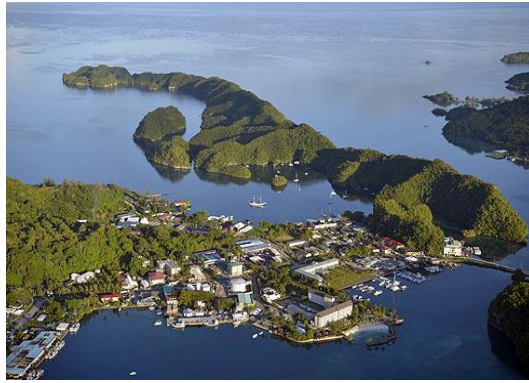




Palau!

The 'Should-See' Dive Sites

Ken Hoppen

Palau is one of the best dive holiday locations in the world. Last issue we went through the 'must-see' dive sites, this issue we'll have a look at the 'should-see' sites.

The fantastic thing about Palau is the overall standard of dives doesn't really decrease from one site to the next. In fact, some of the dives on this side of the ledger would number as my favourites over some of those on the 'must-see' side. It's really hard to choose which goes where! So where do we start this time? How about with....

Siaes Tunnel

This is perhaps my favourite Palauan dive site. There is a chance of anything here. Descending over a small ridge on the reef to the 35m mark, a large tunnel heads into the reef, the floor of which starts much deeper. The first part of the tunnel is totally enclosed in rock, before opening up into two large 'windows' from which you can exit. The whole thing is maybe 50m long. Don't be in too big a hurry to speed through though. Being a deep opening makes the tunnel dark, which attracts some of the species that usually linger deeper into this dive site. Colin's angelfish and Multi-color angelfish are a chance, as is Burgess's butterflyfish, and the spectacularly coloured Harlequin cod. White-tip reef sharks and rays are a chance to be sitting on the bottom. Bottom time here is limited, but the deco stop at 3-5m is worth a long stay. Flame angelfish and Herald's angelfish both reside here, as do a massive array of anthias.



Siaes Wall and Corner

The tunnel is a small part of a larger wall which is well worth exploring. One my first trip here I asked on my last day what was good that I hadn't seen. The reply was that there was a large school of 'jacks' (big eye trevally to us Aussies) being rounded up by sharks on Siaes Wall. That'll do! We spent nearly an hour with a massive aggregation being rounded up by Giant Maori wrasse, about fifteen to twenty grey reef whalers, and some really large blue trevally. This was a stunning dive, and though the school can't always be guaranteed to be there, this wall is up there with most. The corner is known for its strong currents and shark action, so take a reef hook. Once again, the deco stop on the lip of the reef is amazing.

Unique Tours

When timing your trip to Palau, it is best to work out when Unique Tours are up and running. They run from Sam's Tours, and do things that are a little different. With them you get picked up from your accommodation at about 4am, jump into the boat, and get into the water as the sun peeks over the horizon. Depending on the time of year and the stage of the moon, they will take you to a place where you'll think all your Christmas's have come at once. Last time I was there I managed to time it for the spawning aggregation of all of the sail-fin snapper that reside in the area. And I do mean all. Certainly the biggest mass of fish I've ever seen in my life, it has been estimated at over 800,000 individuals. Everywhere there was movement, with females and males zipping up high in the water column to release eggs and sperm together. This is a dive that just boggles the mind. This aggregation only happens twice a year, but the bumphead parrotfish spawning, and the red snapper spawning, happen each month at the right time of the moon. Time your own trip so that you can have a few days diving before spawning starts. These dive days are three tank days. Two dives on the spawning, and one either nearby or on the way back.

These dives are for the experienced, minimum 50 dives and you must be comfortable in the water. Its best if you have done a few days diving with Sam's before heading out on one of these. The currents here are strong, it can be deep, and these aggregations can attract large predators such as bull and hammerhead sharks. Be aware, currents can really rage on these dives, but they are worth the effort!



Blackwater Dives

For groups of four divers minimum, Sam's will run a blackwater dive. These are conducted at night out over the abyss. Lights are dropped into the water to attract whatever they attract, and after half an hour you jump in. You are tethered to the boat by rope to avoid going too far or too deep, and then you see what comes up. Another dive to test the nerves! Strange juvenile creatures spin past the lights, and this is really a macro dive. Usually. Once again you need to be experienced and have a number of night dives under your belt.

Teshio Maru

There are several excellent WWII wrecks around Palau, but this one is my favourite. It is not dived often as it is a little bit away from other dive sites and quite exposed, but it is certainly worth a look. It is a large Japanese cargo ship, about 320ft long and 2500 tonnes, which lies on its starboard side and is broken into pieces. Max depth here is about 27m, and the top of the wreck is in about 15m. Jumping into the water here I was able to see the entire wreck from the surface! The viz here can be outstanding! Look for the black corals that are surrounded by glassfish, and the attending lionfish that are waiting for an easy meal. There is a great deck gun on the wreck, and many places to poke your nose into. Full of life, this wreck is worth a second look.

Jake Seaplane

This is a great site for a third dive of the day. Something about plane wrecks makes them more personal to me than the much larger shipwrecks. This was a Japanese WWII seaplane that sank offshore and now lies in 15m of water. It has a wide variety of marine life on and around it, and once you have inspected the wreck site (let's face it, plane wrecks are small), it is worth swimming in ever enlarging circles exploring the corals around the plane to see what is around.



Big Drop Off

As the name implies, this wall drops off sharply! Going to over 300m straight down from the side of the island, its made for those who love wall diving. Sharks and turtles patrol the wall, and night dives here are brilliant. Spin around into the black and shine your torch on all of the little green reflections that are swimming around behind you! If they are really widely spaced apart its time to leave! This is an exciting dive site. The walls are full of life, and are a great place to spot saron shrimps. This would be the number on dive site in most destinations.

Once again, I feel like I've only scratched the surface. I haven't mentioned Yellow Wall, Devil Fish City, Shark City, Iro Wreck.....I could go on. Nor have I written about the other attractions Palau has to offer in waterfall walks, a dolphin experience, the Milky Way ocean skin treatment, the town itself, snorkelling plane wrecks, brilliant restaurants (try the Indian!), and a fantastic gelati shop that's open till late and was usually our last stop of the day.

You'll just have to go and find them out for yourself. Palau is one of the best dive destinations in the world.

As I write Palau is hoping to open up again in October of this year. I'm told that there have been no cases of Covid-19 at all in the country, so hopefully this is a destination that will open to us when we have this virus under control, and hopefully sooner rather than later!

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. Theres other critters here too, a real muck dive! And before you ask, there really is a Sam, and he's often here diving too!

www.samstours.com

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.