

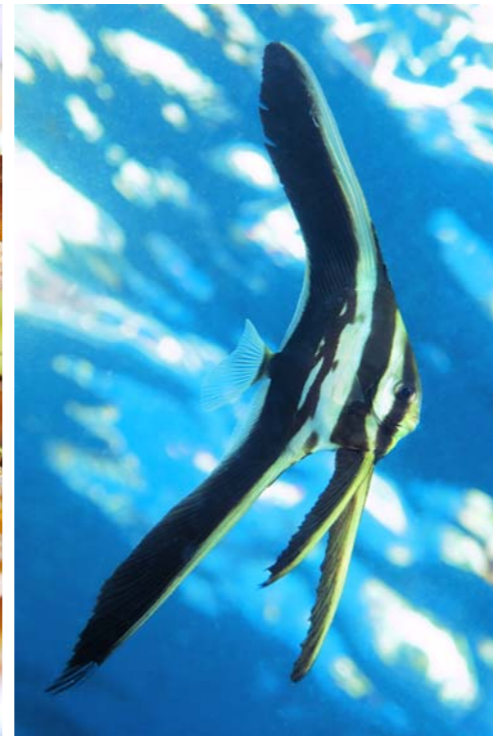


A huge school of jacks

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PACIFIC

PERFECTION



+ LIVEBOARDS REALLY ARE A GREAT WAY TO GO. FOOD, ACCOMMODATION AND DIVING IS INCLUDED, YOU GET UP TO FOUR DIVES – SOMETIMES FIVE – A DAY AND YOU DECIDE WHICH DIVES YOU WANT TO DO. NOT ONLY CAN YOU EXPERIENCE THE BEST SITES, TRAVELLING BETWEEN THEM OFTEN HAPPENS WHILE YOU SLEEP. ONCE ANCHORED, IT'S JUST A BIG STRIDE OFF THE BACK OF THE BOAT!

When you check it all out, liveboards compare very well to other options. Equivalent shore-based services over the same trip period, can be much more expensive and the dive logistics impossible to match.

So here we were in Palau, a maze of 343 beautiful islands that almost seem to float on the water surface. Lying between Papua New Guinea and Japan, this incredible archipelago is a scuba diver's wonderland. Last year we dived with Fish n Fins landbased dive operation, this time we were on Fish n Fins' liveboard Ocean Hunter I.

Dive days typically start around 6:30am to the muffled sounds of the crew quietly preparing the boat, but getting up this early is a personal choice. You let the crew know if you'll be on the first dive at 7:00am. Then, if you're doing the available NITROX option, you check the gas analysis of your tank. After your first dive – what better way to wake up than an adrenalin-pumping drift-and-hook amongst swarms of fish, zooming sharks and marauding pelagics – it's back on board for breakfast. Generally four to five dives are offered daily and you can do as many or as few as you like. Not all are in strong current as this varies with

the tides. Some are gentle drifts and some are no drift at all and it's extremely interesting to witness the change when you do a site like the world-famous Blue Corner under different conditions. The last dive of the day is usually the night dive, a great way to experience Palau macro – sleeping parrotfish in mucous bubbles, nudibranchs, leaf scorpionfish, tiny crabs and shrimps, even vibrant mandarin fish as they go about their wondrous mating rituals after sundown.

NITROX is offered free for all landbased diving and at slight extra charge on Fish n Fins liveboards if you're nitrox



1	2	3	
4	5	6	7

- 1 Soft corals literally drip from the reef walls
- 2 The vertical walls of Palau are often holed with magnificent caverns
- 3 Don't discount macro in Palau, the face of a juvenile scorpion cod
- 4 Louise films a turtle feeding on the reef wall
- 5 Two tiny coral crabs on a night dive at Big Drop Off
- 6 A juvenile batfish shows off its flamboyant fins
- 7 Louise inspects a Napoleon fish as it inspects Louise at Blue Corner

1	4		
2	5	7	
3	6	8	9

- 1 Tubastrea coral in close up, millions of these make create the amazing dive site Yellow Wall
- 2 A squirrel fish sleeping amongst the soft corals at Big Drop Off on a night dive
- 3 A diver's eye view of the beautiful napoleon fish at Blue Corner
- 4 A green turtle shows off its pristine shell as it leisurely swims away
- 5 Jellyfish lake is a completely surreal experience that I recommend highly
- 6 One of the masters of disguise in the marine world, a leaf scorpionfish
- 7 Incredible visibility and yellow tubastrea corals at Yellow Wall
- 8 Hanging by hook on the Pelileu Express, one of the most extreme current dives in the world
- 8 The incredibly coloured mandarinfish out and about at Mandarinfish Lake



“IMAGINE A WALL DIVE THAT TURNS A CORNER BUT THE CORNER IS ACTUALLY AN UNDERWATER PLATEAU JUTTING OUT TOWARDS OPEN OCEAN AT 15 TO 20 METRES DOWN. ADD TIDAL CURRENTS WHICH BRING INCREDIBLE SCHOOLS OF FISH AND PELAGICS AND YOU GET THE PERFECT LOCATION”



certified. This was the first time I'd used it continually on so many dives during a full week of diving. The main consideration is that you must be strict on your maximum depth depending on your nitrox mix. I was concerned that this may be a problem for me but not once did I feel the need to go any deeper than the mix allowed. The HUGE plus is the extended time at depth! Never once was I close to my no deco limit even after days of diving. Some liveboards I'd been on previously had me feeling fatigued from nitrogen build-up after several days, but not this time – every day I felt fresh and alert.

A reef hook is a must-have for diving in Palau and once you own one you can use it on almost any other current dive in the world. This amazingly simple and effective device is basically a two metre cord with a hook on one end and a BC clip at the other. As you drift towards a suitable spot simply unfurl the line, hook it on to a rock or dead coral and slightly inflate your BC. The current will swing you around to face into it and then you just lie back and relax. I found it was best

to attach my reef hook to my BC using the D-rings on the end of my shoulder adjustment straps and use both straps so I was balanced. The first time you hook in on a strong current is a bit disconcerting, and if you have a camera in a strong current, managing it can be somewhat difficult. I discovered that on top of the plateau the current is milder than on the reef face and once hooked in, the fish seem to ignore you and come quite close. We even had a very large group of dolphins squeal past just over our heads, and several huge Napoleon wrasse swam right up to us.

There are literally dozens of sites to choose from throughout Palau and some of the highlights of our trip included:

GERMAN CHANNEL Famous for the bright turquoise water as you motor towards the site over the flat sandy bottom 20 metres below. The mouth of the channel features the edge of a dropoff with a manta cleaning station where you simply kneel on the bottom and relax as the swarms of fish and usually a manta or two swirl over your

head. With a tide running the feel can change with baitballs and pelagic action going off and the fish continually swarming as hunters chase the hunted. Head back up the slope away from the dropoff and there's amazing gorgonians and seawhips extending out from coral bommies scattered over the sand.

BLUE CORNER Often voted by dive magazines as the single best dive spot in the world. Imagine a wall dive that turns a corner but the corner is actually an underwater plateau jutting out towards open ocean at 15 to 20 metres down. Add tidal currents which bring incredible schools of fish and pelagics and you get the perfect location to hook in on the reef and hang in the current. Everything just happens around you. Is it because you're not moving, or that everything else is so caught up in the current and the action that you're not noticed. Maybe it's a combination of both.

TURTLE COVE A very pretty location where the reef runs out in front of a sandy cove frequented by egg-laying turtles in season. A beautiful wall dive featuring a

dramatic vertical hole two metres down where you drop down through to a wall opening at 25 metres. Look out for the many clumps of red seawhip coral and stunning gorgonians on the wall. The dive finishes with turtles, schooling fish and barracuda in the shallows.

YELLOW WALL In the island group of Peleliu, one of the states of Palau. Yellow wall first appears a little barren due to constant exposure from prevailing weather conditions. But the wall comes with incredible visibility and is covered in small yellow tubastrea coral polyps. We were visited by a two-metre hammerhead shark here plus a school of fish shadowing a large bronze whaler shark.

PELELIU EXPRESS The guide book says "People either swear by it or swear at it" and I can see why. It's a deep drift followed by a deep hook-on and the current can be huge. If you miss the hook-on, you're out to sea and away, so the only option is to do a drift safety stop and have the boat pick you up – but with an attentive guide and a good dive brief it should all go well. Once you hook on the

sharks swoop and dive around you like sleek fighter jets. This is definitely an advanced dive.

THE CUT Another drift and 'hook in' at Peleliu. Following a magnificent wall covered in yellow polyps you approach a cut in the reef. Here water from the depths races up the cut and over the reef. This is a great heart-starter in the morning and a must for adrenalin junkies. Keep out from the cut until just past it so that you don't get washed up and over, then hook on amongst all the schools of big eye trevally, fusiliers and black jacks. Here I had whitetip and reef sharks buzzing around me constantly. Once you've had enough, unhook and drift along the wall to do a blue water ascent. We rose through a dozen grey reef sharks and left them behind as we drifted along in a safety stop before being picked up by the chase boat.

JELLYFISH LAKE This is an incredible snorkel. When the sun is out these photosynthesizing jellyfish can swarm so densely that they almost seem to be a pulsating wall in front of you. Swimming

through these stingless jellies is an experience that must be had, it's surreal.

Many books have been written about diving Palau. Here I only have space to describe some of the highlights of our trip on Ocean Hunter I – if I described all our adventures I would also need to publish a book! The diving is awesome, the scenery incredible, the crew are a delight and you leave feeling very, very spoilt and privileged. You too need to experience the wonders and hospitality of Palau.



Ocean Hunter I at anchor for the night

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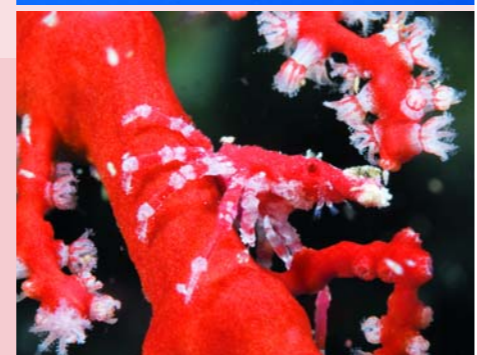
FISH 'n FINS, PALAU
Liveboards: Ocean Hunter I caters for six very spoilt guests so gearing up and getting into the water is a breeze and the diving is uncrowded. There are three guest cabins, two with twin bunks and the third with a double bed plus single bunk, all with private ensuite. The 23m Ocean Hunter II takes up to 12 guests, this is designed to do Palau and the waters beyond. Featuring schedules ranging from 7 to 14 days, gourmet food and nitrox facilities, both boats are specifically designed as liveboard dive platforms. A third and larger liveboard planned for 2008 will cater for up to 16 guests and do exploratory diving in the remotest areas of Micronesia.
See www.oceanhunter.com for details.

Shore Based Diving: A fleet of day boats allows for uncrowded diving by limiting the number of divers per boat. Each boat has several rows of individual seats for two divers each. Your own dry locker under each seat and a four tank rack (two tanks each) directly in front. With dual outboards and sun cover, the sites are reached quickly and in comfort.

Nitrox is free for suitably qualified divers and the dock/dive shop has plenty of rinse tanks, a cafe, internet lounge, photography shop, plus dive accessories and gear in stock.

Landmark Marina Hotel
Situated so close to Fish n Fins that you can look out the window and see the dock, is the Landmark Marina Hotel. Completely refurbished into a very modern luxurious resort it has a waterfront restaurant situated right on the resort's own dock. All rooms come with a very comfortable and large 'Slumberland bed' or two double beds in twin rooms. High speed internet, 32 inch LCD cable TV, bathrobes & slippers, mini bar and Direct Dial International Long Distance telephones. Being so close to Fish n Fins this makes it a good option before and after your liveboard or during a landbased stay. For full details visit www.landmarkmarina.com

TRAVEL FACTS
Getting there: Continental Airlines fly throughout Micronesia. Travel ex Cairns or if you're coming from Western Australia you also can go via the Philippines or Bali. Booking online through Continental can be confusing and expensive if choosing multiple stops, so I suggest using a pro dive travel agent like Dive Adventures. Most flights throughout Micronesia hub via Guam and if your stopover is more than a few hours, day rooms are available at various hotels. We used the Ohana Bay View, central to the Tumon shopping district and the shuttle buses that visit the main shopping areas.
Baggage: Continental allows two checked bags per person up to 23kg each.
Conditions: Two basic seasons, Wet and Dry but conditions vary little all year. The 'dry' is somewhat less rain with more prevailing winds but in essence you can dive all year. Water temps are around 27-29 degrees C. Travel during the Australian winter for uncrowded diving, as Europeans and Americans prefer to visit in their winter (Australian summer).
Entry and Exit Requirements: No visa is required for entry into the Federated States of Micronesia for visitors with Australian Passports. A US\$20 departure tax (cash only) is collected at the airport as you leave the island.
Electricity: 110vAC, 60hz, US outlets (two vertical pins with round earth pin below). Make sure you have chargers capable of 110volts and US adapters.



A grey reef shark cruises in on the current to check me out at Blue Corner.
A chameleon of camouflage, a tiny squat lobster hides in a gorgonian.

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- DIVING SIGN UP AND TRY OUT AT SCUBA POOL
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- TRAINING PROGRAMME'S
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