



# Palau

*Pearl of the West Pacific*

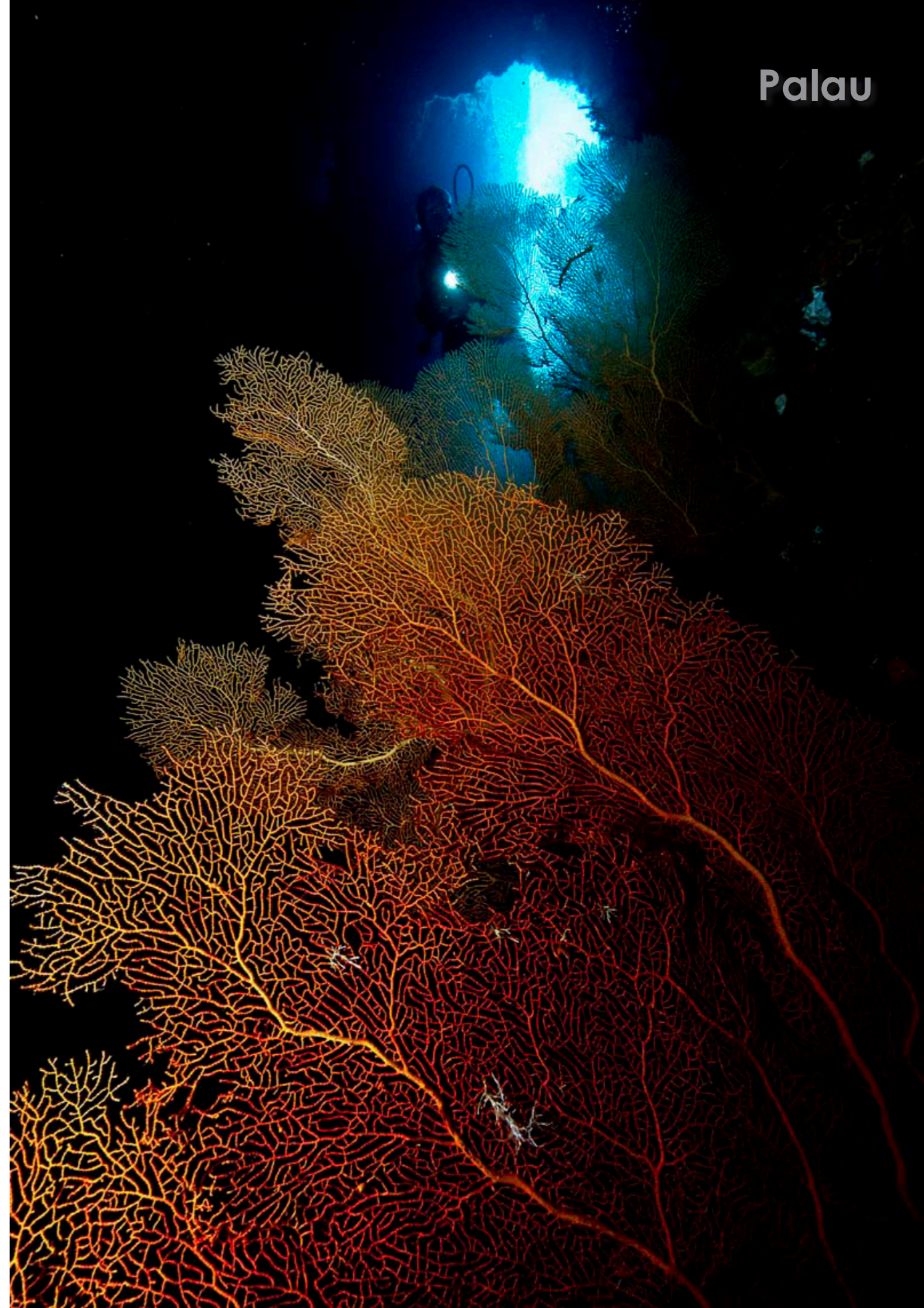
Palau, the pearl of the West Pacific, has enchanted many an underwater adventurer. Nestled in the archipelago of the Caroline Islands, it boasts one of the richest most diverse underwater ecosystems on Earth. To each who visit, Palau is personal, leaving lasting impressions and profound experiences with her guests. So special is Palau, that we have not just one but three enthusiastic accounts from this magical realm at the edge of Micronesia. What follows are tales of discovery...

Text and photos by Michael AW

# Palau Pleasures

—A Photographer's Playground





Appearing like nebulous emeralds adrift over an expanse of a deep blue ocean, Palau is richly endowed with some of the world's most stunning and unique terrain above and below the sea. Geologically, the islands are pinnacles of an undersea ridge of volcanic mountains, part of the "Pacific Ring of Fire" known for its violent subterranean activity. Its vast lagoon is sheltered by a 105-km-long barrier reef, which extends down the west from

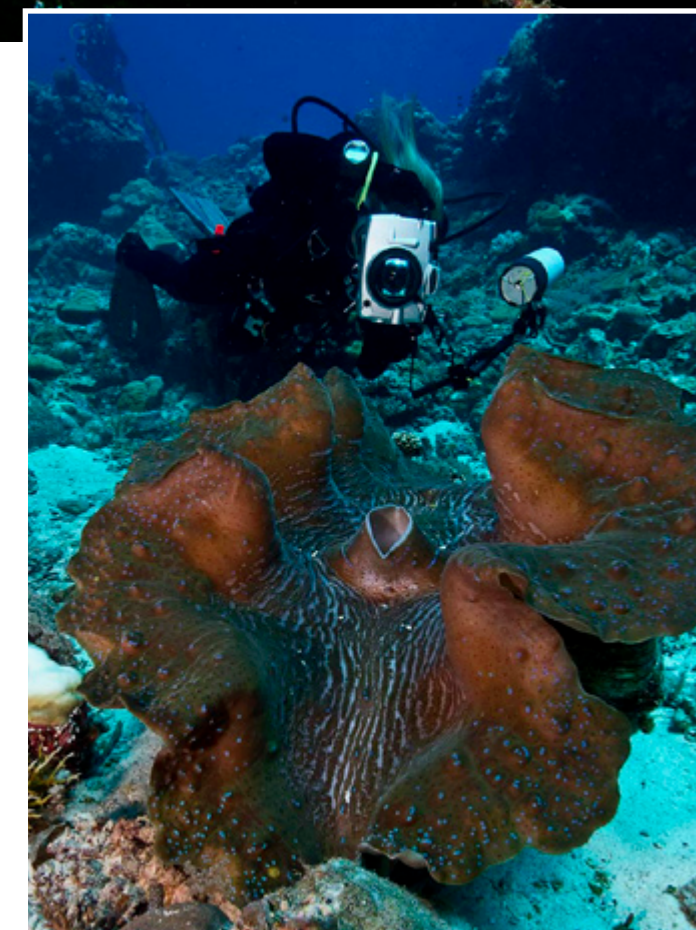
Kossol to Peleliu sheltering over 200 mushroom shaped islets— These Rock Islands are significant of Palau's natural wonder. The bases of these rounded limestone isles have been undercut by eons of water and biological process, creating an optical illusion of them being afloat on the turquoise lagoon. Among the labyrinth of twisting channels, white sand beaches, underwater caves and secluded marine lakes are nurseries for juvenile animals.

Situated closest to the Coral Triangle, the reefs of Palau profuse with wealth of over 1,500 species of fishes and equally astounding in coral diversity. Reef flats plummet quickly to depth beyond 2,000m. Blue holes, huge caverns and immense growths of sessile life are easily accessible in clear water with visibility averaging 30m. Vast number of sharks, mantas, eagle rays, turtles, dolphins and migratory pelagic convene at a unique crossroad of world's three major ocean currents. Because the best dive sites are located outside the lagoon, it is wise to choose a seven-day liveaboard to dive the best sites and the best times without the crowd and long boat rides from resort-based

Underwater photographer in split under-over water shot with Fish'n'Fins dive boat; Diver in cave filled with large fan corals. PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver and playful sea turtle



Luscious soft and hard coral gardens decorate the reefs off Palau (above); Diver peeks through reef window covered with coral life



operations. Albeit many others, three 'must dive sites' that are distinctive include Blue Corner, Chandelier Cave and the enchanting Jellyfish Lake. Situated off edge of Ngemelis Island, Blue Corner is the epitome of adrenaline diving, sensory overload in local terminology. Abundant in shark action, the site teems not just with large school of Moorish idols, but Napoleon wrasse, groupers, barracudas, grey reef and whitetip sharks, turtles, moray eels, jacks, mantas and huge marble rays. Especially when the current is running, the action seems endless and electrifying. The reef starts at about 12m, jutting out sharply into the sea before

Underwater photographer and giant clam

dropping abruptly into the deep abyss. Gorgonian fans and large plate corals are also prolific. Over a seven-day trip on the *Ocean Hunter III* run by Tova and Navot, you will dive the Blue Corner and other signature sites of Palau at the best time.

If you have ever been curious about cave diving, the Chandelier Cave is the place to start. It is safe and one of the most unique marine caves easily accessible to open water divers with large entrance into the four inter-connecting relatively large chambers lying beneath a Rock Island.

The cave was once an air-filled cavern, possibly millions of years ago

when the sea was much shallower. The entrance is at 8m below the surface and the short tunnel opens up to a huge chamber with a ceiling of stately stalactites and clear water creating an illusion of endless visibility.

Farther back in the deeper recesses, the chambers are filled with a sparkling field of stalactites, delicate calcite crystal mirrored upon the lens of still clear water evoke a feeling of neither up nor down. Even with dive lights, the senses are easily tricked, until you break surface to find air-filled chambers dripping with twinkling stone formation in yesteryears.

The Chandelier Cave is world renowned and has been featured



Underwater photographer and swimming nautilus



**QUICK GUIDE:**

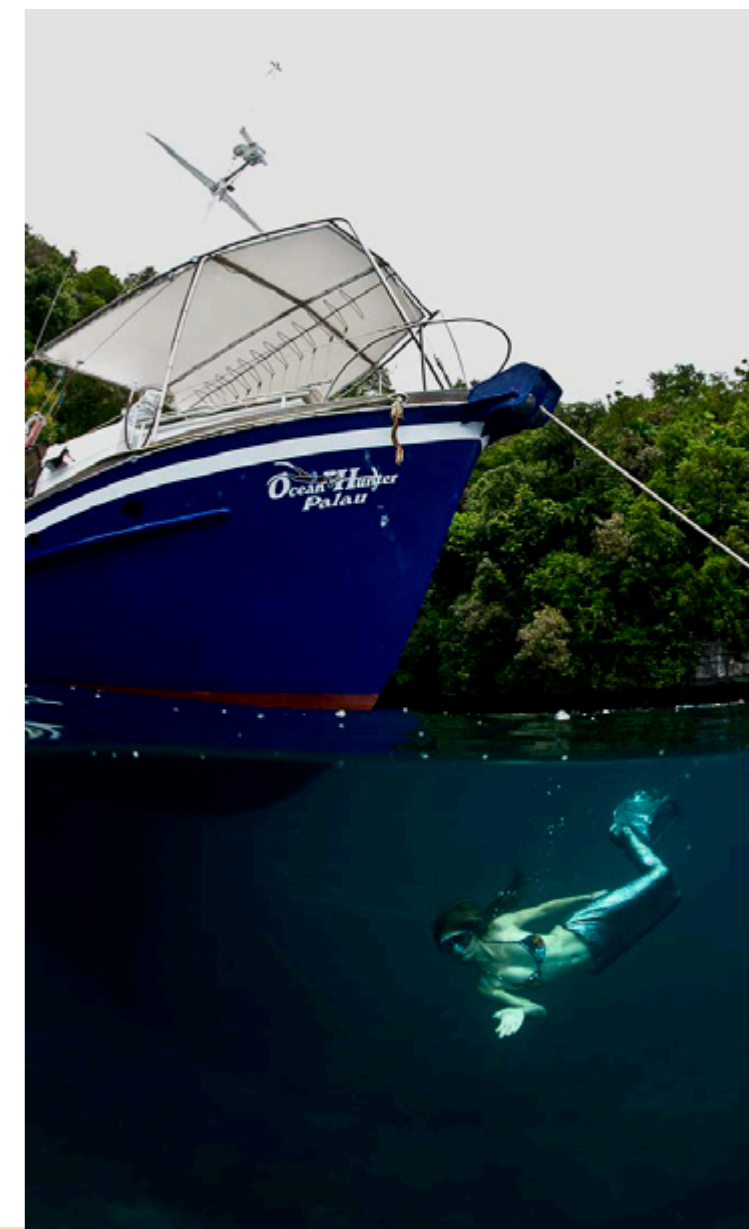
Water temperature: 75°F average

Visibility: 50-120 feet

Best time to go: Generally Palau is dive able all year round but the best time to visit is January to April.

Rainy season: Between July to October

Highlights: Shark mating season is from February to May. Moorish Idol migration is known to be in March. Like in Tahiti, the Groupers spawn in May and June. ■



in *National Geographic*, *Conte Nest Traveller* and glossy lifestyle publications.

Land-locked marine lakes, once linked to the sea are breeding ground for endemic specie of jellyfishes, and rare critters. A short hike up a tropical rainforest easily reaches an uplifted lake that is home to millions of sting-less

jellyfish. The lake is a surrealistic milieu and hauntingly beautiful. While Palau is known for its fast fish action there are many small critters like squat lobsters, gobies, worms, and nudibranch to amuse the macro enthusiast as well.

At several sites, the majestic mandarinfish predictably comes out each evening showing off their courting and

mating antics are subject for the keen photographers. Hanging out with the sharks and jacks at Blue corner, venturing deep into the inner recesses of the Chandelier caves and swimming in the half-light environment of the jellyfish lake fringe by lush rain forest are all part of Palau marvelous diving experience. ■

*Author Note: in my opinion, the best way to dive Palau is with the MV Ocean Hunter I and III; both vessels are rated among the best in the world. The service and standards are superb, and they get you to the each site at the optimal time.*

Freediving "mermaid" caught on film frolicking under the *Ocean Hunter I*

