



Rose hovering above an aircraft wreck

Palau

The Eden of the Pacific

As Rose Kefrig discovered, Palau has a lot to offer: Sun, good hotels, excellent diving, currents, lots of wrecks, sharks, manta rays and a fair amount of historical stuff. The fact that 'sex' also comes into play was a new one to her!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY UDO KEFRIG / TEAM OCEANPICS.DE



Turtle chilling on the reef

“ Almost as if on command, countless reef sharks and grey reef sharks with impressive proportions gather at this spot ”



Huge sea fans

Every island has its own shape and unique characteristic. Situated between Guam, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, the 700km-long archipelago of Palau, with its Rock Islands, boasts some of the most-unique natural wonders in the world. It is home to spectacular dive sites, wrecks, history, rich coral life, mass spawning, a rich diversity of fish, especially of the large predatory kind.

From above, Palau looks like a magical place. There are about 500 uninhabited green islets of coral limestone rising out of the turquoise blue waters, stirring the imagination. The best way to explore the islands is with a kayak tour offered by the dive centre. Canoe paddles are plunged into crystal-clear turquoise water. Starfish in all imaginable colours are visible on the seabed, and between the coral reigns a lively flurry of fish, while thick roots and vines cling like sticky fingers firmly against the rock walls. One would like to stay a bit on every little island, but there is no place to stay, no five-star hotel, no tent. Not surprising, because Palau is a pristine jewel that must be preserved and has the most-rigorous Micronesian nature conservation policy to protect its unique fauna and flora.

PALAU

Diverse language and cultural traditions led to the independence of the small island, which, despite intensive western influence in recent centuries, was able to retain its independence. Which is why there are many reasons why you should visit Palau; be it the exciting history, the unique dive sites in the area, or maybe you are fascinated by the many legends? A friend mentioned how spectacular the country and especially the diving is. Curious, I scoured the internet.



Rose examines a wartime wreck



Palau is spectacular from the air

Facebook, magazines, tour operators and dive centres praised it. And so began the great geography quiz. 'Where's Palau?' My finger was racing over the map until it finally stopped on a little dot. A bit shocked, I realised 'that's a bloody long journey and it's going to rip a big hole in our wallet!' But that's another myth. Palau is easy to reach by plane and there are great deals on dive packages. ▶

THE HISTORY OF THE ISLAND

It was somewhat more difficult to reach Palau for the Spaniard Ruy Lopez de Villalobo. Searching for sea routes to eliminate his Portuguese competitors in Asia, he was the first European to reach the island state in 1543. But let's fast-forward the history of the island. There is evidence that it has been inhabited since 1,000BC, although the origin of the first inhabitants is not known. It is suspected from Australia, Indonesia or Polynesia. Palau's traditional form of society was a complex matriarchal system; the traditional belief Modekngel still exists today alongside Christianity. In 1783, the English captain Henry Wilson was stranded with his crew and unseaworthy ship *Antelope* in Palau. They soon settled, became merchants on the islands and introduced weapons. Soon, the locals used them in fierce disputes against each other and the village wars only stopped when the island was officially awarded to the Spaniards in 1885. However, after the Spanish-American War, war-torn Spain sold the island. This is how the German Reich acquired its 'place in the sun' between 1899 and 1914. The number of indigenous inhabitants was severely decimated at that time due to imported diseases.

The Germans initiated numerous infrastructure projects, built coconut plantations and improved medical care. The island of Angaur, which lies outside the reef, was diligently exploited for rich phosphate mines and shipped to Koror. At the beginning of the 20th century, to shorten the transport route, a passageway was blown through the coral reef from Angaur Island outside the reef to the north-eastern port of Koror. Nowadays it is known as the 'German Channel', a kind of sea motorway which shortens the way for divers to well-known places like Blue Corner and the renowned Blue Holes in the south-western outer reef. If you really want to experience the subterranean attractions, you must immerse yourself in the fascinating underwater world with its colourful coral reefs and rich diversity of fish. But it is not only the corals, fish, manta rays and sharks that attract diving tourists. Numerous warships and aircraft wrecks rest as silent witnesses on the sandy seabed and have something ghostly about them that is very hard to describe. Could it be the terrible thought of a sinking ship and the many lost lives - or is it the image of them destroyed at the bottom of the ocean? Irrespective of their attraction, for adventurous divers and photographers, shipwrecks are the perfect destination for a dive.

TESTIMONIALS OF TODAY

On the little island of Ngermeaus, a stone path leads past old Japanese cannons and destroyed relics. Despite nature taking control, there are signs of a time when Palau came under Japanese control in 1914, where phosphate continued to be exploited and the island was used as a military hideout. Despite an agreement, from 1933 Japan began to massively expand Palau as a military fort because of its sheltered location as a base both for the air force and navy and as a supply base. These included two airfields, one on Peleliu in the south and another on Babeldaob, the largest island in the archipelago, where today's capital Melekeok is located. It was also designed for long-range aircraft; in addition, there were landing facilities for seaplanes, piers for submarines, anchorages for ships of all kinds with appropriate fire-fighting facilities, communication and repair facilities, fuel and ▶



Manta ray in full flight



Palau even has caves and caverns



Boxes of ammunition

weapons depots. During the Palau battles of 1944, no less than 60 Japanese ships and over 200 aircraft were destroyed by the end of the war. The Americans lost a minesweeper, 40 aircraft of various types, 50 Corsair aircraft and eight B-24 bombers. The Battle of Peleliu and Angaur Island in 1944 is known in history as one of the bloodiest of the entire Pacific War. Not all the ships that were sunk off Palau in 1944 can be dived today. Immediately after the war, 27 wrecks were salvaged or dismantled due to a shortage of raw materials, especially those that had been stranded on the beaches or were still jutting out of the shallow water. Many of them, however, lie forever on the bottom of the sea and, despite their sad past, are great diving attractions. They include the Iro, Buoy Nr. 6 Wreck, Chuyo Maru, Helmet Wreck and Jake Sea Plane. One interesting wreck to dive is the Haifa-Day. She rests almost intact on the seabed. And yet Palau has even more to offer besides wrecks.

DIVING ON PALAU

Blue Corner is a site nearly every diver has heard about, as this spot promises a lot of variety, especially when the current is ripping. Almost as if on command, countless reef sharks and grey reef sharks with impressive proportions gather at this spot. If you are lucky, you can witness sharks mating. In addition, schools of barracuda and shoals of mackerel, but also extremely friendly Napoleons arrive in large numbers. The soft coral landscape may not be the best at Blue Corner, but we are interested only in the big fish.

After a two-tank dive, we headed back keen to experience another attraction which occurs in Palau - the mass spawning of various fish species that can be experienced in these waters. Back at Sam's Tours (www.samstours.com), we



Shoal of snapper

checked the board and scribbled our names in the two last remaining places. The dive centre is conveniently located in Malakal, right on the water and with fantastic views of the Rock Islands. It is an award-winning PADI five-star Instructor Development Centre and Sam's Tours facilities have a welcoming feel and are built for comfort and relaxation.

And yes, there is a House Reef! Simply don your dive gear at any time of the day and visit the intriguing mandarinfish located right by the dive centre, or check out the imposing Chandelier Cave, a tunnel system under the tidal zone that leads to the interior of an island. It consists of four chambers, and in some, you can breathe freely. Amazing stalactites glisten and sparkle in the light of our torches. And, if that doesn't take your breath away, sit back with a sundowner and enjoy the stunning sunsets at the Bottom Time Bar and Grill with specially designed tables and fresh local food.

A must! We too enjoy the culinary delights and I make my way to the bar to order a drink. There, I notice a somewhat glum-looking chap staring forlornly into an empty beer glass. With a polite 'hello', I try to draw attention to myself. No response! Lost in thought, his piercing blue eyes continue to stare, almost as if he wishes the glass to be full again! I laugh out loud and ask if he wants a refill and what seems to be troubling him. Like a shotgun, he answers 'Porno!' This was not the answer I expected and felt myself blush. But then he gave a big grin and said: "Actually, fish porn, I'm Paul and we run Unique Dive Expeditions at Sam's Tour and offer divers special events like the red snapper spawning. I watched you take the last two places". Being curious, I take a seat and want to know everything. An hour later I know all I need to know. The early bird gets the worm - and it's a 5am start.

TANTRIC LOVE RITUAL

"When I say dive, you dive, no time to hang about. No extras for the photographers, we are not waiting for you" - Welshman Paul Collins barks his orders. Just time for one last check and Paul shouts. "Ready, dive!" It's a straight descent but everything goes smoothly, and everyone assumes a position in a dreadful current. What the hell are we here for? Oh yes! Raw 'fish sex!' Within seconds thousands of red snapper hang over our heads. It's a bit kinky watching a massive fish gang-bang and I felt like a 'Peeping Tom' observing the masses of silvery, glistening bodies rub against each other and releasing clouds of sperm into the water. I truly hope all this mess will wash out of my hair.

We are not the only ones observing this spectacle. Gigantic bull sharks prey on the sex-mad fish. Time and time again they shoot into the ball of fish, disrupting their pleasure for a mere minute. The current is pumping, and I find it totally exhilarating and white-knuckle. Fish really seem to have a good time having sex! Palau has many fantastic dive sites, is rich in adventure, fauna and flora, you simply must do the out-of-the-ordinary to experience the extraordinary and visit this magical Eden of Palau. ■

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