



Palau

A Diver's Addiction



Text and images by Todd Essick

Have you ever lost that loving feeling for diving? Not that you don't want to dive any more, nothing that extreme, but you remember when it was just new and exciting like a new relationship, burning red hot. Now diving has become a constant, reliable and reasonably predictable, safe, and still makes you happy, but...

This article is for all those divers who may have grown just a little compla-

cent in their diving or have been diving the same dive spots so many times that you almost forget you're diving. As for the new divers out there, you know when I say your desire is still burning, red hot, to be underwater, just happy to be underwater anywhere anytime. Well, when those flames die down a little, and you ever need to bring back that spark and spice it up a little, I have the place—Palau.

For most divers Palau is on the list of dream places to go—right up there with the Galapagos Islands and Cocos Islands.

Palau for those of you who don't know is located in the middle of the Pacific, east of the Philippines, south of Yap. Palau was for three decades part

of the U.N. Trust Territory of the Pacific under U.S. administration, this westernmost group of the Caroline Islands went for independence in 1978 rather than join the Federated States of Micronesia. A Compact of Free Association with the United States was approved in 1986 but not ratified until 1993. It came into effect the following year when the island nation gained independence.

The addiction

Palau has become of a bit of an addiction for me in the last few years. It all started with winning a photography contest in Yap. The plane flight was flying through Palau, so I stopped there first for a week. I was lucky enough to have met Sam Scott, the founder of

Topside view of Palau (above); Diver cruising with the gentle giant, a manta ray (right)



Sam's Dive Tours, at DEMA the previous year. He was very interested in my photography and made me feel welcome to come to Palau even before he knew I was coming.

Upon arriving, Dermot Keane—the general manager at Sam's Tours and the one who started the shark sanctuary in Palau, indeed, instrumental in getting the President to declare all of Palau a shark sanctuary—greeted me and dialed me in for all the scheduled diving for the week.

From my first dive in Palau, I was reinvigorated, reintroduced to diving. It was just like my first dive 30 years ago! I couldn't wait to get on the boat and go and get underwater.

From the moment you dive in at Palau, the water, the corals, the fish are incredible, not to mention the SHARKS. Almost every dive I've ever done in Palau has had sharks—mostly grey reef, with white tips—almost so plentiful you stop seeing them.

I went diving for a week in Palau before I went on to Yap. After Yap, I was supposed to go to Manado, Indonesia, for ten days, but Palau had me under her spell. I barely remember being in Yap or changing reservations to stay in Palau. I just went back to Palau for as long as possible. Since that first visit, I have managed to spend over 180 days on several trips since.

Along with the sharks, barracudas, sea turtles, jacks, giant trevallies, bumphead parrotfish and the friendliest Napoleon wrasse are numerous. The countless species of fish and endless colors of fans and corals will put a diver into sensory overload. As for me, the photographer, I am often left with not knowing which direction to point my camera, as there are just too many things to photograph.

Three dive sites in particular keep calling me back for more: Blue Corner, German Channel and Ulong Channel. Of course, there are many more dive sites. Honestly, I have not made a dive in Palau at any spot that has not made



Luscious coral gardens decorate the reefs of Palau (above); Huge fan corals sprout out of a reef wall (right)

in Palau at any spot that has not made



me pause in amazement, and a truly spiritual experience will be enjoyed at Jellyfish Lake.

Every dive is great in Palau, and just goes up from there, but Blue Corner has offered the most wow moments for me.

Blue Corner

Blue Corner is a corner, an elbow of sorts. It comes out from the reef, starting in shallow water and dropping off to well over 1,000 feet. The Corner's main plateau is at 60 feet/18 meters, though a shallow plateau at 45 feet can offer just as much action as the deeper spot.

The topography lends itself to creating strong currents, as the flow of water comes across this outcropping of coral. The currents, changing with the tides, can approach the corner from either the north or the south, with the speed of the current changing based on the moon phase. This is considered an advanced dive and can be tricky your first time.

As you swim or actually drift to Blue Corner, you will have the wall on your

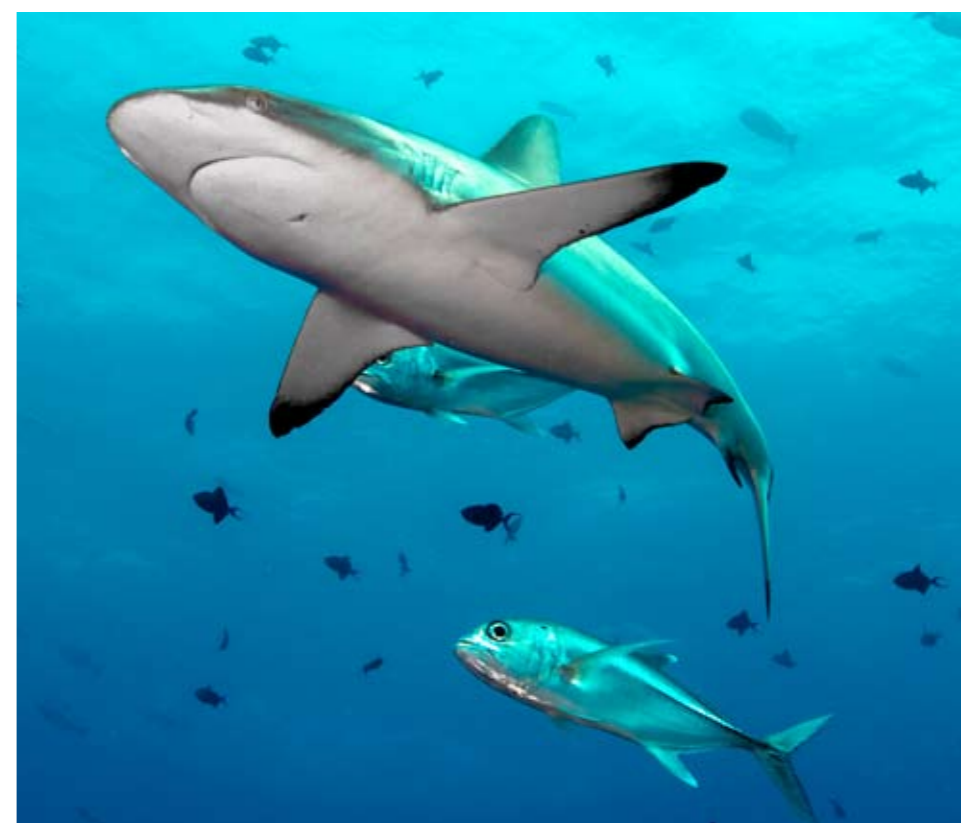


side. If you are lucky you will be able to observe hunting parties including Napoleon wrasse and giant trevally going after reef fish, with a follow up of white tip shark and an occasional grey reef shark coming in from the deep blue with rocketing speed to get in on the

action.

As you get to the plateau, you cross on top of the reef, often greeted by barracudas, or jacks, hovering above the sea turtles or reef fish gathering. The bump-head parrotfish can be very active here.

You pick a spot on the reef near the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Divers are watched by a patrolling reef shark; Napoleon wrasse dwarfs onlooking diver; Reef shark is shadowed by a couple of trevally; Close-up look reveals the silvery sheen of a trevally



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personal. The sharks will get more comfortable with you as the minutes pass and will come within arm's length very often. You will mainly see two species of sharks during the dive: the gray reef shark and the white tip shark.

While the dive described is very typical during the best tides. Blue Corner has a personality all its own. It can be experienced outside of perfect tide conditions and still be amazing, with schools of fish very abundant.

German Channel

German Channel was built in the 1900's, when the German administration blasted through the reef to complete the natural channel and allow ships, primarily carrying bauxite, to pass from the southern islands of Peleliu and Angaur to Koror. Today, it is used as passage through the southwestern barrier reef to many of the outer dive sites. At 10 feet (3 meters), the man-made channel is too shallow to dive and really does not have much to look

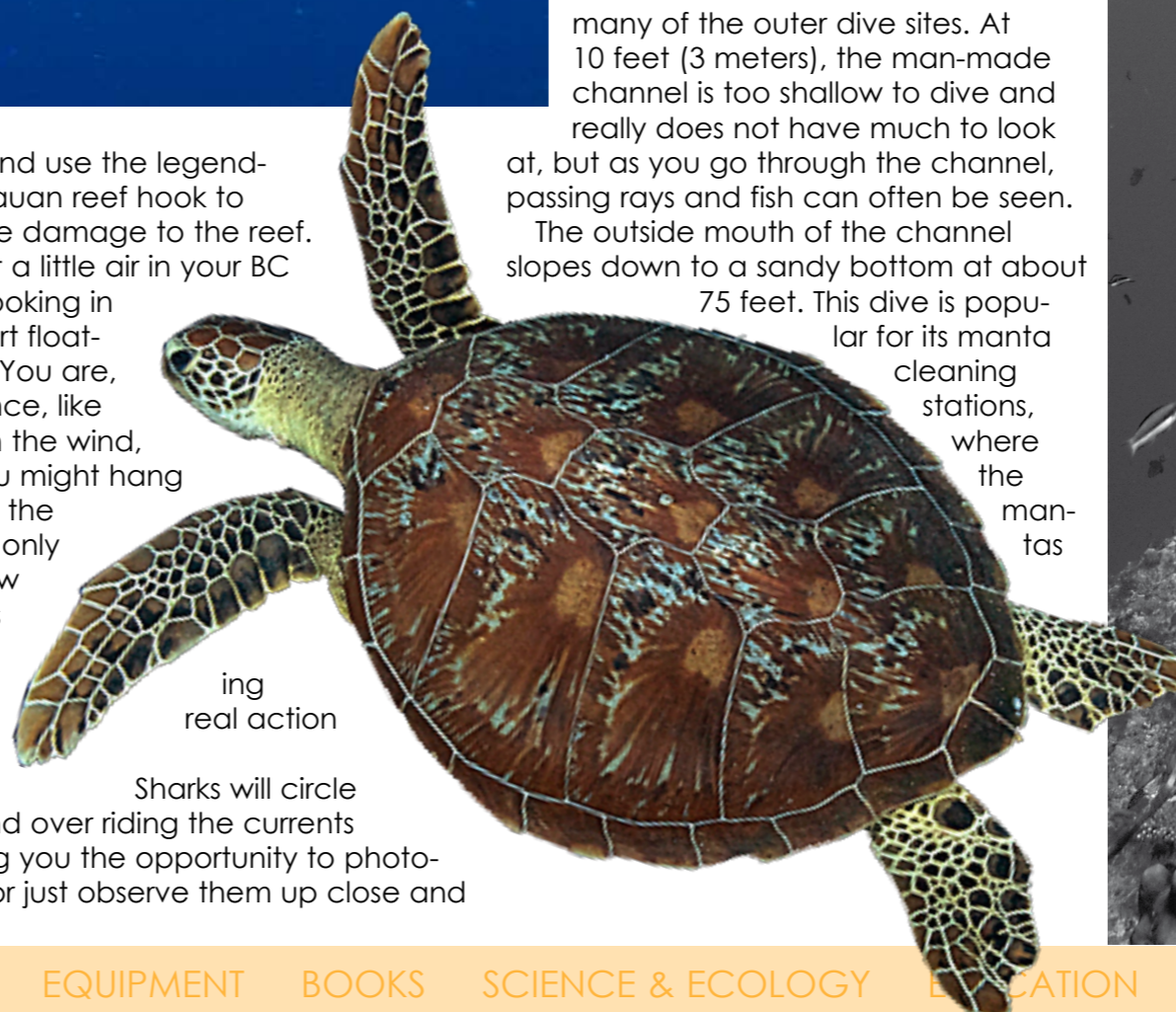
at, but as you go through the channel, passing rays and fish can often be seen.

The outside mouth of the channel slopes down to a sandy bottom at about

75 feet. This dive is popular

for its manta cleaning stations, where the mantas

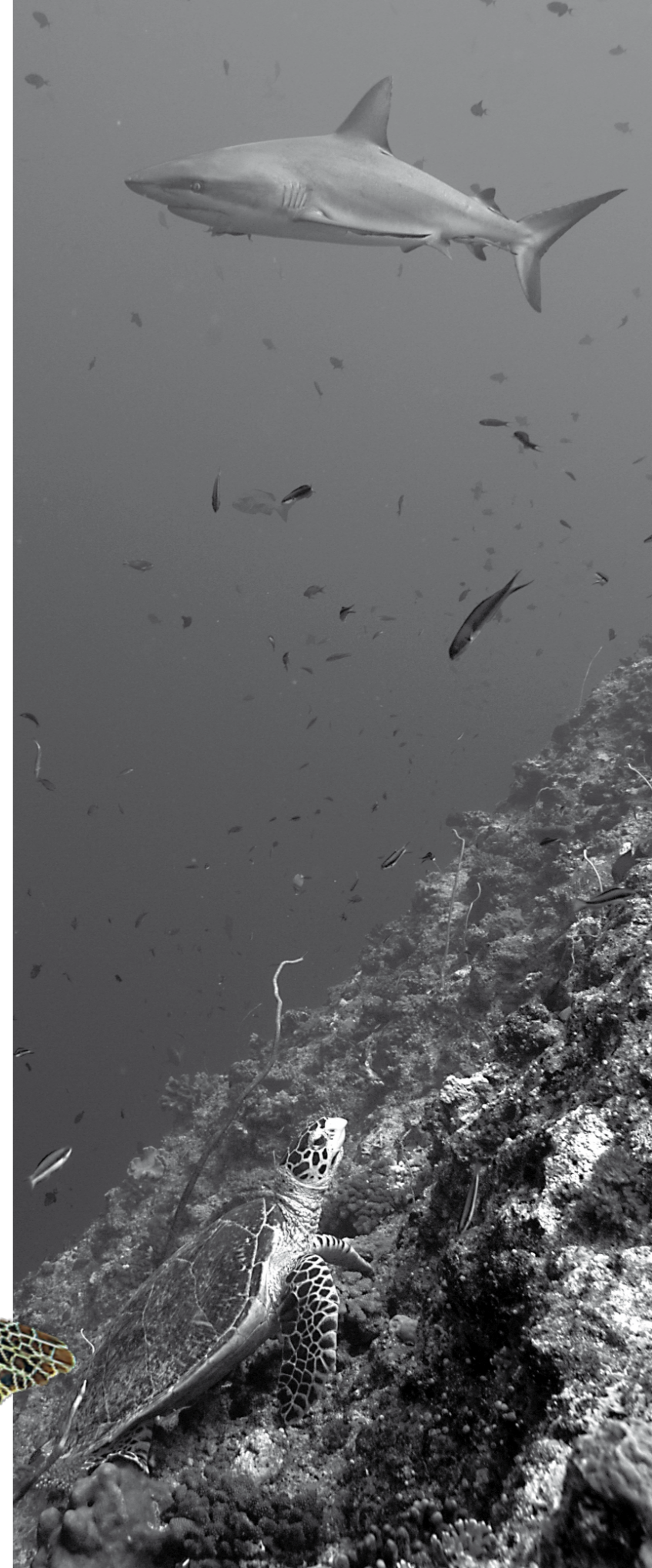
edge and use the legendary Palauan reef hook to minimize damage to the reef. You put a little air in your BC after hooking in and start floating up, You are, in essence, like a kite in the wind, and you might hang there in the current only for a few minutes before watching the starts.

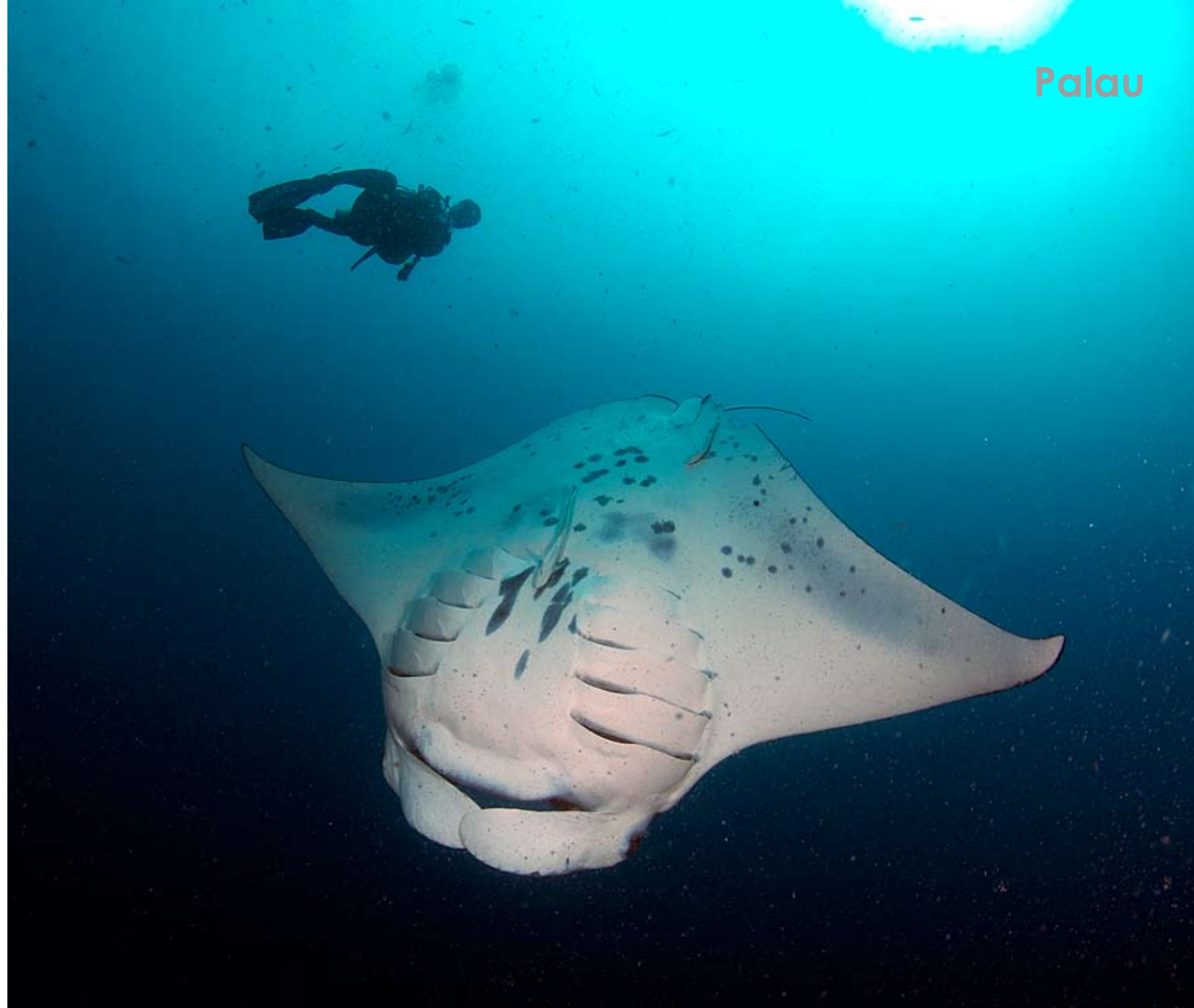


Sharks will circle over and over riding the currents allowing you the opportunity to photograph or just observe them up close and



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Resting whitetip shark; Blacktip shark roams the seas around Palau; Sea turtle rests on reef as reef shark passes overhead; Soaring sea turtle displays an intricate shell pattern





Schooling jacks and trevally meet under the waves; Sometimes mantas will let you swim with them at a leisurely pace

come in, sometimes in large numbers. Divers will group in semi-circles around the cleaning stations, being treated to swooping and friendly mantas stopping to get cleaned.

Occasionally, reef shark come to be cleaned by cleaner wrasse, too. Sometimes, the mantas will allow you to swim along with them and go at a leisurely pace, allowing a truly moving

experience often for as long as your air and your legs will allow you.

Schooling fish being chased by grey reef sharks is an additional attraction to the mantas. You can also see other kinds of rays including stingrays, spotted eagle rays and ornate eagle rays.

Ulong Channel

Ulong Channel is a cut in the reef near

Ulong Island, which was featured on the TV show, *Survivor*. Palau Island is a popular lunch stop for divers before or after diving the channel.

Diving Ulong Channel starts with a short drift wall that leads to the opening of the channel. You make your way across the opening where you will be treated to spectacular table corals in sizes and shapes not seen in many



Swooping manta ray with mandibles outstretched; Various table corals decorate the reef

always a lot of fish life in the channel, a large congregation of groupers live there and will move out of your way as you fly down the channel. Be sure to follow your guide the first time, as there are plenty of triggerfish around



Pufferfish camouflage blends in with table coral

in a few areas, but the guides will keep you at a safe distance to enjoy the ride.

The best time to dive Ulong Channel is on an incoming tide and preferably when the incoming current is strong. Ulong Channel offers some unique experiences that separate it from other dive sites in Palau. When on Ulong Island enjoy the great natural beauty and the ruins of an ancient Palauan village.



places.

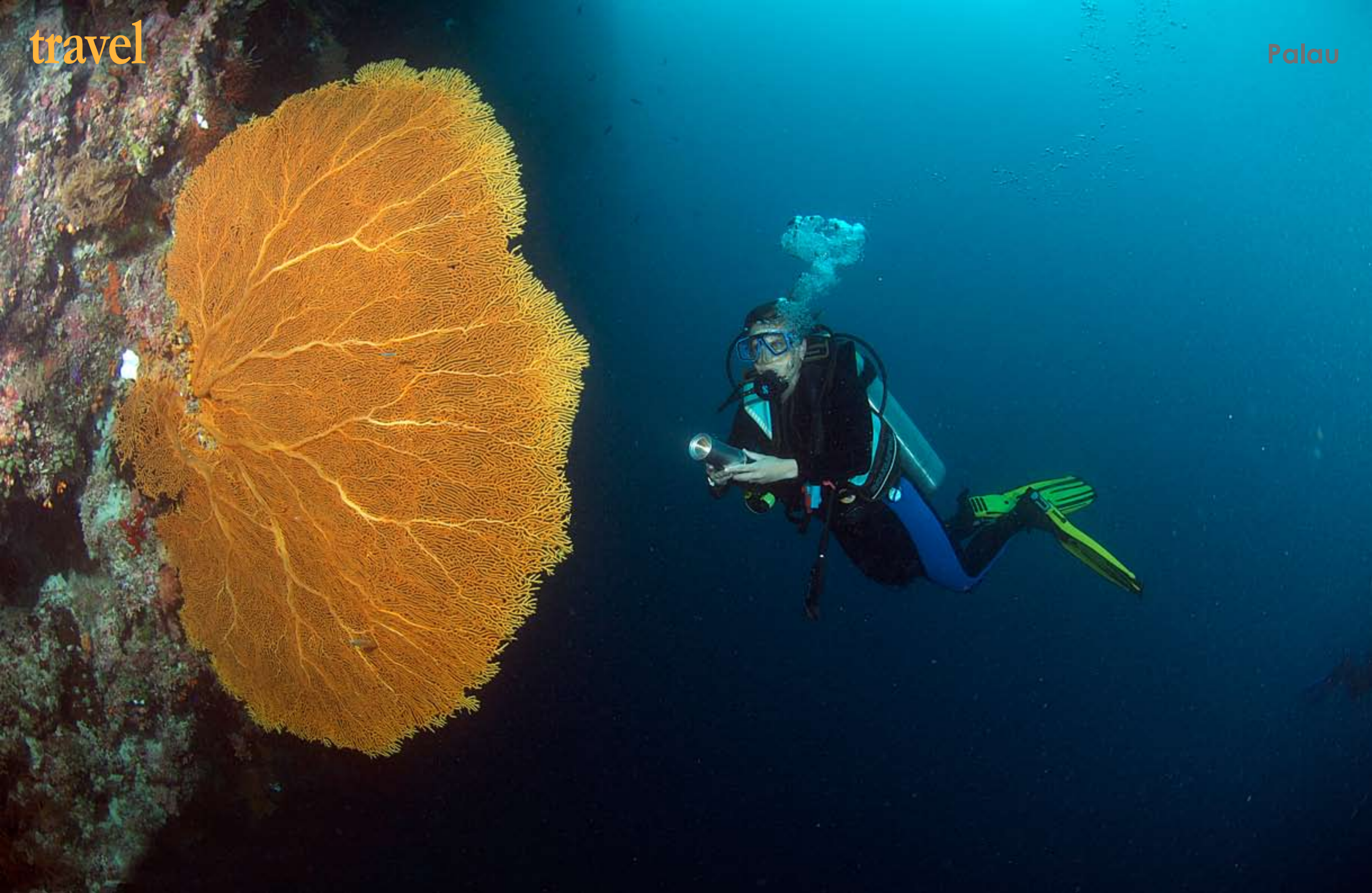
There is a spot to view the many sharks that gather at the opening to the channel. When the current is strong, you can use a reef hook to stay in place and have sharks pass by

incredibly close.

After enjoying the concentration of sharks at the mouth you make your way down the channel on what can be a fast and exciting drift dive, depending on the current. There is

travel

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Model and stingless jellies at Jellyfish Lake; Large fan coral with featherstars; Large grouper resting on sea floor; Cover of Essick's book, *Beginnings*

PREVIOUS PAGE: Divers inspects huge, brightly colored fan coral

photographs will be worth another thousand words in your own mind and will inspire you to come to Palau and see it for yourself. I recommend contacting Sam's

Tours if you plan on visiting Palau.

Originally from Chicago, Illinois, Todd Essick began his career as a photojournalist in Miami, Florida, which led to his work as an internationally published underwater photographer and writer. He has authored a book of underwater photography entitled, *Beginnings: Goddesses, Sirens and Mermaids*. For more information, visit: www.essickphoto.com ■



of millennia have completely lost their ability to sting because they have not had to fight off predators. Instead, they float their days away leisurely, pulsating gently from one side of the lake to the other while catching and following the sun's rays and farming their own food supply of algae.

The effort to get to the lake adds to the allure of going there. A short but steep hike up and down to get to the lake is part of the adventure. The view of the lake before descending down to the water's edge is breath taking.

These are just a few of the places in Palau that have inspired and excited me back to the days when I started diving. Palau offers so much more than I have been able to relate in the few words I have written. I hope the included

Jellyfish Lake
This lake is a spiritual experience, for sure. I was completely moved the first time I went there. I knew I would have to photograph a series of underwater fine art after spending time interacting with the jellies, and watching others with child like fascination embrace them.

I was lucky enough to meet a Japanese dive guide who offered to model for me at the lake. I created pictures that I hope capture the feeling of the connection we all share with nature and the sea.

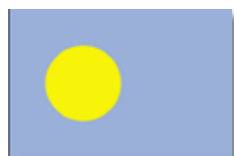
The lake is only open for snorkeling, no scuba equipment is allowed in the lake. Jellyfish Lake is a landlocked body of water with a large population of defenseless jellyfish that over the course



fact file



Palau



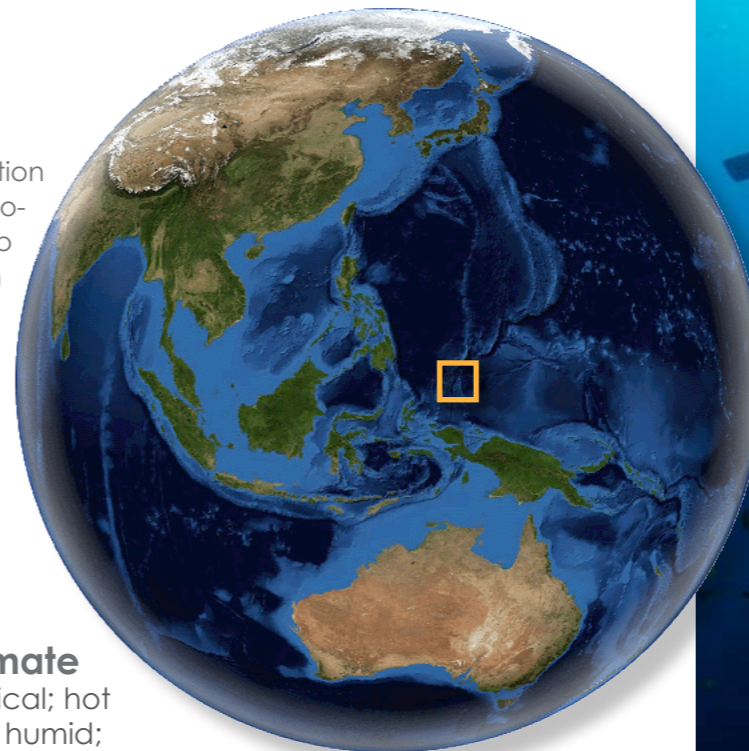
SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History After three decades as part of the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific under US administration, this westernmost cluster of the Caroline Islands opted for independence in 1978 rather than join the Federated States of Micronesia. A Compact of Free Association with the US was approved in 1986 but not ratified until 1993. It entered into force the following year when the islands gained independence. Government: constitutional government in free association with the US; the Compact of Free Association entered into force on 1 October 1994. Capital: Melekeok



Geography PalauOceania, group of islands in the North Pacific Ocean, south-east of the Philippines. Terrain: varying geologically from the high, mountainous main island of Babelthiap to low, coral islands usually fringed by large barrier reefs. Coastline: 1,519 km. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Mount Ngerchelchuus 242m. Note: westernmost archipelago in the Caroline chain, consists of six island groups totaling more than 300 islands; includes World War II battleground of Beliliou (Peleliu) and world-famous rock islands.

consists primarily of tourism, subsistence agriculture, and fishing. The government is the major employer of the work force relying heavily on financial assistance from the US. The Compact of Free Association with the US, entered into after the end of the UN trusteeship on 1 October 1994, provided Palau with up to \$700 million in US aid for the following 15 years in return for furnishing military facilities. Business and tourist arrivals numbered 85,000 in 2007. The population enjoys a per capita income roughly 50% higher than that of the Philippines and



RIGHT: Location of Palau on global map
BELOW: Location of Palau on map of North Pacific
THIS PAGE: Underwater scenes from Palau

Climate

tropical; hot and humid; wet season May to November. Natural hazards: typhoons (June to December)

Environmental issues

inadequate facilities for disposal of solid waste; threats to the marine ecosystem from sand and coral dredging, illegal fishing practices, and overfishing. Palau is party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Wetlands, Whaling

Economy

The economy consists primarily of tourism, subsistence agriculture, and fishing. The government is the major employer of the work force relying heavily on financial assistance from the US. The Compact of Free Association with the US, entered into after the end of the UN trusteeship on 1 October 1994, provided Palau with up to \$700 million in US aid for the following 15 years in return for furnishing military facilities. Business and tourist arrivals numbered 85,000 in 2007. The population enjoys a per capita income roughly 50% higher than that of the Philippines and much of Micronesia. Long-run prospects for the key tourist sector have been greatly bolstered by the expansion of air travel in the Pacific, the rising prosperity of leading East Asian countries, and the willingness of foreigners to finance infrastructure development.. Natural resources: forests, minerals (especially gold), marine products, deep-seabed minerals. Agriculture: coconuts, copra, cassava (tapioca), sweet potatoes; fish. Industry: tourism, craft items (from shell, wood, pearls), construction, garment making.

Currency U.S. dollar is used

Population 20,879 (July 2010 est.) Ethnic groups: Palauan (Micronesian with Malayan and Melanesian admixtures) 69.9%, Filipino 15.3%, Chinese 4.9%, other Asian 2.4%, white 1.9%, Carolinian 1.4%, other Micronesian 1.1%, other or unspecified 3.2% (2000 census) Religions: Roman Catholic 41.6%, Protestant 23.3%, Modekngai 8.8% (indigenous to Palau), Seventh-Day Adventist 5.3%, Jehovah's



Witness 0.9%, Latter-Day Saints 0.6%, other 3.1%, unspecified or none 16.4% (2000 census)

Language Palauan 64.7% official in all islands except Sonsoral (Sonsoralese and English are official), Tobi (Tobi and English are official), and Angaur (Angaur, Japanese, and English are official), Filipino 13.5%, English 9.4%, Chinese 5.7%, Carolinian 1.5%, Japanese 1.5%, other Asian 2.3%, other languages 1.5% (2000 census)

Hyperbaric Chambers Belau National Hospital, Koror

Websites Palau Tourism Authority www.visit-palau.com

