



# Kosrae & Pohnpei

*Micronesia*

Crystal clear  
waters and  
white sand  
beaches

Text and photos  
by Brandi Mueller

**The idea of diving Micronesia forms dreams of warm, crystal blue waters with big animals, wrecks and mantas. Most divers probably include it on their dream dive destination list, or, those who've been there eagerly recommend it to dive buddies and reminisce about sharks, mantas and the beauty of these wonderful islands. Palau's Blue Corner sharks come swimming back into view, mantas by the dozen from Yap and the anemone covered wrecks of Chuuk. But what about the other islands of Micronesia? Little known Kosrae and Pohnpei, both part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), contain the same beauty and wonder as their better known neighbor islands, but are visited far less often.**



Long House at the Village Resort (above) and *Nembrotha kubaryana* nudibranch (right) on orange sponge, Pohnpei

I had returned from my second trip to Palau and, like the first trip, it was amazing. I was anything but disappointed with ten female grey reef sharks on one dive at Ulong Channel, ripping currents at Blue Corner and the curious mysteries of unidentified Japanese World War II wrecks. But along with the remarkable marine life, pristine corals and spooky wrecks, my dive group and I found crowds of people, with several boats at each dive site, lots of other divers hooked into the same areas, and restaurants and resorts congested with other divers and tourists.

It's not that I don't like diving with other people... well, okay, it is. I want paradise to myself, or at least just for me and the group of divers I prefer to travel with. So when my dive buddy—who didn't get to go with us to Palau—wanted to go diving in Micronesia

six months later, I wasn't thrilled. I loved Blue Corner, but not with two other boat loads of people flying by in front of my group and interrupting our shark show. So, I set out to find us that untouched, perfect reef, the one reef that no one else knows about yet.

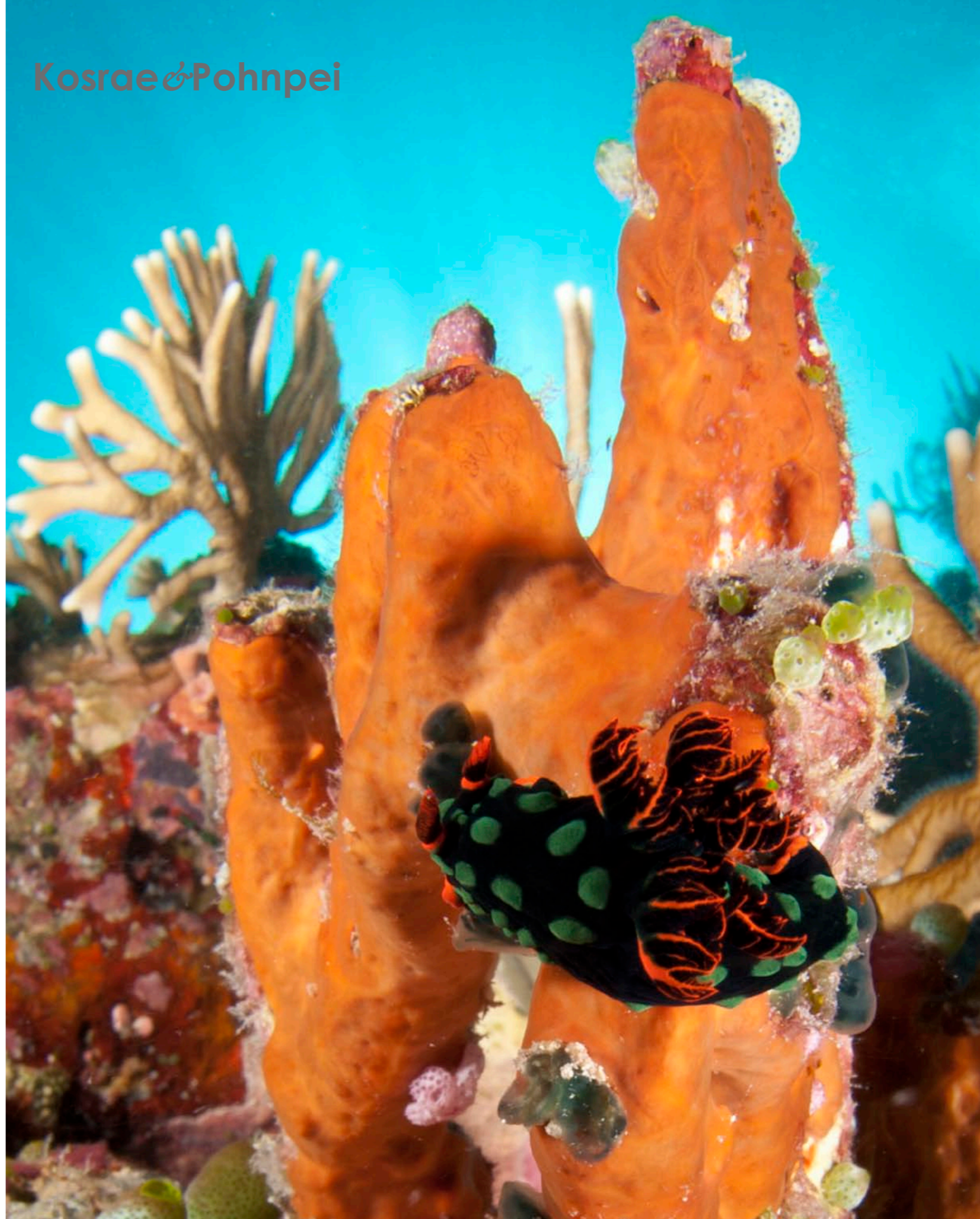
The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is made up of four island states: Pohnpei (the capital), Kosrae, Yap and Chuuk. Located just north of the equator and all having played a role in WWII, these islands have world class diving. We had heard of Chuuk and Yap, so we choose to go to Pohnpei and Kosrae. If anyone was going to ask us, "Why?" We were ready to answer, "Why not?" Of course, we couldn't tell anyone where we were going just yet, as we didn't know how to pronounce the islands' names. (Pohnpei is pronounced *pon-a-pe*, and Kosrae is *kosh-rye*.)

### Pohnpei

It's cliché, but we wanted to go off the map. And my mother pointed out that not all maps have these small islands marked. Amazing adventures never were supposed to be easy, so we decided we would go, a week on each island. Our first stop—Pohnpei. A plane change in Hawaii or Guam is required, to board the "Micronesian Milk Route", which visits Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei and Truk.

Our flight left Honolulu at 6AM for another nine hours in the plane, and at each island stop half the passengers on the plane had to disembark for a security check and then would re-board about 45 minutes later. As the plane descended to Pohnpei, 3,240 miles southwest of Hawaii, through the window we saw a lush, green, heavily forested island with almost no buildings or

## Kosrae & Pohnpei





Lizard on Pohnpei (left); Keperhoi waterfall (above); Colorful soft corals on reef at Pohnpei (right)

Pohnpei has the most land, the most people (estimated around 34,000) and the most development of the FSM. It's boasted to have the friendliest people. Birds flit about everywhere, several of which are endemic or only found on Pohnpei, and there are several species of lizards commonly seen. Pohnpei's only original mammal is bats, and with humans came rats, dogs, pigs and most recently deer.

It's thought that the first settlers to come to Pohnpei migrated from Southeast Asia to Yap and the FSM and then southward to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Historically, Pohnpei was divided into five tribes, with the tribal chiefs having complete control of the land, the people and everything on it. It's likely the five tribes battled amongst one another.

The first European documentation of the island of Pohnpei was from a Spanish ship in 1595, but they did not go ashore. Second contact was likely an Australian ship in 1825, and the ship was chased off by natives in canoes. A Russian ship in



1828 also attempted to land but could not due to native resistance, but for the first time, native Pohnpeians came aboard their ship. Due to whaling, more and more ships came to Pohnpei in the 1800s and with them they brought smallpox, which caused a huge epidemic and many casualties.

Pohnpei has been occupied by several countries, the first being the Spanish in 1886 as part of the Caroline Island chain in 1886. In 1899, the German Empire purchased the Caroline island group, part

of the Marianas and the Marshall Islands, which was then granted to Japan as they assumed control of all German colonial possessions north of the equator in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

Although the FSM played quite a large roll in World War II, no shots were fired on Pohnpei. The island was bombed significantly during the Japanese occupancy and then the island was abandoned by the Japanese. Although there are no battlefields, there are some remnants of

the Japanese occupation on land. Hiking into the jungle can be quite an adventure for a WWII history buff, as there are anti-aircraft guns, a few pillboxes and trenches that are carved-in tunnels. This is all mostly off the beaten track, and it's a good idea to find a local guide or at least get very good directions before setting off by yourself into the jungle. There are rusted gun emplacements, an overgrown airbase (where we had lunch one day), bunkers, bomb craters and several rusted tanks.

houses. The airport consisted of a large, outdoor shack-like building. We collected our luggage, which was hand carried from the plane and placed in front of us with the plane still in view and went to meet the small van waiting for us.



Nudibranch on reef at Pohnpei; Waterbeds with mosquito nets (center) in a treehouse bungalow (below) at The Village Hotel on Pohnpei; Large, branching, cup coral (*Tubastrea micracantha*), Pohnpei (right)

turn slowly to light blue and daylight revealing flat, blue seas. After a leisurely, relaxing breakfast, it was time to dive.

We took a three minute pick-up truck ride down the hill to the water where our captain met us. Dressed in discarded Navy coveralls, he helped

diving and more often than not keeps the lagoon calm and smooth. As the only divers in the whole resort, we had the boat, a divemaster and the captain to ourselves.

After a 45-minute boat ride, we reached our first dive site just outside the barrier reef, Mwand Wall. Back rolling off the boat, we descended down a sheer wall covered in bright orange and yellow sponges and forest green branching tubastrea coral. A slight current carried us from the ocean side of the lagoon into the lagoon. Swimming sideways on the wall were so many brightly-colored fish, it appeared as if the wall was mov-

ing. The wall sloped down to just past 100ft and then turned to rubble and sand further down. One shark cruised with us for a while, and at the end of the dive, we were on top of the wall at 15ft, perfect for a long safety stop, and I found several anemones to photograph.

Wide-eyed with excitement after

In 1947, Pohnpei became part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands created by the United Nations administered by the United States (as trustee only) and became part of the Federated States of Micronesia in 1979.

**Diving**

On the short ride to the Village Resort, we drove through Kolonia, often referred to as "the metropolis" of the FSM. Although not what you would expect from a metropolis, there was a small traffic jam caused by some children playing soccer in the street. On the side of a small cliff overlooking the ocean sits the Village Resort with tree house bungalows, our home for the next week. Thatch roof, mosquito nets and waterbeds (yes, waterbeds!) Nothing seemed more like paradise until we got in the water the next morning.

There is no rush in the Pacific though. With the time change, we woke up before dawn and headed to the Long House where meals are served. Being that it was before 5 AM we made ourselves comfortable on puffy lounge chairs out on the gazebo. We were unexpectedly surprised when the lone security guard appeared out of the darkness with a coffee pot and poured us two cups of coffee. We watched the stars slowly disappear, as the black sky

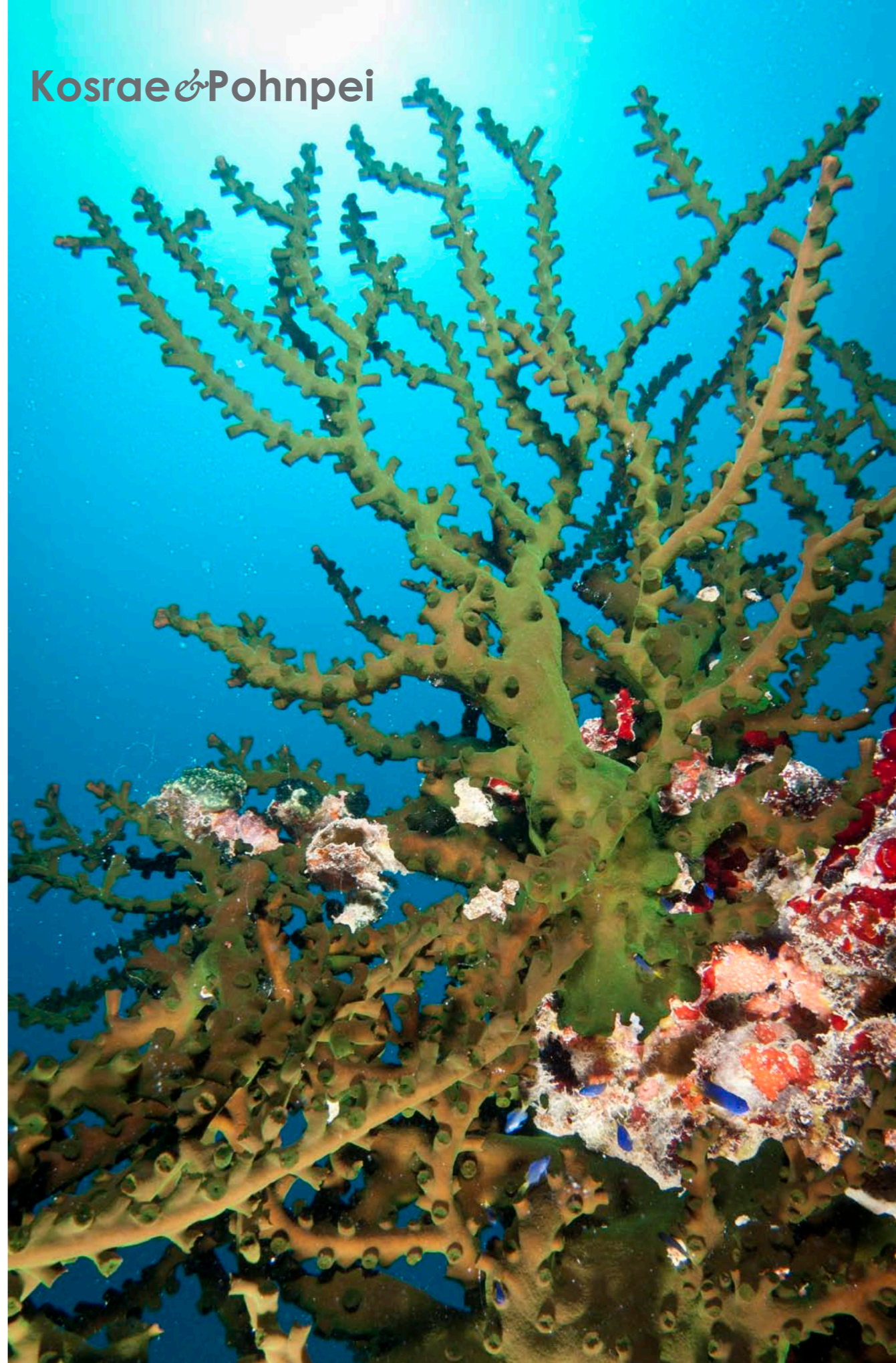


us onto the small flat bottom wooden boat. Sitting on the engine, our captain drove us away from the Village through mangroves so dense we had to duck a bit and out into the lagoon.

Pohnpei is surrounded almost entirely by a barrier reef, which protects the island, making for amazing pass



**Kosrae & Pohnpei**





Kosrae & Pohnpei

the first dive, our captain took us to a dive site called Manta Road. I have always thought that once you named a dive site after something, you never see it again, but as we finished our surface interval in the sunshine, we had already seen at least two mantas on the surface. Feeding on the nutrients brought in during tidal changes, the mantas are present several times a day and do large belly rolls toward the surface as if dancing an underwater ballet. This site is great for non-divers as well because the mantas come right up to the surface.

For lunch, we stopped at a beautiful uninhabited islet with mangrove trees dotting the coastline where we had a pack lunch prepared by the Village.



Wrapped in eco-friendly banana leaves were our pre-ordered rice mixes, with our choice of chicken, pork, shrimp or veggies. After two amazing dives, we were hungry, and almost as good as the food tasted, was the fun of throwing the banana leaves in the water afterwards, creating no trash. After eating and a nice long surface interval, we were back in the boat headed for a third amazing dive.

Back at the Village we settled in at the Long House for a few beers and dinner and were amazed by the food. Melt-in-your-mouth ahi tuna (just caught by a staff member, our servers pointed back to the kitchen to point him out), local mangrove crab, steak, tuna, mahi-mahi and macadamia nut chicken. If the huge proportions didn't fill you up, the desserts were to die for. Flaming bananas foster made at your table, homemade cookies, and my favorite, the homemade sorbet-like ice cream made on site with fresh fruits from the island (the soursop was amazing!)

The next day, with good weather

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Diver and mantas at Manta Road; Tiny shrimp on anemone; Pipefish and golden damselfish, Pohnpei; Delicious ahi tuna for dinner





THIS PAGE: Nan Madol, the “Venice of the Pacific”, on Pohnpei. Massive stones, possibly from a quarry on the other side of the island, were used to build Nan Madol. It is unknown how they were moved to this location



on our side, we took a two-hour boat ride across the channel to Ant Atoll. With beautiful white sand beaches covered with palm trees reaching over the ocean, above water is almost as good as under the water. The sun lit up the reef through the clear water and revealed huge schools of fish, giant orange sponges, sea fans and soft coral. A turtle swam by the wall, munching on some coral, and our dive guide pointed

out four different species of nudibranchs.

### Nan Madol

The island of Pohnpei is beautiful topside as well. A day excursion can take you swimming under waterfalls, hiking through rainforest, visiting WWII remains and walking among ancient ruins. Pohnpei is home to Nan Madol, often referred to as the “Venice of the Pacific”. Likely built around

the 11th century for religious and political means, these ruins can be visited by boat and you can walk among large stone wall structures, which still stand.

The mysteries of Nan Madol are numerous including who built the structures and how they got the massive stones to their current location. The nearest and likely quarry is on the other side of the island, although some legends say they came from Yap, over 1,000 miles away. One myth suggests that twin sorcerers levitated the stones from the quarry to where they stand now.

### Kosrae

After a week on Pohnpei, we enjoyed a short hour-long flight to Kosrae, called the island of the sleeping lady. As you land, you can see the mountain formation that looks like a sleeping lady. Although we loved the romantic jungle atmosphere of the Village on Pohnpei, we were thrilled to reach the Nautilus Resort with glorious air conditioning, a TV and a fully enclosed room, so there was no need for mosquito nets.

We were picked up at the airport by Doug, co-owner with his wife Sally, of the Nautilus. Doug was delightful during our whole trip. It was as if we were visiting a good friend we hadn't seen in,

well, forever. He dove with us, and his excitement for the diving and living in Kosrae was infectious, making the great diving even better.

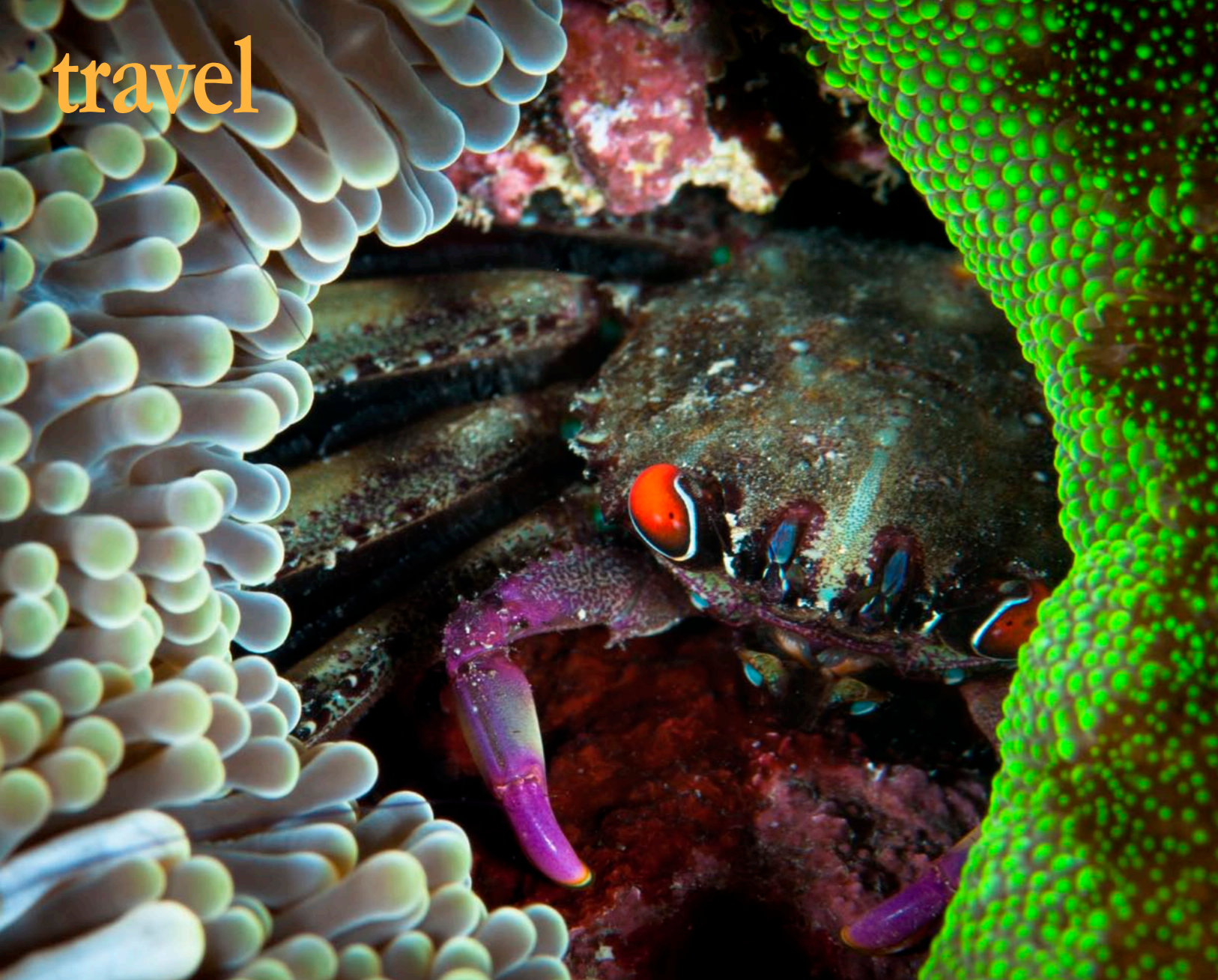
Much smaller in population, Kosrae has less than 7,000 people. Similar to Pohnpei and other Pacific islands, Kosrae had a tribal society with noble chiefs controlling the land and commoners working the land, who served the chiefs. Nobel lineage was determined matrilineality, or traced through the mother or female

ancestors.

The first European contact is thought to be in 1824, and the first missionaries came in 1852, converting most of the island to Christianity by the 1870s. Religion is still a very important part of today's culture in Kosrae. Similar to Pohnpei, Kosrae fell under German rule in 1899 and



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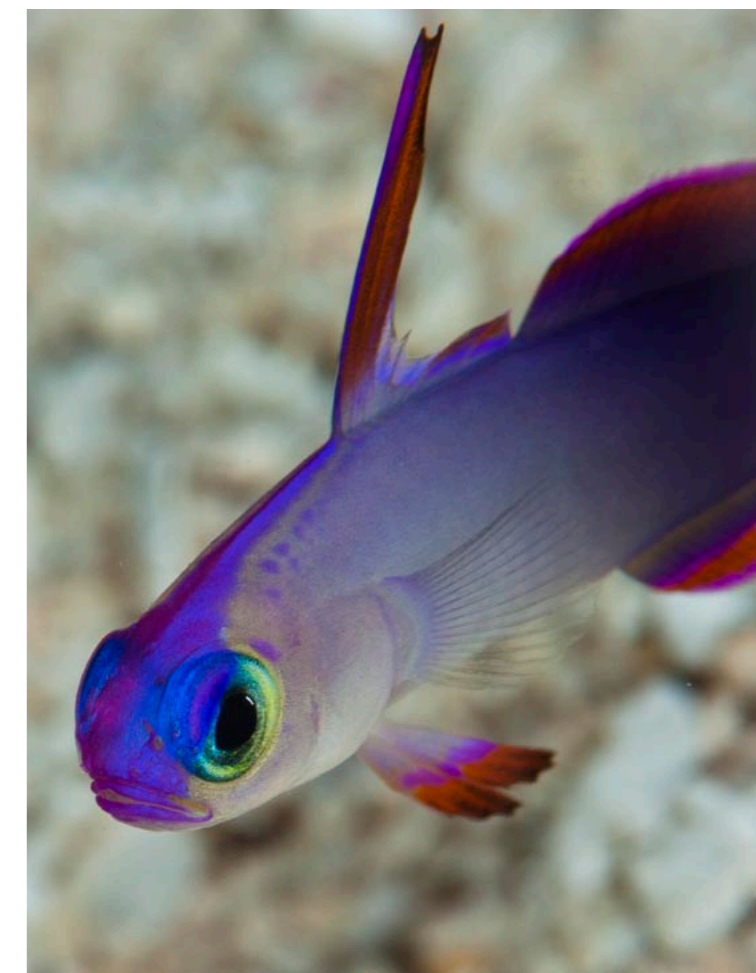


eral years ago, the Kosrae dive operators in association with the government put in 58 mooring buoys around the island to stop anchoring. At most sites, the boat is moored to a buoy, the divers jump in and drift to the next buoy where the boat would be moored and waiting, preventing coral damage from anchoring. Almost all the dives are sloping wall dives providing excellent safety stops with as much life at 15ft as at 100ft.

Our three dives a day

ready to dive. Again we were the only divers (almost the only people in the whole resort) and Doug and a crew member drove us ten minutes to the harbor. The boat was a bit more modern than those in Pohnpei, providing more shade and an endless supply of delightfully sweet Kosrae tangerines and apple-

bananas just off the tree. cleaner shrimp, all right next to each other! And then my dive buddy kept pointing at the edges of the anemone, and it took me a bit to see that there was a red-eyed, purple-clawed crab peering out at us from just below the two anemones. I could have spent numerous dives just at the spot, but Doug pointed out a huge school of barracuda off the wall, so we kept swimming.



Our second dive was at The Jacks, a dive with a reliable school of jacks right off the wall. After gawking at the huge school, the focus was back on the reef, and there were cleaning stations almost everywhere we looked. Wrasses were under every crevice waiting for a parrotfish or a moorish idol to stop in, get cleaned and then pass through leaving room for the next patient.

Being off the tourist track, Kosrae has very few divers. The reefs are nothing but pristine. To keep this unspoiled ecosystems intact, sev-

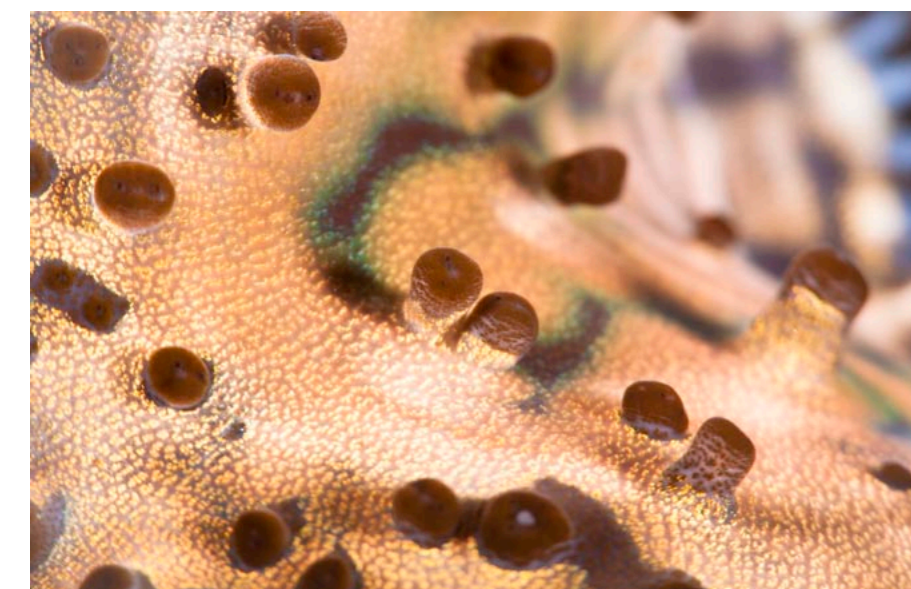
didn't seem to be nearly enough. On each dive, we were overwhelmed by the diversity. We were torn with

then Japanese rule after WWI. No WWII battles occurred on Kosrae, although a Japanese garrison was stationed there with more than 4,000 Imperial Japanese Army men and a company of tanks. Tunnel bunkers can see be seen on top of some of the islands peaks. During the Trust Territory period, Kosrae was considered a municipality of Pohnpei, but in 1977, it became a separate district. Kosrae joined Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei to form the Federated States of Micronesia in 1979.

### Diving

It had been two days out of the water due to the no diving after flying rule, and we were more than

cleaner shrimp, all right next to each other! And then my dive buddy kept pointing at the edges of the anemone, and it took me a bit to see that there was a red-eyed, purple-clawed crab peering out at us from just below the two anemones. I could have spent numerous dives just at the spot, but Doug pointed out a huge school of barracuda off the wall, so we kept swimming.



The mantle of a giant clam (above); Crab peering out from between two anemones (top left); Flatworm on coral head (top right), Decorated dartfish (bottom right), Kosrae



Kosrae & Pohnpei



Boasting Micronesia's best pizza, we were not disappointed, and the fish was fantastic. Much of the vegetables were grown on-site and local, and exotic fresh fruit is abundant.

While both islands are laid back and much slower than city folk may be used to, Kosrae takes "island time" to a whole new meaning. There is a 25mph speed limit enforced on the whole island, and some of the largest speed bumps I'd ever seen (they looked more like speed mountains!) And Sunday is truly a day of rest. Not only does everything shut down, but it is actually illegal (and enforced) that there is no drinking, diving, swimming, fishing, boating or any activities on Sundays.

A trip to Pohnpei or Kosrae is not complete without tasting the local spirit of choice, Sakau. It's actually a type of kava made with crushed roots of a pepper plant, which is mixed with water and squeezed through hibiscus bark. The taste is similar to dirt and causes the mouth to numb, and often a relaxed, calming feeling occurs.

**Afterthoughts**

Like most dive trips, our two weeks flew by, and before we knew it, we were back on an airplane headed home. Although the flights were long, it was entirely worth it for the untouched, pristine and least touristy islands of Micronesia. We found the diving fairly easy with warm water, light currents and unspoiled reef life, and there were no big groups of

divers at all. Although the big creatures were not as numerous as off Palau, there were reliable sites for sharks and mantas, and large schools of barracuda and jacks were common. The macro life was far better than Palau on both islands, especially Pohnpei, with its very colorful soft corals. It was a great trip for seeing healthy reef life and enjoying the extremely relaxing, slow paced, beautiful islands. Pohnpei and Kosrae are a must for anyone trying to get away from the crowds, but still wanting fantastic diving. ■

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what to photograph, not being able to decide if we should shoot macro to capture the flatworms, nudibranchs and numerous juvenile fish, or to shoot wide-angle and capture the colorful reef, occasional sharks that cruised by, turtles and massive schools of jacks, barracuda and other fishes.

Dartfish are one of my favorites, and on almost every dive, we saw fire dartfish, and a few times, we spotted the more rare decorated dartfish. Schools of purple and pink anthias flitted about the reef (often getting in the shots of other fish). And rare juvenile fish that I often spend whole trips looking for were seen on almost every dive. Turquoise and purple giant clams dotted the reef and blennies peaked out from every nook and cranny. On our last dive of the week, Doug pointed out not one, but three yellow leaf scorpionfish. There was never a dull moment. Overall, the diving was fairly easy, with some

mild currents, great visibility and full of life.

**Topside attractions**

Kosrae also has its own ruins. Although not as grand as Nan Madol, Kosrae has its own ancient site, the Lelu Ruins. Architecturally similar in building materials and design to Nan Madol (and thought to be built within 500 years of each other) the ruins suggest historical interactions between the two islands. Free to the public, easy to get to, although not quite maintained as well as Nan Madol, the Lelu ruins are a few minutes' walk from the Nautilus Resort. Bird watching, waterfall tours, hiking and kayaking are also available.

The small island doesn't have many dining options, but we were more than happy dining at the Nautilus. They offered breakfast, lunch and dinner, with enough options to keep us trying new things every day.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Goby on coral; Sunrise view from the gazebo at the Long House at The Village Hotel, Pohnpei; Blenny sticks head out of a coral head, Kosra; Anemonefish, Pohnpei; Author Brandi Mueller



# fact file



## Kosrae & Pohnpei



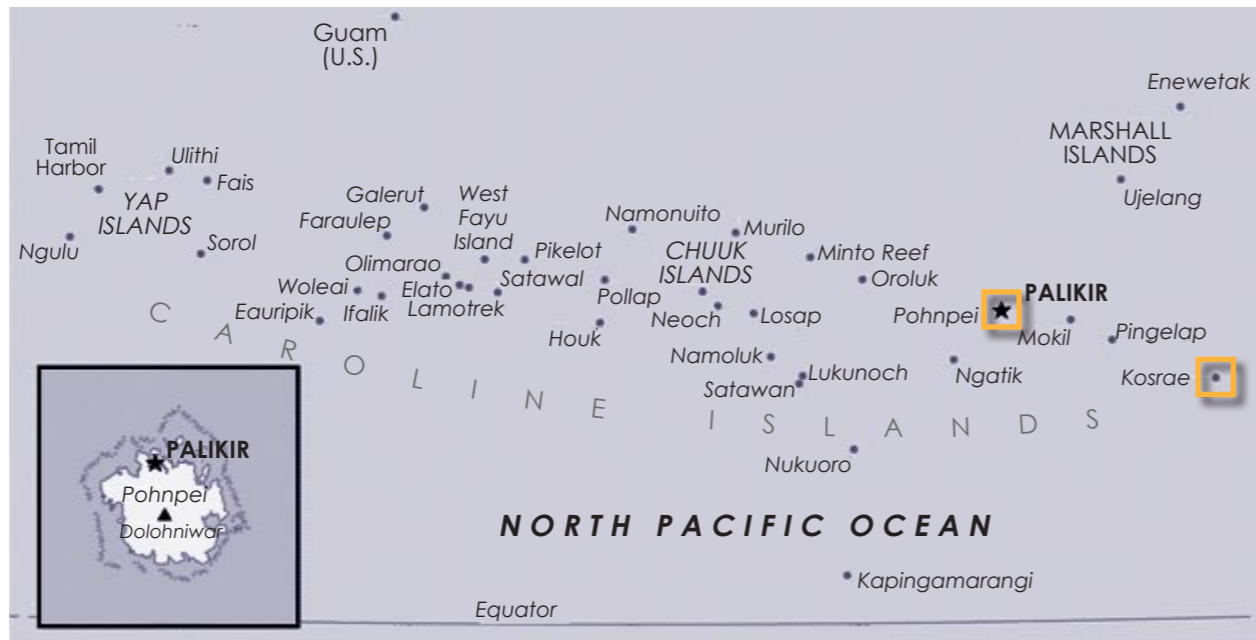
SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, VISIT-FSM.ORG

**History** The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was formed in 1979 including Pohnpei, Kosrae, Yap, and Chuuk (Truk). Currently the FSM is independent under a Compact of Free Association with the US. Occupied by the Japanese prior and during WWII all four islands played a role and evidence of battles remains both on land and underwater. Government: Constitutional government in free association with the United States. Capital: Palikir

**Geography** All four islands are located in the North Pacific as part of the Caroline Islands. Both are extinct volcanoes and the islands are mountainous with tropical jungle. Pohnpei is the largest of the FSM islands, has the highest point, and is mostly mangrove along the coastline with a surrounding barrier reef and outer atolls. Kosrae has both mangrove and sand beaches. Coastline: 6,112km

**Climate** Equatorial tropics with average temperatures of 23-30°C (75-86°F) year round. Heavy rainfall year round with summer and fall being the wettest. Little typhoon risk (June to December). Water temperatures are warm with 27-28°C (80-83°F).

**Environment** Overfishing, climate change and pollution pose



challenges. The FSM is party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection

**Economy** The economy of the FSM relies heavily on fishing and subsistence farming. High-grade phosphate is the only mineral deposit worth exploiting. The tourist industry has potential but is hampered by the remote location and a lack of sufficient facilities, as well as limited air connections. Between 1986 and 2001 the United States provided \$1.3 billion in grant aid under the original terms of the Compact of Free Association. The amount of aid has since been reduced,

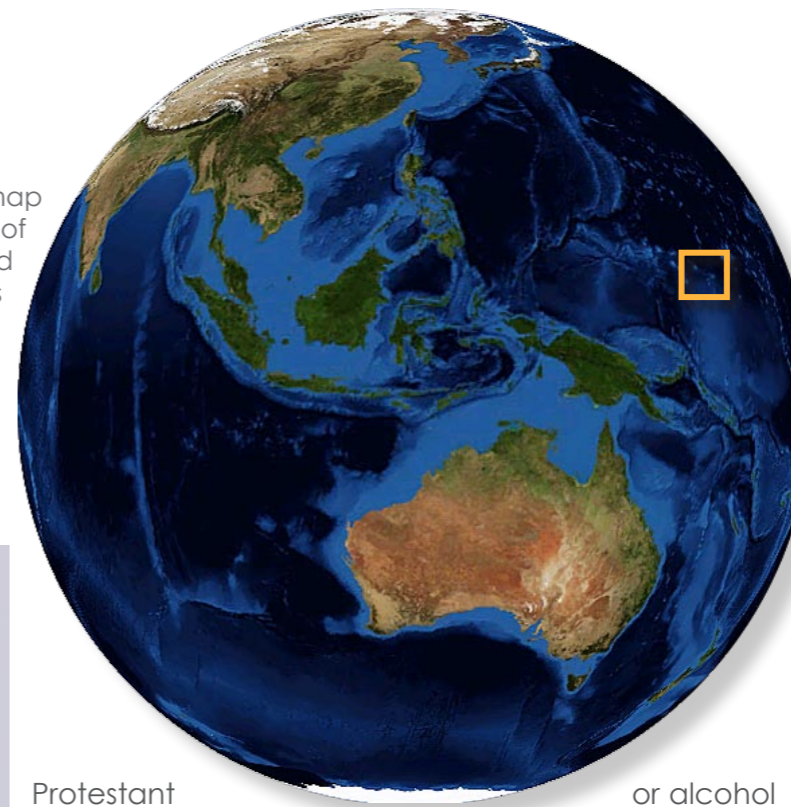
but the Amended Compact of Free Association with the United States guarantees significant annual aid through 2023, wherein a Trust Fund has been established with annual contributions by the United States and the FSM to in effect provide payouts in perpetuity to the FSM after 2023. Despite this move, the medium-term economic outlook looks fragile due to current slow growth of the private sector.

**Population** Pohnpei: 35,000; Kosrae: 7700; The FSM has several ethnic groups: Chuukese 48.8%, Pohnpeian 24.2%, Kosraean 6.2%, Yapese 5.2%, Yap outer islands 4.5%, Asian 1.8%, Polynesian 1.5%, other ethnic groups 6.4%. Religions: Roman Catholic 52.7%,

RIGHT: Global map with location of Kosrae and Pohnpei Islands

BELOW: Location of Kosrae and Pohnpei on map of Micronesia

BOTTOM RIGHT: Christmas tree worm



Protestant 41.7% (2000 Census) Internet users: 17,000 (2009)

**Currency** U.S. Dollar. The islands have few ATMs, although they can sometimes be unreliable.

**Language** Both islands have their own language (Pohnpeian and Kosraean) but English is widely spoken and taught in school. Japanese is also sometimes spoken in tourist establishments.

**Health** There is no risk for rabies or malaria, but occasional risk for Dengue. FSM is very close to the equator, so be aware of heat and sunburn. Local hospitals are on each island but have very few resources. Major illnesses should be flown to Guam (~3 hours) or Honolulu (~7 hours).

**Security** The islands are very safe in general. Be aware of weekend night driving when local consumption of sakau and/

or alcohol is common.

Local customs include 'borrowing' things such as if you leave your sandals outside a house and someone needs a pair, they may be 'borrowed'. But there is no issue in hotels or resorts with theft.

**Cuisine** Most diving packages include meals. Both islands have several restaurants with very good food, but sometimes limited choices. Things listed on menus were not always available, so checking what the daily specials are is recommended. Each island offers a few restaurants and very small grocery stores.

**Decompression chamber** Pohnpei has a chamber, Kosrae does not. Guam or Honolulu, Hawaii, are the next closest locations for chambers.

**Dive season** Year Round.

**Getting there** The islands are only serviced by United Airways and require a stop in Honolulu or Guam. Pohnpei flights are from Honolulu on Monday, Wednesday

and Friday, and from Guam on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Kosrae flights from Honolulu on Monday and Friday and from Guam on Tuesday and Saturday. From Honolulu the flight makes stops in Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Guam and reverses the next day. There are no flights in or out on Sundays.

**Topside attractions** Both islands also have hiking, kayaking, bird watching, surfing, kite boarding, snorkeling and fishing.

**Dive gear** Although rental dive gear is available, it is limited due to the remoteness of these islands. It's recommended you bring your own gear and do not expect to be able to buy gear or parts or have gear serviced on either island.

**Attire** Conservative dress is suggested when leaving resorts, especially on Kosrae, with sleeves for both sexes and pants or skirts covering the knees for women.

**Web sites** Tourism Micronesia [www.visit-fsm.org](http://www.visit-fsm.org)

