic Clark’s anemonefish bathe in the protective tentacles of a glowing orange anemone.

German Channel is also the place to go to watch graceful reef manta rays (*Manta alfredi*) with four-metre wingspans getting a manicure in the southwest mouth of the cut. Divers are placed kneeling in the sand around the cleaning station so the large rays can glide over the divers’ heads during the alternating circling and cleaning process.

Lauren had a curious manta almost sit on her head and moments later, was all but buried by a sand storm created from an excited diver’s churning fins. Visitors really need to keep their fins still. Visibility can go from clear to nil in seconds if only one diver forgets to heed the “Do not stir the sand!” warning.

A Fragile World

The diversity of Palau’s marine organisms and coral structures is as impressive as the entirety of the island nation. Approximately 1,350 species of fish and 650 species of coral populate these waters. Location, habitat variety and conservation are the keys to this proliferation of oceanic life.

The Palau government has launched numerous laws and programmes, such as establishing Marine Protected Areas (MPA) and the world’s first shark sanctuary, to protect their precious natural resources.

The Walking Dead

There is simply no way around it; a visit to Peleliu, an island 37 kilometres south of the main island of Koror, is a visit to the past. Over 20,000 American and Japanese soldiers died there in World War II during a three-month battle from September 15 to November 27, 1944. Most of those killed were under 20 years of age. Remnants of the war, including tanks, troop carriers and

opposite, from top:
A reef manta approaches a cleaning station in German Channel | Gorgeous mandarinfish rising to mate off Koror
below: The clown triggerfish with its remarkable patterns and colours



WE WERE IN TEARS DURING PARTS OF THE ACTUAL TOUR AS WE PICTURED OUR OWN CHILDREN SACRIFICING THEIR LIVES FOR THEIR COUNTRY

heavy artillery guns, as well as American and Japanese memorials, are intricately woven into the rejuvenated jungle growth. Lauren and I watched a documentary the night before we toured the island. We were in tears during parts of the actual tour as we pictured our own children sacrificing their lives for their country. The brave dead still walk on this island as a reminder for humanity not to repeat the sins of the past.

Dives around Peleliu also provide the chance to spot used artillery rounds and other relics from the fighting. The highlight, however, is the drift dive at Peleliu Corner. Here you jump in one ocean, the North Pacific Ocean, and are picked up in another ocean, the Philippine Sea, or vice versa. How many places in the world can give you the chance to experience two bodies of water on the same dive? The current here can rival

the one that rips through Ulong Channel, so be prepared for another Palauan rollercoaster.

Rock 'n Roll

The Rock Islands epitomise the diversity and idyllic qualities of this tropical oasis. They encompass 250 uninhabited islands that are mushroom-shaped and densely forested. These relics

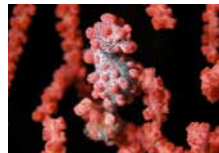
below: Lauren peers from below the stunning growth that characterises Palau's reefs | Swimming among the golden jellies in Jellyfish Lake
opposite: The surreal ambience of Blue Holes

of porous limestone coral reefs were thrust upward from the Philippine Plate and exposed by volcanic activity in the Southern Lagoon. Water movement and bacterial activity have gradually eroded the base of the islands, which makes them look top-heavy. A ride among





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CHARLES DARWIN CERTAINLY COULD HAVE FORMED HIS THEORY OF NATURAL SELECTION HAD HE FIRST STUDIED PALAU'S MARINE LAKES

these fanciful formations is a treat, in and of itself. A collection of seventy of the islands, unimaginatively called Seventy Islands, is a special wildlife preserve where turtles can nest and birds can rest without any interference from humans.

Marine lakes are among the hidden treasures of the Rock Islands. These lakes are connected to the ocean via cracks in the surrounding porous limestone. Water and microscopic organisms are carried to and from the lakes through these conduits. Each lake has evolved independently of the other lakes and thus contains a unique collection of flora and fauna, much in the same way as each of the Galapagos Islands developed on its own. Charles Darwin certainly could have formed his theory of natural selection had he first studied Palau's marine lakes.

Jellyfish Lake or Ongeim'l Tketau is, by far, the most famous of these lakes and the only one open to tourists. Millions of two species of jellyfish inhabit the lake: the golden jelly (*Mastigias papua etpisoni*) and the less common moon jelly (*Aurelia aurita*). Many proclaim these jellyfish to be stingless either out of ignorance or to encourage visitors not to fear them. The jellies can certainly sting, but the sensation is nearly undetectable by humans. This is a snorkelling-only opportunity as diving is not allowed in order to prevent bubbles from damaging the delicate bodies of the jellies and also because there is a dangerous concentration of hydrogen sulphide below 14 metres.

Never Enough

Dive and tour operators, such as Fish 'n Fins and their Ocean Hunter fleet, as well as Sam's Tours, can carry you to all the prime "themed" dive and terrestrial spots, including The Blues, Manta Mania, It's a Small World, The Walking Dead and Rock 'n Roll. We spent a week aboard the Aggressor and then based all of our other explorations from the exquisite Palau Pacific Resort on Koror. I would be remiss in not telling you about the fantastic macro diving in front of the Sam's Tours' dock. I spent countless hours there photographing mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*), mouthbreeders, banded sea kraits (*Laticauda colubrina*), razorfish (*Aeoliscus punctulatus*) and many other fascinating subjects in less than seven metres of water. Above all, the main thing to know

opposite, clockwise from top: A male Wassinki cardinalfish with eggs in its mouth at Ngerchong Coral Gardens | A large nudibranch in Ulong Channel | A tiny, colourful candycane dwarfgoby at Big Drop-off | Stalactites in an air chamber in Chandelier Cave

about Palau is, like all world-class theme parks, you simply cannot see all the sights enough or ride all the rides enough or soak in all the otherworldly vistas enough in a single visit. [SDAA](#)



NAVIGATOR PALAU

- PACK YOUR BAGS** Guam is the doorway to Palau for many travellers. United Airlines (formerly Continental Airlines), Asiana Airline from Incheon, South Korea, China Airline from Taipei, Taiwan-ROC, and Japan Airlines from Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka are the main airlines.
- ENTRY AND VISA REQUIREMENTS** A free 30-day Visa is issued upon arrival and may be extended within seven days in advance with approval of the Chief of Immigration for a fee of US\$50.00.
- CURRENCY** The U.S. dollar. Credit cards are widely accepted.
- WEATHER** Climate is tropical, with a hot and humid rainy season from May to November. The average annual air temperature is 27°C and surface temperature is 28°C. Typhoons are rare.
- ELECTRICITY** 110-120 volts with North American style plugs.
- DIVE WITH** Fish'n Fins (fishnfins.com), Ocean Hunter (oceanhunter.com), Palau Aggressor II (aggressor.com), Sam's Tours (samstours.com).
- STAY WITH** Palau Pacific Resort (palaupr.com) and Cliffside Hotel (cliffsidehotelpalau.com).