



Palau

Pearl of the West Pacific

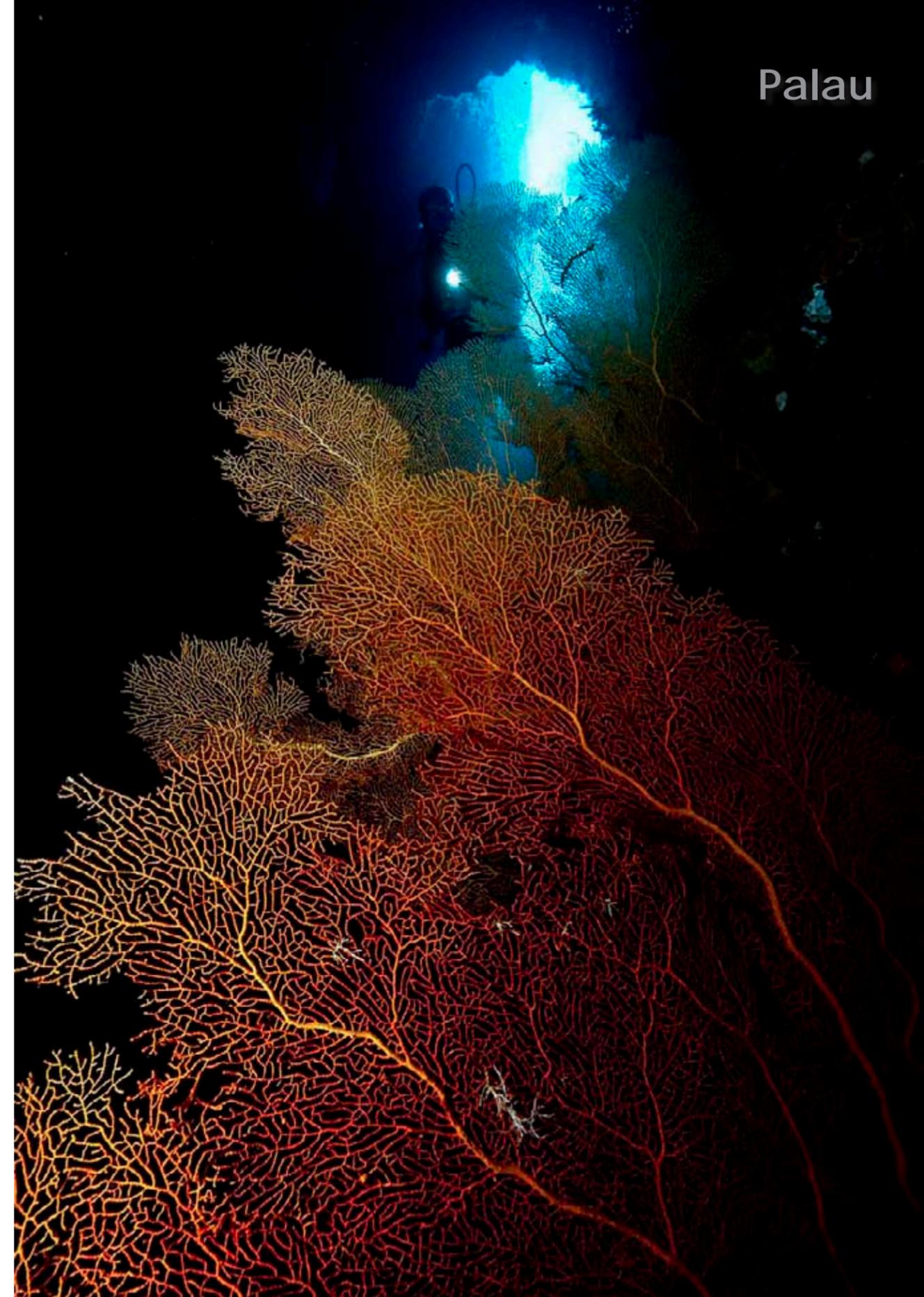
Palau, the pearl of the West Pacific, has enchanted many an underwater adventurer. Nestled in the archipelago of the Caroline Islands, it boasts one of the richest most diverse underwater ecosystems on Earth. To each who visit, Palau is personal, leaving lasting impressions and profound experiences with 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'nFins 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



Underwater photographer and giant clam

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

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:

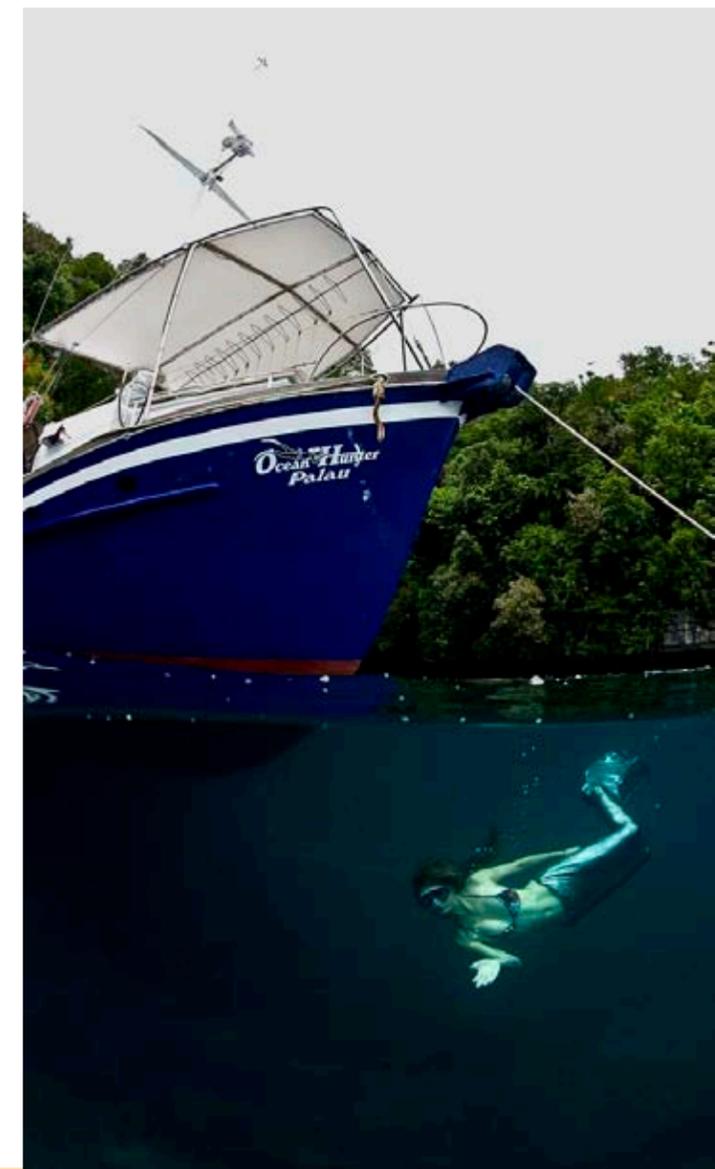
Water temperature: 75°F average

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*

Palau's *Diving & Dining Fiesta Diversity* Treasures

STUART WESTMORLAND

Text by Svetlana Murashkina. Edited by Gunild Symes
Photos by Svetlana Murashkina, Tim Rock, and Stuart Westmorland

On the table, there was an invitation in a pale yellow envelope, soft to the touch. It read, "Palau Pacific Resort and Fish'n'Fins have the honor to invite you to dinner, *Fiesta Diversity*."

And this was just our first morning in Palau! A fiesta diversity is exactly what was promised by Tova Bornovski of the Fish'n'Fins dive center, with whom our

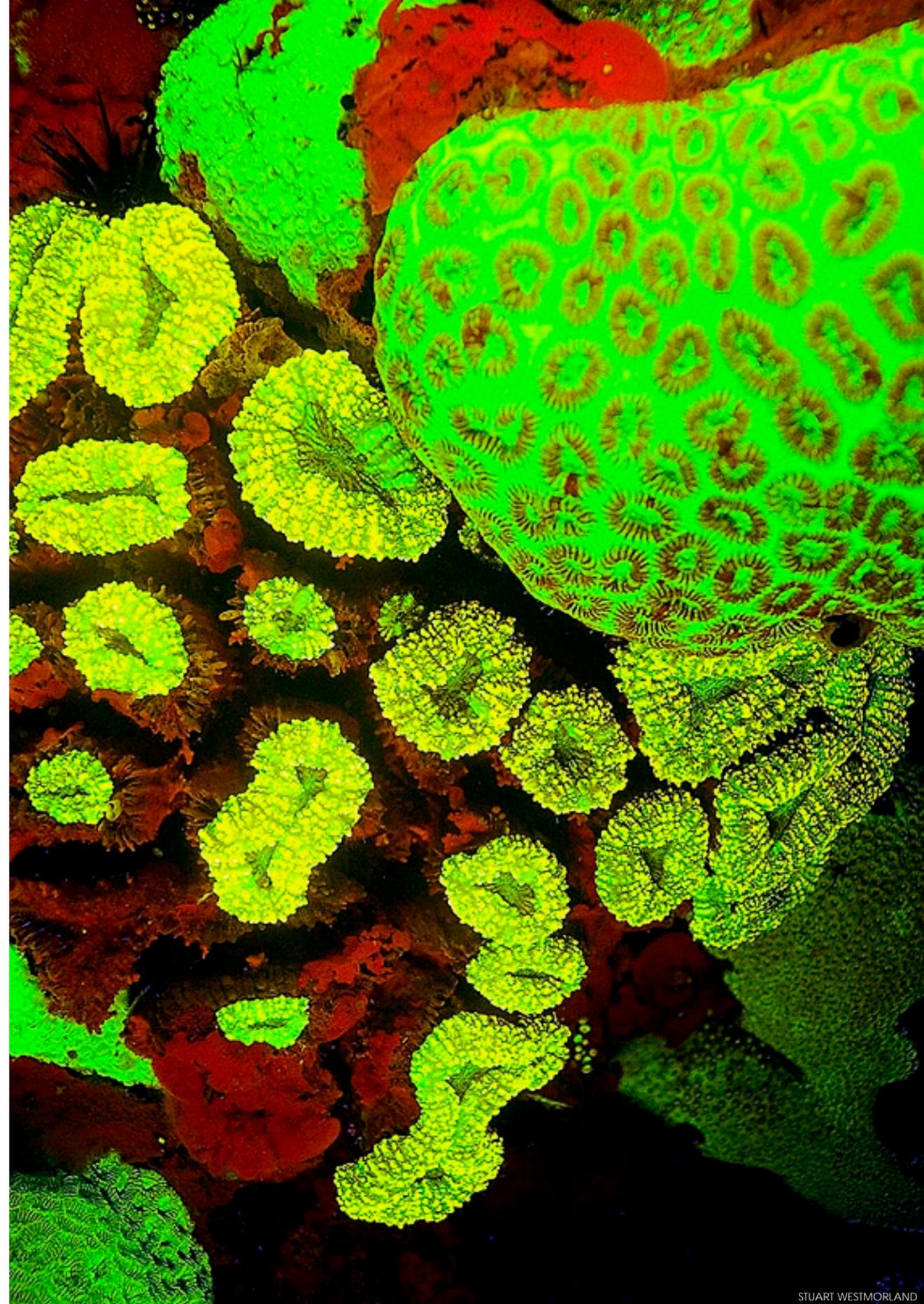
group was going to dive. However, we had yet to gain our bearings. It was not surprising after such a long flight to lose orientation in time and space. Our flights took us from Moscow to Doha to Manila to Koror—a total of 16 hours in the air, plus time waiting for transfers.

Outside, we heard the characteristic metallic zing-zong sounds of air cylinders being loaded by a Japanese dive center at a nearby resort. They were going for a dive from the pier opposite our balcony. But we were not in a hurry, because we were going to be taken

out diving by Fish'n'Fins.

Instead, we thoroughly investigated the resort, Palau Pacific Resort. We saw the footpaths among the thickets; the tennis courts (which were too darn hot); the remarkable beauty of the flowers; the swimming pool and bar; the beach of white sand and palm trees; and the ocean. It's what paradise probably looks like.

We waited in great anticipation of this "Fiesta" to which we were invited, for on each day planned, we were not just going to a new dive site to enjoy a



STUART WESTMORLAND

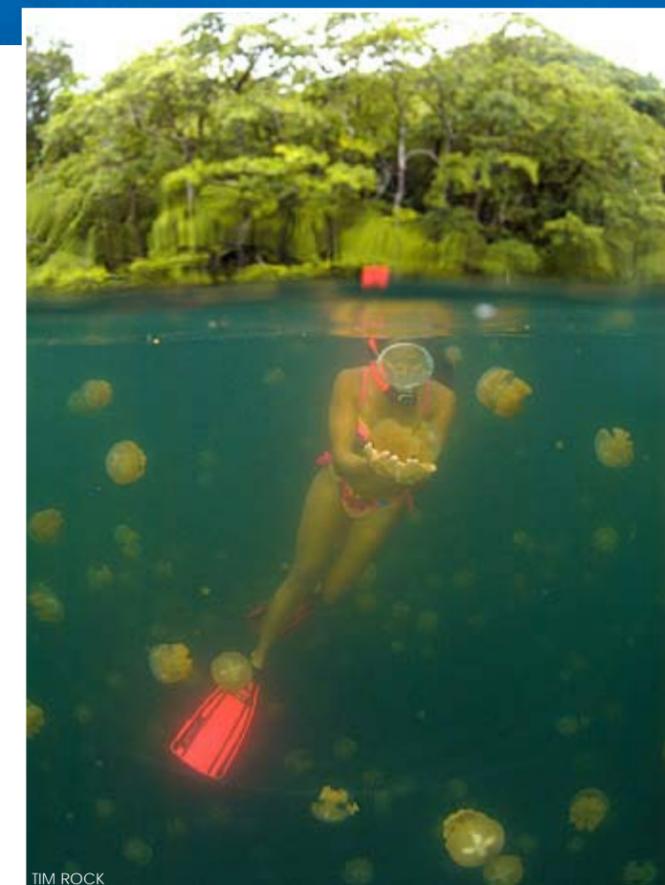
Huge school of barracuda (left); Phosphorescent green and yellow hard coral (right)
PREVIOUS PAGE: Snorkeler at The Arch, one of the 200 Rock Islands in Palau



TIM ROCK



TIM ROCK



TIM ROCK

LEFT TO RIGHT: Snorkeler drifts with stingless jellyfish at Jellyfish Lake; Blacktip shark patrols the waters around Palau; Intimate view of the Rock Islands which seem to hover over the sea

new diving experience, but also each evening, we would be trying a new cuisine. We knew that scuba diving in Palau was legendary—it is, undoubtedly, one of the best dive locations in the world. But, as one of my old college buddies once aptly pointed out, “Food is included in my list of sensual pleasures.” And why not in Palau, too?

Diving and Dining

The organizer of the event, which will most likely become a most popular attraction, was Tova Harrel-Bornovsky of the Fish’n’Fins dive center. Partners in the program included the Wine Company Shimbros, Hotel Landmark Marina, Palau Pacific Resort and several of Palau’s best restaurants—all supported Tova’s project.

The basic premise of the project is to provide opportunities for guests—after visiting various dive sites (wrecks, sharks,

caves, coral gardens, blue holes)—to be able to enjoy a gourmet dinner each evening at a different restaurant on the island. The menu would be composed of local products and culinary gifts of the islands, accompanied by complementary wines from the Pacific rim region. All this was scheduled for September. And here, we finally were. So let’s dive in...

Diving on Palau

The western Caroline Islands, which host the state of Palau, are situated close to the triangle with the greatest biodiversity on Earth. Here, there are 1,500 species of fish, five species of sea turtles and 700 species of corals and anemones. There are whitetip, blacktip, gray reef, bull, leopard and hammerhead sharks as well as manta rays and Mandarin fish. Dive sites on Palau are very well described,

known to millions of people due to articles and photographs in the media. So, in this article, it will be personal feelings, which are unique to each individual, that will be presented.

Naturally, we wanted to dive with Fish’n’Fins. It was the first dive center on Palau, founded in 1972 by the famous local diver, Francis Toribiong (see the profile article on Toribiong in this issue). He was one of the pioneer divers who discovered all the local dive sites. The Bornovski family (Tova and Navot) are the current owners and managers of the dive center, which has been in operation (with Francis) since 1986.

When the young sailors, Navot and Tova, first came to the island, they worked on the first dive liveboard in Palau called, *San Tamarin*. Then, Navot returned home to Israel to continue his education at the university. He received

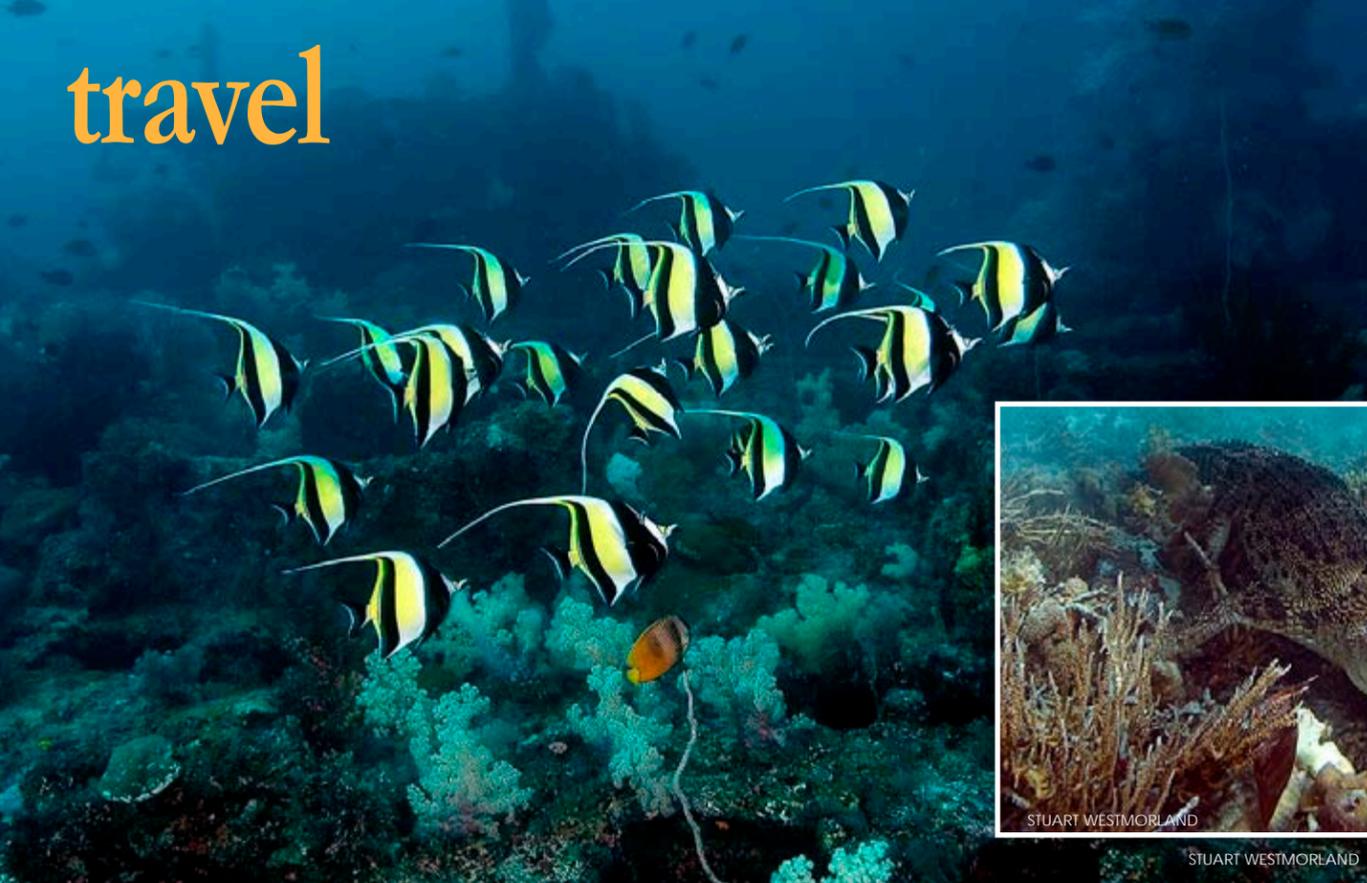
a diploma in the field of ship building and mechanical engineering.

The family decided to develop a dive business in Palau (*in Heaven!*) and bought a boat in Florida, the *Ocean Hunter*. They took both their children (a girl of four and a boy of three) and headed out to sea on the boat. Navot was the captain, Tova, the sailor, cook and everything else. The journey took nine months. When they got to Palau, they operated the boat themselves, and Tova did the cooking until they trained a new cook how to create their culinary specialties.

By the way, it is very common for Tova and Navot to teach and train staff—it is their manner of conducting business. This practice is especially valuable in Palau in terms of developing occupations for the local population. Initially, very few Palauans did scuba diving. But

Palau

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Schooling sargentfish;
Alligator; Neon green
and yellow coral



Fish'n'Fins was constantly doing orientation programs for the local community to train, certify, and often in the summer, invite the classmates of their children to come diving with them.

Now the dive center (which started in 1998) has nearly 50 employees. The staff each have multi-specialities, so employees can step in for one another. The staff includes a manager, marketing officer, accountant, drivers, guides, dive guides and motorists. Absolutely everyone, including the cafe workers are educated in safety rules and first aid.

The local dive guides are grown from zero to PADI divers—some have already reached instructor level. All the captains are also local, starting from scratch and educated to captain. Training and diving personnel are educated by Navot. He is a PADI instructor and the captain of the ship. He is also a technical diver.

Indeed, Fish'n'Fins provides

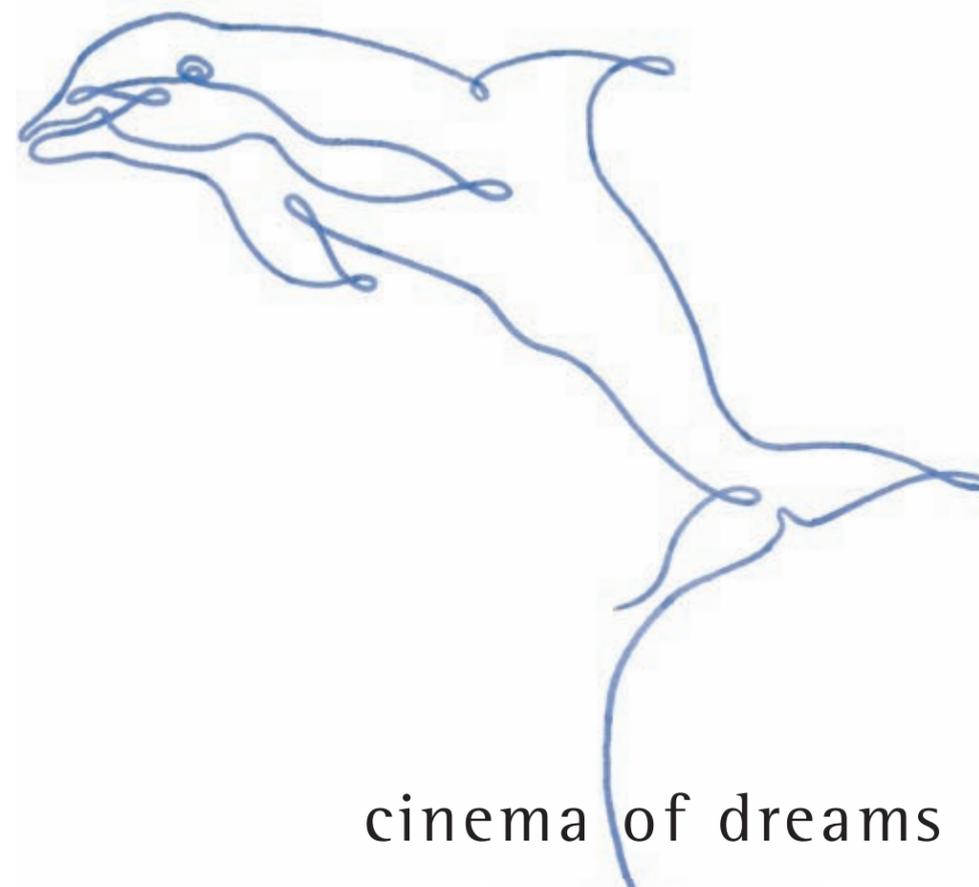
support for technical divers. Few *techies* come to Palau, but when they do, they are happy. The depth, wrecks, organization and great opportunities are here—everything that techies may want or need.

On the other hand, Tova never obtained a significant number of diving certifications despite the fact that she has thousands of dives under her belt. Her strengths are in commanding the general organization of the operation and managing the business as well as speaking several languages. In the dive center, they speak Palauan, English, German, French, Spanish, Japanese and Russian. Tova personally speaks many of these.

And, of course, her café is a winner, where delicious food is cooked as well as terrific *lunch boxes* prepared so divers can enjoy snacks between dives. There's also *real* Italian coffee here (the only such place in the



silver



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Clouds of stingless jellyfish pass under the rays of the sun at Jellyfish Lake

Palau

Islands of Palau, especially during low tide. All the local skippers are very experienced navigators.

Ocean Hunter III is a luxury yacht for 16 guests, designed by Navot, based on his own experience. It is on this vessel that a few times a year they send expeditions to the remote south western island.

On some of the islands, there are only a few people residing. Others are generally uninhabited, so that nature on these islands is really untouched.

Dinner on the beach

After a long transition to the tropical climate, we decided to go to an island nearby where in the evenings one will find tables, candles and torches, and bamboo leaves serving as napkins. The white, white sand,

waves, warm water... Yes, this was paradise!

Cave Candelabra. The next day, we went to Cave Candelabra. Through the 130-meter-long tunnel, leaving

the deep karst base island, Ngerchaol, with caution, we floated into the cavity of crystal clear water. Here, it was like a castle! The stratagems that decorated the chambers, made it look like a cathedral by Gaudi. It is undoubtedly one of the most loved dive sites of Palau, and very well-known, thanks to the spectacular photographs taken by renown underwater photographer, David Doubilet, using dramatic lighting. Such equipment, by the way, is available at Fish'n'Fins.

The following day, we went to dive a new drop off. Along a stunning wall, we descended down slowly to 30 feet, to admire a bizarrely overgrown screen and frame. Everywhere on this trip, the water temperature is always 29°C. I casually lifted my head and saw that a very small shark (about 50-70 centimeters, no larger) was swimming almost straight up! I could not pull my eyes away. The shark reached the surface, looked up a little and turned down. She did something there, and then, once again went back to the surface. This was the first time I had ever seen this behavior.

German Channel. This channel is marked in my logbook with six exclamation points! The channel was dug by the Germans in the beginning of the 20th century in order to facilitate navigation. We saw sharks, including leopard, and a huge school of barracuda. Mantas and rays could be found at a cleaning point where they awaited to be pecked free of algae by cleaner shrimp and fish. Mantas could be seen even from the dive boat!

In the evening, we had dinner at a very cosy small "home-style" Japanese restaurant, whose

whole state, yes, probably, as well as nearby islands).

Dive sites

Almost all the dive sites are reachable in 20-40 minutes by

boat. Every morning, Tova, like a general preparing for battle, commands the boats, which are often at odds. Part of the job requires her to coordinate the vessels: one goes to the wrecks;

the other through the Milky Way for snorkeling; the third, to Blue Corner, and so on.

For more distant or long trips, they use a fleet. Their first boat, *Ocean Hunter I*, is a veteran

(but still in excellent shape) and has room for six people. The construction of the boat allows it to operate close to the reefs and walls, which is important when navigating between the Rock

TIM ROCK





CLOCKWISE: *Ocean Hunter III* caters to luxury travellers and divers; Graceful young dancers entertain guests at Palau Pacific Resort; Delicious, vibrant dishes prepared for guests; Tranquil seaside accommodations

owners were good friends of Tova's. There was, of course, the freshest sashimi, a salad of red and green papaya (such as I have never eaten before), prawns in sweet and sour sauce, tofu and lamb. And for dessert—fruit.

This family has lived on the island for 45 years. They have their own home recipes, and there is a plantation where they grow organic fruits and vegetables.

Incidentally, when Palau was under Japanese control, there was a plantation of pineapples and even a plant to process them. Now Americans are pretty happy with Hawaiian pineapples and do not import pineapples from Palau. These fruits cannot be preserved for a long time, but they are delicious!

Jellyfish Lake. I'd read about the lake and saw the sea of images, but the gentle touching of the jellyfish cannot be described in words or photographs—you have to feel it. To get there, we had to walk right through the mangroves, along the narrow rather steep trail, slide down the wooden walkways and jump into the blue turquoise water. Jellyfishes. Thousands of them. Basically, they are light golden honey orange



in color (*Mastigias papua*) or white and transparent (*Aurelia aurita*)—very small, with thin circular lace-like edges. The small were very small, the big, very big—pulsating, moving, floating... Most importantly, over the millennia of isolation in the local lake, the jellyfish have lost the ability to sting!

That evening, the Palau Pacific Resort hosted a school band and a dancing troupe with graceful little girls wearing

swishing straw skirts. In the group was Gail, the youngest daughter of Tova and Navot. And then came the haute cuisine exclusively designed by Chef Alex Suzuki, who deserves distinction. Everything was perfect. The second course was a clear broth, or bouillon, of reef fish with mango leaves. I wanted to write "fresh fish" but realized it was pointless—there are no "unfresh" fish, or anything else not fresh on Palau. It just doesn't happen. And, of course, for dessert—Banana

Pancakes, served with California wine, Ironstone Cabernet Franc. The incentive behind the program, "Fiesta Diversity", was that when you pre-ordered dinners, you could receive them at special "package" prices.

Blue Hole and Blue Corner. These are the most famous dive sites on Palau—and it's all true. Here, I have nothing to add to the words of previous dive writers who usually describe the place as: "Blue Corner = many sharks", and vice versa. It was funny when the weight of a school of sharks shifted to the point where I hung very close to

the bottom, grasping a reef hook, they were soon replaced by a huge cloud of Napoleon wrasse, which, as noted by our dive guide Ken was, "good for all".

At Taj Indian Restaurant that evening, we enjoyed the atmosphere of an aristocratic Indian house of the early 20th century. The cheerful owner, Robert Ckaria, brought us traditional Indian tea with milk and spices; fresh bread with nuts and dry fruit; and kebabs straight from



the grill. We had to taste everything, for later that night, we'd be gone.

New feature

Another surprise came at the end of the trip. Recently, the airport opened a private waiting room called Ocean View Lounge. The basic idea is simple: avoid the hassles of a crowded terminal. The place is elegant and includes amenities: Internet, work desk, bar, showers—oh, and relaxing massage, a home theater with lean-back leather chairs. How do you get in? By booking through Fish'n'Fins, of course.

Afterthoughts

While writing about this trip, I remember that we did not dive on Peleliu, nor did we visit the Falls, nor did we reach the petroglyphs that can be seen on the rocks. We did not buy the traditional jewelry decorated with local coins made by the local woman, nor did we buy



All images this page by Svetlana Murashkina

the carved wooden paintings, worked on mahogany, that are produced by locals in prison at the center of Koror. We also did not get to see the pineapple plantations, nor the relics of the WWII still standing on the Rock Islands. One week was just not enough. ■

Svetlana Murashkina is a doctor of geographical science and editor of the Russian dive magazine, InVertum.

Palau Announces Massive Marine Sanctuary

Palau has declared that all of its territorial waters, an area encompassing more than 600,000 square kilometres, would be a sanctuary for whales, dolphins, dugongs, sharks and other species.

Text by Scott Bennett and Kelly LaClaire

On October 22, the Republic of Palau announced the establishment of a wildlife sanctuary for marine mammals in its waters. The Sanctuary, which covers more than 600,000 square kilometers (230,000 sq. miles), was unveiled during Japan's Ocean's Day—an event where representatives from all sectors, including governmental agencies, private sector groups as well as associations of science and industry, gathered to address the loss of ocean and coastal ecosystems. The sanctuary, which has served as the world's first shark preserve since 2009, now extends its protection to all whales, dolphins and dugongs.

"There will be no hunting or harassment of marine mammals and other species in our waters," said the Honourable Harry Fritz, minister of the environment, natural resources and tourism of the Republic of Palau.

"We urge other nations to join our efforts to protect whales, dolphins and other marine animals," Fritz said at a press conference during Oceans Day at the meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan.

"Palau now supports conserving marine mammals, along with sharks and other species," said Susan Lieberman, director of international policy for the Pew Environment Group, a large U.S. NGO. "This is a very significant announcement," Lieberman told IPS.

Opportunity

An area size of France, the tiny island nation's waters are also home to 30 whale and dolphin species,



Aerial view of the Rock Islands of Palau

including a breeding population of sperm whales. "This sanctuary will promote sustainable whale-watching tourism, already a growing multi-million-dollar global industry, as an economic opportunity for the people of Palau," he said.

Despite a global ban on commercial whaling since 1986, Japan kills 600 to 900 minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and a few fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) each year in the Antarctic for what it calls "scientific research", which is allowed under the ban. Norway and Iceland also hunt a limited number of whales off their coasts. Those countries and some others have lobbied hard to end the ban on commercial whaling of some species such as the minke, where populations are estimated to be well over a million. Most whale species have critically depleted populations, including those in the Pacific, due to past commercial whaling largely by foreign companies, Fritz noted.

Palau's sanctuary may be in name only, with just one boat supplied by Australia but operated by the Palau government to patrol the vast region. "We are thankful to Pew for a recent grant for fuel so they can go out more than twice a month," he told IPS. "Last August I received a report from the U.S. officials in Guam showing more than 850 vessels fishing illegally in Palau's waters," Fritz added.

Fines

Some of those were prosecuted and fined by Palau government, he confirmed. They also have an agreement with the small Pacific island state of Niue to do aerial patrols of their shared waters. Scuba diving, snorkeling and other forms of tourism are the major foreign revenue source for the country, said Lieberman. "Whales and sharks are worth far more alive than dead to the people of Palau," she said. ■

Help Give Sharks A Fighting Chance



Join divers worldwide demanding sharks get the protection they deserve

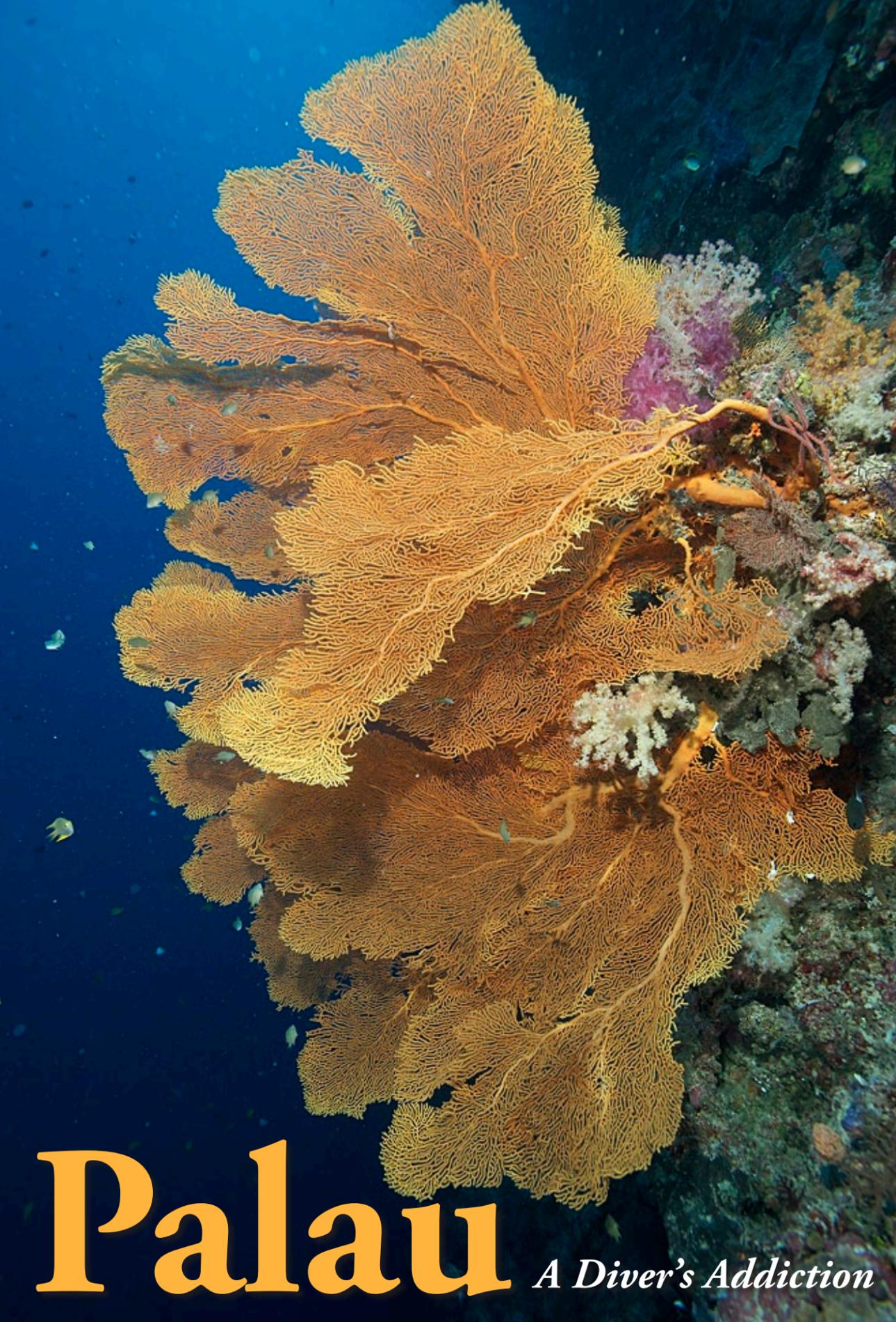


Sign the Petition

www.projectaware.org/givesharksachance

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Palau

A Diver's Addiction



Text and images by Todd Essick

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'm an underwater fine art photographer. You may have seen my work featured here in X-RAY MAG or elsewhere. I am an artist who happens to have the ocean as my studio. I do not consider any aspect of my life as being typical. When it comes to being an artist, diver, photographer or traveler, my perspective is that of a dreamer—a dream that I get to live out everyday. I really do not generally photograph the type of nature pictures depicted here, which you see in this or other underwater magazines. Though, when I am traveling, I have been known to photograph something underwater that does not include a model. I

am primarily known for photographing nude and semi-nude women underwater with sea life. I travel and dive around the world pursuing the dream of sharing the connection that we all have to the sea with everyone through my photographs. I am fortunate enough to travel to some beautiful dive locations searching for inspiration and locations to create my art. When I spoke to my friends at X-RAY MAG and told them of a newly formed personal connection with Palau and how moved and inspired I was by this incredible destination, they asked me to share this with you.

Palau—prior to a few years ago—was just a name that meant a distant dive destination on my list of places to go.

I had seen the periodical article written with its crystal blue water emerald green rock islands and sea life and coral combinations like no other place diving. A dive site called Blue Corner, sounded like fantasy land, almost as if it were thought up by Walt Disney himself, if he were a diver. In the back of my mind I knew that I would get there one day. I just never thought it would make the impression it did and change my life.

I am not a diver first. I am an artist/photographer, but as I was fortunate enough to move to Florida in the United States as a teenager, diving has been a part of my life for 30 years. Most of my diving for well over 20 years was primarily in Florida and the Caribbean. During

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



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

that time in Florida, diving became second nature. I did it so often, sometimes while looking for lobster, I honestly forgot I was diving. I had grown a little complacent, which as we know as divers, is not a good idea; but Palau changed that, and it brings me to this question.

Love affair with diving

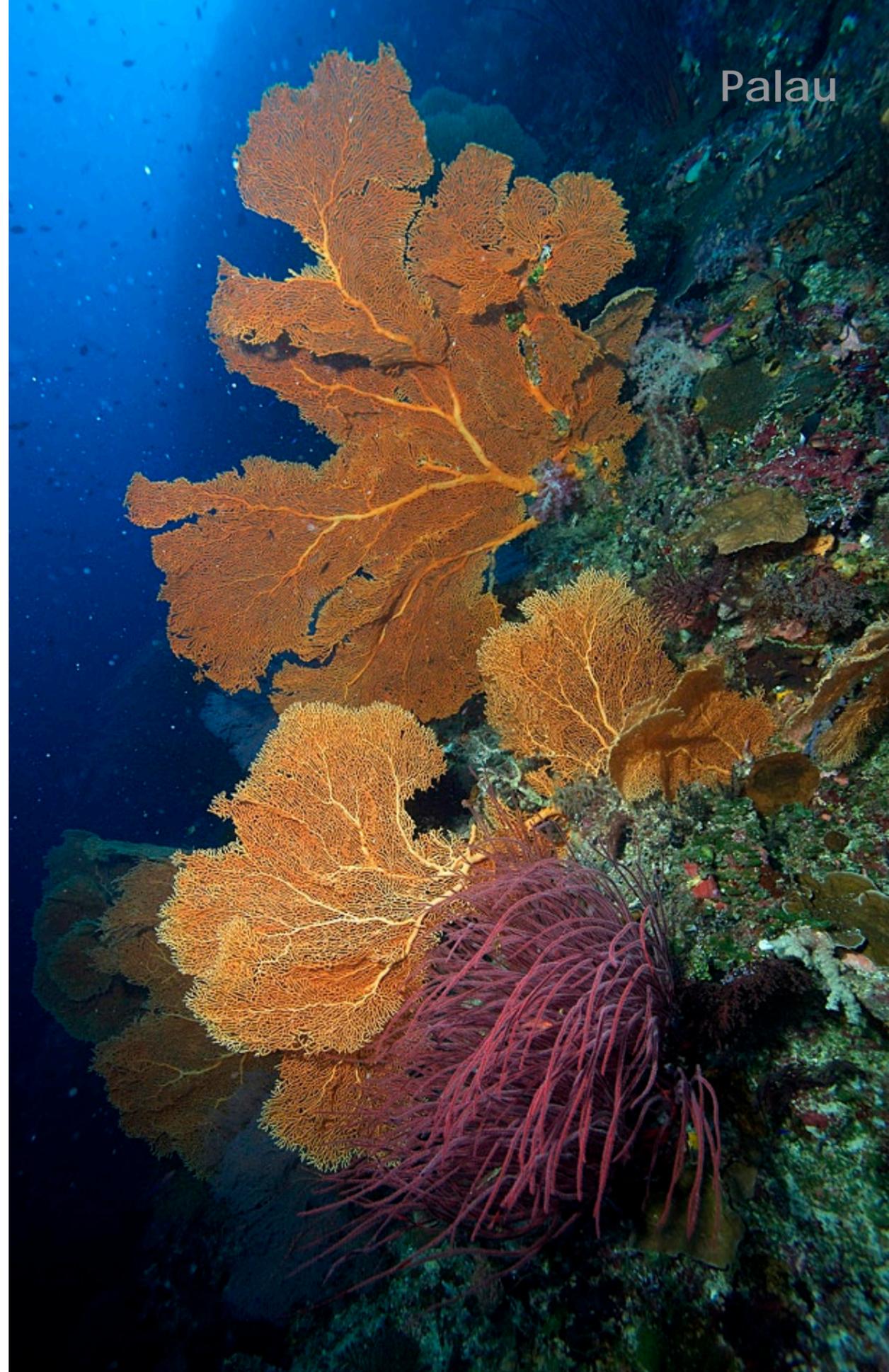
Have you ever lost that loving feeling for diving? Not that you don't want to dive any more, nothing that extreme, but you remember when it was just new and exciting like a new relationship, burning red hot. Now diving has become a constant, reliable and reasonably predictable, safe, and still makes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

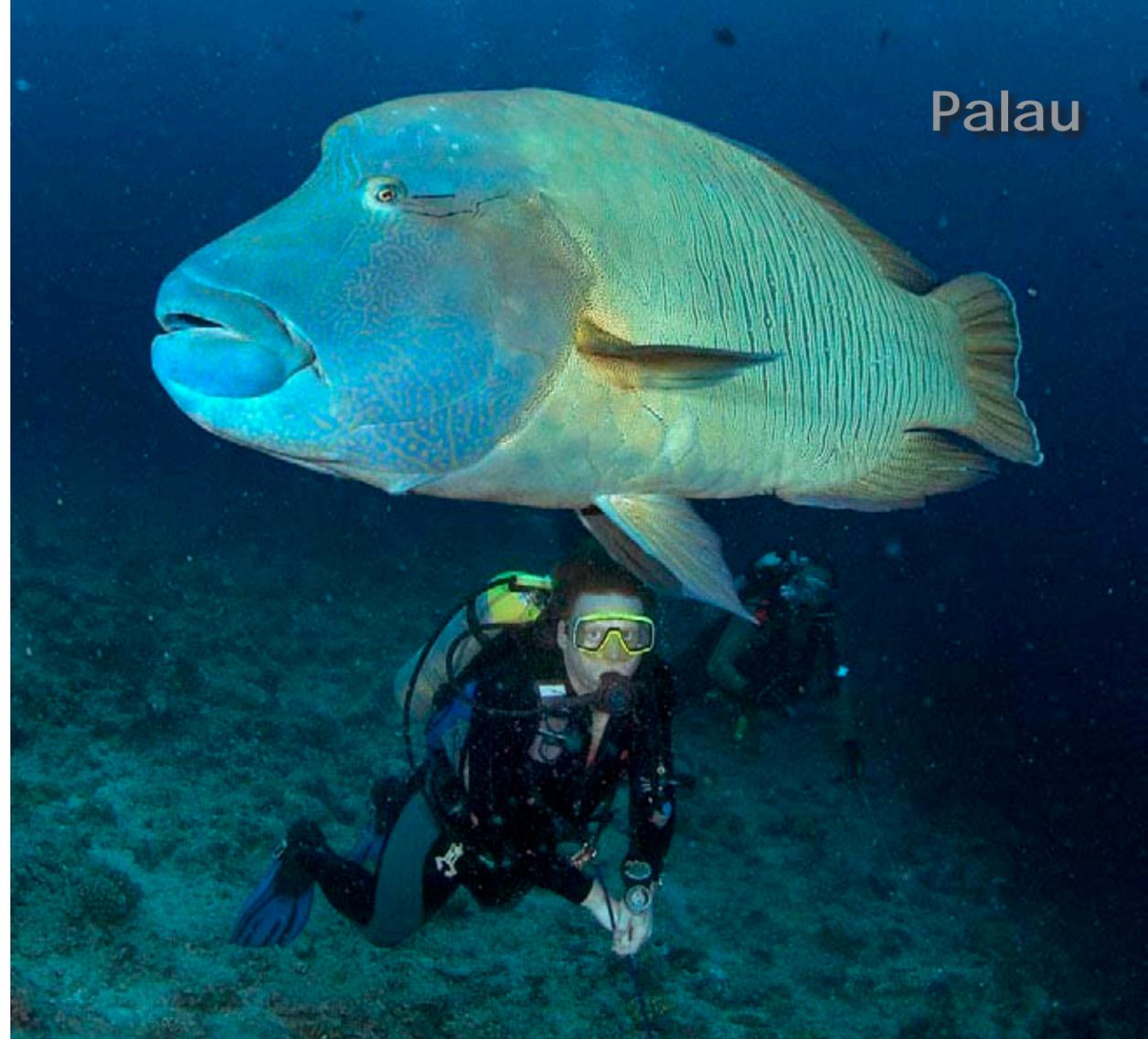
This is to all those divers who may have grown just a little complacent in their diving or have been diving the same dive spots so many times that you almost forget you're diving as I had. As for the new divers out there, you may not know what I am talking about—your love affair with diving is still burning, red hot. Your desire to be underwater never changes. You're just happy to be underwater anywhere anytime. Well, when those flames die down a little, or to those who just need or want 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, and Raja Ampat.

East of the Philippines

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 western most 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





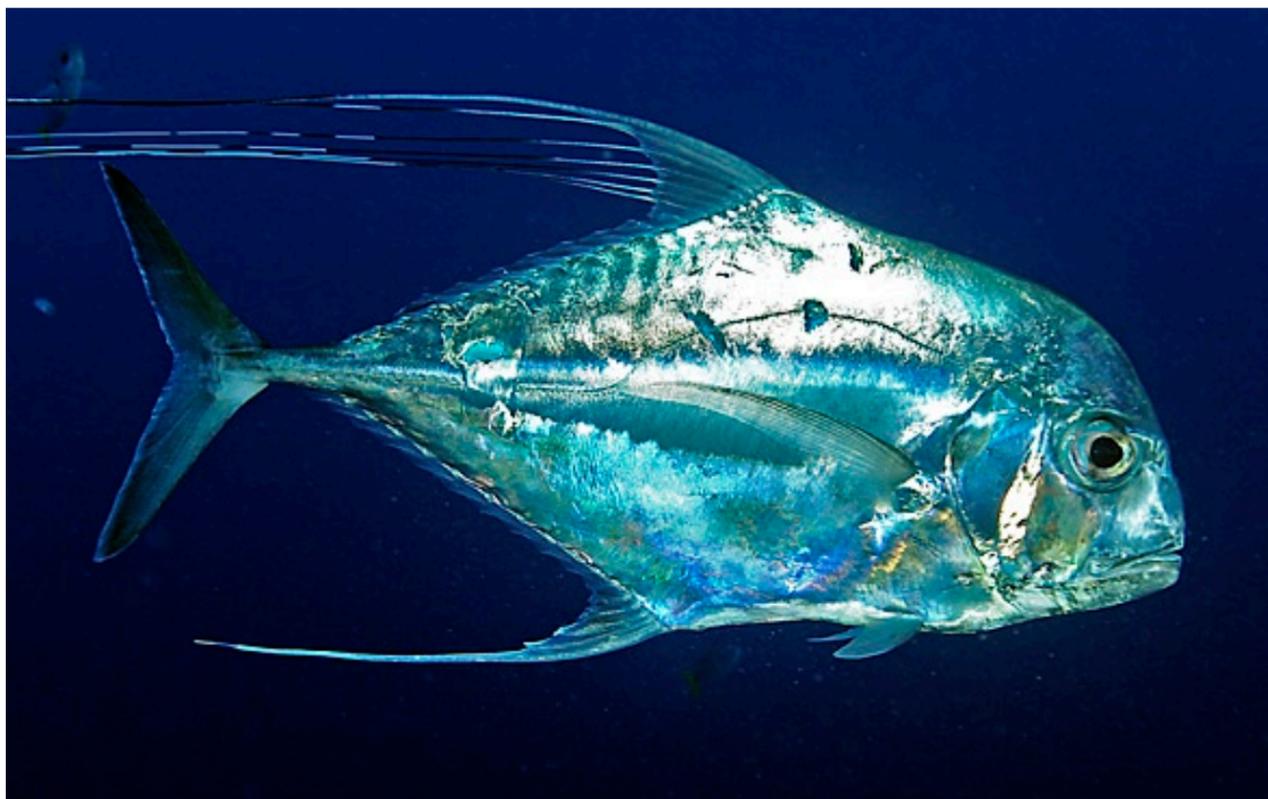
approved in 1986 but not ratified until 1993. It came into effect the following year when the island nation gained independence.

The addiction starts

Palau has become of a bit of an addiction to me in the last few years. It all started with winning a photography contest to 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 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—the person who started the shark sanctuary in Palau and was instrumental in getting the President to declare all of Palau a shark Sanctuary—greeted me and dialed me in for all my scheduled diving for the week.

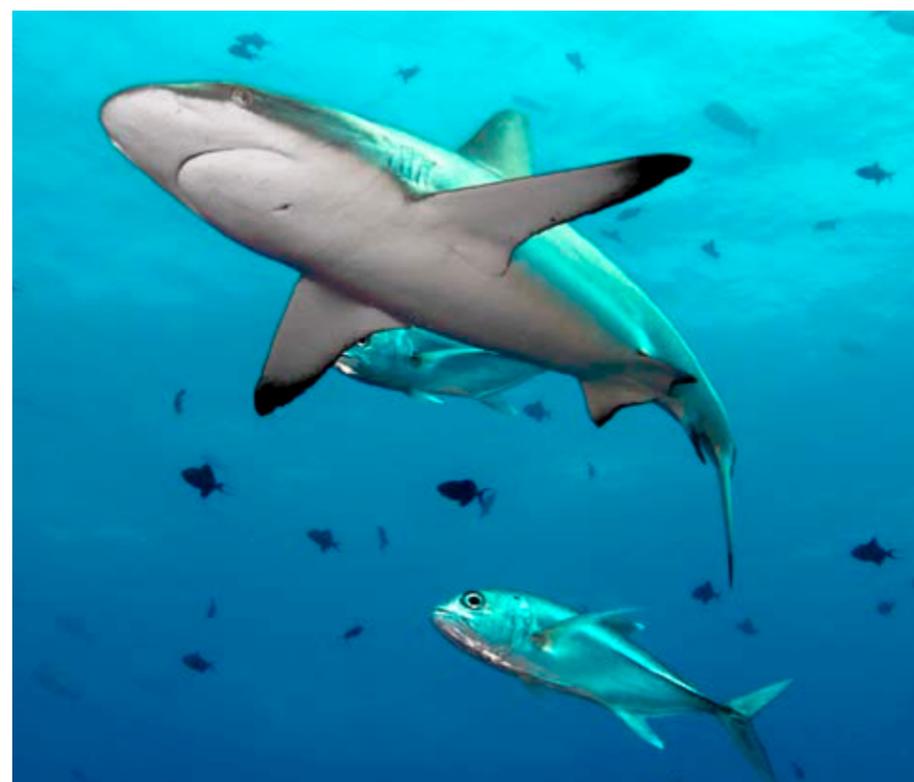
From the first moment of my first dive in Palau, I have been in rapture—gliding past table corals in sizes and multitudes that cannot be described other than to say “you have to see it to believe it”; seeing countless species of fish in every



direction looking for a place to hide but all the spots are taken already so they are on full display despite their stage fright; then, it is looking over the edge of a wall and me seeing sharks just going back and forth along the wall in anticipation of an easy meal either above or below. The larger reef fish made cameo appearances. The Napoleon wrasse, bumphead parrot, jacks, and giant tre-

vallies, all take part in the show. This was my first taste of Palau. I was reborn as a diver, at the very least, reinvigorated and reintroduced to diving with the same excitement as it had been on my first dive 30 years ago—unbelievable!

In Palau, I regained a wide-eyed wonderment that had been lost on some decompression stop a long time ago.



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



Palau

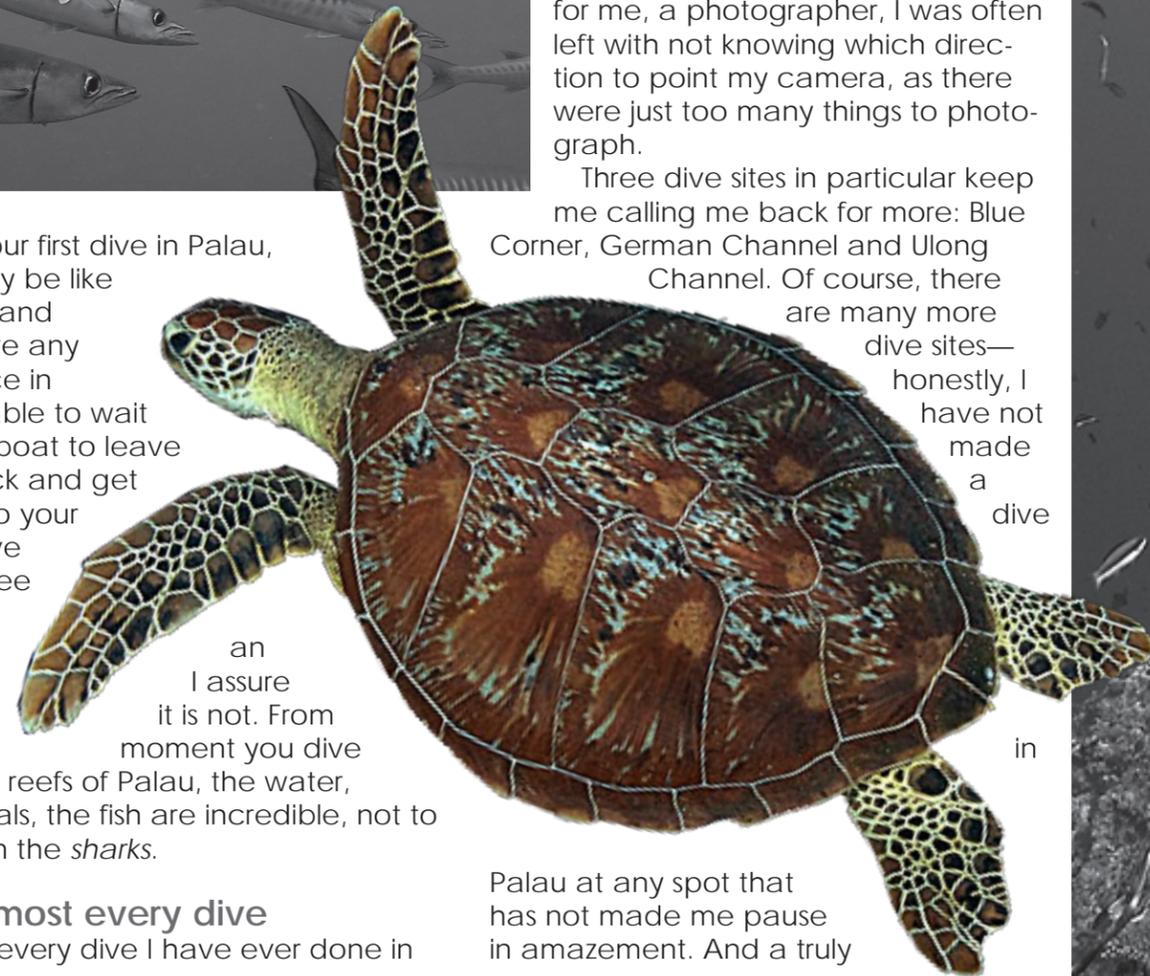
Palau has had sharks, mostly grey reef, with whitetips almost so plentiful you stop seeing them.

I went diving for a week, in Palau, before I went onto 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 and have managed to spend over 180 days on several trips since.

Along with the sharks, barracudas, sea turtles, jacks, giant trevallies, bumphead parrots 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, a photographer, I was often left with not knowing which direction to point my camera, as there were just too many things to photograph.

Three dive sites in particular keep me 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

After your first dive in Palau, you may be like a child and not have any patience in being able to wait for the boat to leave the dock and get going to your next dive just to see if it was all just illusion. you, the moment you dive into the reefs of Palau, the water, the corals, the fish are incredible, not to mention the sharks.



On almost every dive Almost every dive I have ever done in

Palau at any spot that has not made me pause in amazement. And a truly



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Resting reef shark; Schooling barracuda; 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

spiritual experience snorkeling 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; it gets top billing on the marquee for Palau.

Blue Corner

Blue Corner is a corner, an elbow of sorts. It comes out from the reef, start-

ing 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



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



Pufferfish camouflage blends in with table coral

through the neighborhood.

On either the upper or lower plateaus, you move as close to the top of the wall and pick a spot on the reef near the edge. You hook in using the legendary Palauan reef hook to

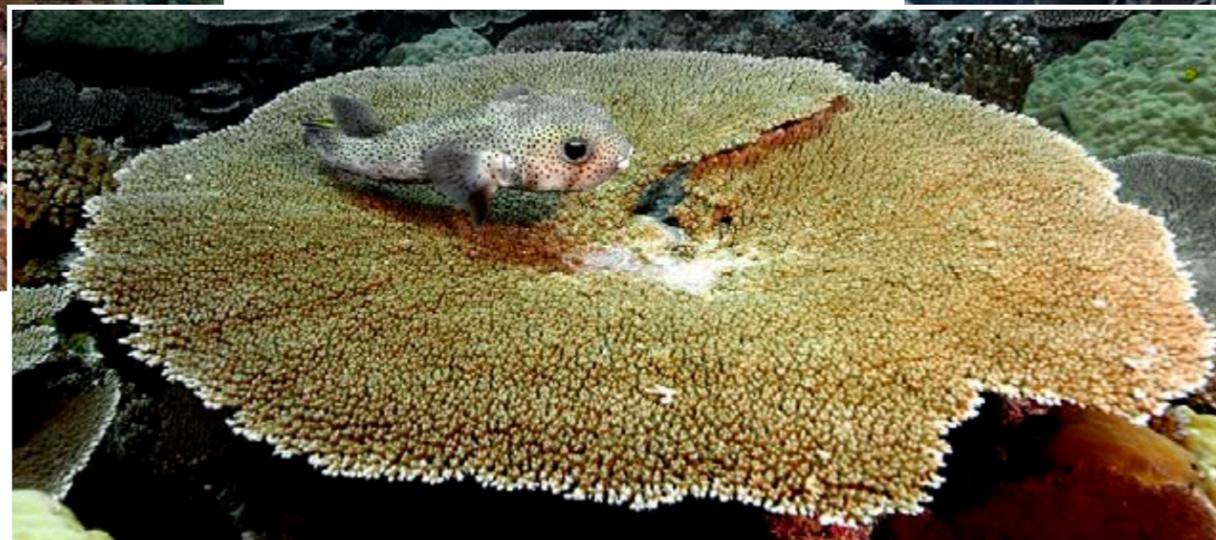
minimize damage to the reef. You put a little air in your BC after hooking in and start floating up; you, in essence, are like a kite in the wind, and you might hang there in the current only for a few minutes before watching the real action start.

Sharks will circle over and over, above and below, riding the currents, allowing you the opportunity to photograph or just observe



Napoleon wrasse and giant trevally going after reef fish, with a follow up of whitetip sharks 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 turtles or reef fish gathering. The bumphead parrotfish can be very active here, like a street gang moving



travel

Palau





The limestone outcroppings of the Rock Islands of Palau have been worn away through the ages so that the islands look as if they are floating above the water (left); Large fan coral with featherstars; Large grouper resting on sea floor. PREVIOUS PAGE: School of bluestripe snapper, *Lutjanus kasmira*

the cleaning stations and be treated to swooping and friendly mantas stopping to get cleaned. Occasionally, reef sharks come to be cleaned by cleaner wrasse also.

them up close and personal. The sharks will get more comfortable with you as the minutes pass and will come within an arm's length very often.

This can be an experience of a lifetime. Time stands still, or more accurately, is moving in slow motion, as the sharks, with very little effort and speed, move against the current. You are tethered to the reef as you hover with them, and they come closer. Your ability to look them in the eye and observe the most minute body movement and detail is better than any High Definition movie.

You will mainly see two species of sharks during a dive: the gray reef shark and the whitetip shark. But many other species of sharks are in Palau.

While the dive described above 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

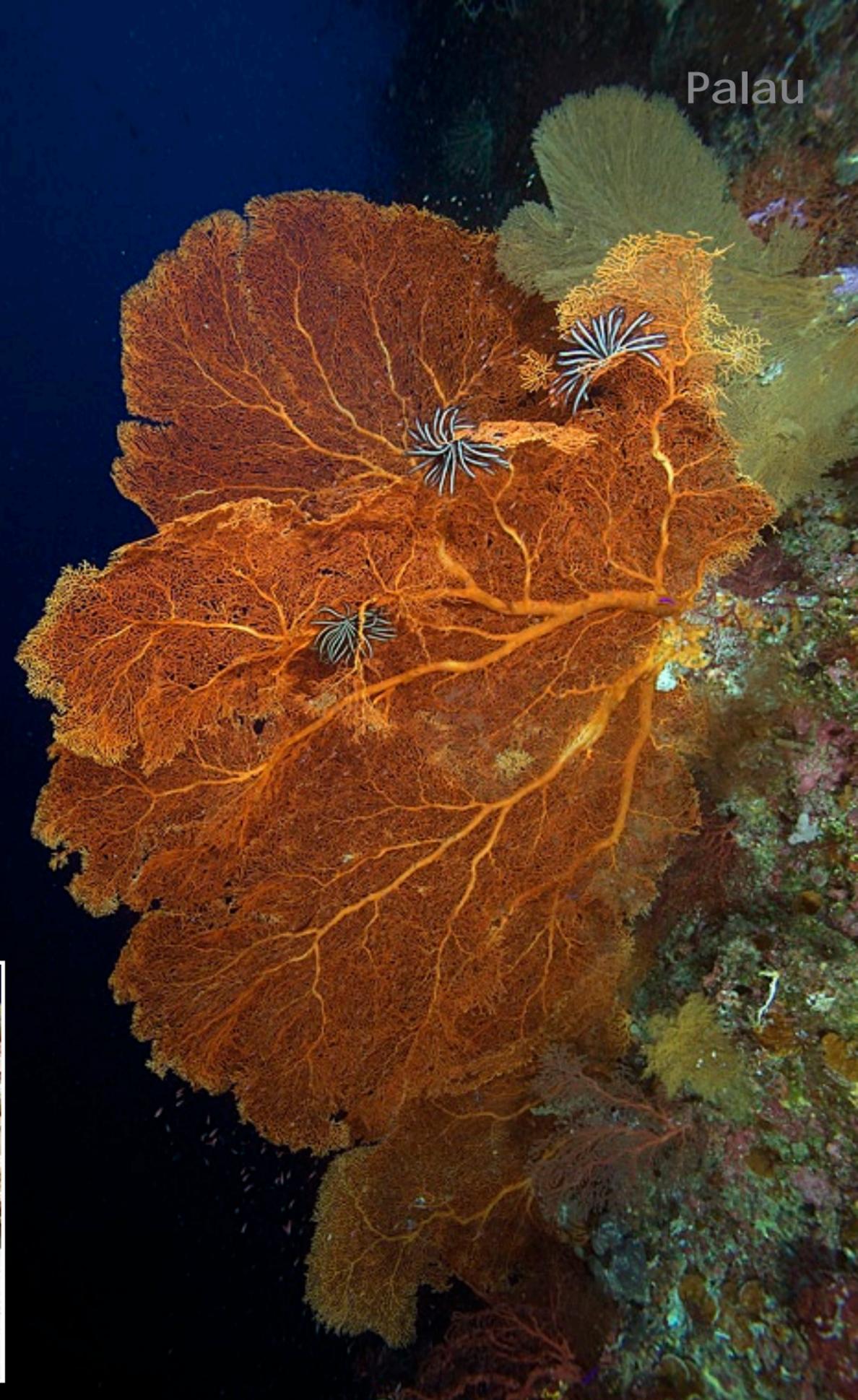
German Channel was built in the 1900s, when the German administration

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 a passage through the southwestern barrier reef to many of the outer dive sites. At 10ft (3m), 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 come in, sometimes in large numbers. Divers will group in semi-circles around

Sometimes, the mantas will allow you to swim along with them and go at a leisurely pace—allowing a truly moving experience for sometimes as long as your air and your legs will allow.

Schooling fish being chased by grey reef sharks is an added attraction to the mantas. Sleeping whitetips in the sand are a common site, along with resting leopard sharks and rays. You can see a





Model and stingless jellies at Jellyfish Lake. FAR LEFT: Cover of Essick's book, *Beginnings: Goddesses, Sirens and Mermaids*

JELLYFISH LAKE
(Palauan: Ongeim'l Tketau, "Fifth Lake") is a marine lake located on Eil Malk Island in Palau. Eil Malk is part of the Rock Islands, a group of small, rocky, mostly uninhabited islands in Palau's Southern Lagoon, between Koror and Peleliu. There are about 70 other marine lakes located throughout the Rock Islands. Jellyfish Lake is one of Palau's most famous dive (snorkeling only) sites. It is notable for the millions of golden jellyfish, which migrate horizontally across the lake daily.

Jellyfish Lake is connected to the ocean through fissures and tunnels in the limestone of ancient Miocene reef. However, the lake is sufficiently isolated, and the conditions are different enough that the diversity of species in the lake is greatly reduced from the nearby lagoon. The golden jellyfish, *Mastigias cf. papua etpisoni*, and possibly other species in the lake have evolved to be substantially different from their close relatives living in the nearby lagoons.

— Wikipedia

as though you have dropped into an alien world. The visual sensation of seeing millions of jellyfish is incredible but to also feel these gelatinous creatures sliding down your skin can take a minute or two to get use to.

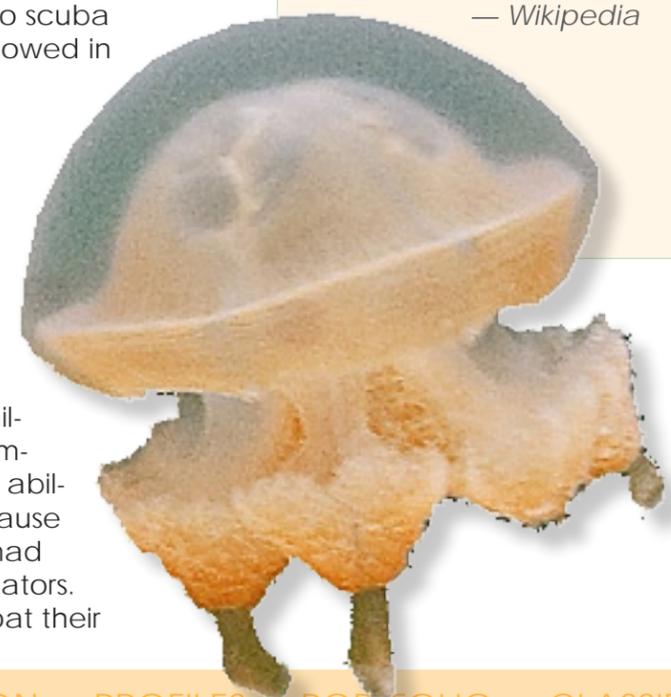
I knew just after a few minutes that I would have to photograph a series of underwater fine art here. I watched other swimmers, with a youthful fascination, embrace the jellyfish.

After spending time interacting with the jellies, I had to complete my task. 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.

Stingless

Jellyfish Lake is a landlocked body of water with a large population of defenseless jellyfish that over the course of millennia have completely lost their ability to sting, because they have not had to fight off predators. Instead, they float their



Palau. Ulong Island is also 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 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.

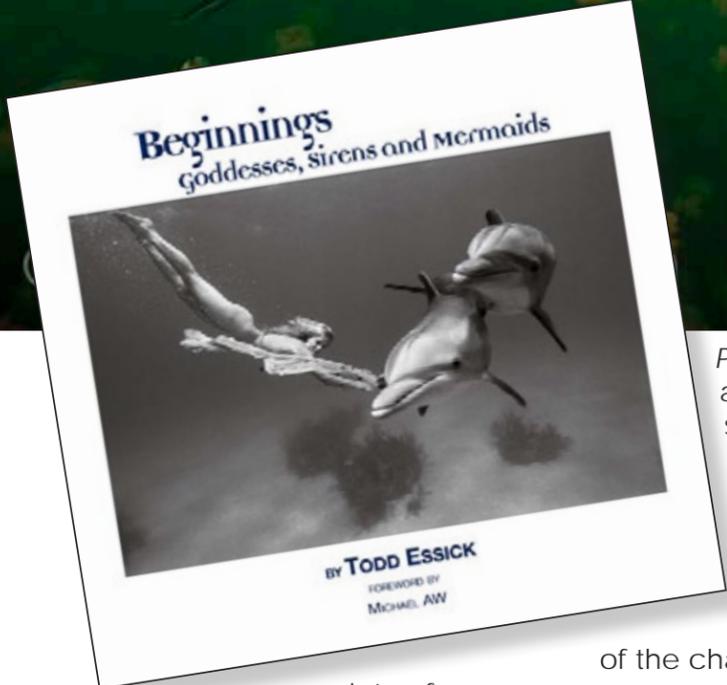
There is always a lot of fish life in the channel. A large congregation of groupers live there and will move out of your way as you fly down the channel. A huge wall of lettuce coral awaits you, and if you are lucky, you might pass a shark making its way back to the opening of the channel. Be sure to follow your guide the first time, as there are plenty of triggerfish around 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.

Jellyfish Lake

This lake is a spiritual experience, for sure. I was completely moved the first time I went there. It is truly serene. You will feel, on the inside as well as on the outside,



variety 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*



Diver and huge fan coral sprouting out of a reef off Palau (left); Swirling barracuda (right)



hotels in Palau. And with one of the best all around staffs—whether dive guides, boat captains, office staff or operations staff—they will all make you feel welcome and work hard to assure you have a good experience. The Bottom Time Restaurant at Sam's is a great place to eat or to have that post dive beer, and Sam's Tours can also help arrange discounted air flights from Guam or Manila.

There are a couple of live-boards, if this is how you like to go, and is completely understandable if you are limited on time and want to get in as much diving as possible. I like getting out and socializing with the locals, and of course, a live-board will curtail this along with missing out and experiencing two great restaurants in Palau. The first is the Taj run by Robert from New Delhi, India. It has

amazing traditional dishes, food and hospitality not to be missed. Robert worked for many years serving India's dignitaries and elite but found a home in Palau. The other restaurant is Kramer's run by a German. Before you say or do anything, this guy can really cook. Rene (and his wife, Jayne) serve up nightly specials along with locally caught fish. They serve a very international

menu. Also, Tuesday night is spaghetti night, and if you can eat three plates, it's free. I heard someone did it three weeks in a row. I guess he really liked the spaghetti almost as much as he liked Palau.

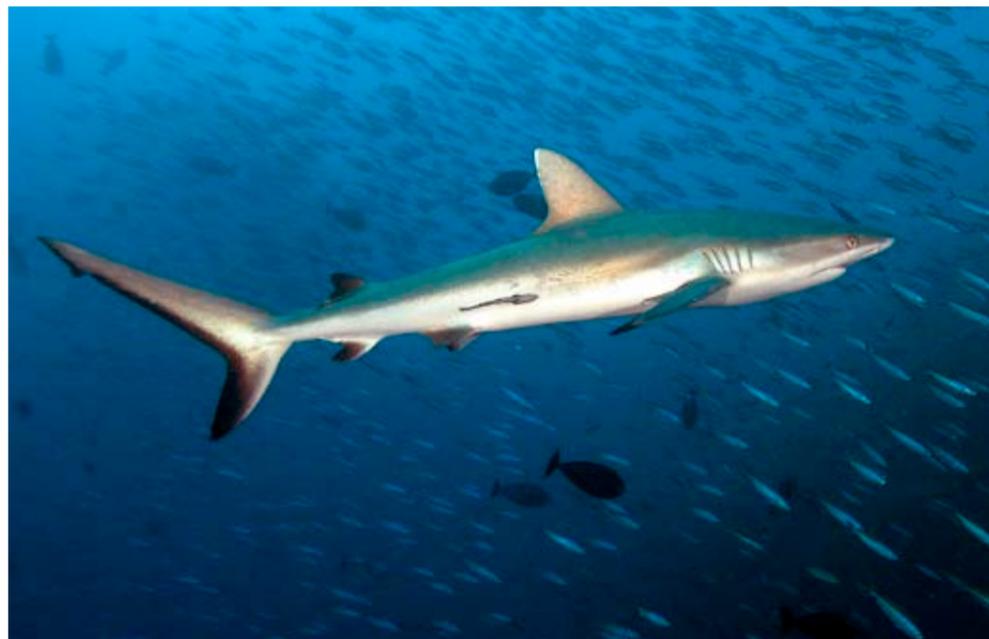
Above and below the surface of the water, Palau puts on a hell of a show and should not be missed. Once you go, you will want an encore performance and will be trying to figure out how and when you'll get your next ticket to the show.

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 ■

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.

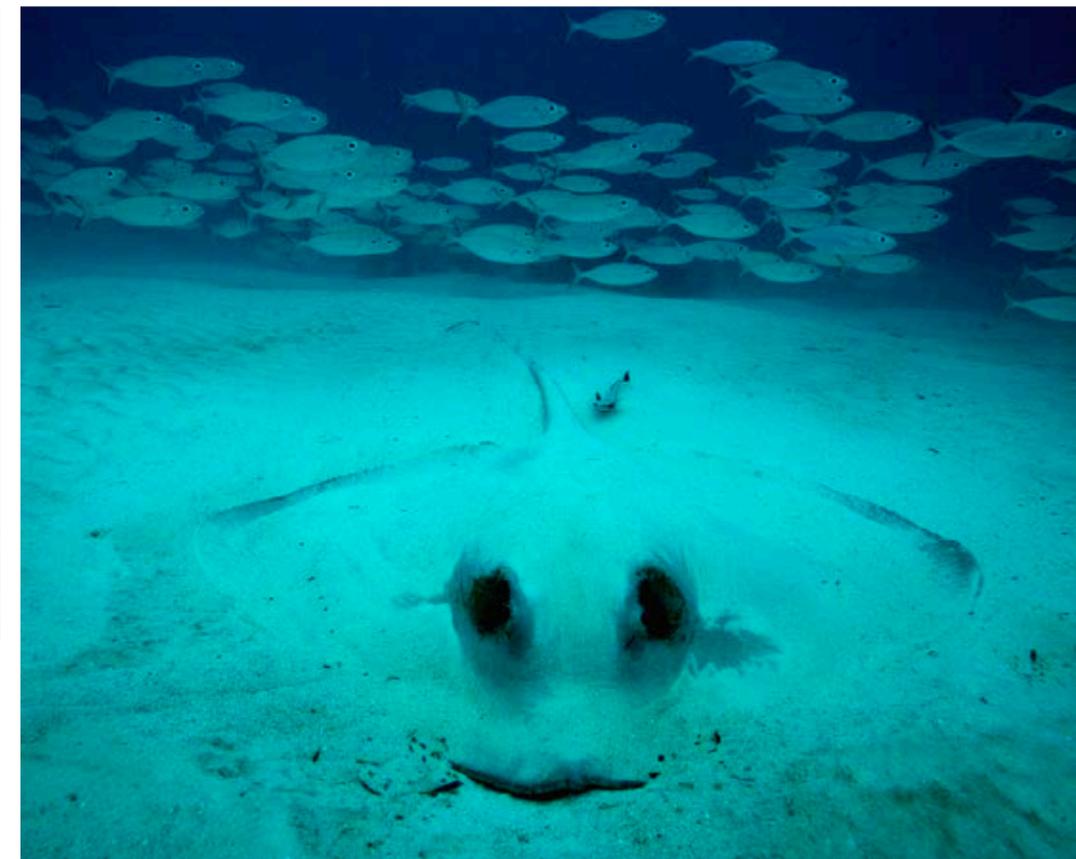
The effort to get to the lake adds to the allure of going there. A short but steep hike up and down to get to the lake is part of the adventure. The view of the lake before descending down to the water's edge is breath taking.

These are just a few of the dive sites in Palau that have inspired and excited me back to the days when I started diving. Palau offers so much more in dive locations, land tours (especially the rock islands) and the amazing culture of the Palauan people. In what I have written, I hope I have been able to relate in these few words just enough of an introduction to interest you in Palau. I hope



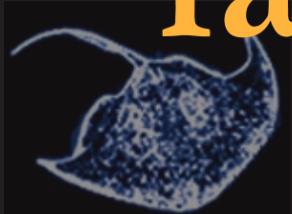
the included photographs will be worth another thousand words in your own mind and will inspire you to go to Palau and see it for yourself.

When in Palau I prefer a land-based dive operation. This is, of course, just a personal preference. I recommend Sam's Tours; they offer great packages with various



A stingray (left) buries itself under sand and awaits passing unwary prey; Grey reef shark (far left)

fact file



Palau



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Palau, which is the westernmost cluster of the Caroline Islands, opted for independence in 1978 rather than join the Federated States of Micronesia, after three decades as part of the U.N. Trust Territory of the Pacific under U.S. administration. In 1986, a Compact of Free Association with the U.S. was approved but was not ratified until 1993. The following year the Compact entered into force when the islands gained independence. Government: Constitutional government in free association with the United States. Capital: Melekeok

Geography Palau is located in Oceania. It is a group of islands in the North Pacific Ocean, southeast of the

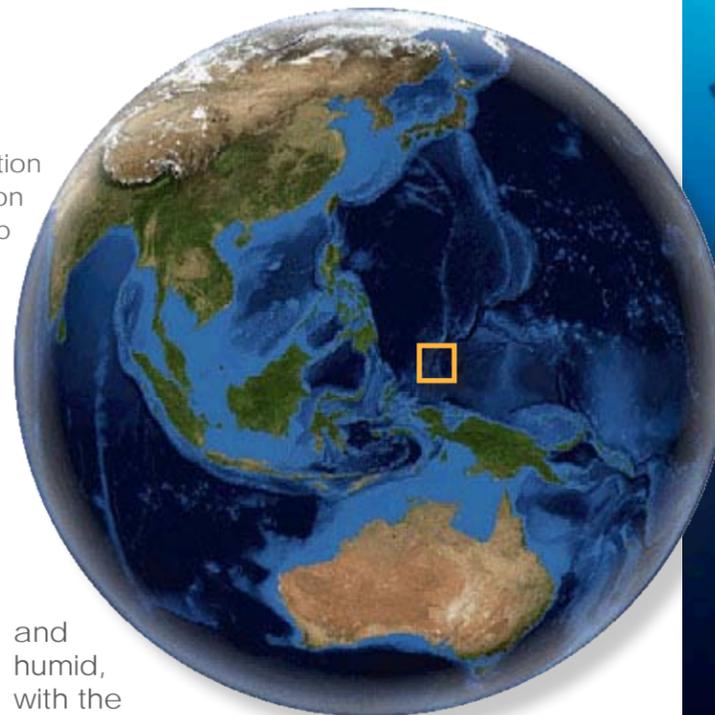


Philippines. Terrain varies geologically from high mountains on the main island of Babelthuap to low, coral islands commonly fringed by large barrier reefs. Coastline: 1,519km. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Mount Ngerchelchuus 242m. Note: The westernmost archipelago in the Caroline chain, Palau consists of six island groups totaling more than 300 islands, which includes the World War II battleground of Belliyou (Peleliu) and the world-famous rock islands.

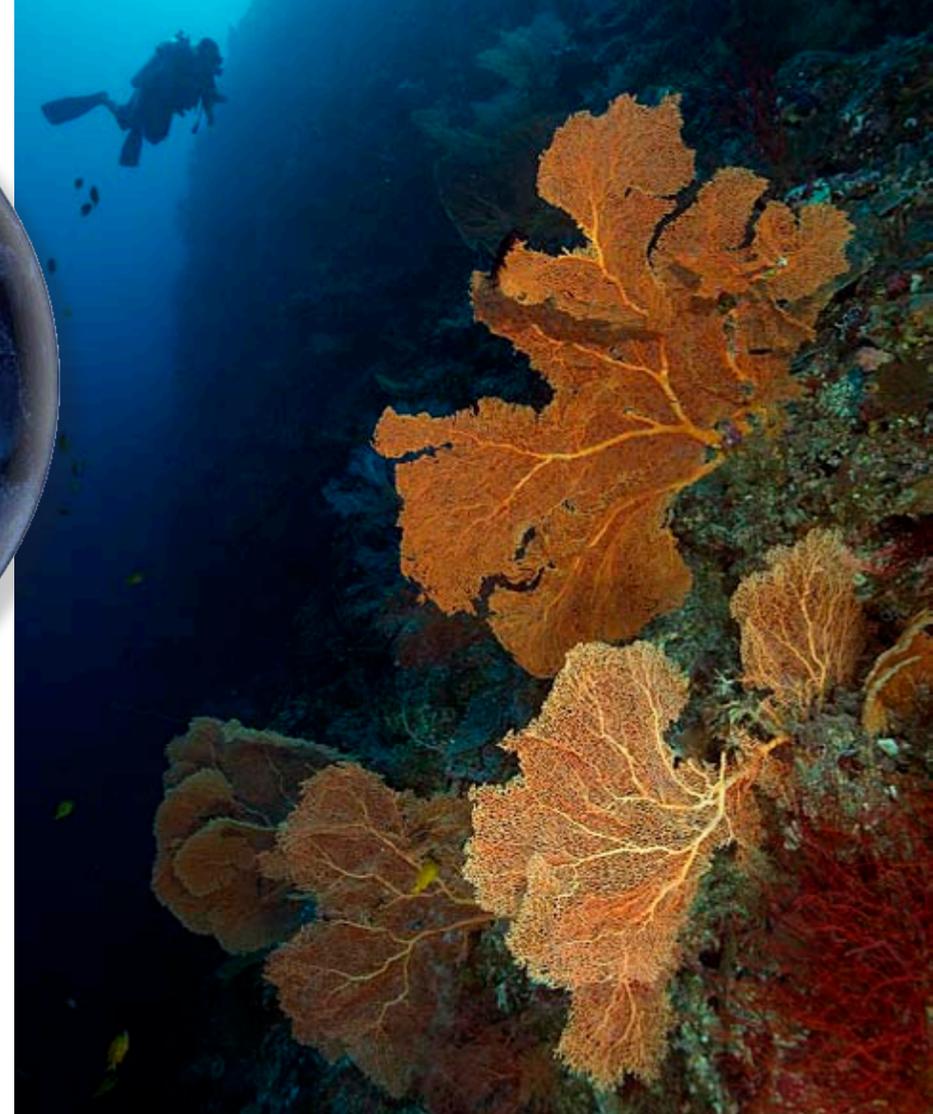
Climate Palau's climate is tropical, hot

and humid, with the wet season occurring May to November. Natural hazards include typhoons (June to December)

Economy Palau's economy is primarily based on tourism, fishing and subsistence agriculture. While relying heavily on financial aid from the United States, the government is the major employer of the work force. After the Compact of Free Association with the United States took effect 1 October 1994, U.S. aid amounted to US\$700 million over the following 15 years in exchange for Palau furnish-



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



ing military facilities. In 2007, visitors on business and tourists numbered 85,000. As a result, the population of Palau has a per capita income approximately 50 percent higher than that of the Philippines and much of Micronesia. Expansion of air travel in the Pacific, rising prosperity of leading East Asian countries, and the financing of infrastructure development by foreigners has bolstered long-run prospects for the key tourist sector. 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 (which is Micronesian with Malayan and Melanesian admixtures) 69.9%, Filipino 15.3%, Chinese 4.9%, other Asian groups 2.4%, white 1.9%, Carolinian 1.4%, other Micronesian groups 1.1% (2000 cen-

sus) 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 religions 3.1% (2000 census)

Language Palauan is primarily the official language in all islands except Sonsorol where Sonsoralese and English are official; Tobi where Tobi and English are official; and Angaur where Angaur, Japanese, and English are official. Other languages include Filipino 13.5%, English 9.4%, Chinese 5.7%, Carolinian 1.5%, Japanese 1.5% (2000 census)

Hyperbaric Chambers
Belau National Hospital, Koror

Websites
Palau Tourism Authority
www.visit-palau.com

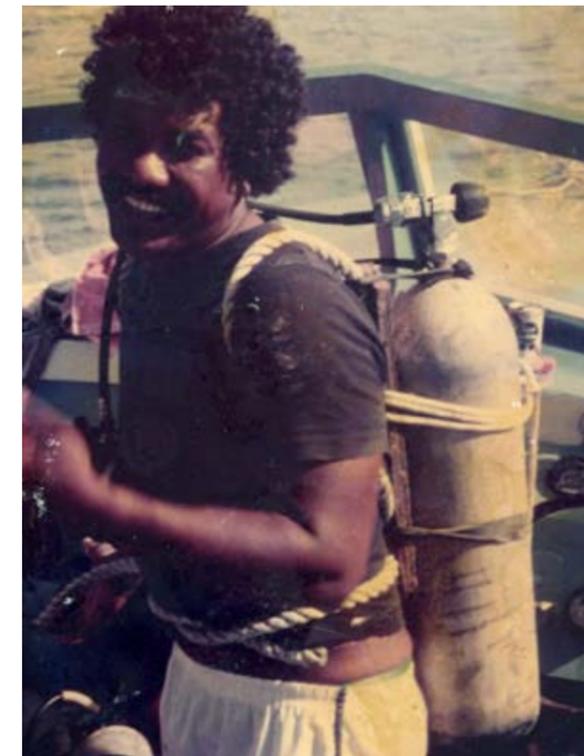


Francis Toribiong

Text by Arnold Weisz

Photos courtesy of Navot Bornovski of Fish'n'Fins Dive Center in Palau

In January 2010 Francis Toribiong received the ultimate honor and recognition in the diving industry—he was inducted into the Scuba Hall of Fame, an honor given only to a select few. He shares company with such luminaries as Jacques-Yves Cousteau, Lloyd Bridges, Sylvia Earle, David Doubilet and Rodney Fox. X-RAY MAG's Arnold Weisz caught up with Toribiong to learn more about Palau's scuba diving pioneer, his thoughts and visions for diving, past, present and future.



AW: In your early diving days Jacques-Yves Cousteau visited Palau. What kind of impression did a legend as Cousteau make on you?

FB: During my inexperienced youth, to tell you the truth, I was more impressed with Palauans who were diving at that time. When Cousteau came to Palau in the late 60's, I thought, "If I had the money he has, I could do that too!" But Palauans, at that time, had no resources, but still figured out how to dive, salvage war wrecks and repair broken equipment with nothing!

With limited news and limited exposure to western culture in early 1960s, not many people around the Pacific knew who Cousteau was. In retrospective, it was a great honor to have the chance to meet with him when everything just started.

AW: Starting a diving operation on a remote location, such as Palau, could be considered, in the 1970s, like a daunting task. Did you ever regret your choice of career?

FB: No, because I love to be challenged. Being a pioneer diver in Palau was a fulfilling challenge that also provided great reward.

AW: What is your most memorable

diving experience?

I have very many memorable diving experiences, but if I have to choose two, [one would be] discovering Blue Corner. At the time in Palau, there were only two main dive sites: the quadruple Blue Holes and Shark City. Due to weak current at the exit from Blue Holes, we always followed the current and followed the wall toward the north. One day, I decided to turn left and came upon the corner. The next day, I briefed my guides, "When you leave the Blue Holes, follow the reef south to the corner," and soon after, it became Blue Corner, and the rest is history. [And the second one would be] finishing the search for WWII wrecks with Klaus Lindemann.

We found six new wrecks. It is part of Palau's history. Being there and helping uncover the mystery and location of the lost fleet was a once in a lifetime experience.

AW: Together with your family, you went on

screen in the Academy Award nominated IMAX documentary film, The Living Sea. The movie was very well-received by audiences all around the world. How did participating affect you as a diver? And did the movie raise awareness of Palau as a scuba diving destination?

FB: *The Living Sea* was one of the first IMAX features. At the time, I did not know what an IMAX

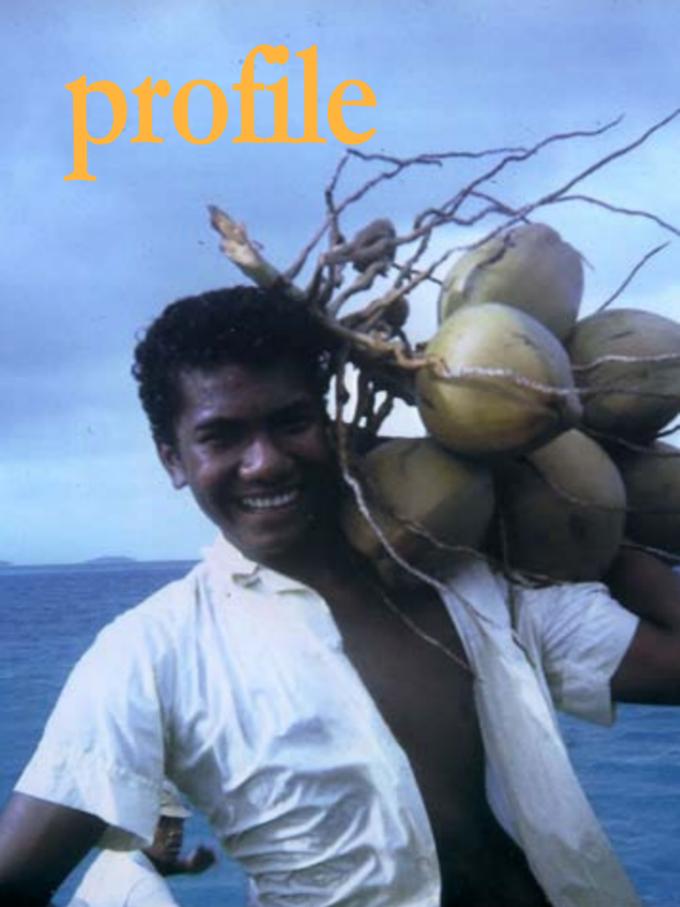
film was, so when MacGillvary contacted me, I thought it was just going to be a movie like others before it (i.e. raising awareness of Palau as a destination). Even now, more than 15 years later, we still get divers coming to Palau because they saw the IMAX movie when it first came out, and they have been dreaming and saving since then to come to Palau and see it for real. The movie was also instrumental in raising world-wide awareness of ocean conservation.

AW: What has it meant to you being inducted into the Scuba Hall of Fame, where your name will be mentioned in the same breath with diving pioneers such as Jacques-Yves Cousteau,

Francis Toribiong receives award at his induction into the Scuba Hall of Fame



Palau dive pioneer, Francis Toribiong



Lloyd Bridges, Sylvia Earle, David Doubilet and Rodney Fox?

FB: I have meet Cousteau a few times. I dove with Silvia Earl and David Doubilet, and I respect these people very much. To be mentioned with them was very humbling.

AW: You are not the only one in your family having a tremendous impact on conserving Palau's marine environment. Your brother Mr. Johnson Toribiong, who is the current president of

Respect for nature and conserving resources are part of our Palauan tradition and our heritage and goes way back to our ancestors.

Palau, officially recognized the world's first shark sanctuary. It must make you immensely proud that your brother shares

your passion for protecting the ocean?

FB: Yes. Our father used to tell us—don't just talk, "walk the talk". Respect for nature and

Francis Toribiong



THIS PAGE: images from Francis Toribiong's past and present, as a pioneer in establishing and developing scuba diving in the Republic of Palau in the early days and today



FB: My concern is just like everyone else's living on an island. Traditionally, Palau has been involved in protecting the environment for many generations. Palau is currently protecting, by law, 45 percent of

of its terrestrial areas. As a member of the United Nations, we are one of the smallest contributors to global warming, yet one of the first to be affected by it without anyway to improve the consequences. Ultimately, Palau may pay the biggest price. ■



conserving resources are part of our Palauan tradition and our heritage and goes way back to our ancestors.

AW: Palau, as so many other nations, has to balance its economic development with the exploration of the nation's natural resources. You have been involved as the Marine Biology Coordinator for Palau Pacific Exploration (PPX), which has secured a million-acre drilling concession on the North Block of Palau located at the Velasco Reef in Kayangel State. Do you find it difficult to combine your role as an environmentalist and serving as

the adviser to an oil company? FB: No—again it is a challenging task. At this point, it is an assessment of the potential to find oil or gas not drilling! I feel it's important for me to be on the 'inside' and know what is going on with a project like this and be able to raise concerns rather than to be at the mercy of information coming from the newspaper.

AW: As a native of a small island nation, what are your concerns about the environmental challenges ahead, such as global warming and rising sea-levels—for Palau and the rest of the planet?

its marine areas and 20 percent

