

R&PACIFIC

WHEN DUTY'S DONE

AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2011

The Ethereal Frontier
Diving on Guam

The Butterfly in your Throat
Thyroid & Weight Gain

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Palau
Perfect



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On the cover: Palau Pacific Resort at dusk

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Natural wonders like the picturesque natural arch abound in Palau

Palau Perfect

Story and photos by Jessica Peterson

PALAU IS A DESTINATION like no other in Micronesia. The chain of islands is small and remote, but developed for comfortable, western style tourism. Palauans are strict guardians of the island's pristine and delicate terrestrial and aquatic ecology. What has coalesced at 07°20 north of the Equator is nothing short of phenomenal. Locals are quick to boast about the island's ecological charms, often rhapsodizing about its unique beauty. Palau is home to more than 1,300 species of fish, 700-plus species of coral, and 12 endemic bird species, the richest native bird community in Micronesia. Adventurers love the exciting wreck diving at dozens of WWII air and naval carnage sites. Marc Bauman, director of sales and marketing at Sam's Tours, calls Palau a kind of "Eden."

"Palau is one of those places that popped up in probably one of the most perfect places you could ever be. If you really look at it geographically it's not in the typhoon belt, it's not in the monsoon belt, it's protected by a barrier reef, it has deep water walls all the way around it. It has a lot of cold water upwelling which brings nutrients into the upper levels of the water column. It's just like all these things conspired in one place to form this Eden, if you will, of diving."

DAY ONE

Sleep in; after all, you probably flew in on a red-eye late last night. Hopefully, you booked the United Continental resident package, which includes hotel, breakfast, and a rental car. Mosey down to the first-rate breakfast spread at the **Palau Pacific Resort** (palauppr.com), the island's poshest hotel. The 160-room resort has plenty of beautiful spots at which to lounge or take in nature, from the open-air lobby to the beachside pool. Enjoy the daily fish feeding at the resort pond with its resident sting ray and turtle.

Skip the coffee this morning — the 82% humidity should convince you it's just too smoldering — and savor the fresh fruit juice as you gaze out at a waveless sea and private white-sand beach. Shake off the urban stress you've been carrying on your shoulders and breathe deeply.

Call Sam's Tours (samtours.com) to book your Day Two Rock Islands tour.

Snorkeling is a must in Palau's pristine and teeming waters. Prepare to be dazzled by fish every color of the rainbow, psychedelic two-foot clams as bright as a loom, and Technicolor coral. Crystallize the moment with a rented underwater camera from local dive shop Fish 'n Fins. Keep bobbing bottoms slathered in sunscreen, for even under cloud cover, you will end up looking like fried chicken without skin protection. Float effortlessly and take in the sound of nothing but

an ethereal crackling like a dim electric current and fish munching on coral. *Scrape, scrape, scrape.*

For lunch, get a taste of Palau's only Indian restaurant at **The Taj** (tajpalau.com). It's one of the classiest joints in Koror, Palau's dated city center. Surprised to find authentic Indian food in Palau? This is the real deal. Let the paneer tikka masala, homemade cheese with spiced tomato gravy, melt in your mouth, as you scoop it up with well-oiled garlic naan. Order the nawarathan korma, vegetables cooked with dried fruits in a light creamy sauce, and leave satisfied.

Take a leisurely drive through Koror, crossing the uncharacteristically cosmopolitan suspension bridge to **Babeldaob**, the second largest island in Micronesia. With only 6,000 inhabitants, there aren't too many must-sees besides the Corinthian capitol building, lonesomely situated on a hill like Mecca itself in the state of Melekeok. Admire the perfectly saturated green forests and play "spot the bat" on your drive through the winding Compact Road that circumnavigates Babeldaob.

On your way back to the resort, snap a photo at the decayed remains of a Japanese administration building in Airai.

Return in time for dinner and a climb to the picturesque lookout tower at dusk just when the bats come alive. Call Fish 'n Fins (fishnfins.com) to book your Day Three off-road eco tour.

DIVING

"Palau is the Mecca of diving for most people. There's a handful of destinations around the world that are on every diver's bucket list. Whether it's Galapagos, Cocos, or Raja Ampat or Palau or these mega diving destinations. Divers are travelers. Most don't live in a place where they can really dive. Palau is a dream destination for most people and it's definitely the one place in the world where people can dive and get a little of all of the world class diving. This is one of the few spots that you can do wrecks and great reef dives and have pelagics and do cave dives and do tech diving and do it all. You can do everything right here. And it's all at a very high level." — Marc Bauman, Sam's Tours

"The most exciting thing the last two years is the mantas. We've had a lot more mantas than usual and even more than Yap, so we've sort of become famous for the mantas, especially since the German Channel took the place of Blue Corner as our number one dive spot the past two seasons." — Mandy Etpison, Neco Marine.

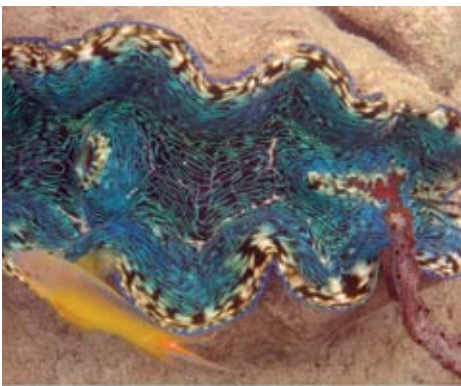


PHOTO CREDIT: RW BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK



PHOTO CREDIT: RW BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK



Moorish idols and a healthy shark population mingle in Palau's pristine waters.
PHOTO CREDIT: RW BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK

DAY TWO

A day trip with **Sam's Tours** (samtours.com) is an alternately thrilling and relaxing water adventure. Rise early to depart on a speedboat, whizzing through the majestic Rock Islands with their plumes of grass sprouting from limestone mushroom heads. Stop to snorkel and you may catch a glimpse of an elusive sea turtle or a family of black-tipped sharks, two- to three-feet long and as curiously cautious as you.

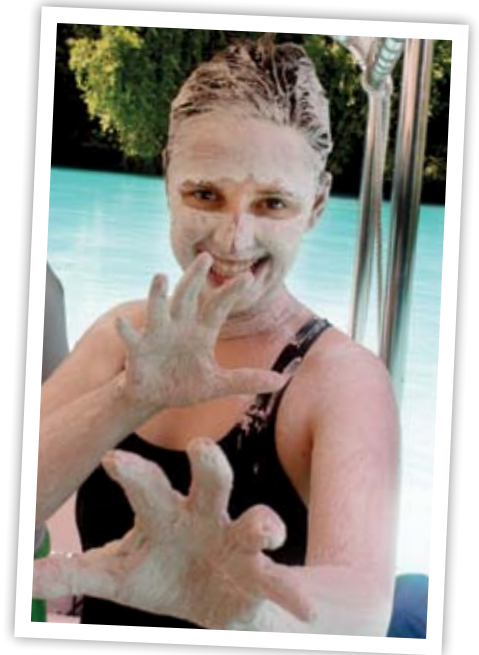
Palau is also home to giant mantas with up to 10-foot wingspans, especially in the German Channel, a dive spot ascending in popularity among visitors. If you're a certified diver, book a dive trip with Neco Marine (necomarine.com) for another day.

Glide through the hamlets of **Long Lake** on your double-occupancy kayak (let the backseat do the rowing) with its canopy of Mangrove forest shielding you from the morning sun.

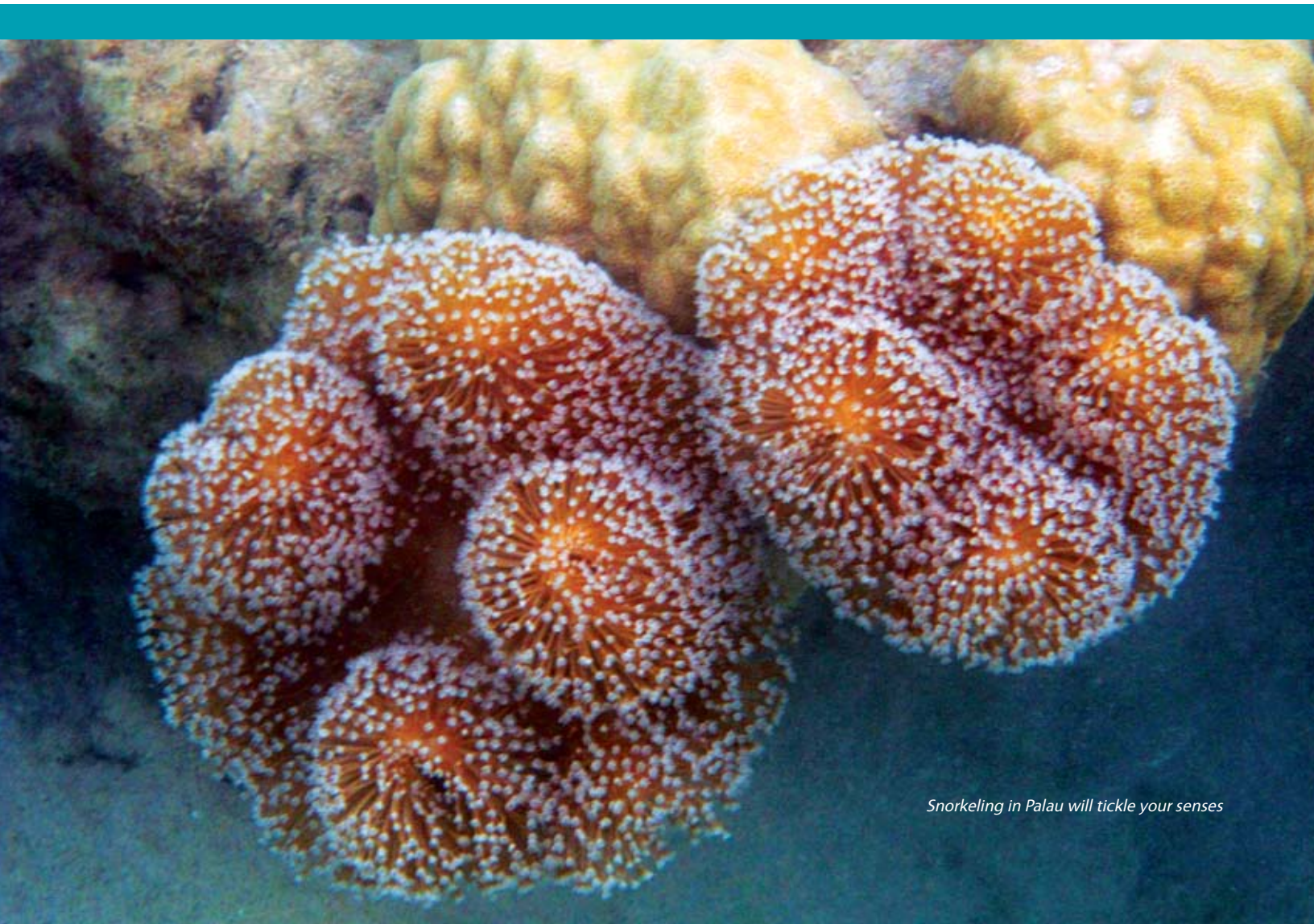
Enjoy a packed lunch on an uninhabited island beach. Send a postcard back home that says, "I landed on 'Survivor' island." Locals are quick to boast of the many "Survivor" series filmed in Palau.

As Palau was part of the WWII Pacific stage and has tons of submerged Japanese Zeros in shallow waters, your charismatic guide will revel in the history of bygone Japanese pilots, crash landing on the reef, some even surviving. Make a mental note of his fantastical tales for future blog entries.

Frolic in the **Milky Way**, a cove where visitors are keen to smother their bodies with white silt from the ocean floor. It is rumored to have rejuvenating properties for the skin, but it's really just rotting vegetation and fish waste. Be the designated photographer or clay up yourself — you won't be able to do both without thoroughly soiling your camera. Wrap up the day with a sunset photo at the picturesque natural arch.



Clay up in Palau's "Milky Way"



Snorkeling in Palau will tickle your senses



Explore the untamed island of Babeldaob in a military-grade off-road vehicle.



Dusk at Palau Royal Resort

DAY THREE

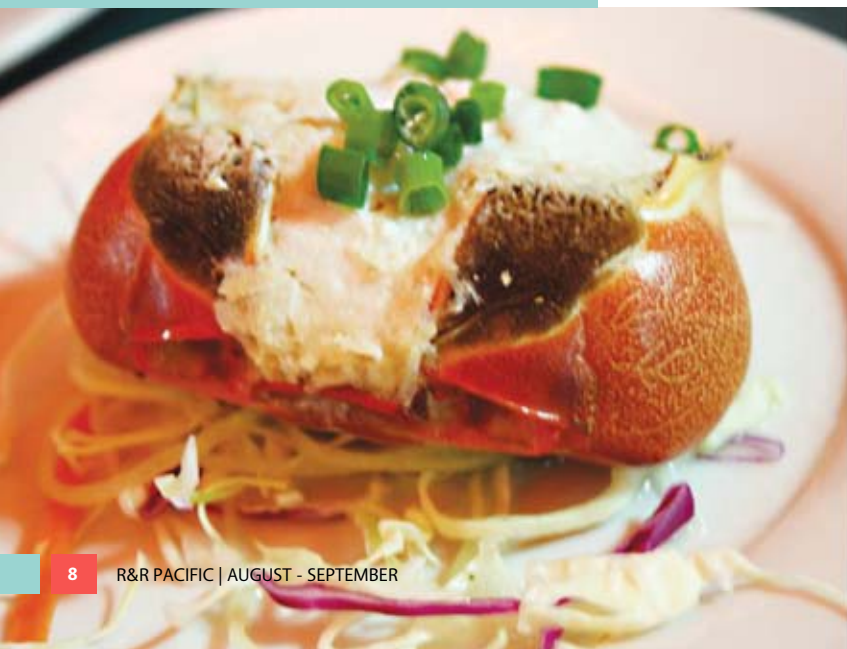
Babeldaob is Palau's largest island — about three-quarters the size of Guam and **Fish 'n Fins** (fishnfins.com) offers the only off-road eco tour of the island. Rise early for a wild ride off-road in a military-usage Polaris, which is a great way to see the island.

Slather on the sunscreen for a full throttle ride in an open-air four-wheeler. The more adventurous types will want to drive it, which is optional. Just ask your guide to play navigator. Bring your water shoes and don't be afraid to get wet as you first trek through a rainforest, then across the top of a waterfall. Don't be surprised when your guide pulls out a machete and makes an impassable road passable on your way to an abandoned Palauan village. The effort is worth the stunning vista of miles

of lush green hills and vibrant blue waters. Is this paradise?

After you've scrubbed the mud from your, well, everything, head to the city center of Koror for dinner at the locally-acclaimed Penthouse Hotel (penthousepalau.com). The restaurant, Uab's Table, may look like a conference room, but what it lacks in charm it makes up for in taste. Enjoy inexpensive, sweet Palauan mangrove crab — a steal at \$6. The local spinach is perfectly sautéed in garlic and oil, and taro leaves soup is creamy and unique. Your server may surprise you with a complimentary fruit smoothie — 100% fresh and natural.

There's much more to do on Palau, so savor the rest of your vacation and save up for another fantastic adventure at rainbow's end.





The silty floor of Palau's "Milky Way" is rumored to have rejuvenating properties for the skin.

PHOTO CREDIT: RW BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK