

An underwater photograph showing several divers in silhouette against a blue background. A large, spotted fish, possibly a grouper, is swimming in the foreground. The scene is lit from above, creating a gradient of blue.

Miracle OF THE SEA

ROSE KEFRIG reckons that Palau deserves to be at the top of your 'must-dive' hit-list thanks to the rich blend of dramatic walls, atmospheric wartime wrecks and stunning marine life

Photographs by UDO KEFRIG / TEAM OCEANPICS.DE

The first overwhelming view the tourist is confronted with when the plane flies into the capital city of Koror is the mushroom-shaped, overgrown, uninhabited Rock Islands and the evergreen island towers reaching out from the turquoise waters. This is probably one of the most well-known landmarks of the country. From this incredible postcard perspective, the archipelago of Micronesia shows many faces and diversity so rich, divers can already begin to imagine what scenes lie in wait. The unique dive excursions and day trips open up the real Palau - one which lies beyond the guidebooks. Just listen to dive instructor and underwater tourist guide Eric Loske and his fiancée Kayley. I call him an underwater tourist guide as he is a walking encyclopaedia with a vast knowledge concerning the underwater world. Even more: the couple fell in love with the mysterious history of this island, enquired about a job and have been with Sam's Tours Palau ever since. The dive centre, which ranks among the largest in Palau, has set high standards of professionalism, service and organisation. They can lead you to dive sites that Cousteau raved about, long before the archipelago on the other half of the globe became a focal point for the tourist and dive industry, and turned into a dream for divers from around the world. However, let's turn our attention back to our ever-happy Eric. He can tell us more about the ocean and their inhabitants, the country, the people and the history of the island.

WELCOME TO SAM'S!

"OK guys, welcome to our dive centre. For the next 14 days I will take you to the best dive sites you have imagined. Each day check the board, get your kit ready and get it on the dive boat. Follow our safety instructions at all times, listen to your guide, and most importantly have fun." With these words Eric shakes everybody's hands and continues. "There are numerous wrecks, large and small right in front of our doorstep. They are silent witnesses from specific times of unfortunate events during Japanese occupation of the 700km long archipelago and its more than 200 islands. They tell of the dreadful battles that raged here during the Pacific war. The remnants of deadly war machinery, now resting peacefully on the seabed, draw divers into their spell with their incredible diversity of living organisms.

"And, we have spectacular drop-offs, mystic caves, incredibly colourful, densely overgrown and species-rich reefs. Another hallmark of Palau is the amazing macro world, which causes photographers' hearts to beat faster. So, let's get ready to rumble and enjoy!"

DIVE-TIME STORY

Specialising in daytrips, Sam's has such an abundance of dive sites, that 14 days are not enough to visit all the highlights. In the Southwest and West, steep walls beckon with small creatures, huge soft corals and a varied reef fish life. Palau's waters are a year-round comfortable 28-30 degrees Celsius with good visibility, where more than 1,500 fish and over 700 coral and anemone species add to the unique nature of this world. The drift dives past dramatic drop-offs are sensational - big clouds of hunting tuna, schools of barracuda, sharks and turtles are the order of the day or, seasonally, spawning fish migration. If you don't want the hassle of a drift dive, simply reach for your reef hook at the more-exposed sites (compulsory in Palau) and watch the pelagic creatures as they inquisitively cruise by. Between January and April, whalesharks cross the waters, and breathtaking encounters with mating mantas and sharks at the German Channel are not uncommon. Blue Corner is where you have most of the action. Here, you often see groups of divers floating effortlessly in the current. Do the same! Pull out your reef hook and watch! Sharks elegantly cruise in the blue.

Although the archipelago counts over 60 well-known dive sites, and it belongs to the top five dive destinations in the world, not all regions have been accessed and are still waiting to be discovered. That also applies to a few places off the south-of-Koror-located island of Peleliu. This was once a strategically important island. From 1914 until World War Two, Palau was under Japanese occupation. On 14 September 1944, Allied troops landed. Evidence of these dreadful war days is destroyed military war equipment, which can be found everywhere: underwater it is covered with an abundance of coral and teeming with life; on land it is densely overgrown and hidden in the evergreen jungle of Palau. Among divers, Peleliu is known for its steep walls, but also the extreme currents which attract big fish.

ENTER THE UNDERGROUND

In many places, limestone dominates the area. Overhangs, caverns, caves and tunnels surprise with exciting adventures, like the Chandelier Cave with its bizarre

stalagmites and stalactites. It is virtually on the doorstep of Sam's Tours and reached within a minute by boat or four by diving. Another favourite is Turtle Cove with the shells of drowned turtles, or the Siales Tunnel with its mesmerising light and shadow games and opulent growth of soft coral. Several blue holes offer further temptation for divers, like the ones between the Rock and the Ngemelis Islands. The caves start on a shallow reeftop, leading down to depth until they get wider and carry on winding through passages toward the outer reef into open water.

SILENT WITNESS

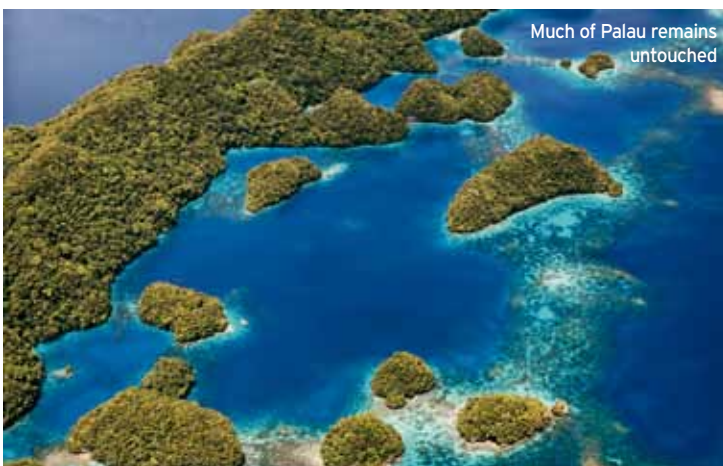
On the ocean floor, other relics can be found. They are from World War Two. On 30 March 1944, an American attack saw ships and planes fall victim. These historical memorials, like the Iro Wreck, Buoy Nr 6 Wreck, the Chuyo Maru and the Teshio Maru, as well as many fighter planes all bear silent witness to the terrible events. Today, they are beautifully overgrown, and offer shared accommodation for fish. Most are safe and easy to dive, their silhouettes illuminated by sunlight, cargo and ammunition still visible. This is an absolute must for wreck fans.



Palau has some beautiful caves



Wartime wrecks are smothered in life



Much of Palau remains untouched

SAM'S TOURS PALAU

Sam's Tours is a PADI five-star IDC Dive Centre and eco-adventure tour company based in Malakal Harbour, Koror. Professional excursions include scuba diving trips, snorkel trips, Rock Islands tours, land tours, kayak trips and sailing charters. The dive centre offers a complete range of scuba experiences from introductory scuba programmes through to PADI Divemaster certification and includes technical diving services and rebreather support. Sam's Tours offers complimentary nitrox up to 32 percent with proof of certification. www.samstours.com



Inside one of the many wrecks

ACCOMMODATION

Sam's Tours guarantees a regular shuttle pick up service to/from your chosen hotel or apartment to the dive centre.

West Plaza Malakal - Conveniently located within five to ten minutes walk from Sam's Tours Palau.

www.malakal.wphpalau.com

Palau Central Hotel - Located in downtown Koror, with many shops, bars and restaurants within walking distance

www.palaucentral.com

Palau Pacific Resort - One of the most luxurious properties in Palau, nestled in 64 acres of lush tropical gardens with a pristine white sand beach.

www.palauappr.com



A diver peers into the wreck of a plane



Palau's reefs are covered in colourful corals

SHARK SANCTUARY

Palau's former President, Tommy E Remengesau, was one of the key supporters of Shark Sanctuary, signed into law on 5 September 2003, which boasts some of the world's toughest shark protection legislation. This ground-breaking legislation remains the law in Palau today. In January 2004, Palau received international recognition from Shark Project as the recipient of their first Shark Guardian of the Year for passing such tough shark protection laws. On 25 September 2009, President Johnson Toribiong - during his address to the United Nations General Assembly - officially declared Palau's Exclusive Economic Zone as the world's first officially recognised Shark Sanctuary. Today, President Tommy E Remengesau Jnr is now spearheading an historic effort to establish a marine sanctuary covering 80 percent of Palau's territorial waters, providing even greater protection for the environment while further enhancing the country's tourism revenues.

GOODBYE PALAU

Stress free, for beginners or professionals, the diving in Palau is unique. Drop-offs, caves and the abundance of fish, especially if currents push into the lagoons from the open sea, are incredible. The German Channel often sees mantas cruising at their feeding stations. All dive sites are places our friend Eric knows like the back of his hand. He and all the other guides are proud to be a part of Sam's Tours. Personally, I reckon that if Daniel Defoe or Robert Louis Stevenson had ever been to Palau, they would have been enthralled and used this island nation as their setting for the novels Robinson Crusoe or Treasure Island. We have only given you a small insight into what Palau has to offer. Despite this being modern times, the country has adventure, culture, history and is naturally eco-friendly. If you choose to visit, don't forget to say 'hi' to our friends! ■



Diver hangs alongside a wall

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