

Text and photos by Wolfgang Pölzer

# *Underwater* **Austria**

*—a freshwater view of diving*



Completely landlocked doesn't necessarily mean that diving is out of the question. Austria is best known for alpine skiing, historical Vienna and delicious cakes, but also offers some really spectacular diving. Here, one can dive wrecks and walls, enjoying a rich aquatic life in lakes with great visibility.

Before we take you on a trip through the top ten list of freshwater diving in Austria, let's have a look at some facts. Since the break-up of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1918 Austria hasn't had any access to the ocean. On the other hand, freshwater is in rich abundance in this small central European country. Together with countries like Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Finland, mountainous Austria is one of the areas in Europe richest in freshwater. And the water is clean. Ninety-nine percent of Austrians have access to potable ground- and spring water. Austria boasts a whopping 9,000 lakes, of which two thirds are natural and the last third are man-made. The man-made lakes are mostly created to support hydroelectric plants.

#### Widely known secret

For many divers, freshwater diving is not real diving. No coral reefs, no sharks. Cold and dark. Even amongst Austrian divers, their own backyard is a secret. Contrary to popular belief, freshwater diving can be exciting.

Enjoying clear vis in Grünersee





Austria

THIS PAGE: Grunersee from above and below; Diver and rainbow trout at Grunersee

As in the ocean, you need to choose your dive site according to what you want to see, water conditions and best time of the year. The most important aspect of freshwater diving is the season.

During the year, the temperatures in the lakes change between freezing and warm; the transparency of the water fluctuates; the vegetation differs; and fishes change their favorite hangouts. In places where you, for example, can observe perch hide in full green vegetation during the late summer months (August-September), you will only encounter a desert-like sea floor in the spring (March-April).

If you are looking for fish, my tip is to dive in the summer months (May-August) and stay in the shallows (1-5 meters / 3-16 feet) near land. Some species will be sleeping, while other will be

hunting. Another treat is the water temperature at the water's edge often allows for a 5mm wetsuit and no gloves.

## Top ten dive sites

### Grüner See (Green Lake)

This is by far the lake in Austria with the best visibility. It's situated in the heart of Steiermark (Styria), one of Austria's nine federal states. The distinctive character of this lake comes from the fact that its water source is almost entirely made of melted snow. Because of this, the lake actually only exists from late spring until late summer. The rest of the year it is often nearly dried out. During the dry season the lake-bed serves as a hiking trail. The water level usually peaks during June, and floods not only the dry rocky lake-bed in the middle, but also the surrounding grassland and forest. Diving the Green

Lake gives you an opportunity to dive among park benches, wooden board walks and along hiking trails. This is also a popular fishing spot, and every year, trout are released into the lake. When melting snow from the surrounding mountains, starts to fill up the lake in the spring, it passes through sand and gravel, which function like a filter. The water is therefore mostly very clear. This also means that the lake is very cold. The average temperature hovers around 6-8°C (43-47°F).

### BASIC FACTS

Depth: 12m / 36ft  
 Best season: beginning of May until end of August  
 Entrance fee: EU€ 8 per person per day, available at the main parking area  
 Dive center: no center, but it's possible to fill your tanks at the Gasthof Seehof: [www.seehof-gruenersee.com](http://www.seehof-gruenersee.com)

[seehof-gruenersee.com](http://www.seehof-gruenersee.com)  
 Tourist info: [www.tragoess-gruenersee.at](http://www.tragoess-gruenersee.at)  
 (Call/write ahead to check the water level, just in case).  
 YouTube: [www.youtube.com/v/WkDSIFexs-Y?](https://www.youtube.com/v/WkDSIFexs-Y?)

### Samaranger See (Lake Samaranger)

This is another gem in the collection of Austrian freshwater lakes well worth a few dives. The lake is very small, just about 100 meters, or 328 feet, across. You will usually find yourself diving in crystal clear water and almost be able to get a complete view from the





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver and northern pike; Beautiful scenery around Erlaufsee; Northern pike hiding in foliage; School of common rudd

middle of the lake. For the best visibility, visit during the late autumn (September – October). Besides a few rainbow trout, there isn't much fish life in the lake. The lake is full of tree trunks and branches, which are partly overgrown by algae. This allows the creative photographer to create some mysterious images. The lake bottom is covered with very fine silt, so move around with controlled fin strokes. The Tyrolean lake is situated a few hundred meters from the Palace Hotel Fernsteinsee, which is named after another nearby lake. Both lakes can only be dived with permission from the hotel, which owns the lake and the surrounding lands. You need to stay at least two nights at the four star hotel to gain a diving permit.

**BASIC FACTS**

Depth: 12m / 36ft  
 Best season: late summer and autumn (July – September)  
 Entrance fee: two night's accommodation at the Schlosshotel Fernsteinsee.  
 Dive center: no center, but it's possible to fill your tanks at Schlosshotel Fernsteinsee: [www.fernsteinsee.at](http://www.fernsteinsee.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.mieminger-plateau.at](http://www.mieminger-plateau.at)  
 Lake Samaranger on YouTube:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_wEEWrY8zK0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wEEWrY8zK0)

**Erlaufsee**

This lake is considerably larger than the two previous lakes. Erlaufsee is right on the border between Styria and Lower Austria, not far from the tourist village of Mariazell. This lake provides you with a visibility of 10 to 15 meters / 30 – 45 feet most of the year, except in the spring (March – April) when melt-water tends to cloud the lake with particles. This lake has rich fish life, so try to get here when the visibility is good. The Erlaufsee is known for its large stock of northern pike (*Esox lucius*). The pike like to hide in the dense vegetation in shallow water. Don't be surprised if you observe at least a dozen perches during a dive. Another great feature of this lake are the numerous rudds (*Scardinius erythrophthalmus*) that inhabit the Erlaufsee. Also look for the European perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and the spiny-cheek crayfish (*Orconectes limosus*). This freshwater body even boasts a wall that drops off to 30 meters. The usual tree



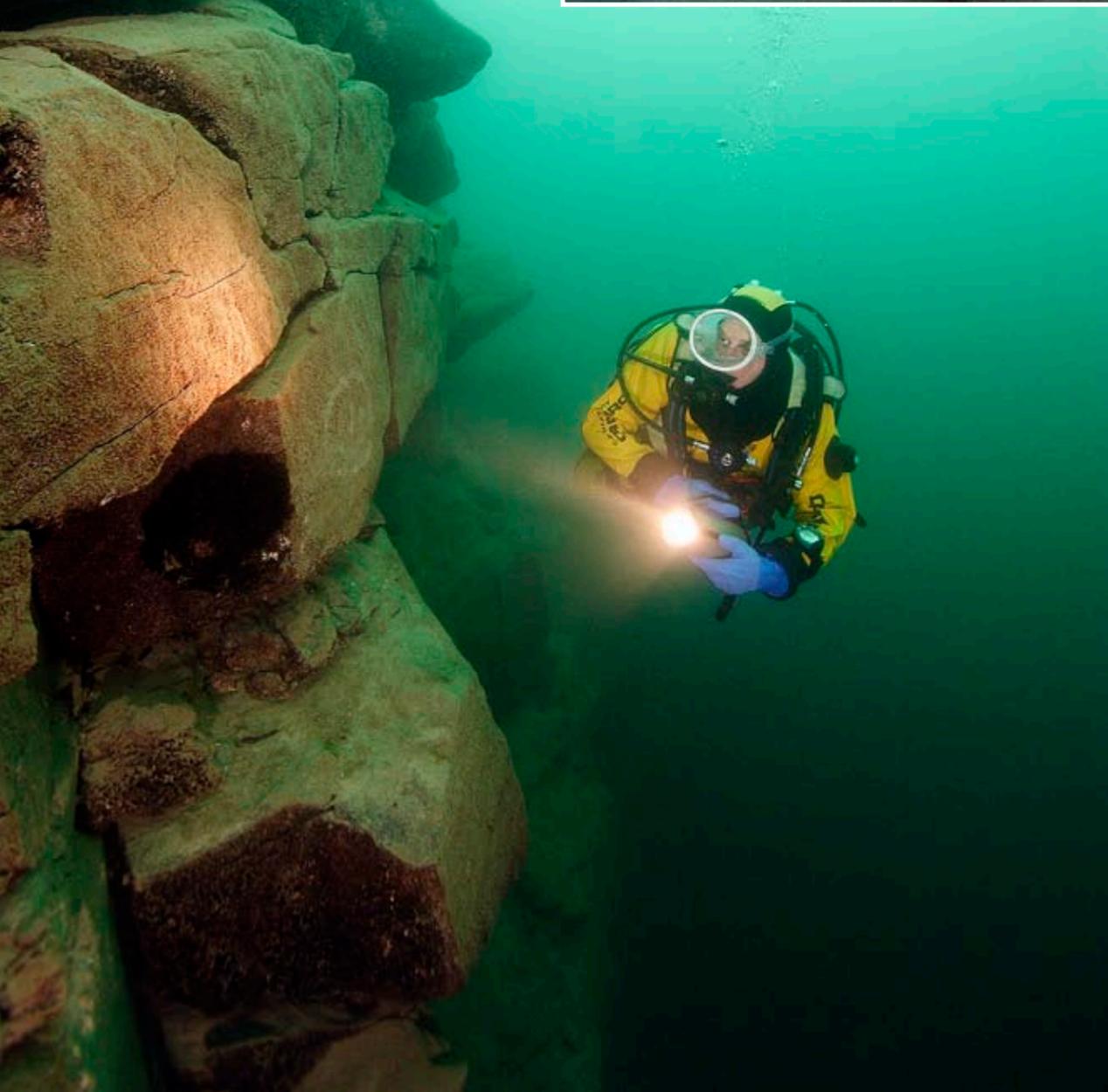
trunks and branches that have fallen in from the surrounding forest make this lake one of the most versatile dive sites

in Austria. Diving here is strictly regulated. Use only the three well-marked entry/exit points. You also need to carry an Austrian

Divecard, which can be bought for € 15, and is valid for many of the Austrian lakes for a full year.



## Austria



### BASIC FACTS

Depth: 38m / 125ft  
 Best season: summer and autumn (June – September)  
 Entrance fee: Austria Divecard, EU€ 15 per person per year  
 Dive center: Harry's Tauchschule in St. Sebastian next to the Gasthof Seewirt: [www.tauchschule.co.at](http://www.tauchschule.co.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.mariazell.at](http://www.mariazell.at)  
 Google Earth: 47°48'0"N 15°17'0"E  
 YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJzDFrTk7\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJzDFrTk7_k)

### Attersee

This is one of the largest and deepest lakes in Austria. It is also the most dived lake. The reason for this is good visibility year around, varied underwater landscape, many possible entry/exit points and good parking facilities around the lake. And last but not least, you dive here for free! The 20 kilometer- / 12.5 mile-long lake is nestled between alpine mountains and soft rolling hills. Along the highway, which runs along the edge of the lake, you will find many sign posts of entry/exit points. At the dive sites, you will also find info-boards with detailed descriptions and drawings of suggested dives. This gives you the choice of what you want to do under water: photograph tree trunks shrouded in algae, explore ship- and car wrecks or just enjoy diving in a varied landscape with walls and deep water. Just remember to check your depth gauge often, as you descend into the clear

water. Even at 40 meters depth, you will have good natural light on a sunny day. Besides the lure of the deep end, you should also venture into the shallows and vegetation-rich zones along the lake sides.

### BASIC FACTS

Depth: 171m / 561ft  
 Best season: Summer and autumn (June-October)  
 Entrance fee: free  
 Dive center: Nautilus Dive-Company, at Weyregg, directly on the lake,

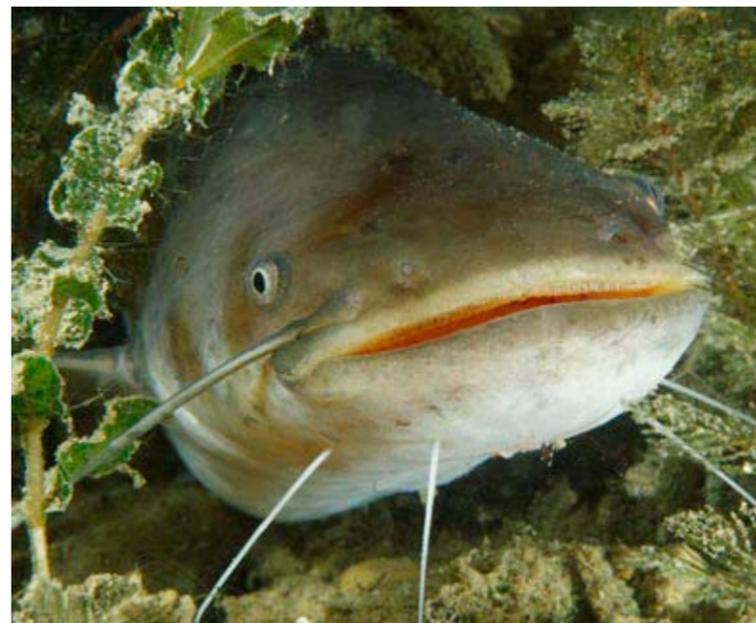
[www.nautilus.at](http://www.nautilus.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.attersee.at](http://www.attersee.at) (The tourist infrastructure in the area is very good. There are several places to fill your tanks in addition to a variety of accommodations and eateries).  
 Google Earth: 47°54'N 13°33'E  
 YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xb6gd2LGBA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xb6gd2LGBA)

### Gosausee

This alpine lake is surrounded by the impressive peaks (2,500 meters / 8,200 feet) of the Dachstein mountain range



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Exploring the landscape under Attersee; Diver and Titanic canoe wreck; Divers and kayakers at Attersee; Burbot (Lota lota)



an angle of 45°. There are a few smaller walls at around 20 meters depth. The lake is dominated by huge boulders creating

**Klopeiner See**

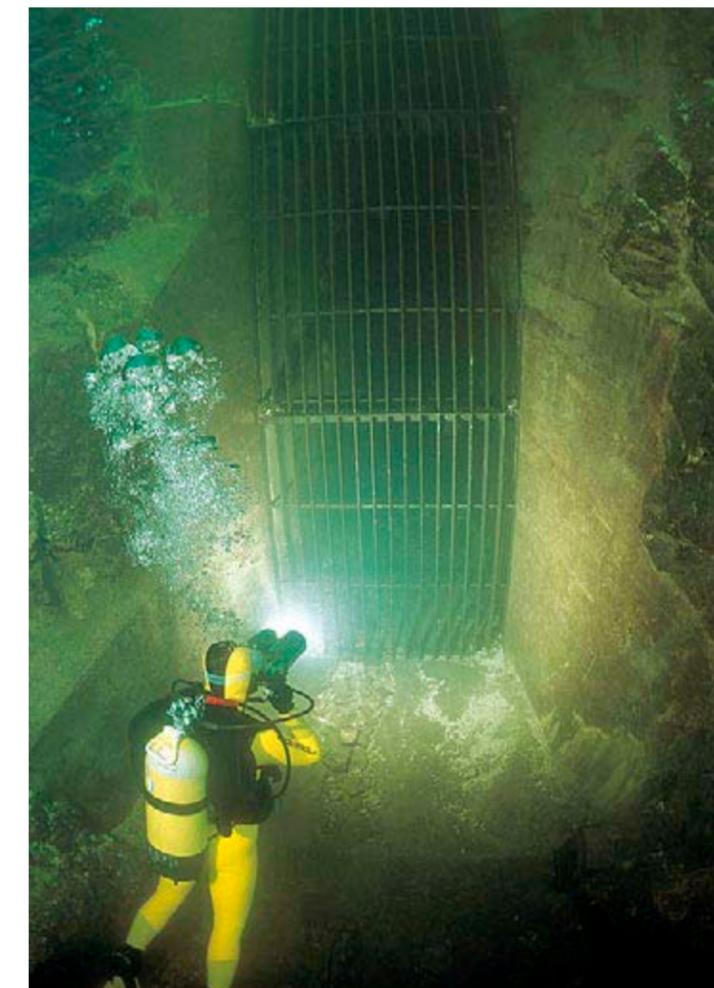
In stark contrast to the previously mentioned lake, the Klopeiner See has rich fish life and is warm enough to be a popular place in which to swim. At only 1.1 km<sup>2</sup> / 0.7 mi<sup>2</sup>, the Carinthian lake is not big. The higher temperature lessens the visibility, though, which will be in the range of 8–10 meters at its best. The lake still has its attractions for divers. Due to the profile of the lake bottom and the fact that there are seldom strong winds here, the different water layers don't mix very well. Below 30 meters / 99 feet depth, there is a nearly oxygen-depleted water layer. The area around the lake is a mix of farm land and villages, which have had a strain on the lake. To keep up the water quality, the local government installed a "deep water ventilation plant" that at least partly enriches the lake's oxygen levels. One of the positive effects of the distinct layers in Klopeiner Lake is that the top layer heats up to around 25°C / 77°F during the summer months. This makes it the warmest lake in Austria and attracts more than a fair share of lakeside tourists. The

an exciting underwater landscape to explore. Stuck amongst the rocks, you can come across old tree trunks and roots, which make great photo subjects. It is forbidden to dive in the vicinity of the water intake for the hydroelectric plant. There is a 5x2 meter / 15x6 foot metal grid here, but the 3,000 foot-long pipeline creates some current. There is little of fish and vegetation in the lake due to the big difference in the water level.

**BASIC FACTS**

Depth: 85 m / 279 ft  
 Best season: Summer and autumn (May-October)  
 Entrance fee: Austria Dive card, EU€ 15 per person per year.  
 Dive center: Tauchclub Dachstein-Salzkammergut, directly on the lake, [www.dive-adventures.at](http://www.dive-adventures.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.gosau.com](http://www.gosau.com)  
 Google Earth: 47°35'0"N 13°32'0"E

at the border of Upper Austria and Styria. The tiny lake is best dived between early summer and late autumn (May – October). The present water level is a result of a dam, which was built 100 years ago. As it is a water reservoir, the water level can fluctuate as much as 30 meters. When you arrive at the lake from November until June, it can give you the impression of an half empty bathtub. In the spring, the melting snow fills up the lake again. You can dive here all year round, but when the water level is low, it is difficult to haul heavy diving gear down the rocky slopes. Also, the best visibility is only had when the water levels are at their peak. Expect up to 50 meters visibility at depth. This is the real highlight of the lake, but before you reach this visibility, you need to penetrate a couple of thermoclines and endure a water temperature of 4°C / 39°F. The lake-bed slopes at



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Scenes under the surface of Gosausee; Silurus glanis in Klopeinersee; Delicate flora and fauna in Klopeinersee



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Juvenile Wels catfish (*Silurus glanis*); *Lepomis gibbosus*; Diver and huge Wels catfish resting on ledge of Klopeinersee; Diver prepares to dive Weissensee; Scenes below the ice in Weissensee

white lake. The lake bed is covered with calcareous mud. Fish seem to like this because as many as 24 species inhabit the Weissensee. Northern pikes (*Esox lucius*) are easily observed. The common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) appears in large schools. If you are looking for greenery, you need to stay in

the shallows at the water's edge. As many of the fish like to hide here, this makes for good dives in summer nights.

**BASIC FACTS:**  
Depth: 99m / 325ft  
Best season: Autumn (August - October)  
Entrance fee: free  
Dive center: Tauchschule

nice temperate water makes this lake more inviting to plant and fish life than other lakes in Austria. Klopeiner Lake is inhabited by 17 species of fish. The avid fish lover can encounter slightly exotic fishes such as Eurasian ruffe (*Gymnocephalus cernuus*), or pumpkinseed sunfish (*Lepomis gibbosus*) and the impressive Wels catfish (*Silurus glanis*). Getting close to one of these bottom dwellers, which can reach a length of more than two meters and weigh as much as 250-300 kilograms / 550-660 pounds, would spike any diver's adrenalin levels. Besides the ecological curios, you can also see a more than 300-year-old tree at 10 meters / 33 feet depth. For those chasing depth, there are a few places with drop offs as well.

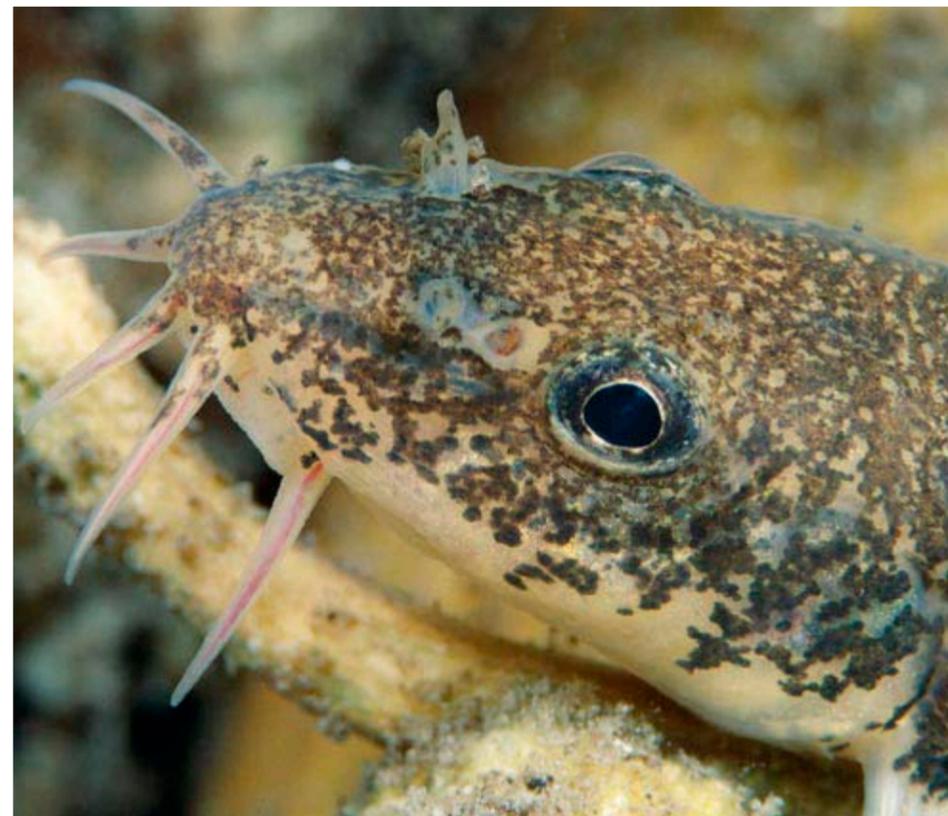
**BASIC FACTS**  
Depth: 48m / 157ft  
Best season: Autumn (August - October)  
Entrance fee: EU€ 1.50 per person per day  
Dive center: Tauchschule Easy Dive, at the Strandbad Süd, [www.easydive.at](http://www.easydive.at)  
Tourist info: [Klopeinersee.com](http://Klopeinersee.com)  
Google Earth: 46°36'16"N 14°34'59"E

**Weissensee**  
This lake in the southern part of Carinthia is good for diving all year. This 11 kilometer- / 6.8 mile-long but less than 1 kilometer- / 0.68 mile-wide

body of water is walled by high mountains rising up to an altitude of 930 meters / 3,050 feet. It freezes over completely from January to March, and good ice makes it popular for ice-diving. Under the ice, the visibility is usually good at 20 meters / 66 feet or more. This lake offers some breathtaking walls—some of them with

large overhangs, and even some caves. Add to that the usual collection of tree trunks, some wrecks and good fish life, and you have dive sites for any taste. It is easy to dive the Weissensee, as you can rapidly reach all the different dive sites with a boat. The lake is rich on calcium, which gives the lake its name— Weissensee, or the





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Ice hole for diving in Blindsee; Stone loach (*Nemacheilus barbatulus*); A zander (*Stizostedion lucioperca*) is a species of fish related to perch; Diver approaches zander; Zander in Blindsee hovers over its nest

Dive World, at the Strandbad Stockenboi on the eastside of the lake, [www.dive-world.at](http://www.dive-world.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.weissensee.com](http://www.weissensee.com)  
 Google earth: 46° 42'22.17" N 13° 20'34.55 E

**Blindsee**

This is a small alpine lake with some rare species of fish. You can find the lake at 1,100 meters altitude in Tirol. On sunny days, the turquoise water surrounded by evergreen needle tree forests crowned by snow capped mountains, makes a great photo. Just like the previously-mentioned Samaranger See, this lake is on private land and connected to the four star Mohr Life Resort. The kilometer-long lake attracts divers because of its special fish population. Of the handful of species, which have made the lake their home, the large amount of slender silvery zander (*Stizostedion lucioperca*) quickly catches one's eye. These tasty predators are best seen in

the spring during their mating rituals. During this period, the males build nests at two meters depth where the females place the eggs to be fertilized. The males then guard the eggs ferociously against other predators. This fish has even been known to attack divers, biting them while defending their eggs. The smaller and evidently less aggressive stone loach (*Noemacheilus barbatulus*) are also an abundant in Blindsee. These finger-long bottom dwellers are rarely seen by divers in other lakes in Austria. Should you grow tired of fish-watching, you will find an intriguing pile of trunks interesting. They resemble a pile of Mikado sticks. They are the result of an avalanche that swept parts of the forest at the water's edge into the lake about 30 years ago. You can swim around his labyrinth of waist-thick tree trunks.

**BASIC FACTS**  
 Depth: 23m / 75ft

Best season: Autumn (August - October)  
 Entrance fee: free for hotel guest, others EU€ 12.50 per person per day  
 Dive center: Tauchen in Tirol (this is an operation from Innsbruck, which has an outlet at the Mohr Life Resort, [www.tauchen-in-tirol.at](http://www.tauchen-in-tirol.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.mohr-resort.at](http://www.mohr-resort.at)

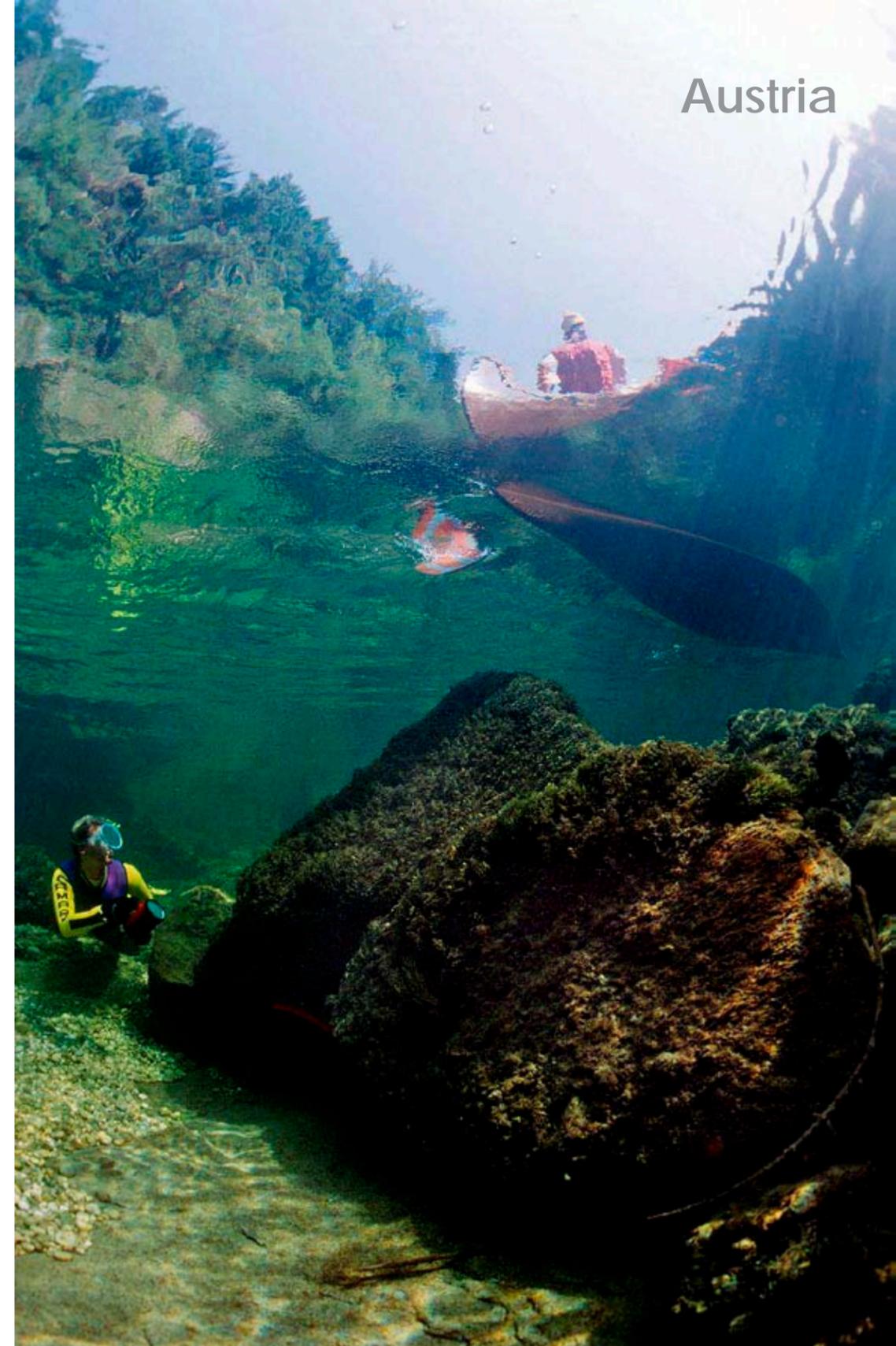
**Grüblsee**

Feeding fish while diving is normally banned in Austria, but at the Grüblsee, nobody will frown upon you if you bring a plastic container with some treats for the fish. And since our scaled friends are quite used to this practice, they will quickly descend upon you to get a bite of the goodies. On the other hand, this lake is not natural. It's actually a large "foil pond" found at 1,160 meters / 3800 feet altitude. Not made for divers or swimmers but as a reservoir to feed all the snow-cans used by the ski-resorts in the area during the winter season. Flexible as the





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Diver and schooling brook trout and Rainbow trout; Divers prepare for a freshwater dive in Gröblsee; Diver under the waves and kayaker on the surface at Traunfälle; Diver with sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*) of the sturgeon family



Austrians are, they convert one of the ski huts into a dive center during the summer months. The local ingenious dive base owner has also stocked up the lake with 14 species of fish over the last eight year—not only fish but also European crayfish (*Astacus astacus*) and swan mussels (*Anodonta cygnea*). If that isn't enough, the lake offers divers underwater platforms, statues, treasure chests, a Christmas tree forest and other bizarre sculptures. Still, for most divers, the unafraid fishes are the highlight. Rainbow- and brook trout feed right of your hand. A little more shy but more impressive are the three species of

sturgeons found in Gröblsee. These fish can, after all, grow to be several meters long. The tiny 200x100 meter- / 660x330 foot-large lake easily gets warm during the summer months, which makes diving here rather pleasant. You can dive safe and hassle-free in the shallow pond and still enjoy 20 meters / 66 feet of visibility.

**BASIC FACTS**  
Depth: 9m / 27ft  
Best season: summer and autumn

(May-October)  
Entrance fee: EU€ 3 per person per day  
Dive center: Tauchschule Präbichl, a small center directly on the lake, [www.grueblsee.at](http://www.grueblsee.at)  
Tourist info: [www.vordernberg.at](http://www.vordernberg.at)



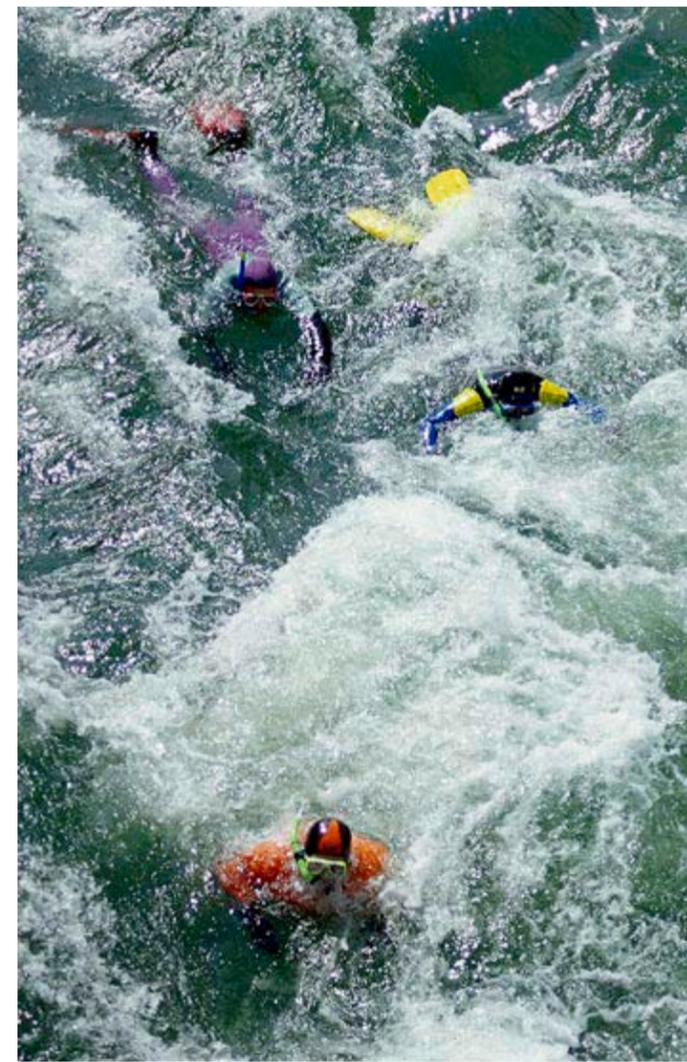
**Diving in Gröblsee**

**Traunfälle**  
At the end of our list, but not by far the least excellent diving, is the Traunfälle, or Traun waterfall. This is one of the best rivers to dive in Austria. The Traun

River, which has its source in the Salzkammergut, runs through several lakes and then empties into the mighty Danube. The best part of the river to dive is situated in Upper Austria. A dam was built on the river in 1922. At a safe distance from the hydroelectric plant, the new dam was erected

at a wider part of the river. Here, you can find a canyon-like riverbed with polished rock formations and a maximum depth of 19 meters. When the water

flow isn't too strong, you can dive through 30 caverns and tunnels. The best way to dive here is to let the local dive center drop you at the best and safest places with a



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The falls at Traunfälle; Divers brave the rapids; Diver and common barbel; Diver explores the underwater landscape of Traunfälle; A grayling, *Thymallus thymallus*, of the salmon family

several species of trout are plentiful, but also, the more rare and endangered Danube salmon (*Hucho hucho*) can be seen. In addition to the river above the falls, you can also dive below the waterfall. Springs add clear water into the river creating pockets of good visibility of ten meters or more. Due to the a wider and flatter riverbed, the water flow is stronger, so you won't be able to dive on long stretches of the river, unlike above the falls—at least not with scuba gear. If you enjoy snorkeling, you can traverse some of the stronger flowing parts of the river with fins, mask and snorkel. To do this kind of "drift snorkeling", contact the local dive center and do this

with a guide.  
**BASIC FACTS**  
 Depth: 19m / 62ft  
 Best season: summer and autumn (May-October)  
 Entrance fee: EU€ 10 per person per day  
 Dive center: Atlantis Qualidive, in the village of Viecht above the waterfall, [www.flusstauschen.at](http://www.flusstauschen.at)  
 Tourist info: [www.schwandenstadt.at](http://www.schwandenstadt.at)  
 Google Earth: N 48° 00.909' E 013° 47.962'  
 YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsLMCVGkrU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsLMCVGkrU)

*Wolfgang Pölzer is a native of Austria. He has written a book on diving in Austria together with his wife Barbara Lackner entitled, Die schönsten Tauchgewässer Österreichs, ISBN 3-900323-73-9. For more*



boat, for a one-hour drift-dive. The river is rich with fish, and you can encounter more aquatic life here than on many ocean dives. Fish like northern pike (*Esox lucius*), common barbel (*Barbus barbus*), burbot (*Lota lota*), grayling (*Thymallus thymallus*) and

# fact file



## Austria



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

**History** Austria was once the center of power for the large Austro-Hungarian Empire. After its defeat in WWI, it was reduced to a small republic. Austria's status remained unclear for a decade following annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938 and then occupation in 1945 by the victorious Allies. In 1955, a State Treaty was signed which ended the occupation and recognized Austria's independence, forbidding unification with Germany. That same year, a constitutional law declared the country's "perpetual neutrality" terms for Soviet military withdrawal. The meaning of the nation's neutrality was altered after the collapse of the Soviet Union's in 1991 and Austria's entry into the European Union in 1995. In 1999, Austria was a prosperous, democratic country entering the EU Economic and Monetary Union. Austria assumed a nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2009-10 term, in January 2009. Government: Federal republic. Capital: Vienna

**Geography** Austria is located in Central Europe, north of Italy and Slovenia. The terrain in the west and the south is mostly mountainous (Alps); along the eastern and northern margins it is mostly flat or slopes gently. Coastline: 0km (Austria is landlocked). Lowest point: Neusiedler See 115m. Highest point: Grossglockner 3,798m. Note: This landlocked country has a strategic location at the crossroads of central Europe with numerous easily traversable Alpine passes and valleys. Austria's major river is the Danube. Because of steep slopes, poor

soils and low temperatures elsewhere, its population is concentrated on eastern lowlands.

**Climate** Austria's climate is temperate. It is continental and cloudy, enduring cold winters with snow in mountains, and frequent rain and some snow in the lowlands. Summers are moderate with occasional showers. Natural hazards include landslides, avalanches and earthquakes.

**Environmental issues** Austria's challenges include some forest degradation due to air and soil pollution; soil pollution due to the use of agricultural chemicals; air pollution due to emissions of coal- and oil-fired industrial plants and power stations as well as trucks moving between northern and southern Europe. The nation is party to agreements including Air Pollution, Air Pollution-Nitrogen Oxides, Air Pollution-Persistent Organic Pollutants, Air Pollution-Sulfur 85, Air Pollution-Sulphur 94, Air Pollution-Volatile Organic Compounds, Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands, Whaling.

**Economy** Austria has a well-developed market economy and high standard of living. It is closely tied to other EU

economies, particularly Germany's. The nation's economy has developed a big service sector—with strong commercial relations in banking and insurance sectors—a solid industrial sector, and a small, but well-developed agricultural sector. However, the country was affected by the recent global economic downturn and financial crisis, after enjoying several years of healthy foreign demand for Austrian exports and record employment growth. A recession in the country persisted until late 2009, although unemployment has not risen as much as in other European countries since the government subsidized working hour reduction schemes allowing companies to retain their employees. Current challenges include developing knowledge-based



RIGHT: Location of Austria on global map  
BELOW: Location of Austria on map of Central Europe  
FAR RIGHT: Paddle boaters on Klopeinsee



sec- of the tors economy, creating greater labor flexibility and participation to offset unemployment growth, dealing with an aging population and an exceedingly low fertility rate. Natural resources: oil, coal, lignite, timber, iron ore, copper, zinc, antimony, magnesite, tungsten, graphite, salt, hydropower. Agriculture: grains, potatoes, sugar beets, wine, fruit; dairy products, cattle, pigs, poultry; lumber. Industries: construction, machinery, vehicles and parts, food, metals, chemicals, lumber and wood processing, paper and paperboard, communications equipment, tourism.

**Currency** euros (EUR)

**Population** 7,821,281 (July 2010 est.). Ethnic groups: Austrians 91.1%, former Yugoslavs 4% (includes Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, and Bosniaks), Turks 1.6%, German 0.9%, other groups 2.4% (2001 census). Religions: Roman Catholic 73.6%, Protestant 4.7%, Muslim 4.2%, other groups 3.5% (2001 census). Internet users: 5.937 million (2008)

**Language** German is the official

language nationwide at 88.6%, Turkish 2.3%, Serbian 2.2%, Croatian (the official language in Burgenland) 1.6%, other languages including Slovene (the official language in Carinthia) and Hungarian 5.3% (2001 census)

### Hyperbaric Chambers

Dept. for Thoracic Surgery & Hyperbaric Surgery, County Hospital, University Medical School, Auenbruggerplatz 29, Graz, Austria 8036  
Tel. +43 (0) 316 385-2827

Medical University of Vienna, Anesthesia and Intensive Care Medicine, Währinger Grütel 18-20, Vienna Austria 1090  
Tel. (+43) 1 40400 1001

### Websites

Austria Tourism  
[www.austria.info](http://www.austria.info)





# 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

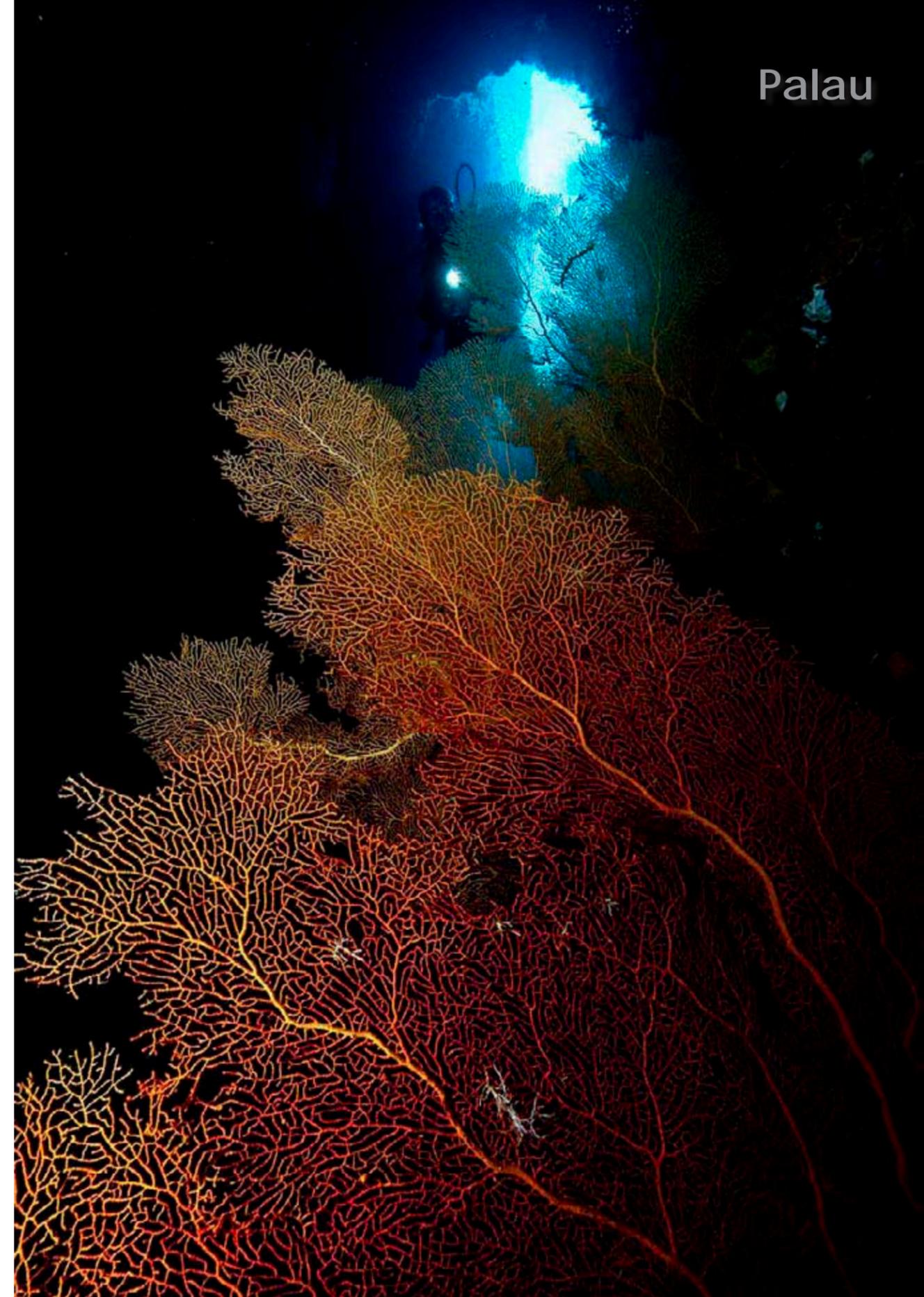




Appearing like nebulous emeralds adrift over an expanse of a deep blue ocean, Palau is richly endowed with some of the world's most stunning and unique terrain above and below the sea. Geologically, the islands are pinnacles of an undersea ridge of volcanic mountains, part of the "Pacific Ring of Fire" 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

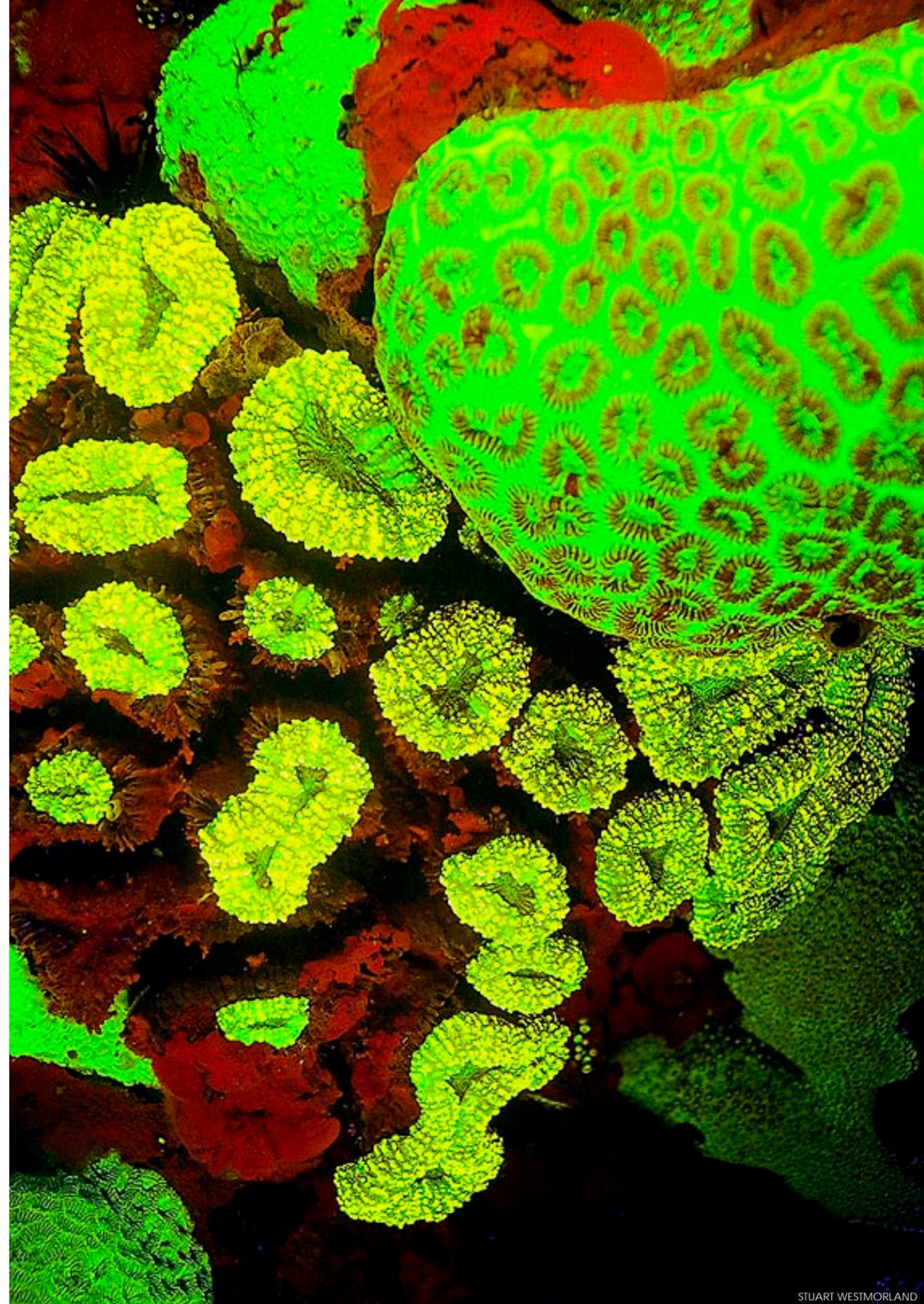
group was going to dive. However, we had yet to gain our bearings. It was not surprising after such a long flight to lose orientation in time and space. Our flights took us from Moscow to Doha to Manila to Koror—a total of 16 hours in the air, plus time waiting for transfers.

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

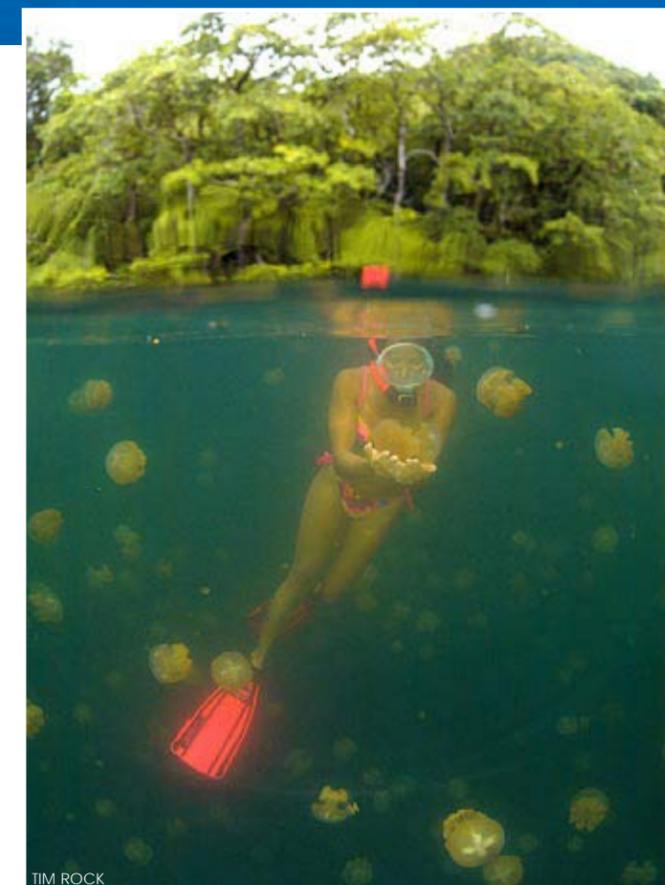




TIM ROCK



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

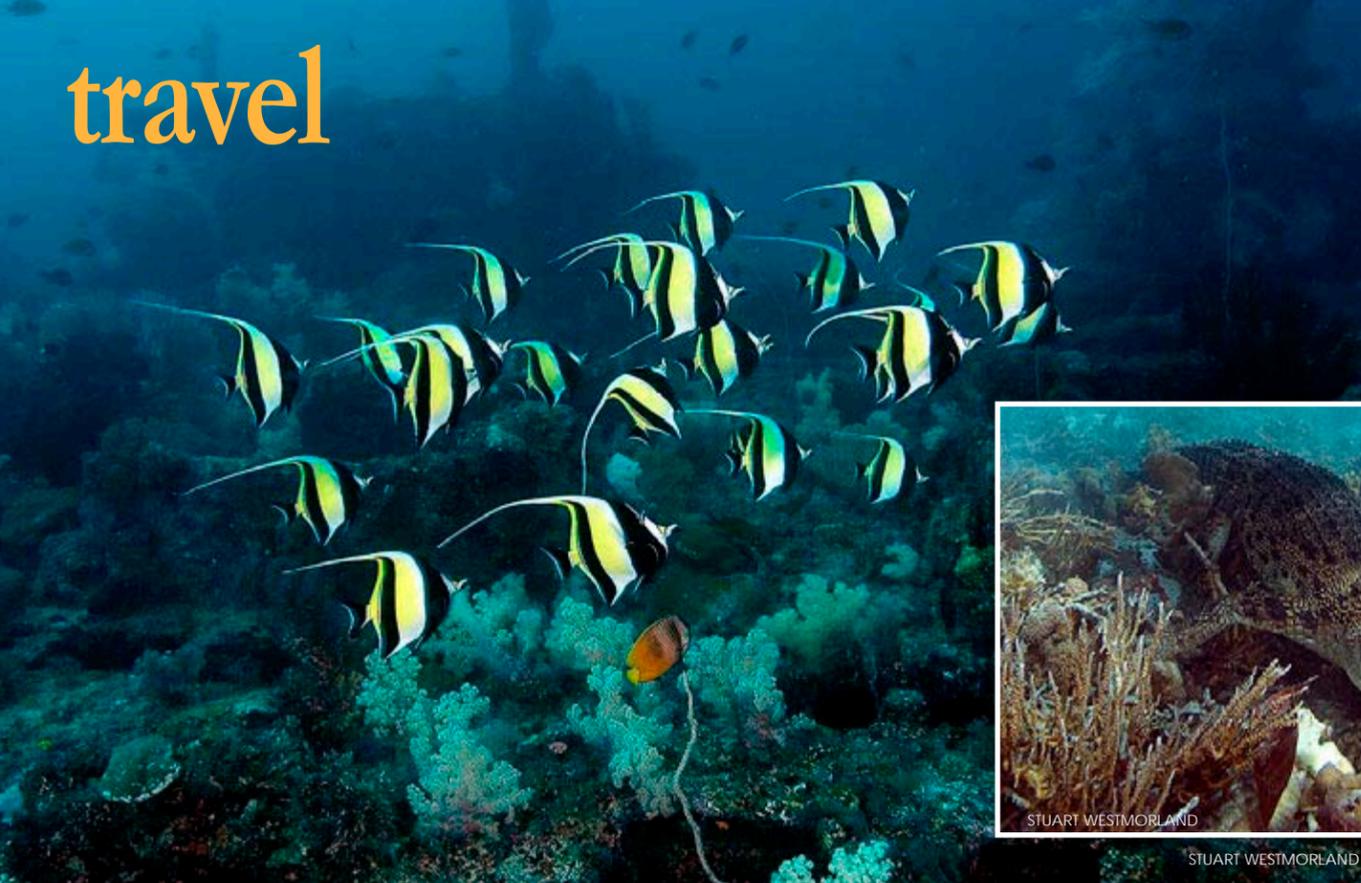
a diploma in the field of ship building and mechanical engineering.

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

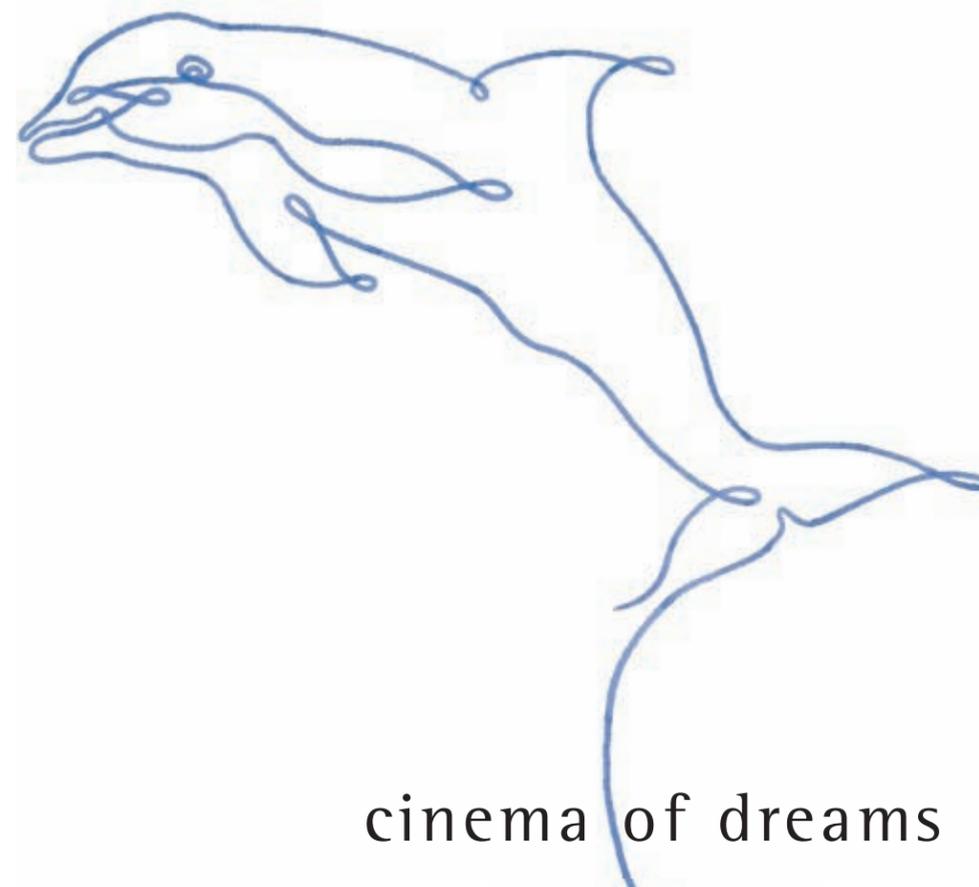
support for technical divers. Few *techies* come to Palau, but when they do, they are happy. The depth, wrecks, organization and great opportunities are here—everything that techies may want or need.

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



cinema of dreams



www.seacam.com

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



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,

TIM ROCK

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

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

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



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](http://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

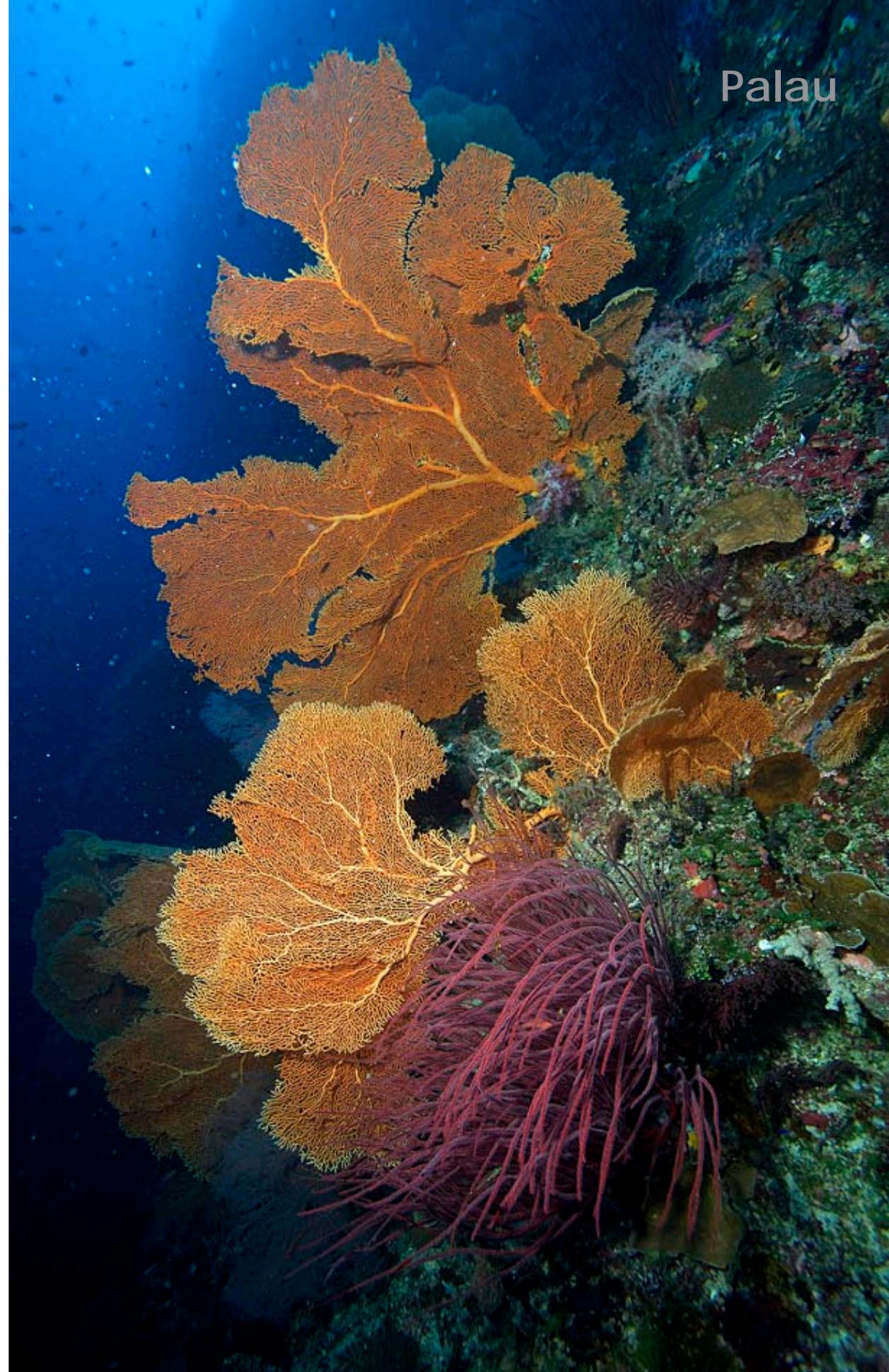
Have you ever lost that loving feeling for diving? Not that you don't want to dive any more, nothing that extreme, but you remember when it was just new and exciting like a new relationship, burning red hot. Now diving has become a constant, reliable and reasonably predictable, safe, and still makes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

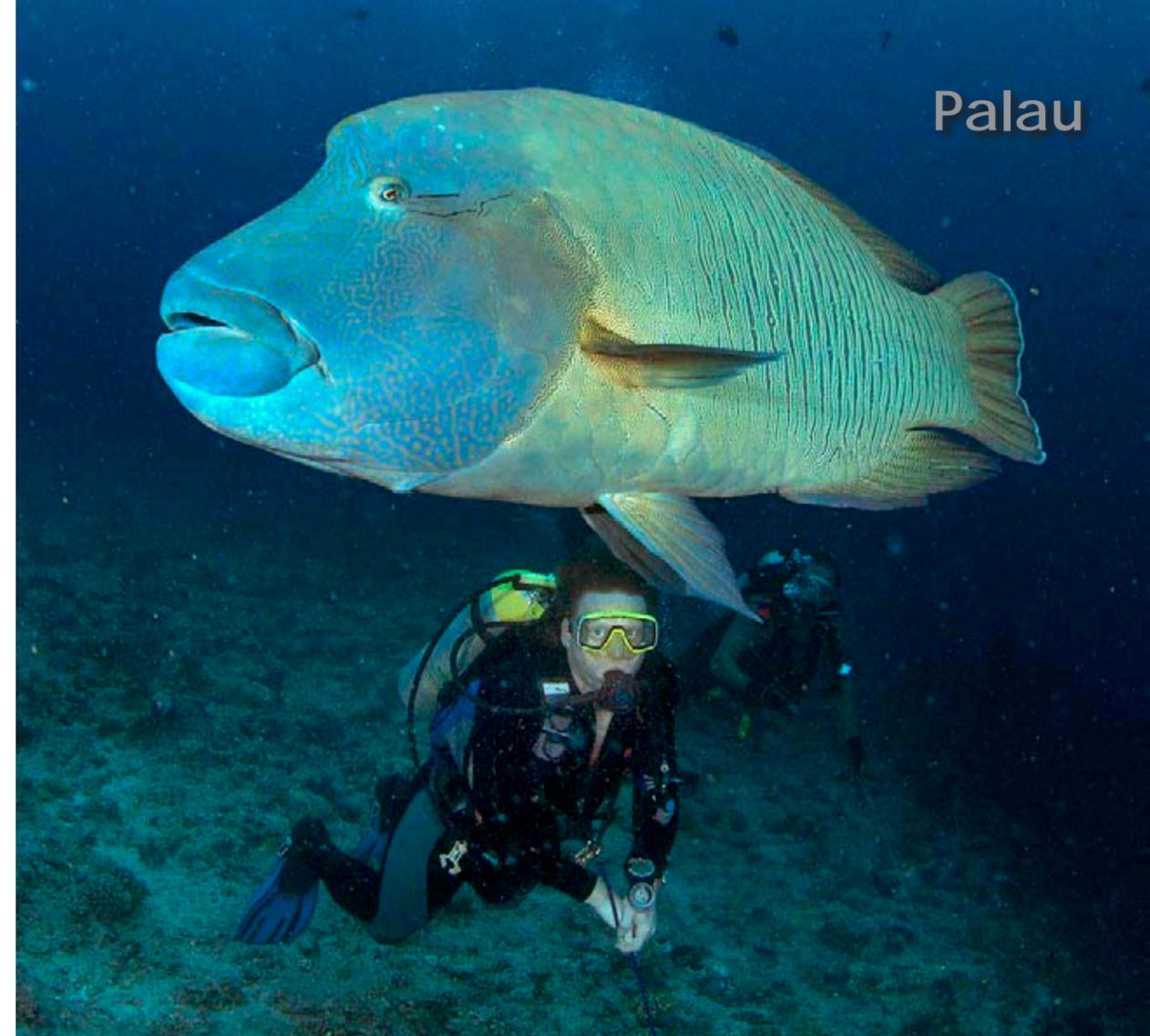
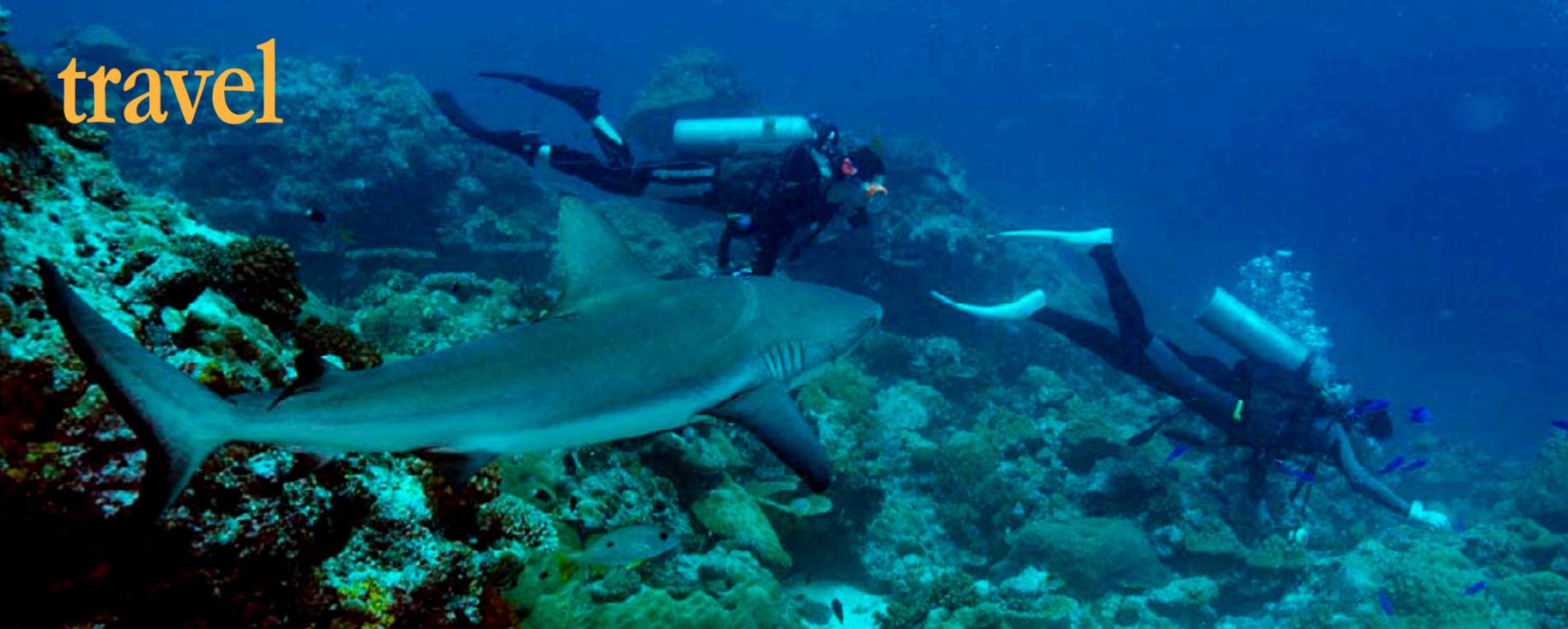
This is to all those divers who may have grown just a little complacent in their diving or have been diving the same dive spots so many times that you almost forget you're diving as I had. As for the new divers out there, you may not know what I am talking about—your love affair with diving is still 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

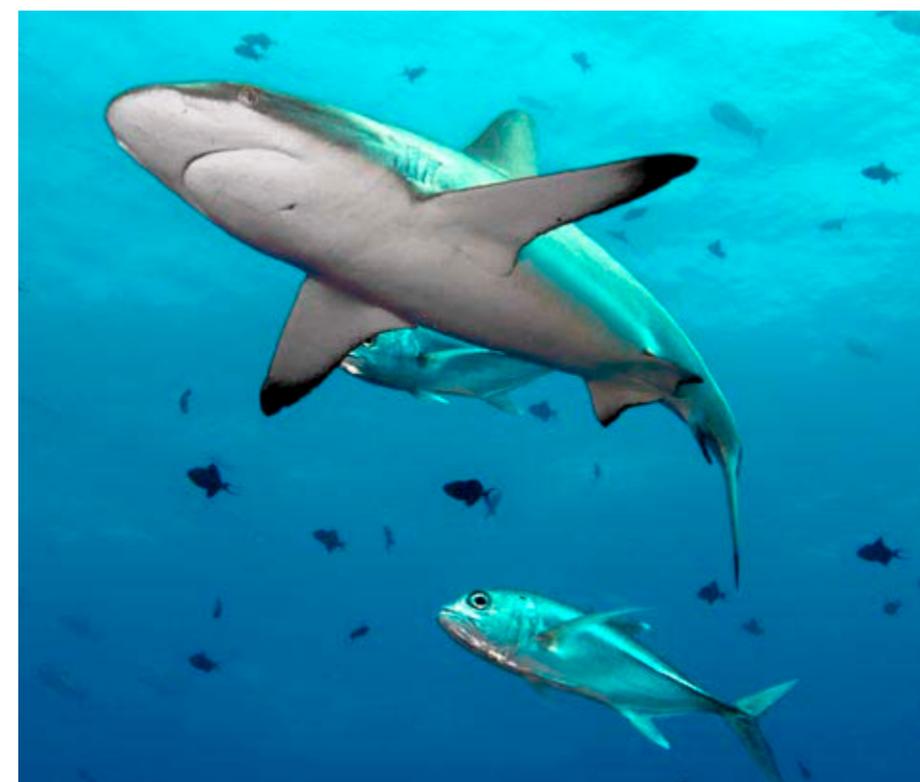


direction looking for a place to hide but all the spots are taken already so they are on full display despite their stage fright; then, it is looking over the edge of a wall and me seeing sharks just going back and forth along the wall in anticipation of an easy meal either above or below. The larger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

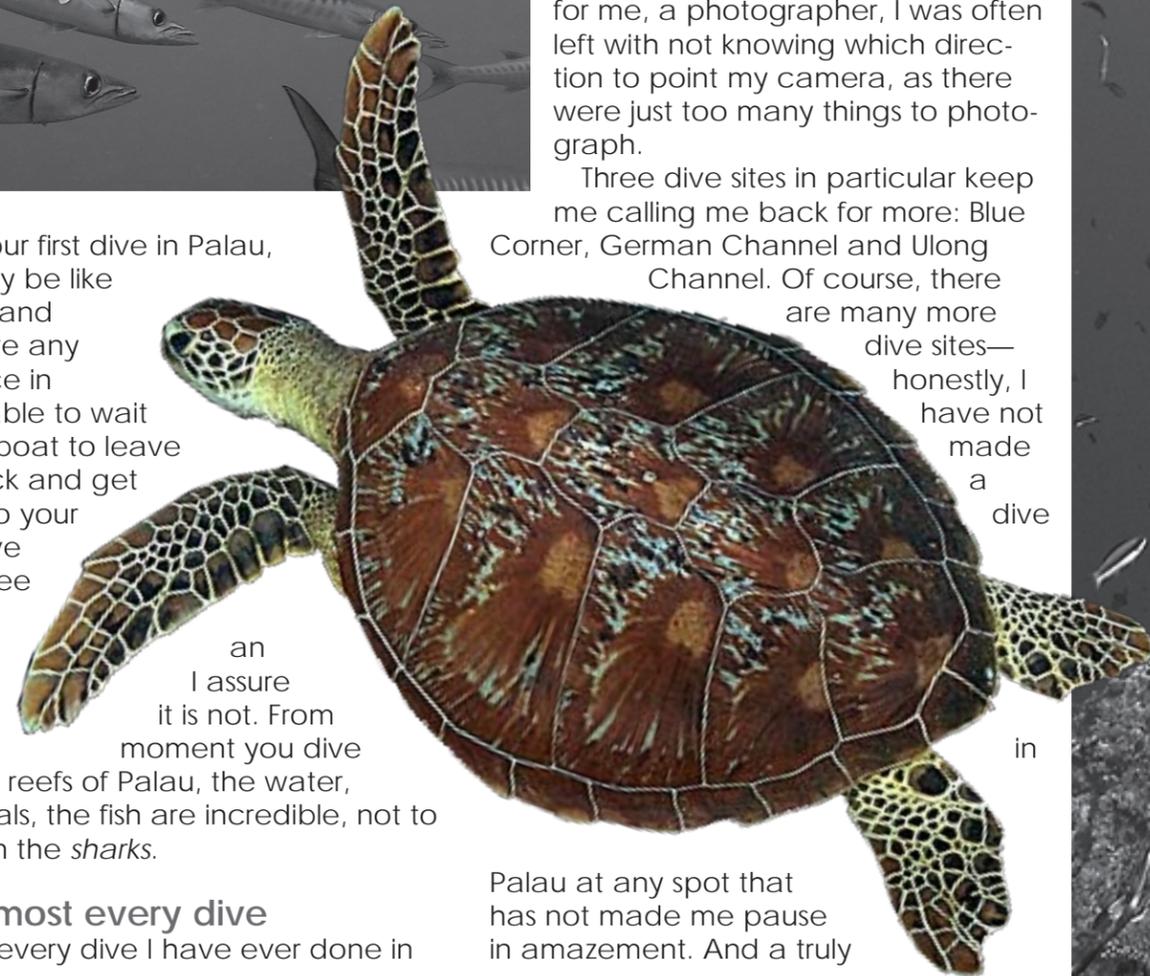
**On almost every dive**  
Almost every dive I have ever done in

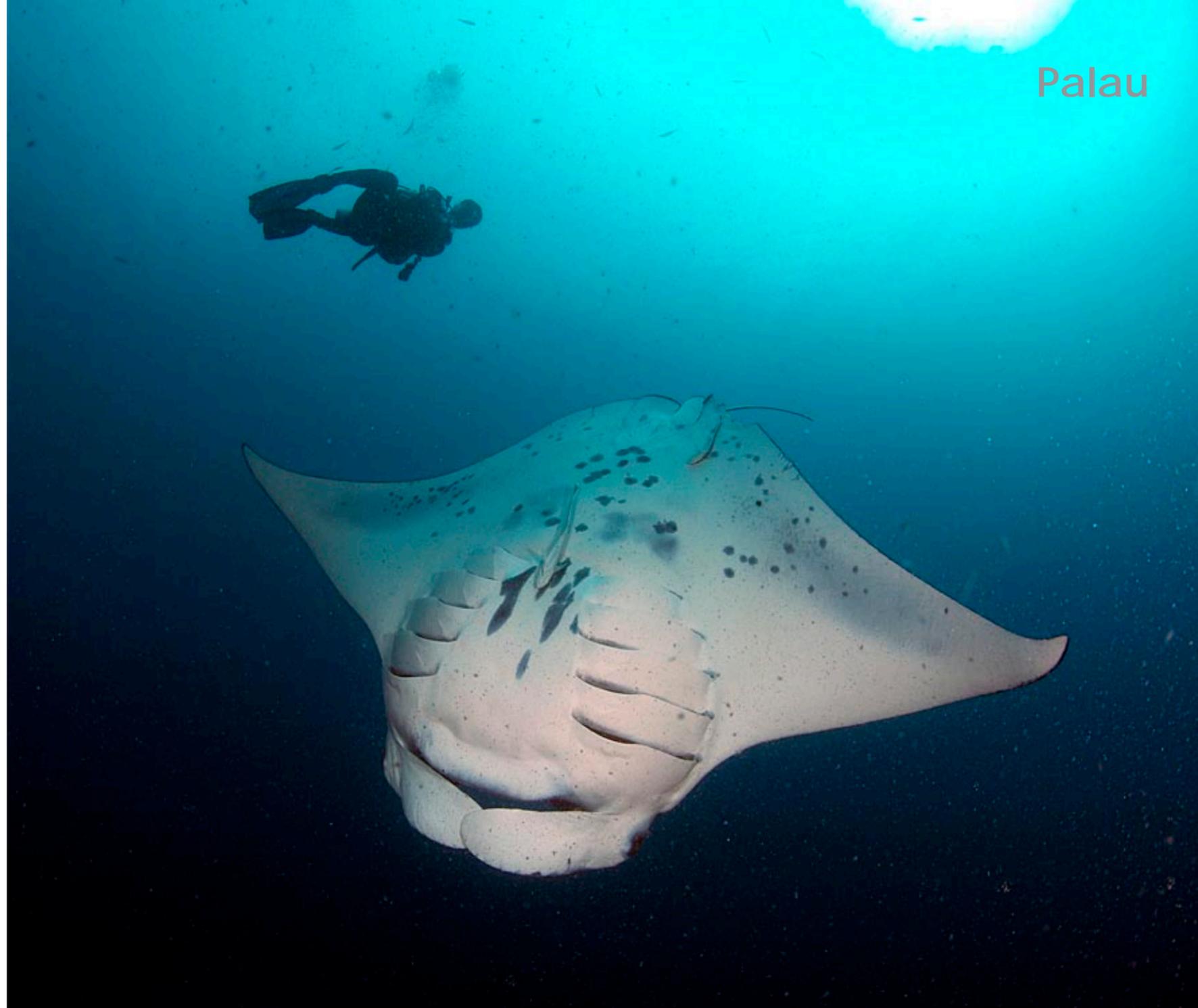
Palau at any spot that has not made me pause in amazement. And a truly



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

an I assure it is not. From moment you dive in





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



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

Pufferfish camouflage blends in with table coral

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.

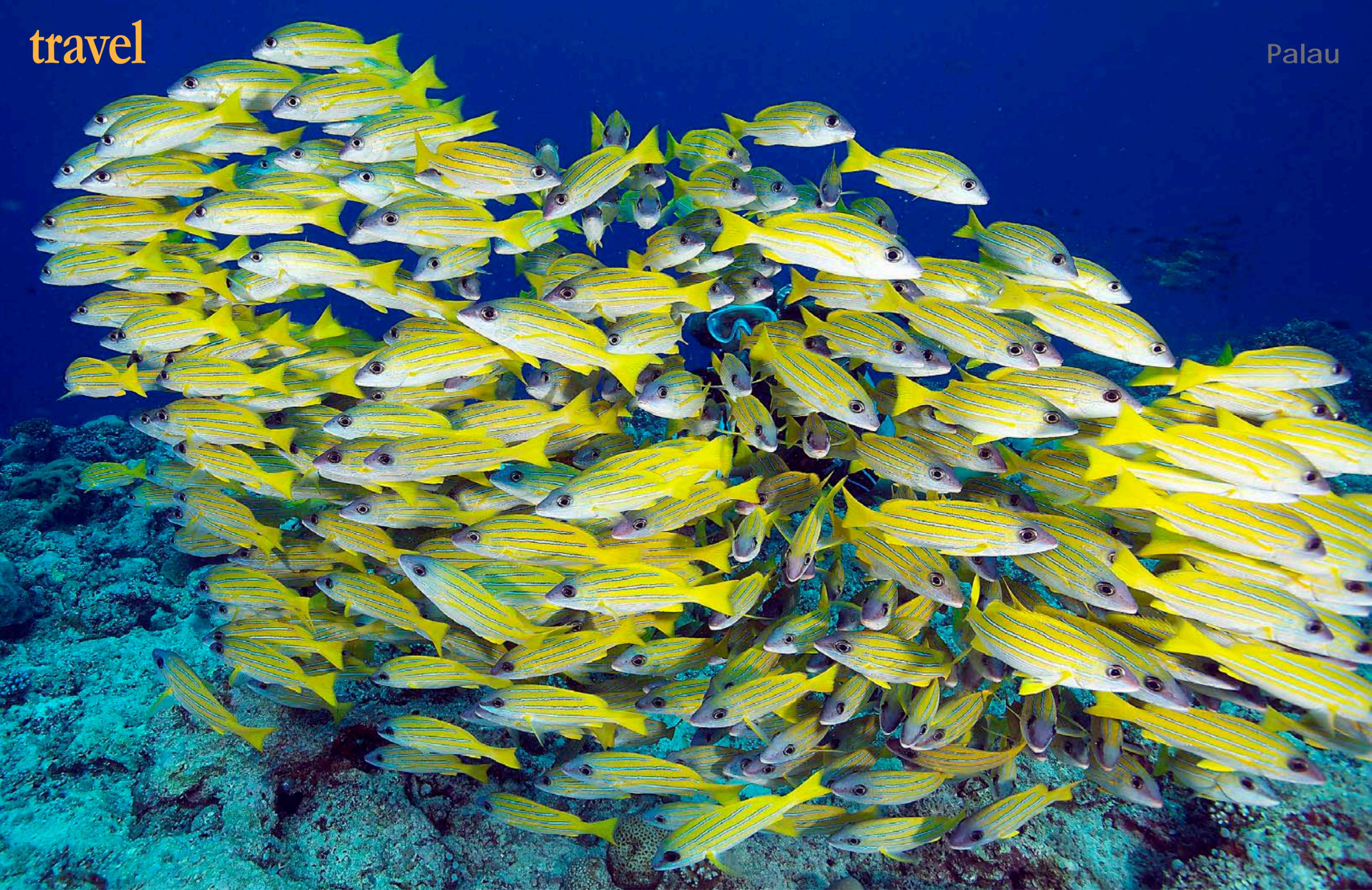
Sharks will circle over and over, above and below, riding the currents, allowing you the opportunity to photograph or just observe



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







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

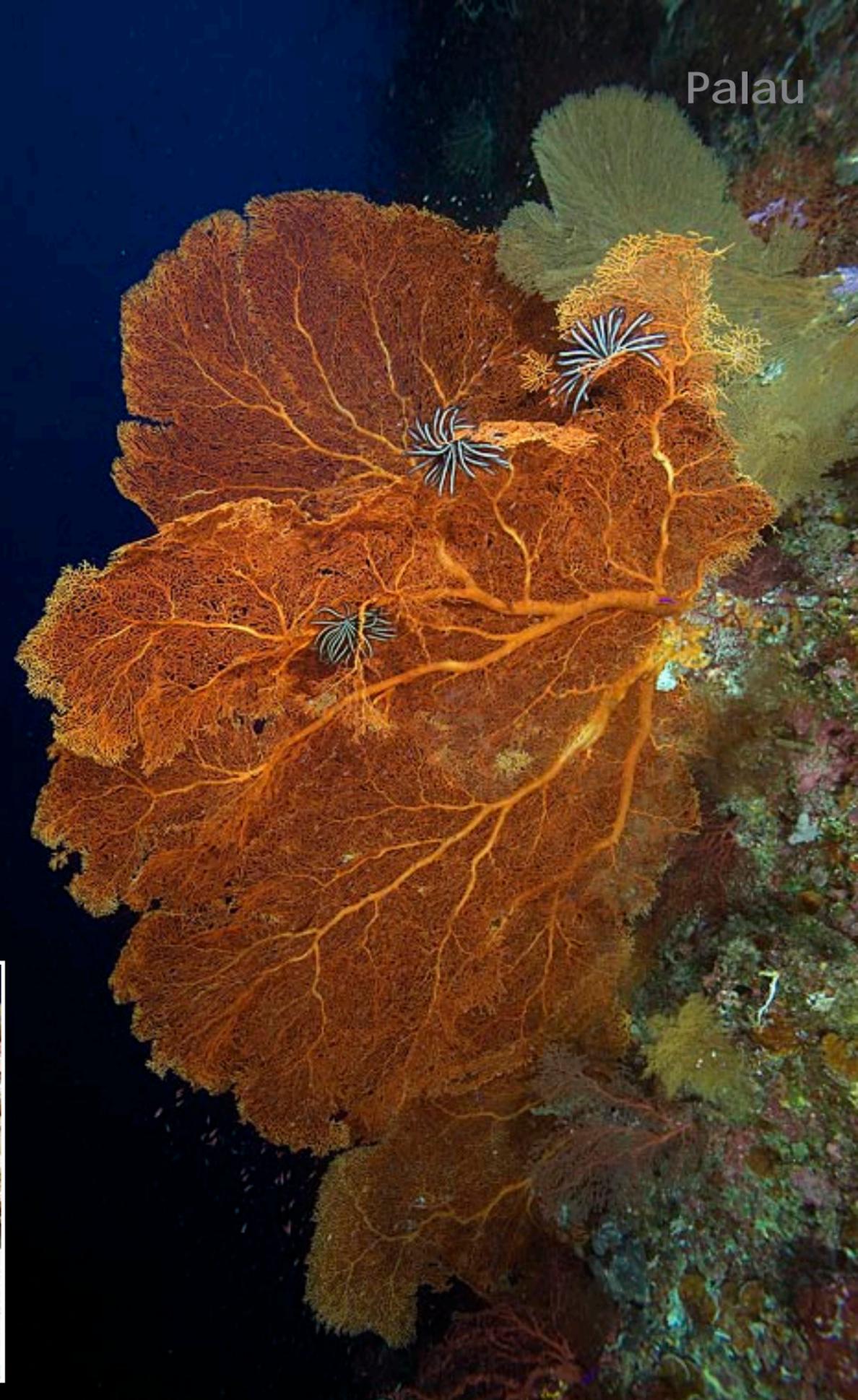
German Channel was built in the 1900s, when the German administration

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*

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

### JELLYFISH LAKE

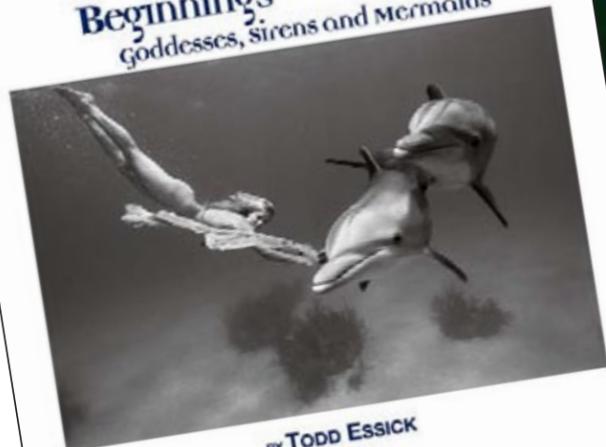
(Palauan: Ongeim'l Tketau, "Fifth Lake") is a marine lake located on Eil Malk Island in Palau. Eil Malk is part of the Rock Islands, a group of small, rocky, mostly uninhabited islands in Palau's Southern Lagoon, between Koror and Peleliu. There are about 70 other marine lakes located throughout the 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



### Beginnings Goddesses, Sirens and Mermaids



by TODD ESSICK  
FOREWORD BY MICHAEL AW

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*

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,



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.

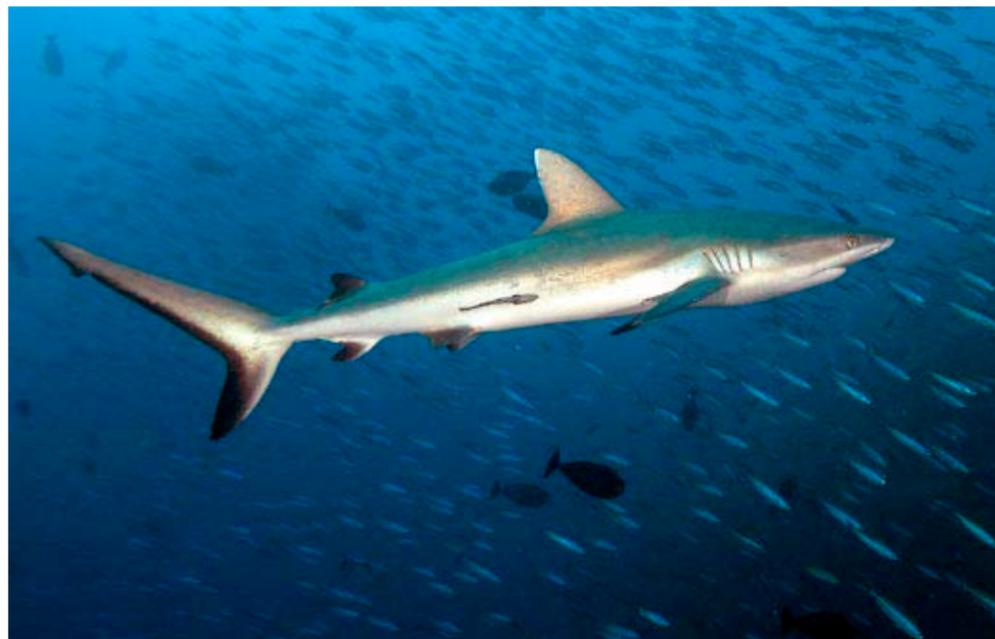
Above and below the surface of the water, Palau puts on a hell of a show and should not be missed. Once you go, you will want an encore performance and will be trying to figure out how and when you'll get your next ticket to the show.

*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](http://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.

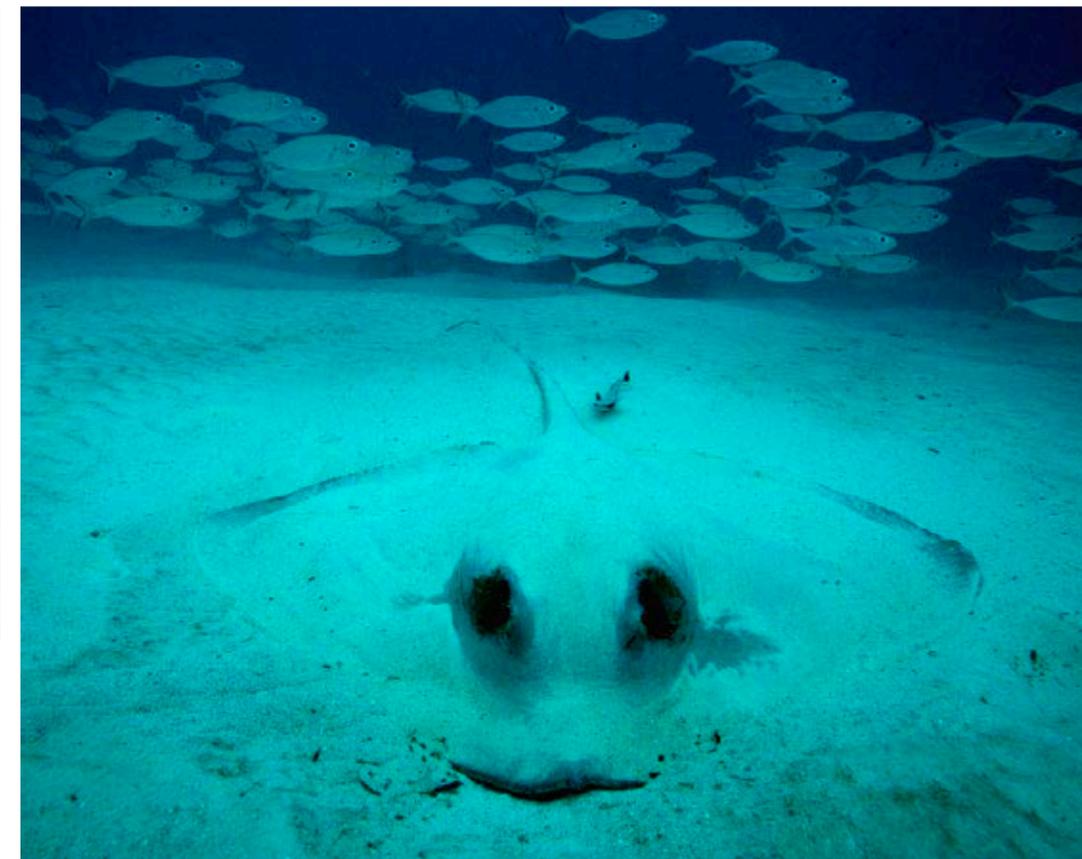
The effort to get to the lake adds to the allure of going there. A short but steep hike up and down to get to the lake is part of the adventure. The view of the lake before descending down to the water's edge is breath taking.

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



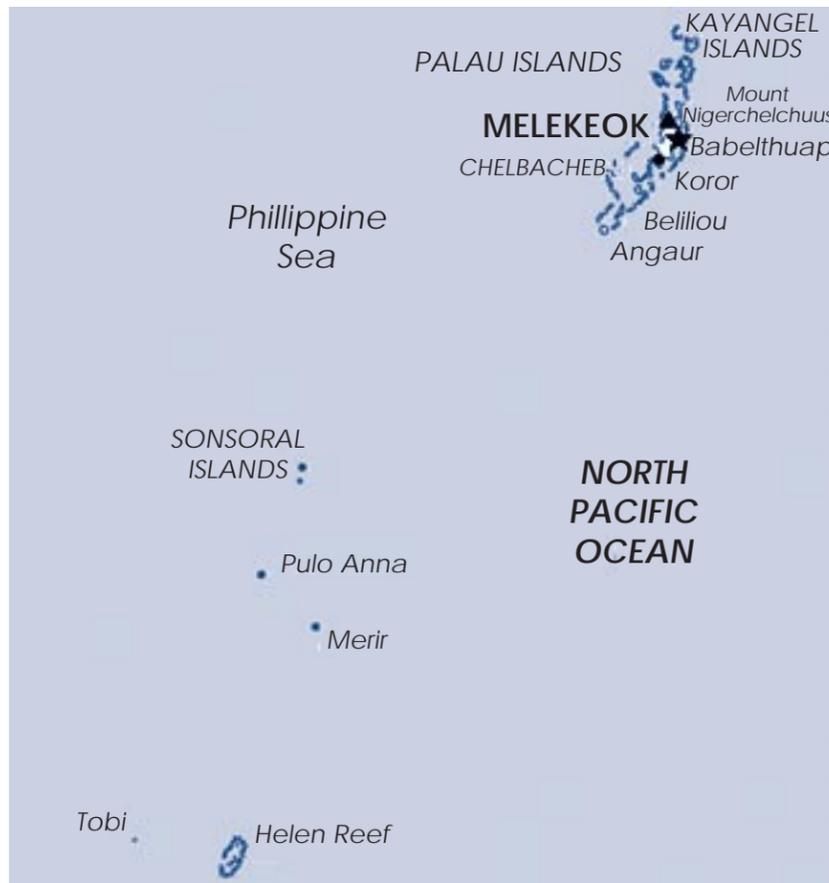
## Palau



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

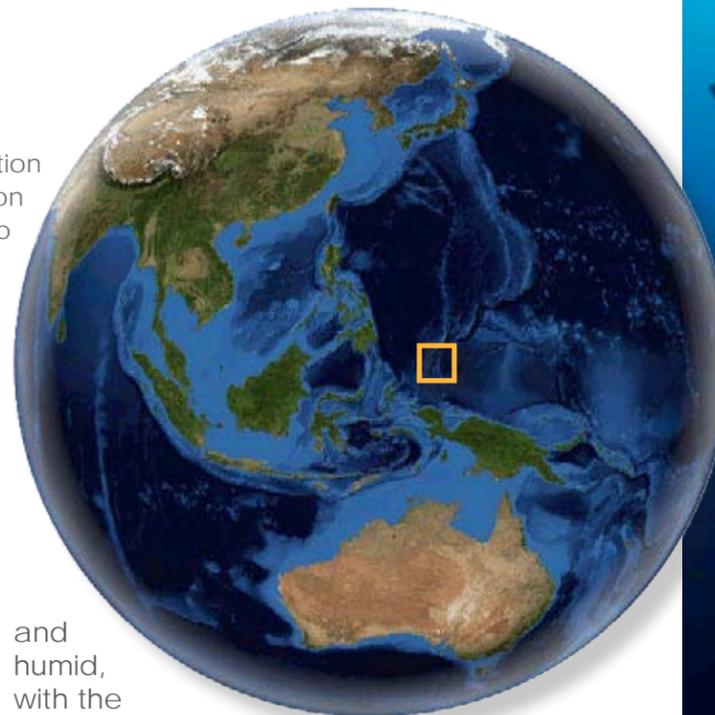


Philippines. Terrain varies geologically from high mountains on the main island of Babelthuap to low, coral islands commonly fringed by large barrier reefs. Coastline: 1,519km. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Mount Ngerchelchuus 242m. Note: The westernmost archipelago in the Caroline chain,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

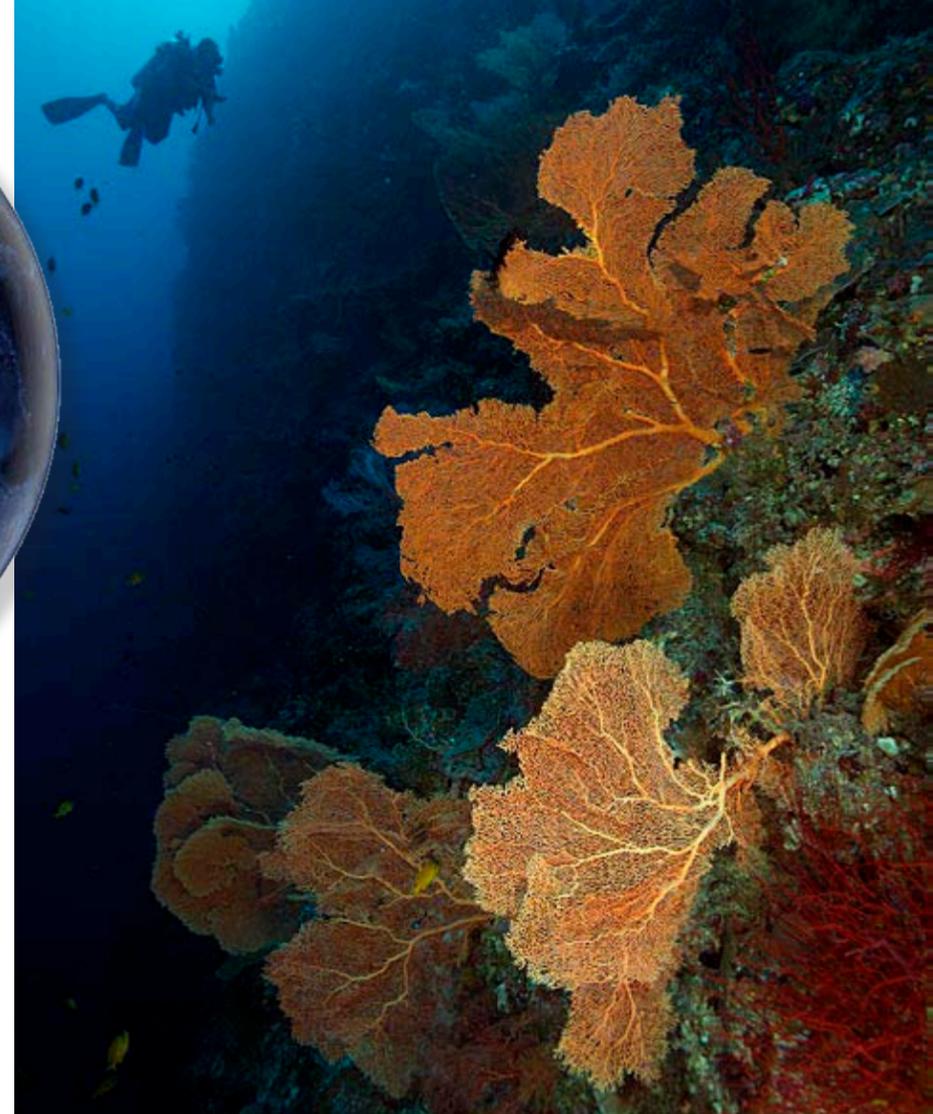
**Climate** Palau's climate is tropical, hot

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](http://www.visit-palau.com)