



Diving Palau: Beauty And Tragedy In The Remote Pacific

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09 DECEMBER 2020

Palau is a cluster of tiny, beautiful islands in the western Pacific. It is one of the world's premier sites for scuba divers with dramatic scenery, pristine coral reefs and walls, and a large population of sharks.

We got there at six in the evening. We had hoped to arrive in time to arrange all our diving for the next seven days but the Continental Micronesia flight from Manila was five hours late.

We were staying at Fish and Fins, the oldest hotel on Palau, built only to cater for divers. As soon as we stood at the check-in we knew that something was amiss. There is always a buzz, an excitement about haunts frequented by divers recounting their experiences, looking forward to the next day but here it was like checking in to a mortuary.

We asked what was wrong.

Five novice Japanese divers and a dive guide had gone to dive Peleliu Point. It's at the south-east tip of Palau and with its strong currents and often heavy seas is for experienced divers only. That had been two days before. As night fell the dive boat returned without the divers. Every available boat had gone out to look for them on the day we arrived and they had not been found. Some said the boat boy had lost them because of the rough seas, others said that he was inexperienced, filling in for a cousin who was sick. Still today no one knows exactly what went wrong.

From Peleliu Point, the nearest significant landmass is over 1,000 miles away. In between is nothing but the Pacific Ocean. That evening two spotter planes flew in from Japan but could do nothing in the darkness.

The next day we went diving but the mood was very subdued.

I have dived in many places in the world but Palau is simply without equal. With vertical coral walls, coral gardens, wonderful drift dives where you simply let the current take you, and the abundant marine life it is a diver's paradise.

We started with a couple of relatively simple dives and then Palau's signature dive spot: Blue Hole/Blue Corner. The Blue Hole is a vertical shaft in the coral with, at a depth of 80 feet, an outlet into the open water. Follow the coral wall and you come to Blue Corner. There you let all of the air out of your BCD (buoyancy jacket), grab hold of a rock and hang on otherwise the current will take you away.

It is like sitting in an enormous natural aquarium.

We watched the parade of marine life floating past – a group of huge dogtooth tuna, silver scales glistening; shoals of trevally and jackfish; barracuda; a Napoleon wrasse the size of a small car hanging lazily in the current.

And everywhere, sharks.

Grey reef sharks, white tips, black tips. At one point the dive guide pointed out into the water. At first, I saw nothing, then a huge dark shape coming towards us. It was a large mako shark. The mako is correctly called the blue pointer. It is a cousin of the white pointer, also known as the Great White. This one was about four-metres long. It cruised quietly past, totally uninterested in us, more intent on the banquet of fish spread out before it.

A wonderful, surreal, unbelievable dive.



And everywhere, sharks. Photo Credit: Author

Eventually, we surfaced and headed back to the hotel.

There was only one question on everyone's mind: had they found the missing divers?

Yes, they had. They were found drifting in the Pacific, many miles from the dive site. They were all dead from thirst, exposure, dehydration. There is a safety device called a "safety sausage". It is simply a bright orange inflatable sleeve about three metres high. It weighs nothing, costs about \$10, is easily inflated with the air from your tank and can be seen for miles. Just one would have saved them all.

There was little chatter around the dinner table that evening.

The next day we headed for a place which is not, strictly speaking, a dive site. You moor the boat then take a sweaty 15-minute hike through the tropical vegetation carrying your diving gear till you come to a placid stretch of green water known as Jellyfish Lake.

It is a unique spot for here are the only jellyfish known to man who do not sting. It is a weird sensation passing through these masses of jellyfish literally brushing them aside with your bare arms.



Palau's Jellyfish Lake. Photo Credit: Lonely Planet

Afterwards, back on the boat, we were taken to another site where we were dropped off at another coral wall. We rose slowly from a depth of about 30 metres until the wall flattens out and the current took us. We flew along, pass a startled leopard shark hanging in the current and ended some 15 minutes later in a wonderful coral garden, carpeted with a green coral known as lettuce coral, sand eels waving in the current, clownfish darting among anemones, parrotfish nibbling at the coral, two green turtles chasing each other, a couple of small sharks wandering by.

There were just four of us on that dive and as we surfaced we all stared at each other, all with the same thought. That we didn't want to dive any more. That after such a perfect and blissful experience anything else would surely be a disappointment.



In a wonderful coral garden Photo Credits: Author



In a wonderful coral garden Photo Credits: Author

Later I undertook one of the dives I enjoy the most. A night dive on a shipwreck. In the light from our torches, the night denizens of the deep could be seen: crabs, shrimps, lobsters, a huge Moray eel, the eyes of red snapper reflecting back like tiny headlights in the darkness and all around the ghosts of long-dead sailors.

We dived for seven days in Palau and it was with some reluctance that we packed our gear to fly back home.

Two years later we went back again to Palau. This time we met up with a dive crew who were shooting footage for a *Jaws*-themed restaurant in the US. They were there of course, for the sharks. They were very experienced divers but all agreed that Palau is something quite unique. This led to one very surreal experience: walking off the dive boat into the sea, putting on my mask then turning over to see, 20 metres below me on the seabed, a large sign saying 'EXIT'



Prowling White Tip Reef Shark Photo Credit: Author

I dived some new places, some old and familiar places, but I had already decided to save the best for last. On my final day there once again I dived the Blue Hole/Blue Corner. As I prepared to exit at the base of the Blue Hole something caught my eye. I went back to look. It was a plaque inset into the wall.

On the plaque were engraved six names: one of a local dive guide; five in Japanese. I do not know where they buried those unfortunate divers who were swept away by the currents of the Pacific Ocean. I do know that they will be remembered by everyone who dives the Blue Hole.

I proceeded a little more slowly then, a little more carefully, sharply aware of the fragility of my own existence among the teeming life of Palau's clear blue waters.

Feature image via [Lonely Planet](#)

