

Palau!

The 'Must-See' Dive Sites

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Every serious diver will eventually plan a trip to Palau.

Many only plan trips to Palau.

This small island nation lies all on its own about seven degrees north of the equator, east of the Philippines and north from Irian Jaya in Indonesia. It's a modern country, with a wide variety of accommodations, restaurants, beaches, and best of all, dive sites.

Where Palau stands out from other central Pacific dive destinations is the sheer number of top-quality dive sites to explore. It would be easy to plan a ten-day dive trip here and not do any dive twice, and at the same time do not have the quality of dives deteriorate in any way.

There are some dives that must be done of course, and these dives deserve more than a single look. Some you could spend your entire trip at, and still want to do them again and again. So, where to start? How about with...

Blue Corner

Probably Palau's signature dive site, and constantly ranked in the top three dives in world lists, it's hard to pass up any opportunity to dive this incredible site. Dropping into the water some distance from the corner, the current will take you along the island wall and onto a shelf where your dive guide will ask you to hook onto a rock using a reef hook. BCD's are then inflated, and you can hang comfortably and watch the ocean swim past. Out in the blue, and cruising past the divers, 150+ grey reef whalers and white-tip reef sharks show who is really made to live in the current. Spanish mackerel, dog tooth tuna, spotted eagle rays, barracuda, massive schools of trevally, this site has it

all. Occasional visitors too, such as hammerheads, tigers, whale sharks, yellowfin tuna, marlin and sailfish add to the spectacle here in blue, blue water.

Time goes here quickly, and soon you are following the guide over the plateau to see what's there, and head to the lee of the current to surface. Large giant Maori wrasse, not shy, come up to check out the divers. Camouflage cod hide under table corals, and colourful reef fish abound. The dive isn't finished though, as often schools of quite large rainbow runners circle divers on the deco stop, making every moment of this dive memorable.



Blue Holes

Not far from Blue Corner lies Blue Holes. Entering the water here sees a short swim over the reef top to a large hole in the reef, where divers begin to descend. Entering the darkness, it takes a moment for the eyes to adjust and see the massive cathedral-like cavern that billows out below. Descending to the bottom at around 26m to a sandy cave floor and looking up is a mid-blowing sight. Five or more exits, including the one you have just swum through, look out to the blue water beyond, and it's worth taking a few moments here just to take everything in. Dives here finish with the group exiting one of the holes in the wall and drifting down the wall until the bottom time or air tells you to go up.

Chandelier Cave

Situated just a few minutes from Sam's Tours, Chandelier Cave is a perfect third or fourth dive of the day, and one out of the box. Firstly, those who are claustrophobic or who don't like diving at night shouldn't enter here. The entrance is just a few metres below the surface, and dips down in an s-bend to enter the cave proper. It probably gets down to about ten metres here; but is best done at the 3-5m mark so divers don't stir up the bottom. The best views are near the surface, where multiple stalactites come down from the ceiling, creating an amazing seascape in the dark water. There are three chambers here, and you can surface and talk to your buddies in each as the cave system takes your breath away. A torch here is a must, and if you have one that has a second colour (red or blue) the effects off the walls are stunning.



German Channel

Created as a shortcut by the Germans when this was a German Territory in the early years of the 20th Century, the channel is a site for special encounters. Many species of rays use the sandy bottom here to sleep on, and the channel is known for mantas! Here at all times of the year, the first few months of the year seem to be best at the moment for encounters of several mantas at once. It's not uncommon for some of the cleaning stations to have 10+ mantas swimming around, waiting their turn to be cleaned, and coming close to patient divers. Its worth noting that the thing to do around a cleaning station is to pick a spot and stay still. Swimming after mantas will only cause them to swim away, before they eventually turn around and head back to the cleaning station, which is where you were and really is where they want to be. Stay still, remain calm, and these magnificent rays will return again and again.

Ulong Channel

This is a drift dive, usually not more than 10m deep, that races you along a natural channel that runs into the reef. Starting on the outer wall on an incoming tide, the mouth of the channel can be full of grey reef sharks. Last time I dived here we had 50+ very small juvenile grey reefs, not much more than 40cm in length, in a school travelling back and forth along the reef. Once into the dive proper there is a lot to see. One section has the two biggest giant clams I have yet seen, and another a perfect lettuce coral reef. Turtles, batfish, stingrays and more drift past, and divers are on the watch for titan and yellow-margin triggerfish which are known to make their nests in the sand along the channel. The current races you past, so keep your eyes out for all of the critters that live amongst the corals here.



Peleliu Express

If speed is your thing, this is the underwater equivalent of a ride in an F1 car! Located on the southern island of Peleliu this dive is a race along the side of the island, past turtles and schooling fish and whatever else wants to experience this strong current. The topography of the bottom remains reasonably flat, with the occasional nook, cranny and arch, until you get near the end. Once you see your dive guide going up in the water column a little bit, it's time to do the same! For those speeding along 7m or so above the bottom, the current will take you out into the blue to be picked up by the boat. But be warned! If you are too close to the bottom when the reef runs out the current can take you over the lip and down the wall! If this happens start to swim away from the wall where it is easier to ascend. Not everyone's cup of tea this one, but worth a look if you haven't done anything like this before.

Jellyfish Lake

Simply out of this world, there is nothing like it. Trek over a small hill to a saltwater lake that is disconnected from the ocean and has been for thousands of years. The jellyfish here farm their own food in their bells, following the sun to use it for energy, and taking up most of the space in this unusual habitat. There are over 13 million jellyfish in this lake, and all stingless. No need to possess stinging tentacles here, nothing to feed on and nothing to protect yourself from. The result is a mass of gelatinous life that has to be seen to be appreciated. This is one of the weirdest, strangest and most memorable snorkels you will ever do! Don't dive too deep here, the water turns sulphurous about 5m down and is not good for any life. The top few metres teem however! Unforgettable!



I'm going to have to stop here, with so many more dive sites I'd like to include. They'll have to come into the next one, and some of them really should be on this side of the list.

As I write this I should have been packing for my next Palau trip, but as with everyone else in the world my travel plans have had to be put on hold. Palau will be just postponed though, not cancelled. This is a place to return to again and again.

Sam's Tours

Sam's Tours are located in Koror, the capital of Palau. They have a free pickup to and from your accommodation and are one of the best run dive shops I've ever come across. They have a bar and restaurant at the dive shop, which gets a lot of use from the late afternoon on! There are dedicated camera areas, good gear rinsing tubs, basically everything you could need. This includes a mandarin fish dive straight under the bar's nose, a couple of metres from those relaxing. Just grab a tank and drop in from the jetty in the late afternoon. There're other critters here too, a real muck dive! And before you ask, there really is a Sam, and he's often here diving too!

Palau Diving

Palau is one of the few places in the world to ban shark fishing and are looking to ban fishing totally from over 80% of its waters! To help fund this the government charges a permit tax for those diving, snorkelling, kayaking, etc. Different areas need different permits, though the main one is US\$50 for ten days covering the Koror area, which covers most of the dive sites above. Jellyfish Lake Permits cover Koror and Jellyfish Lake for the ten days and are US\$100. Peleliu (far south) and Ngarchelong (far north) have their own permits, which are cheaper. These permits must be paid in cash in Palau. They can be purchased from Sam's Tours. Palau is very serious about its environment, and upon arriving on the islands you must sign a pledge in your passport to treat the environment with respect. Written by the children of Palau, this is a brilliant innovation, and one that should be strived for worldwide.