

: SEANNA CRONIN

# PALAU DIRECT

> 'PALAU IS WHERE THE RAINBOW ENDS' MY IMMIGRATION ENTRY CARD TELLS ME AS I FILL IT OUT. I'M ON PACIFIC FLIER'S FIRST OFFICIAL FLIGHT TO PALAU; THIS NEW AIRLINE FLIES DIRECT FROM BRISBANE TO KOROR, PALAU'S CAPITAL AND CUTS MORE THAN A DAY OFF TRAVEL TIME FROM AUSTRALIA. KEEN DIVERS USED TO CATCH THREE FLIGHTS TOTALLING 36 HOURS. IN KOROR, I FIND NO POTS OF GOLD, BUT DO FIND A UNIQUE TROPICAL ISLAND PARADISE.

To fully appreciate the unique geology of Palau's photogenic rock islands they're best viewed from the air and the man to ask for is Aussie expat Matt 'The Pilot' of Palau Helicopter. This experienced flier knows Palau's 200 uninhabited rock islands like the back of his hand and even points out turtles and dugongs from the air. He takes us over the Milky Way, a sheltered bay known for its white silt; German Channel, the best place to see manta rays; and manoeuvres the Hughes 500 chopper through a narrow valley so that the foliage seems almost within arm's reach. Hovering above the islands, it looks like a French pastry chef has scattered dollops of green meringue across a sheet of turquoise paper. Coral reefs radiate out from the islands like polka-dotted skirts.

The limestone islands are the product of the upheaval of an ancient coral reef, and many have internal caves. Some of the submerged caves can be dived and some of the dry caves were used by the Japanese during WWII. Each island has an overhang at the waterline where the salt water and wave action have slowly eroded the fragile limestone. From the dive boat the overhang creates the illusion the islands are hovering just centimetres above the water. Perhaps this is where James Cameron got his inspiration for Pandora's floating mountains. He certainly could have borrowed Avatar's colour palette from Palau! The aquamarine and cobalt hues of the clear water are



Clockwise from left: Fish 'n Fins snorkeling and free diving guide Jonathan shows visitors how to enjoy Jellyfish Lake without damaging its fragile inhabitants; Tiny Mandarin fish are one of Palau's most colourful species and can be found at several sites, including the dock at Fish 'n Fins dive centre; Palau's coral-fringed rock islands are a spectacular site from the air.

### PALAU'S MUST-SEE DIVE SITES

Blue Holes  
Blue Corner  
Chandelier Caves  
Jellyfish Lake (snorkel)  
Peleliu Expressway  
Big Drop Off  
New Drop Off  
Ulong Channel  
Siaes Tunnel  
Iro (shipwreck)

complimented by the neon pinks, reds and yellows of the coral reefs and the saturated greens of the plants that cling to the islands' steep slopes.

#### Blue Corner – A Meeting Place

Palau's Blue Corner is famous for its variety of pelagics and huge fish schools. Securing ourselves to the reef with our reef hooks, the dive group hangs suspended a few feet above the reef to get a good view of the action. It's like watching a busy intersection from the window of a downtown office building with the windows open. We swing side to side in the shifting current like kites in the wind. When the current is strong enough it even sounds like wind. A school of

thousands of jacks shimmers in the sunlight, moving slowly against the current with a few snapper trailing behind. Then a school of chevron barracudas swims down current, taking a hard right just in front of us to patrol the reef plateau.

Blacktip, whitetip and grey reef sharks cruise past at eye level, effortlessly working the current. Two eagle rays fly by, clearly in a hurry to get somewhere, or perhaps they have no interest in hanging around the sharks. Then a metre-long Napoleon wrasse floats along the dropoff, pausing just out of arm's reach to check me out with its swivelling chameleon-like eyes. Occasionally divers even spot great hammerheads, whale sharks, mantas, marlin, sailfish and whales here.

After unhooking from the corner we drift back along the sand channel running across the top of the reef. A group of garden eels poke their slender heads out from the sand as cod and that curious Napoleon wrasse swim nearby. Thanks to the reef hooks we all have plenty of air and take our time exploring the reef plateau – a great dive on its own.

On one side of a large brain coral we find a metre-long whitetip reef shark resting on the bottom and a lionfish tucked in a crevice; on the other side a tiny crab peeks out from the protection of a branching coral. A school of surgeonfish flitter across the reef, steering clear of a territorial triggerfish that chases everything – including divers – off its turf.

Just before we ascend for our safety stop a hawksbill turtles swims right up to me and for a few seconds we lock eyes, a great way to end an hour-plus dive.

#### Jellyfish Lake – Another World

As I carefully make my way down the narrow, rocky path to the pontoon at Jellyfish Lake, I think about the special place I am about to enter, a sort of Petri dish for evolution. The lake is a microcosm where the usual snail's pace of adaptation has been set on fast forward.

It looks unassuming enough. From the shore it would be hard to spot the special inhabitants which draw visitors from around the world to Palau. Jellyfish Lake's namesake – the golden jellyfish – has adapted to its sparse, even hostile surroundings in two astounding ways.

Opposite page: Popular drift dive site German Channel can be seen clearly from the air thanks to Palau's crystal clear waters; A pair of masked bannerfish (*Heniochus monoceros*) butterfly fish flit about the reef at Turtle Wall.

This page: The picturesque bungalows of five-star Palau Pacific Resort; Colourful sea fans line the walls of a swim through at Turtle Wall; Dolphin Pacific's Dolphin Bay facility is nestled in the rock islands. The non-profit organisation offers surface, free dive and scuba dolphin encounters.



When the Miocene reefs that would become Palau's rock islands were thrust upwards and out of the ocean, salt water formed several lakes. Trapped in those pockets were the ancestors of the golden jellyfish which, like most jellies, used their stinging cells for defence and to capture food. When the jellyfish became separated from the ocean they faced both a catch-22: there were no predators in the lakes but there was no food either. The adaptations to these pressures would make Darwin smile.

The jellyfish shed their stinging cells – why waste energy creating them when they weren't needed – and adopted the same tactic used by corals to feed themselves. Through small cracks and fissures in the limestone, the lakes exchange some water with the ocean. This allowed the jellyfish to incorporate zooxanthellae, photosynthetic algae found in tropical waters around the world, into their bodies. The algae make sugars from the sun, feeding the jellyfish in exchange for a home.

Despite knowing that Jellyfish Lake's jellies have no sting, swimming through the 'smack' (the humorous term for a group of jellyfish) still takes some getting used to. But it's actually the jellyfish that have something to worry about. One hard kick from a fin and a jellyfish is torn to pieces. Our guide Jonathan advises us to swim slowly with our arms and avoid kicking our legs, a swimming style foreign to most divers. We glide slowly towards the centre of the lake, where the concentration of jellyfish is greatest.

Jonathan shows me a cool trick, diving down a few metres, turning to face the surface belly-up and slowly floating upwards through the layers of jellyfish. There is no diving in Jellyfish Lake. If the hike to the lake isn't enough to discourage all but the fittest of divers, the anoxic layer of hydrogen sulphide at the bottom of the lake makes strapping on a tank pretty much pointless.

On the advice of Fish 'n Fins co-owner Tova Bornovski, who also happens to be

#### A BIT ABOUT PALAU

In the past 200 years, Palau has been occupied by many outsiders. The Germans, Spanish, Japanese and Americans have exerted their rule over the islands. In WWII Palau was a strategic staging point for Japanese forces. After the Americans took the airfield at Peleliu and eventually won the war, they governed the islands as a United Nations trusteeship. In 1994 the Republic of Palau gained independence, but the country still has strong ties to the US and uses the US dollar. In September last year President Johnson Toribiong announced the creation of a Shark Sanctuary, which bans the fishing or killing of sharks in an area the size of France. While enforcement in the sanctuary is still problematic, and the government can't afford to pay for the amount of petrol needed to patrol the sanctuary regularly, it's a world first that conservation groups hope other countries will follow.

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an incredible cook, I saved my visit to the lake for the last day of my trip. After living and diving in Palau for 18 years she certainly knows best. Not only did I maximize my diving time, but our late afternoon stop at the lake meant we had the entire place to ourselves – it can get quite crowded – and I was still smiling when I boarded the plane that night.



## THE PALAU BASICS

Stay with: Palau Pacific Resort

[www.palauappr.com](http://www.palauappr.com)

Dive with: Fish 'n Fins

[www.fishnfins.com](http://www.fishnfins.com)

Currency: US dollar

Visa/entry requirements: No visa is required for trips less than 30 days.

There is an exit fee of US\$20.

Best time to dive: Diving is excellent all year but January to April is considered the best season.


Climate: Tropical with an average temperature of 28C and average humidity of 82%. There's no defined rainy season, although more rain falls between July and October. Typhoons are rare. Water temperature is between 25C and 27C. Visibility ranges between 15 and 30-plus metres.

>LINK The new *Pacific Flier* airline was founded by Gold Coast businessmen Grant Vickers and Reg Free. Palau flight schedules are on [www.pacificflier.com](http://www.pacificflier.com)



*Palau offers world class snorkeling, which can be enjoyed during surface intervals and during your final day before flying.*

**From gas mask & dustbin lid to Siebe Gorman rig...**



Ivor Howitt was one of the world's first post-war recreational air scuba divers and the first known in the UK. Ivor and his friends formed the first UK sport dive club; the Aberdeen-based Amphibians dived, canyoned, caved, mountaineered, biked, biked, and skied. Ivor's sense of adventure eventually landed him in Australia with his Siebe Gorman rig. *Fathomeering* has a full colour section of possibly the first colour images taken in Australia and contains records of the Amphibians' exploits and purchases.

Mass and full colour, 167 pages, soft cover

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