

Text and photos by Daniel Brinckmann

Yap

Home of the Big Stuff





Yellow, white, black and purple paper fishes inhabit a bommie in Mi'l Channel (left); Lovestoned eagle ray the second before it hits the dome port (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Valerie the manta ray with the tell-tale v-shaped marking on her belly greets a diver

You name it and you know it—the itching and scratching in the morning, those five minutes of mini breakfast, the coffee swallowed so quickly it burns your throat—all for the anticipation of the adventure to come. The Big Game. Every experienced diver knows that feeling, but hardly anybody is able to describe the notion just why one feels a certain day is gonna be *the* very special one.

Probably the most intriguing thing about my "day of days" is that none of the above happened. Actually, it started out worse... much worse. The evening before, dive center manager, Jan Sledsens, and Bill Acker, the owner of Manta Ray Bay Resort in Yap, assembled in front of the weather forecast on the internet. The worried looks on their faces said it all: one typhoon was coming in from Guam in the North, one from that coral patchwork in the East they call the Outer Islands of Micronesia, and finally the last one from the Philippines just after it left Manila flooded and devastated. "This could be too much for the 56 square kilometers that Yap

is," said Bill after taking a deep sip from his beer mug. "The day after tomorrow, we need to tug in the jetty and get the resort storm-proof."

The next morning, the tropical paradise greeted us with its grim face, it was raining cats and dogs, and instead of rushing off to dive boats, everybody seemed to be glued to their coffee cups. Shrugging his shoulders, Jan said: "Okay guys, let's go. The other guests are waiting for their mantas."

The giant rays, one has to know, are Yap's pleasure and pain, at the same time, since many guests are just keen on their flying carpets and ignore even the sharks, the reef and everything in between. Adding insult to injury, no



There to feed the cliché: spinner dolphin family riding the dive boat's bow wave; Two reef sharks on patrol (right); Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers (top right)

mantas had been seen in the last two days, and everybody was pushed to the limit to get the guests "their" mantas.

Green water engulfed us as we navigated through Goofnuw Channel, in the middle of the Valley of Rays. We could hardly find the cleaning station. Even though the water was blooming with plancton, there were no mantas around. "Why didn't I just stay in bed," I thought, but in the next moment, the tables turned.

Driven by an invisible force, a strong current came in from the open ocean, clearing up the water by more than 20 meters. And with



MANTA ETHICS

Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers is the only locality in the world where divers are able to do a PADI "Manta Awareness" specialty. Bill Acker, who basically founded tourism on Yap, and his crew celebrate their 25th anniversary this year—not too bad for a privately owned dive resort in the middle of the Pacific. This is exactly how long the guys have been diving with those elusive flying carpets.

Around 100 different individuals have been recorded and named in the dive center's data base over the years. If you should be one of the happy ones that find a new one, which after all these years still happens, you can gladly give it a name. With six cleaning stations in Mi'l and Goofuw Channel located between 33 and 78 feet, Yap is an all year round destination for manta ray encounters, even though they can often be absent for a few days.

Only last January saw the discovery of a new cleaning station in just 21 feet of depth. "This is a sensible environment," dive center manager Jan Sledsens said, "and that's the reason why we do have a code of conduct for diving at the channel's cleaning stations." First, to sit still on the sandy bottom and swim after the mantas are as much no-no's as touching them. How they get the mantas to hover over your head and make them fill the frame

of your fisheye lens is a different issue you best explore on the spot.

The reef mantas (*Manta alfredi*) inhabiting Yap's waters usually do not exceed a wingspan of 15ft, however there are some special features about the local animals, for instance, with the presence of two white specimens—one aptly named Snowwhite. Judging from the photos, renowned ichthyologist, Helmut Debelius, claims these two animals are "rather unlikely real albinos, but suffering from a lack of pigments". On the other hand, this color variant is much rarer than the black ones ("melanism") that can often be found off Komodo, for example.

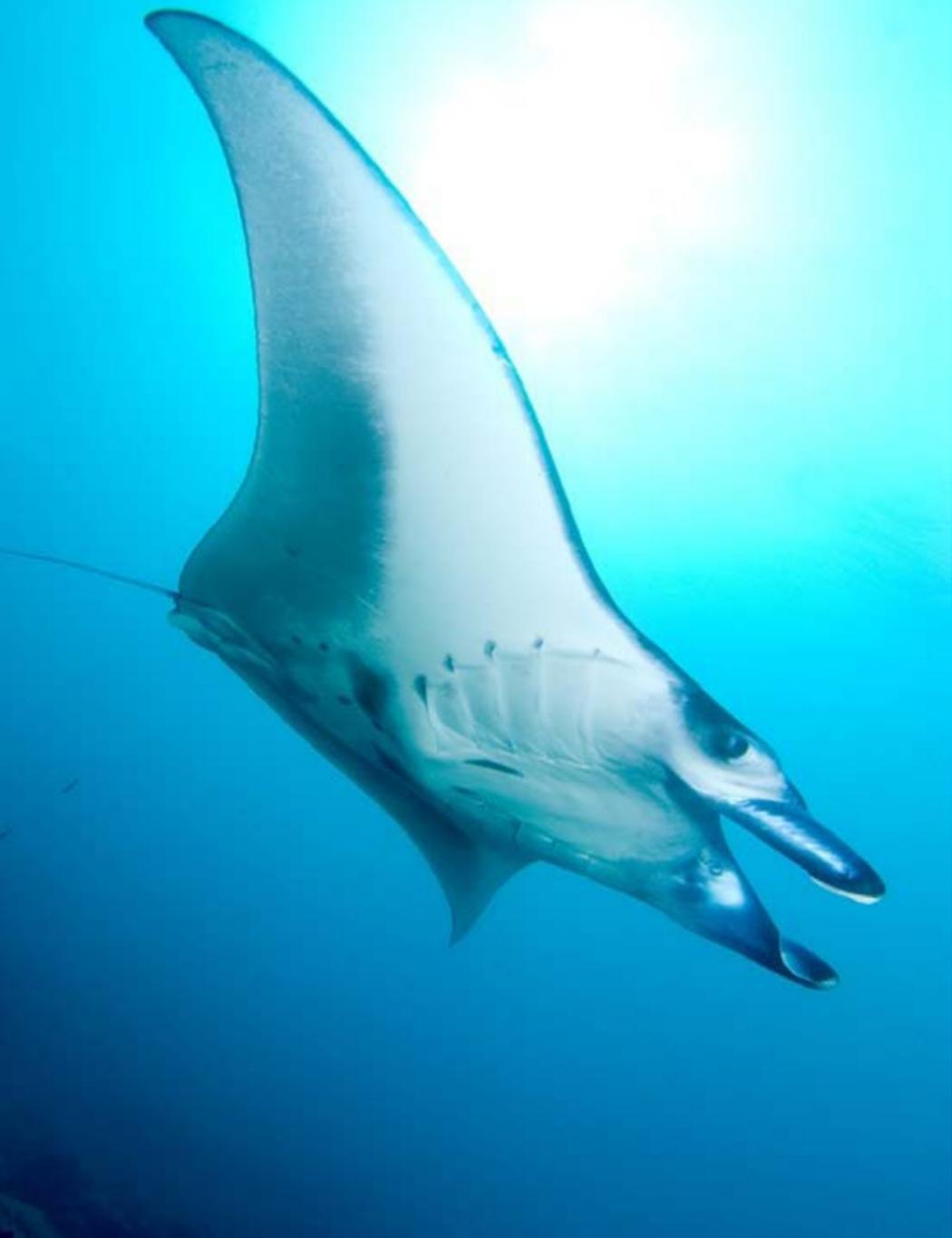
Between December and April, divers that are in the right spot at the right time may witness mating dances in Mi'l Channel. Generally speaking, it is less the numbers but more the quality of the encounters that make Yap an enchanted place to go for the giant rays. But don't let the mantas fool you, diving Yap is so much more, with the steep walls off the west coast, 120 feet plus of viz on the outer reef, the healthy shark population (these days "Vertigo" hosts less divers and more teeth than Palau's famous "Blue Corner"), the pelagics, the critters on the inner reef and the surprise encounters that the open waters off the southern tip may hold for you. See: www.mantaray.com ■

the clear blue water—surprise, surprise—came the mantas. One, two, three, four—one by one, they glided over the rocky channel bottom and rose up to the cleaning station next to our heads.

From the V-shaped blotches on her belly, I recognized Valerie, one of the "friendliest" mantas in Yap, that has a very special habit. Swimming a long curve, she passed me and hovered on top of my buddy's head, going deeper and deeper until she basically sat on top of

his head. Valerie just loves the tiny air bubbles from the regulators. No doubt, if she was human, Valerie would spend her days in a jacuzzi. Mission accomplished! I could almost hear dive center manager Jan sighing in relief.

Pretty much to our surprise, the other mantas also remained motionless. As if they hung on transparent wires, they did not even bother to move a single tip of their black wings. Maybe they saw them coming earlier than we did: a bunch of



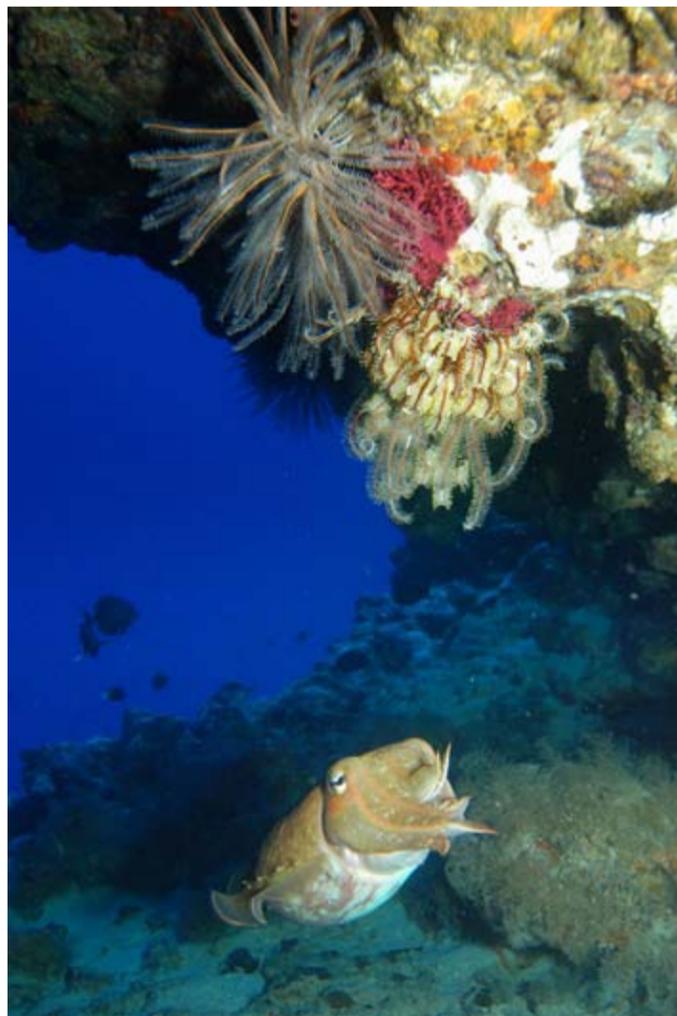
grey reef sharks made their way up the channel, of course, not without taking a closer look at the foreign intruders.

As cool and as bold as they appeared to be, their lively eyes were rolling and revealed that they were not about to miss the slightest movements on our part. For some people, the sharks

ventured closer than they had ever wished.

Orca time

Ninety minutes after we jumped in, we finally breached the surface with nearly empty tanks. The second boat which had just arrived, brought news: "Guys, we've seen a couple of orcas just



Yap

THIS PAGE: Mandarin fishes, gobies and cuttlefish are typical critters; The cleaning stations not only attract mantas, but huge humphead parrot fishes

in front of the main channel," said Captain John with a calm smile, as if to suggest that the movie he'd just watched wasn't too bad.

Initially, everybody started cracking jokes: "Sure, orcas, here in the tropics, we call 'em spinner dolphins, my friend! Let's go for them, and after that, you get us a school of tiger sharks feeding on floating coconuts." However, jaws dropped when John showed us a video on his mobile phone with an orca looking curiously up to the dive boat's bow.

Five minutes later, the plans for any further dives were put to rest for the day, and we were going out with roaring engines. Orca time! "This is like looking for a needle in the hay," I thought to myself, hoping for the best and expecting nothing at all. And there they were—

Would I? Should I?" Before I started thinking too much about the risky part of sharing the water with wild orcas, I grabbed mask, snorkel and fins and slid into the water as calmly as possible. "If they take me for an alternative to Hawaiian monk seals or whatever else, then so be it."

But just like it is most often with so-called dangerous animals, the orcas immediately fled as soon as we saw a glimpse of them. However, the first five attempts proved to be not fruitful at all. All the way we saw nothing but wonderful transparent blue water... up to the moment when a huge black body of at least six meters appeared as if it came out of nowhere.

Resembling a big black torpedo, one of the adult orcas came on a straight head-on course towards

three dorsal fins sticking high out of the water like swords in the air.

"Could I?"

me. I think my heart stopped beating for a second! A heartbeat later, it approached me for a quick sonar scan and quickly passed below my fins. There are hardly words to explain how it felt to be in the water with such a big animal, without a reef at your back, a tank on your back, or even a buddy close to you.

Let's say, it is less frightening than just overwhelming, because you are so much struck by the fact that there is no space for fear in your brain! Needless to say, once we climbed the ladder back onto the boat, we all enthusiastically started shouting, probably so loud even the seagulls were scared away.

In this happy mess, it turned out that the others counted four animals, including a small calf. What a day. From then on, we saw them only a few times, even though our approach got a little more professional—jumping into the water and going after the whales at full fin power obviously did not



Mangrove whiptail rays can often be seen resting

Yap

SHOOTING MANTAS

Obviously, with the exception of shots of the eye or other details, crisp manta photos demand either fisheye or super wide lenses, with an angle between between 8.5 to 18mm. Timing and control of your strobe power is everything. Mantas are highly individual in behavior. Marine biologist and renowned manta specialist Dr Andrea Marshall pointed out recently that "mantas are the only fishes that probably, get "the concept of playing due to their intelligence". Still, not every one of these flying carpets might be in the right mood. With respect to both their future behavior in presence of divers and your very own results, it is recommended to wait for the right moment to pull the trigger rather than to go for rapid fire, which might scare the animals off. This goes especially for cleaning stations, which are sensible environments and crucial to the mantas. At the same time, cleaning stations give photographers extensive shooting opportunities as the mantas will often circle the corals where the cleaner wrasses live and come over to the divers before getting back to body hygiene. Their snow-white bellies will often require low strobe power. However, one is better off if the equipment allows TTL-corrections. With manual settings you will need to be quick, as it can be difficult to trace the manta's next movement. Let the animal come close, wait for your shot and never ever chase it. ■

Sunfishes are rare visitors, but make a good example for special encounters off the island's southern tip

than of proper sized whales. The case seemed to be clear—taking into account that the bull and the cow had a semi-adult and a calf of not more than two meters with them, it was obvious that they were looking for shelter in relatively shallow and safe water just

off the outer reef wall in order to protect their young one from predators like tiger sharks. This said, everybody knew that orcas normally tend to stay and feed in cooler water with only a few exceptions off the Great Barrier Reef and Papua Newguinea.

The next resident population from Yap lives around Okinawa in south of Japan. Still a good share of miles to swim. So, could it get any better at that point? Yes, indeed it did! Not only were we able to track the orcas for the next two hours and spend a few minutes with them swimming in the distance, we saw another high dorsal fin in between the whales when we followed them around the southernmost point of Yap to the west side. "A fifth orca?," somebody thought out loud.

Sunfish fun

Sliding into the water once again, we immediately saw the orcas playing with a massive sunfish before they noticed us and changed directions. And while all of the snorkelers were going after the whales, I rushed after the sunfish with the camera housing in increasingly aching arms.

Running out of air and cursing the



cigarettes from last night, I noticed a small boat approaching. "Hey, wanna ride?" a familiar face shouted. It turned out to be a local marine biologist I briefly met. He threw a line over board, towed and dropped me just in front of the sunfish.

This was my moment—for the next ten minutes, nobody disturbed my tête-à-tête with the beautiful spotted giant. Having seen a number of sunfishes off Estartit

do the job.

You could fin forever, as some red faces indicated, but the animals were always faster even though they did not seem to move at all. We found ourselves in a much better position when we stopped the boat 20 meters in front of them, got into the water, just hoping they

would not change their direction. Quite often, we would see them swimming past us 10 to 15 meters away. In fact, they tended to keep this distance, which did not make things easy for me, as I was equipped with a strong wideangle lens.

Looking through the viewfinder, the orcas reminded me more of sardines





One in roughly 20 curious grey reef sharks (above) resident in the shallows at Vertigo Reef; Hawksbill turtles (left) frequent Mi'l Channel, next to a patch of purple spiny soft corals; Wanyaan Beach can be reached within 20 minutes (right)

ten years," joked Bill, Manta Ray Bay Resort's owner. "I should send you back to f*****g Germany!"

Needless to say, the evening went by much too fast with beer from the house brewery flowing like a waterfall, and the best footage surfacing on the restaurant ship's five-meter outdoor screen.

"Two mantas, whitetips, at least five grey reef sharks, four orcas, a sunfish and two bottlenose dolphins," I thought to myself with a beer in my hand, "This is what I call a good quota!" Cheers!

Take two

Of course, by that time, the seed was planted into the mind of all those who did not have the

and the Azores islands, I can say that this animal had the greatest coloration of all. Certainly it was not the brightest of them. He really did justice to the reputation of a fish with a walnut-sized brain and ran me over with flapping fins more than once.

Once the other seven snorkelers arrived with the boat, the sunfish quickly became more shy, went horizontal and started spinning.

One could tell the animal started to feel stressed, so I decided to leave it alone just to be approached by two bottlenose dolphins for a quick hello.

On board, photo buddy Andy Sallmon gave me a big thumbs up: "You lucky bastard," he yelled while hugging me. "Congratulations on this excellent sunfish footage." Not the worst compliment from a veteran

underwater photographer, who took his first pictures by the time I learned how to walk.

With increasingly rough sea and clouded skies it took us more than half an hour to find the orcas again and decide to head for the coast before we run out of fuel.

Back in the dive center, happy insults are flying. "Now, I hate you even more than I did before—I haven't seen an orca in Yap for



chance to see the whales. So, against all odds and the weather, we went out again the next morning.

After roaming the southernmost point for a while, we found them. To our surprise, one of the adults was missing, but they did not turn away like before—they just ignored us, if we did not get too close. Being the smart animals they were, they really seemed

to become more familiar with the boat and those strange humans in rubber suits watching them from every angle possible. Unfortunately, the cloudy weather and the waves swallowed the last beams of light below the surface, leaving me with low contrast and dark blue water like ink.

While the conditions did not improve a bit the next morning, we could see the whales really



Adult nurse sharks prefer deep overhangs in the channel entrances (left); Dressed for success—Yapese siblings ready for a traditional chamorro dance (far left)

day. "You mean, these black and white whales? Yes, of course we know about them," he said and left us with mouths wide open. "They have been around for almost one month now and always try to steal our hooked tuna."

With stars in his eyes he recounted how one of them jumped out of the water with a shark in his mouth. "Having a really great head-on shot of this would be a good reason to sell all of my equipment and quit diving," I thought. Actually, Stan wondered that we did not hear about the "small whales with the round fins" as he names them.

Back at the hotel, we asked Bill about it and earned shrugging shoulders: "Yes, there is a group of pilot whales living around the island, but you never asked for them, and I thought you'd rather go

diving than spending the day on the sea searching them." If we could only speak "whale" and invite them on a few fishing trips...

Manta Visions

The pioneering dive center of the island, Yap Divers, harbors the photo and video center, Manta Visions, and plenty of dry storage room for housings and other equipment. Or, to put it in a nutshell—16 booths, each equipped with electric looking glasses, charging station with three 220V European style sockets, as well as three 110V US-style sockets and a spacious locker unit. Over the years, pros like Eric Cheng, Marty Snyderman, Andy Sallmon and Bob Halstead rubbed shoulders at Manta Ray Bay Resort, as well as many TV crews up to National

showing off their playfulness. Instead of us approaching them, it was them approaching us, with splashing black and white fins so close to the boat we all got a shower.

The group of Swiss guests on board could hardly believe their eyes and decided to leave the close encounter underwater to me. As it started raining heavily, I was surprised to even see the orcas coming, thanks to their white bellies. Surprise again—they all came towards me upside down and clearly communicating with each other. It really seemed as if the parents decided to show their calf the strange beings that we must be to them. As if to say: "Look, these little humans are not dangerous, they produce bubbles just like us."

Evidently, at this point, the four whales were not uncomfortable with our presence anymore. Maybe it should

have rather been me who feel uncomfortable sharing the water with predators that outgrow a great white shark? Anyway, the Swiss guys slowly dared to go into the water. In the best cartoon style, one by one—with every jump into the water—there was yet one more snorkeler.

Whales, whales, whales...

Leaving the orcas aside for a moment, the true miracle was maybe not even them, but the three typhoons. They could have devastated the island and the surrounding reef, but they all changed directions less than a hundred kilometers off the island. Still the wind and two-meter waves forced us back to the shore, where we decided to go on an island trip.

During our visit in Kaday Village we were surprised to learn that "our" orcas were old news. Stan Fillamed, a 69-year-old fisherman from the village really made our



Orcas roam the seas around Yap (left and right)



The walls of the Western side offers enough subjects to make a good movie as seen on the big outdoor screen of the resort's restaurant schooner Mnuw, *Seahawk* (below); Underwater photographers with their gear (bottom center)

opportunity to sneak in and connect your notebook while you're waiting for your blackened sashimi. ■

Daniel Brinckmann, 31, started diving at age 11 and published his first travel story in a German scuba diving magazine prior to his final exams at school. He then went for journalism and media studies and English at Düsseldorf University. Throughout this period, he worked as a freelancer for the county capital's daily newspaper as well as for other scuba diving magazines. Following his university career, he decided to focus on travel reporting full-time and now works for 11 magazines throughout Europe. His motto: "There are no boring dive spots. SOMETHING can even be found in a dirty little pond, even if it is only a withered lighter with small shells on top!" Photo equipment used by the author includes 2x D90 with 2x Ikelite DS-160/161, Tokina 12-24mm, Sigma 50mm, Sigma 105mm.

used by National Geographic and Discovery Channel, nine years in French Polynesia made him also an expert of marine life in the tropical Pacific. In short, ask him what subject you need and how to get it, and he will very likely bring it to the table—not only the big classics, such as sharks and mantas, but also mating mandarin fishes, white mantis shrimps and a colorful array of leaf fishes just to name a few.

Next August, Schneider will also host the MantaFest shoot-out along with fellow pros Tim Rock, Frank Schneider and—once again—Marty Snyderman.

While there are no docking stations at Manta Visions to catch an immediate glimpse of one's

photographs, Yap's reputation for "big stuff" extends to the screening of images—the restaurant ship beamer screen measures no less than 18 feet and is used for the display of the day's best images and frames virtually every evening at dinner time—a perfect

Geographic.

Apart from the decent infrastructure for us lens geeks, the resident videographer and manager of Manta Vision is another good reason to pick Manta Ray Bay Resort in Yap. Peter Schneider, originally a cameraman for German public TV in Berlin, worked with the likes of Christian Petron (Luc Besson's film, *The Big Blue*) and won an award for his film, *Sharks of Rangiroa, from Legend to Reality*—an uncompromising manifesto against shark fishing, which effectively triggered a federal ban on finning in the Southern Pacific in 2006.

Schneider was also the first to capture not only the mating of manta rays, but their actual copulation in the wild. Not only were his frames

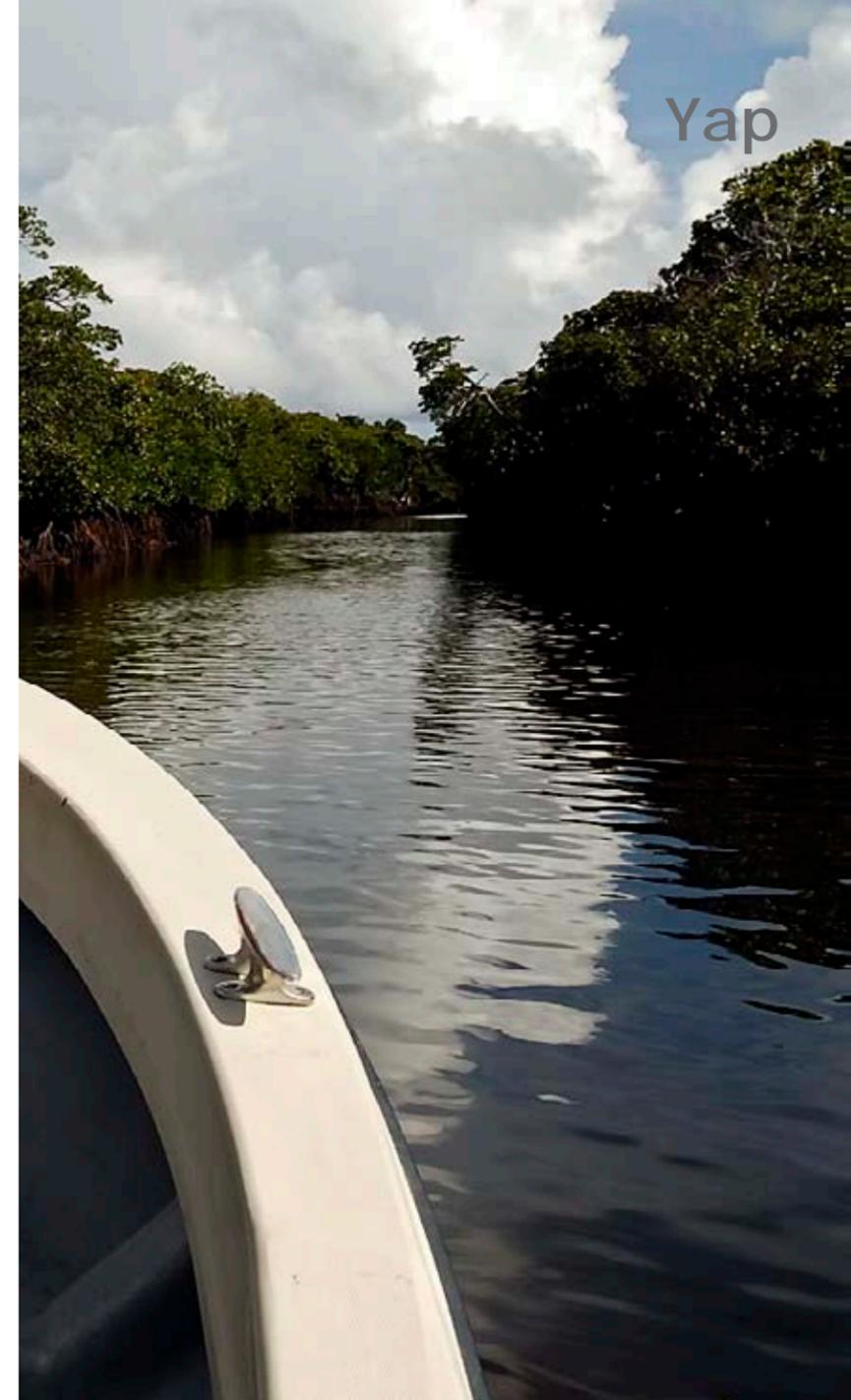


The Islands of
Yap
*Exploring
the Garden of Eden*
Text and photos by Scott Johnson





A Yapese girl (above) weaving a basket at Kaday village



Schooling Pacific barracuda in Goofnuw channel (left); Mangrove-lined German channel (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Leaf scorpionfish on Lionfish Wall

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. When He reflected on His handiwork, God thought, "Is there anything I can add to crown my glorious creation?" His answer, of course, was "Yap!" So, He added the lovely island chain, and then, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis, chapter one — journalist translation)

Of course, in the Garden of Eden, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." (Genesis 2:25). The naiveté and simple pace of the people in this island paradise were certainly refreshing, once one got used to the bared flesh, of course.

The Yapese are known to be a friendly, but traditional and shy people. Their shyness apparently does

not include their entire wardrobe (although, woman's thighs must be covered at all times, including visitors).

Confused. I admit it. I feel confused and yes, a little bit embarrassed. I am used to seeing canned foods, packaged goods, fresh vegetables and luscious fruit in a grocery store. But the situation here was challenging, as half of the women were fully dressed in

shirts and knee-length skirts, while the others were only covered from their waste down. I did not want to be rude by avoiding eye contact, but I also did not want to stare. Lauren Johnson, my wife, was obviously enjoying my discomfort, though I am sure she was perplexed as well.

Yap is not the land that time forgot, but more like the islands where





the past and present mix in intoxicating ways. We sensed no true clashing of times, where a digitally and mechanically driven world view was trying to forever cover the old, or where ancient ways were attempting to keep out any modernization. Instead, there seemed to be a tranquil blend of traditional village life with more contemporary social elements, such as schools, a hospital and grocery stores.

Yap, itself, is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and slightly north of the equator. If you mark a

diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk (formerly Truk) and Yap, are members of The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), which is a constitutional democracy. It is closely aligned with the United States as evidenced by the Compact of Free Association the two entities signed in 1986. Ultimately, the agreement provides the FSM with security and economic benefits, including regular coverage by the U.S. Postal Service, and the United States

maintains a valuable presence in the region.

Lost in translation

The Yapese absolutely cherish their roots and heritage, yet embrace “sensible” advances in education, medicine, communications and even name changes. The islands of Wa’ab became the islands of Yap due to a miscommunication. According to the Yap Visitors Bureau, “When the first ship to anchor at the central islands arrived. A canoe of local warriors from the remaining islands went out to greet the ship, and through sign language, communicated their desire

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver explores one of the many formations at Yap Caverns; Yellowfin goatfish in the shallows of Mi’I Channel; Pajama or coral cardinalfish and mandarinfish; Beautiful six-banded angelfish are common



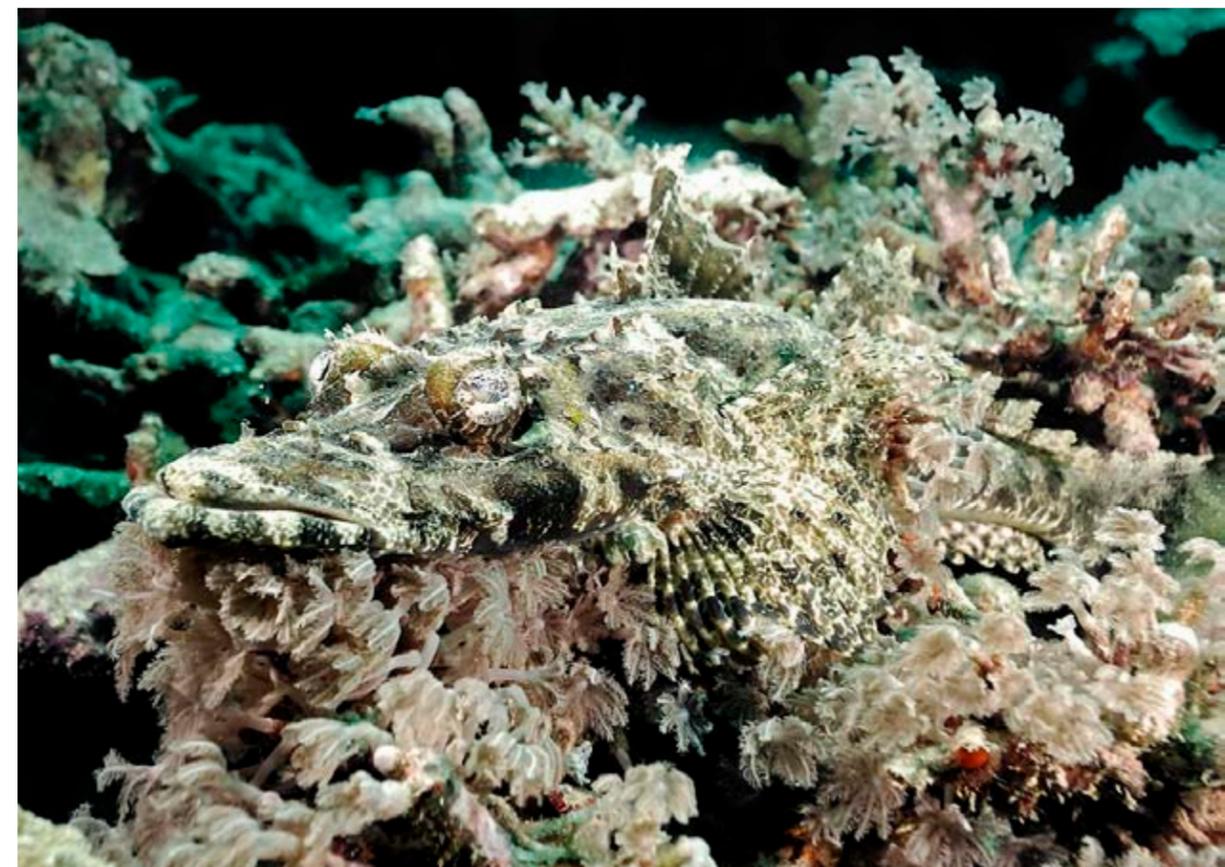
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kaday village scene; Nudibranch at Slow & Easy; Living wall of big-eye jacks at Manta Ridge; Resting crocodilefish in Goofnuw Channel

to have the captain come ashore for discussions. As they boarded the warrior's canoe, the ship's captain pointed towards the shore and asked the name of the nearby landmasses. Thinking that the captain was pointing at a canoe paddle held by a navigator in the bow, the warriors responded proudly, "Yap." The name was duly recorded by the captain, and it stuck, so to this day the islands of Wa'ab are known to the outside world as Yap, which translated is *canoe paddle!*

Pocket change

If non-divers outside of Micronesia are aware of Yap, they probably think of it as the Island(s) of Stone Money. The Stone Money, or Rai, are doughnut-shaped disks that were primarily quarried from Babelthaob, Palau. Ranging in size from 4m (12ft) to .3m (1ft) in diameter, the Rai

are easily the largest coins in the world. The ancient Yapese admired the shiny properties of the Palau calcite, so they sent warriors with rudimentary tools in outrigger canoes to hew and transport the Rai over hundreds of kilometers (miles) of potentially treacherous water. Many Rai and the bones of even more warriors ended up on the sea floor between the two states. The difficulty of the journey, including the loss of life and property, that brought a piece of stone money to Yap is one of the most important aspects that determine its overall worth. Other key features that impact a coin's value are its size, shape and texture. The U.S. dollar is now the accepted currency in Yap, but Rai are still used for ceremonial and traditional exchanges, such as marriages and land transfers. Most Rai are never moved and stored in Stone Money Banks in the villages.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Reef octopus at Yap Corner; Male mandarinfish ready for a night on the town; “Just” another nudibranch at Slow & Easy

David Dean O’Keefe, an Irish-American sailor, was shipwrecked on Yap in 1871. His rescue by and subsequent stay with the Yapese endeared the people and location to him. O’Keefe left Yap only to return with a new ship and a grand business proposition. He offered to transport the Rai from Palau in exchange for copra (the dried coconut meat) and beche-de-mer (sea cucumbers). The Yapese not only accepted his proposal, but granted him a 30-year monopoly on the business. While “O’Keefe-money” was valued much lower than the Rai brought by canoe, it allowed more villagers to achieve the status of owning stone money without having to risk their warriors to

obtain it. O’Keefe’s life even inspired the 1954 movie, *His Majesty O’Keefe*.

On wings of mantas

Let’s face it, manta rays put Yap on the radar of the scuba diving world. Mexico’s Revillagigedos Islands, the Maldives (Hanifaru Bay, in particular) and Yap are widely lauded as the hottest of the hot spots for these massive filter-feeders. Lauren and I have been to all three places and can validate the manta mania reputation of each.

What separates Yap from the other two is the same timelessness that permeates the rest of the island state. The Revillagigedos Islands and Maldives encounters are seasonal

events, which means divers have a limited access window each year. In addition, liveboards and a 28-hour crossing are the only way to visit The Boiler, the Revillagigedos renowned manta site. Yap, on the other hand, is open for business year-round and requires only a short boat ride each day. By all means, visit all three destinations and become the envy of manta aficionados everywhere. This will also help you best appreciate the simplicity and consistency of Yap’s manta dives.

There are two types of mantas, worldwide: giant (*Manta birostris*) and reef (*Manta alfredi*). Giant mantas are pelagics that roam vast areas of open ocean, while the reef mantas

tend to take up residence in one area and stay put, though definitely not on the same sedentary scale as the Rai. The mantas seen around Yap are predominantly the resident reef mantas.

If the mantas get credit for putting a marine face on Yap, then Bill and Pat Acker—the owners of the Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers—deserve to be recognized as their chief publicity agents. In particular, Bill, a Texan from the United States who found Yap and then his lovely wife, Pat, via a tour in the Peace Corps in the late 70’s, is credited as being the person most responsible for bringing recreational diving to the state. I have never met a better





ambas-
sador for
a destina-
tion.

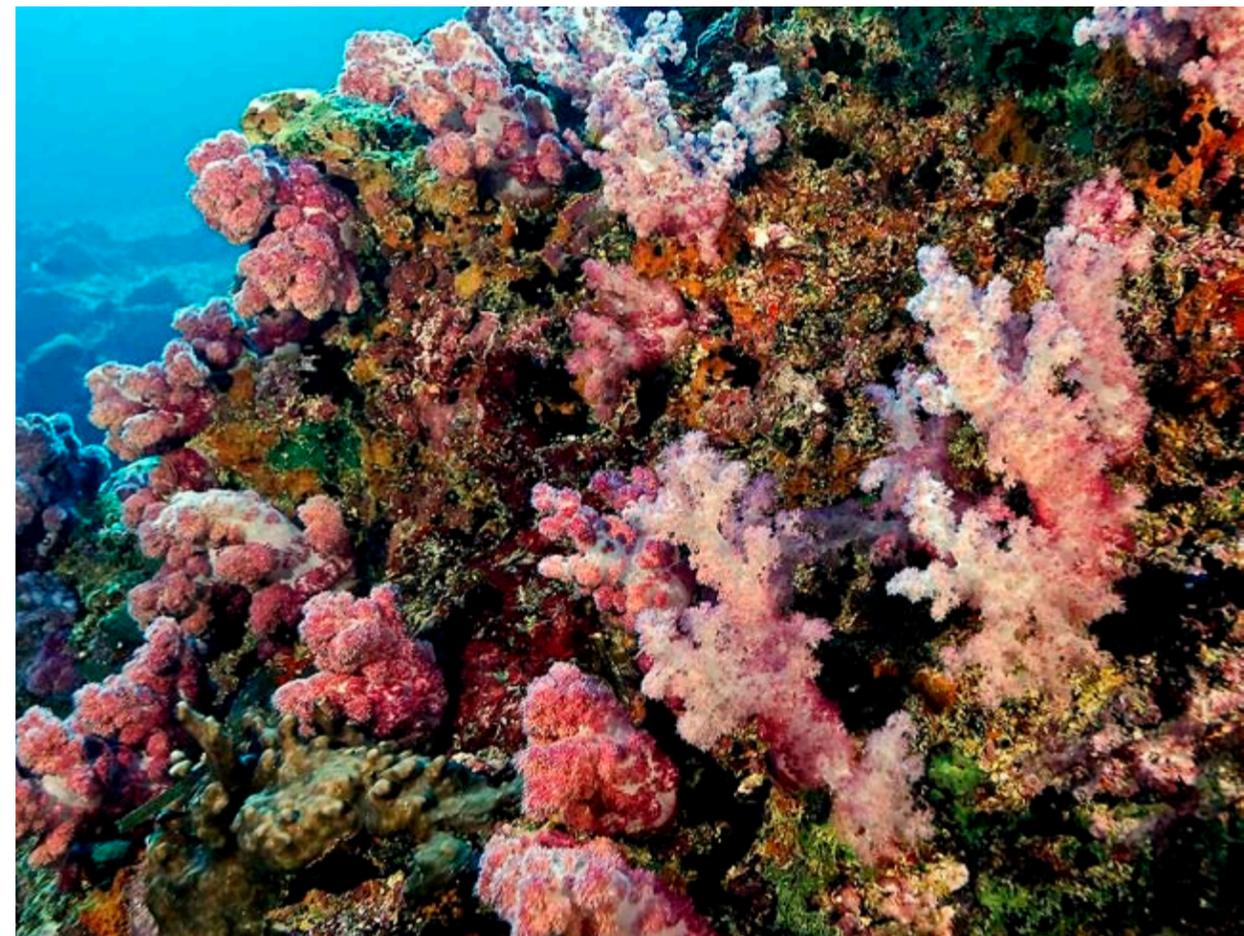
Jan Sledsens, a transplanted dive junkie from Butare, Rwanda, is Yap Divers' dive operations manager. He warmly greets us on our opening day of diving, asks if we need anything to get started and then introduces Alex Raimon, Gordon Keiji and Nico Erhieisap, our dive guides and captains for the day. There is nothing per-

functory about the process, though Jan has clearly performed the same ritual thousands of times before.

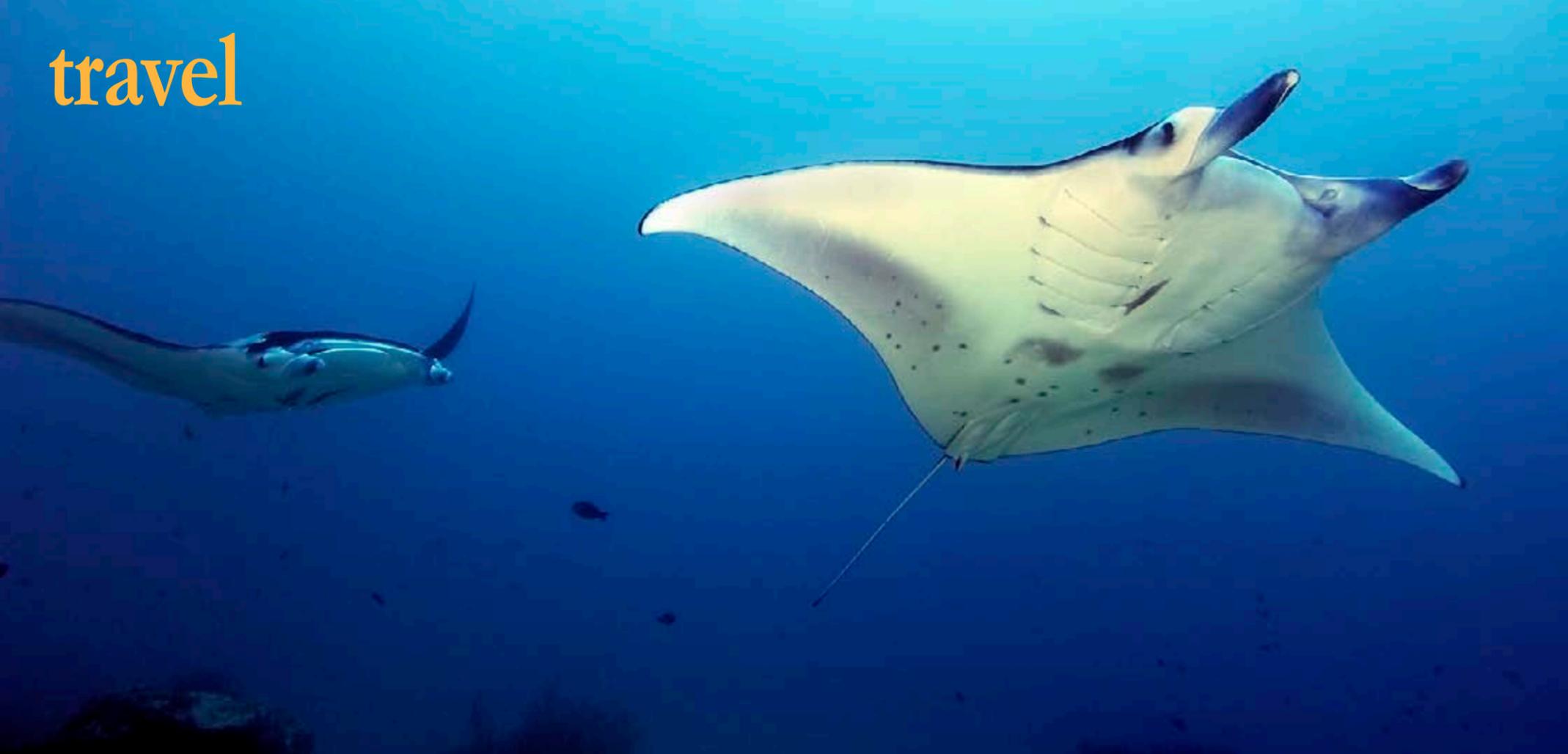
Nico's big smile displays gums and teeth stained bright red from chewing betel nut. The Yapese believe you should always carry a bag during the day (empty hands indicate pending mischief) and a light at night (only trouble makers walk in the dark). Areca nuts, betel leaves and lime, the essential ingredients in a good betel nut chew, are in the bags of most. You learn to watch where you step in the Garden of Eden or you will become a part of the chewing experience, one way or another.

Our three escorts put our gear, including my two Aquatica housings equipped with a pair of Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes

each, in the boat and then we were off. We slowly made our way through the mangrove-bordered German Channel until the boat stopped. The tide was still so low that Nico and Gordon jumped out

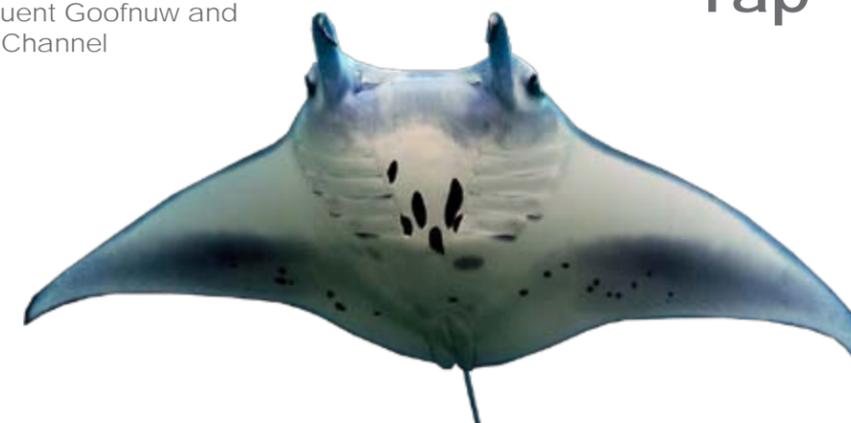


CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Lionfish are plentiful at Slow & Easy; Brilliant leaf scorpionfish at Magic Kingdom; Soft corals in Mi'l Channel; Fire dartfish hovering above the sand at Yap Caverns; Princess damselfish at Yap Caverns



THIS PAGE: Some of the majestic manta rays that frequent Goofnuw and Mi'l Channel

Yap



and pushed us until it was safe to use the engines once again. The Germans who originally carved out the channel, and the Japanese who then refined it before

and during World War II, apparently could not do anything more to improve navigating the low tide conditions.

The best time to dive for mantas is

on an incoming tide. This floods the channels with clear water from the open ocean, gives rays and other animals a jet stream to ride inside the barrier reef and carries divers in to the safety of the islands instead of out towards the unprotected sea. By the time we reached our drop point in Mi'l Channel, it was apparent that the tide had started to turn.

In the winter months, which is usually from December to April, mantas congregate in great numbers in Mi'l Channel to mate. During the summer, they tend to prefer Goofnuw Channel. When not mating or feeding, the mantas flock to cleaning stations in the respective channels so industrious Bluestreak Cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) and other small fish can rid them of parasites in their mouths, around their gills and on their skin. It is basically the manta version of a

manicure.

Yap Divers focuses on putting their guests on rocks and dead coral around the cleaning stations, so the largest rays can glide over the divers' heads and at times, around them, during the alternating circling and cleaning process. Since the cleaning stations are relatively shallow and the divers are given IMAX-like seats, the only thing preventing extended bottom times is the amount of air the excited divers waste while acting like children being presented with a parade of gifts on Christmas morning.

We suited-up, hit the water and followed Nico and Gordon to a site called Manta Ridge. We literally had to swim through a veritable wall of big-eye jacks, or trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*), in order to reach the coral formation at 16.8m (55ft), which is home to all the eager beauticians that keep the





Yap



rays coming back for more. A three-meter (10ft) manta was already circling when we arrived.

Over the next hour, we observed and photographed rays gracefully gliding around us and taking turns being cleaned. This unique form of aquatic ballet was quite peaceful and certainly not the adrenaline rush one feels during a death defying stunt, like child rearing, or white-knuckling a roller-coaster. In fact, the mantas own apprehension appeared to be linked to our breathing rate and general state of calm. The more we relaxed, the closer they came.

Getting sharky with it

Hi. My name is Scott. I am a sharkaholic. I have hit most of the planet's celebrated shark dives at least once. If you want to dive with bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*), look-up Beqa Adventure Divers in Fiji. For tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), lemon sharks (*Negaprion brevirostris*) and Caribbean

reef sharks (*Carcharhinus perezii*), you should try a Little Bahamas Bank charter from the U.S. Cocos Island. Costa Rica and Ecuador's Darwin Island in the Galapagos Islands are your best bets for schooling scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*). Great whites (*Carcharodon carcharias*) are the featured attractions at Guadalupe Island, Mexico. And, the Southern Red Sea and Cat Island, Bahamas, are the last reliable footholds for oceanics (*Carcharhinus longimanus*).

My recommendation for grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) is right here in Yap. Where Bill Acker has succeeded in marketing the mantas, he has done a poor to average job of letting us know about his sharks. Maybe Bill was trying to keep it a secret, but the proverbial cat is out of the bag now. I have never enjoyed watching or photographing grey reef sharks more than at Vertigo Reef.

Vertigo, located on the eastern side of Yap Proper, features a reef that

THIS PAGE: Grey reef sharks at Vertigo





starts as shallow coral gardens and then plunges to more than 100m (300ft). The blue water drop-off is captivating and the perfect backdrop for the shark feed. Frozen bait is placed in impact resistant crates that permit water to flow-through, but keep the bait relatively intact as sharks try to get it. The crates are then secured mid-water by ropes attached to both a buoy and rock on the bottom. The result is an irresistible enticement for the sharks to come calling and to stick around as happy divers observe them in water that is not fouled by free-for-all feeding. Once the dives are over, the divers return to the boat and the sharks are finally rewarded for their patience. It is a win-win, all-around.

Forty or more grey reefs and a

hand full of blacktip reef sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) and whitetip reef sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*) greeted our arrival. Lauren knows I rarely need her services when I am dancing with sharks, so she found a nice comfortable piece of dead coral from which to watch the action. Meanwhile, I positioned my back to the crates, faced the blue and waited for the sharks to approach. Though there was a greater sense of urgency displayed by the sharks than the graceful mantas in the channels, the sharks clearly responded to human anxiety

in a similar fashion. The slower my respirations and beating heart, the more the animals focused on the bait and less on me. This meant I could take shots at point black range without my flashing strobes causing the hungry creatures undue stress.

Sex, sex, sex

As the days of our two-week stay continued to melt away, Bill and his crew entertained us with sun dappled swim-throughs at Yap Caverns, macro-gone-amuck at Slow & Easy and thrilling drift dives through the channels. And yet, these daytime adventures simply could not scratch the itch that was only satisfied when watching the passionate sex of the locals in the light of the moon.

Night after glorious night, we politely declined Bill's generous invitation to join him in the *Mnuw's* Crow's Nest for a round, or ten, of beer. He brews the libation in his own 600-liter micro-brewery in the hotel's lobby. Bill is proud of his beer and a firm believer in its "Drink, Pee, Repeat!" slogan, so it is hard to turn



THIS PAGE: Glimpses of the Manta Ray Bay Resort





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giant feather duster worm at Lionfish Wall; Yapese dance during a Kaday village tour; Hawksbill turtle resting in Mi'l Channel

him down. Additionally, the *Mnuw*—the South Seas schooner that doubles as the hotel's restaurant and bar—offers a great view of the sunset over Tomil Harbor, so, it, too, is tough to pass-up. Still, the unbridled flirting and rampant sex that was soon to engage just a short boat ride away was too alluring for such seasoned voyeurs to stand.

Rainbow Reef was the scene of the unbridled debauchery. At dusk, we descended to the great depth of 6m (18ft) and waited for the players to show themselves. We used red filters in our Princeton Tec flashlights because our subjects, mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*)—the most exquisite fish in the sea—are leery of bright lights. In addition to the red filters, we have learned to arrive early, so we and the life around us can adjust to our pres-

ence. It took time for our eyes to get used to the dim light and even longer to finally notice the apprehensive little fish weaving through the coral, as its desire to mate started to consume it. We were learning to build patience during these dives just like a weight-lifter slowly added muscle.

When the sun finally bled into the horizon, the mandarinfish prepared for another early night on the town. Mandarinfish maintain complex social structures, as evidenced by these nightly mating rituals. Community members look for action in the same locations each 24 hours, which simply means mandarinfish have their own version of a local street corner. Males are generally larger than females and occasionally extend an elongated, pointed dorsal fin in a regal display. I suppose any male this pretty

needs to do something, anything, to advertise its prowess.

Mandarins throw caution to the wind as the courtship nears its climax. Once the female acquiesces to the male's passionate pleas for sex, these bashful, gentle creatures rise, side by side, from the top of the coral, shimmy against one another, release their respective cargos of eggs and semen, then flip their tails to scatter the combined offering before rushing back to safety. This unusual, frenetic boogie may be repeated multiple times. Each occurrence increases the possibility of offspring, but also places the fish at their most vulnerable position to predators.

Paradise Found

In the beginning—before we had met Bill or even researched the destination—

Yap was not on our bucket list of places to visit. In fact, we knew very little about the islands. While wrapping up a project for a client, my client shared details of his recent trip to Yap with me. His spontaneous testimonial on Yap started us on a path that ultimately led to underwater mandarin sex, will-work-for-food sharks, hygiene-conscious mantas and burn-your-bra shopping. Yap is not the "hand me down" offspring of Palau or the place to waste a few days at the end of a long holiday. It is an idyllic tropical paradise that is fortunately well off the beaten path. If one day you make your own pilgrimage to Yap, please remember to tell Bill we said, "Mogethin!" (hello) and be sure to look the locals in the eye when you go shopping. ■

fact file



Yap



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Both Germany and Spain claimed Yap in the mid-1870s. In 1886, Pope Leo XII settled the feud by awarding Yap and the other Caroline Islands to Spain, but granted Germany commercial rights. Spain made a tidy profit on the deal when it turned around and sold Yap and the remainder of Spanish Micronesia to Germany for US\$4.5 million 13 years later. As a result of World War I, Japan was awarded all the Pacific islands north of the Equator via the Treaty of

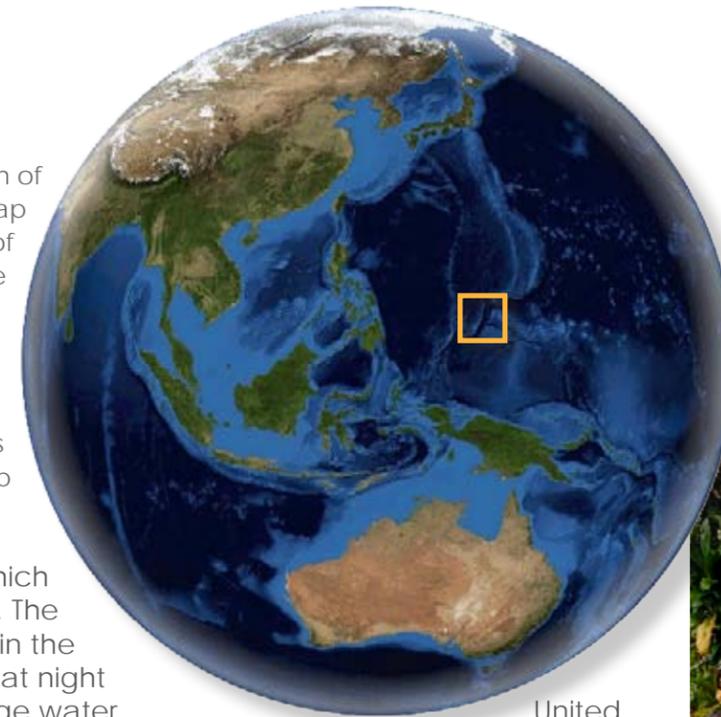
Versailles. Japan then surrendered Yap to the United States after a World War II battle in 1945. The creation of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was ratified in 1978. The Compact of Free Association between the United States and FSM went into effect in 1986, which formalized the relationship between the two entities.

Geography Yap is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and

slightly north of the equator. If you mark a diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the Web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Climate Tropical, which means hot and humid. The average temperature in the day is 27°C (80°F) and at night 21°C (70°F). The average water temperature is 28°C (81°F). North-east trade-winds typically blow from November to April, which results in slightly less rain and humidity.

Economy According to the U.S. State Department (www.state.gov), under the terms of the Compact of Free Association, the



RIGHT: Location of Yap on global map
BELOW: Location of Yap on map of the Caroline Islands in the North Pacific
BOTTOM LEFT: Children perform traditional dances for guests of Yap

Guest stands next to one of the largest coins in the world. Stone money, or Rai, is still used in traditional weddings and land transfers on Yap



United States provided the FSM with about US\$2 billion in grants and services between 1986 and 2001. The Compact's financial terms were renegotiated for the 20-year period 2004 through 2023, with the aim of encouraging sustainable development. The United States will provide almost \$100

million in direct assistance every year until 2023, which includes the systematic reallocation of a portion of the direct aid to a jointly managed Trust Fund. Additional federal grants to the FSM total approximately \$35 million annually. Tourism and fishing play key roles in the economy.

Currency U.S. dollar

Population Approximately 11,500

Language English is the official language of Yap State, but these four other

languages are also spoken: Yapese, Ulithian, Woleaian and Satawalese.

Hyperbaric Chambers The Yap State Health Department manages a recompression facility in Colonia Hospital. Volunteers from both the hospital and the diving community run it.

Websites
Manta Ray Bay Resort
<http://www.mantaray.com>
Yap's Visitor Bureau
<http://www.visit Yap.com>

