

## MICRONESIA

Most divers head to Palau, where big fish abound. The Blue Corner is among the world's best high voltage sites. Visibility can approach 200 feet, while currents range from nil to dangerously strong so use a reef hook and bring your safety sausage. Long day-boat rides to the best diving weave through calm water and past magnificent rock islands, but there's the potential for rough seas on the outer edges. Most divers prefer live-aboards. Marine biodiversity is among the greatest in the world, but coral bleaching and commercial fishing is taking its toll. Wreck diving mavens head to Chuuk and the world's most diverse wreck diving on a Japanese fleet sunk by Americans during WWII. Most wreck dives, other than on the superstructures, exceed 80 feet, but they're great even without penetration. The wrecks are starting to suffer and many artifacts that should have been left alone have been purloined, but the ships are festooned with coral, and most all the unique reef fish of the Pacific have made them home. Expect calm water, occasional poor visibility, and hot weather. Both destinations are such a long haul that divers usually stop at a second island to amortize their trip costs. Yap has been the traditional stopover, but Kosrae and Pohnpei may be better choices.

### Palau

**Dive Palau, March 2007, Scott Johnson (travelsnj@aol.com), Murrieta, CA.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F, calm, choppy,

currents, no currents. My 7th trip report on Palau in as many years. I had a well-known person sitting next to me flying to Palau: Dan Bailey, who has discovered many of the wrecks in Truk and Palau. He pulled out his books he has published on Palau and Truk and showed me many of the original wreck pictures as they were discovered before we divers got to them. He does remarkable work with the BentStar.org people who are still trying to locate MIAs from WWII. I was fortunate to be able to attend his talk during wreck week at Sams and have dinner with him one evening. Pat with BentStar, along with other speakers, was giving a presentation nightly about WWII.. The Diving, again the best and diving with Keith Santillano of Dive Palau.. (PalauDive.com) was again the best! I noticed a few thermoclines down to a bone chilling 79 degrees usually is and was 82 to 83. Also visibility was not as good as usual, but the weather was a vast improvement over last year. With the cooler currents rising from below, a few people had been spotting the great hammerheads ... not me! The first dive at the Blue Corner was fabulous as usual. I was down at about 95 I could see about 30 below me a large school of schooling grey reef sharks with a big silvertip (about 9) in the middle of them. Did the Ulong channel a couple of times — what a great dive — the cabbage patch coral, croc fish, sharks, wrasses, giant clams, etc. Had my first 75-minute dive. One of my favorite dive sites, Turtle Cove, this year had visibility problems — although Turtle Cove usually only has 60 vis, this time it was 30 to 50 — a little disappointing. The further north you went, the vis was better.

**Fish N' Fins, Palau Pan Pacific Resort, October 2006, Steve Dussault (steve@**

**awuwi.com), Dover, NH.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Fish N'Fins dive operation is a very good. Well organized and easy to arrange dives via e-mail. The boats are fast. The Palau Pan Pacific resort is a wonderful resort. Be sure to do the nature walk and check out the orchids. We found better rates by booking the diving and lodging separately rather than booking directly with Fish N'Fins. The walls in Palau are very beautiful and colorful.

**Fish N' Fins, January 2007, Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerland-scaping.com), San Francisco, CA.**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy, currents. Fifth trip with Fish N' Fins. While the ride out to the dive sites is generally about 50 minutes, it's such a beautiful trip that we don't mind it. Great diving and snorkeling (my wife is an ocean snorkeler) and of course a great location to see sharks, mantas, turtles, dolphins, jacks, morays as well as many small things too. With new people coming on to the dive boat every couple of days we went to Blue Corner about 5 times (which was fine — it's great to get sharks, sharks, sharks). One of the nice things about going back to this location so many times is that I relocated a nice big frog fish, many morays and other items that most people don't have the time to look at with all the sharks around. Yoko and Allain were great dive masters. While there are high-end hotels available, we continued to stay at the West Plaza Deskotel, which is a no-frills hotel above a grocery store about a 5-minute walk from everything. No pool, no room service but convenient. We also flew through Manila on Continental Micronesia, which may be a good alternative rather than the Guam-Honolulu trip ... FNF arranged

our fare on the Manila-Koror legs for a good price, making the trip about \$500 less than the itinerary would be through Guam.

**Neco Marine, Palau Pacific Resort, December 2006, Laura Cook, Westfield, MA.** Experience: 300+ dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm and flat, currents. Beautiful resort, great food, some of the best diving I have encountered. Must snorkel Jellyfish Lake. Amazing experience. Chandelier cave was also a great dive. Beautiful views of the islands. A must-dive location.

**Peleliu Divers, Storyboard, Dolphin Bay, February 2007, Brooke Briggs (brookebriggs@sbcglobal.net), Bloomfield Hills, MI.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, currents. The Storyboard and the new Dolphin Bay Bungalows, a mile or so apart, are operated by the same people. We found Storyboard online and made our reservations through an agent (Sams Tours) in June 06 for a February 07 visit. We were not advised that the restaurant and diving facilities had been closed at the Storyboard and moved to the Dolphin Bay Bungalows a month before we arrived. Calls to the Storyboard a week before we left the Koror area were answered at Dolphin Bay (without stating that they are now at a different facility) and we were told that the rooms have A/C. Dolphin Bay, the new resort, does have air. Storyboard does not. No mention was made of the change in amenities, diving schedules, shuttling, etc., until we arrived, and then it was done with a definite attitude. We were told we had booked with Storyboard and all the other guests had booked with Dolphin Bay, a difficult thing to do since they have just the Storyboard website. New guests confirmed that this was a

lie since they were lodged at Dolphin Bay although they had booked at the Storyboard. You'd think 7 months would be enough to contact us about the changes. They had our contact info. At the Storyboard, the bottom sheets don't fit the beds so you end up sleeping on the mattress and pad. The owner said, "yeah, we know." We had to go behind the cabin to turn on cold water for the shower (only the hot worked). No hot water was available in the sink. Cockroaches are impressive, but harmless. Lots of cute geckos and lizards live indoors and out. The sand floor dining room was charming. The food was okay. They asked about allergies, etc. The purpose for booking lodging on Peleliu is to dive the choice spots before the boats from Koror arrive. Peleliu Divers, also managed/owned by Storyboard/Dolphin Bay, was overbooked and the 4 divers in our group were at the mercy of the other dive group of 9+/- divers staying at Dolphin Bay. That group always had first call on dive time and dive sites. Arrival day we waited on the dock for 2+ hours for van pickup which took us to Dolphin Bay. It's only a 7 min drive and there was a driver waiting at the dock with the van, but he had to wait for the other dive group to come in before he could take us to the bungalows. Our 1st dive day we were told we had to wait for 2 new guests to arrive before we could dive because they were diving with us. They arrived about 10:30 am and we were then told they weren't diving that day. The 2nd day we had to wait for the first boat to return before we could dive. The new guests were told they had to dive late with us because they had to do a checkout dive. We dove Peleliu Express to the Cut. Some checkout! The dm barely kept them in sight. On both days it was close to lunch time before

we were in the water. A tip, given to our dm with specific instructions to share it with the boat captain, was not shared. When questioned the following day, the dm stated, "yes, I shared it," and when she realized the captain was behind her shaking his head, said "I mean I'm going to share it with him." These managers/owners only had 10-12 divers and a few bungalows to handle. I expected better. The dive sites are terrific. Make sure you tour the WWII sites with the wonderful and informative Tanzi. He's great and so are all the locals we met!

**Sam's Tours, Lhens Motel, February 2007, Steve Belmont (steve@dadvis-constructors.com), Fairbanks, AK.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. Russelle Carig of Sam's Tours putting together a dive stay package. She can take care of everything from 3 star to 5 star accommodations. I chose Lhens Motel. This is a working man's apartment/motel with large, simple rooms with cable TV and efficiency kitchens. The rooms are clean and staff friendly. My price per night was \$64 with tax and airport transfers included. We dined out and the most expensive meal was \$15. Most evenings we ate in local establishments for \$5 to \$7 per meal. Sam's offers 12 dive boats that can handle up to 12 divers. They are covered for protection but have no bathroom facilities. The shop is well equipped with free Nitrox (32%). Boat dives run \$119 for a two-tank dive, with lunch and refreshments included. My cost was \$107 for two-tank dives since I dove for 14 days. The boats offer no photographic wash tubs or tables; however, there is a professional photography shop attached to Sam's. Sam's captains are knowledgeable and give you wonderful tours through the Rock Islands to and from the dives. Daniel taught

me how to dive the extreme currents of Blue Corner and the Peleliu Express using a reef hook and neutral buoyancy. His knowledge of the marine life was tremendous. He showed me how to detect current changes by watching the smaller reef fish. The drifts in the Palau waters are strong, so be prepared to change dive direction. Daniel's dive plan was wall on the left, sharks on the right or wall on the right and sharks on the left. Using a white board, he would profile the dive with depths and times. He sent up his safety sausage to signal the boat and did a count after each dive. I suggest that each diver have his own sausage. Blue Corner has been a dream for 22 years. I was mesmerized by the number of white tips, grays, dog tooth tuna, giant trevally, and a giant school of barracuda that completely engulfed me. Once the group is together, you begin your drift to the Corner. Once there, you hook off to the reef and watch the sharks just hovering in the current. When it is time to leave, you drift to the elbow and cross over to a shallow plateau. Here you will find more sharks, turtles, and a Napoleon wrasse who will swim right up to your mask. This became my number one dive out of 769 lifetime dives. That lasted all of two days and then we dove the German Channel. The start of the dive was disappointing, with a sandy bottom and poor visibility. All of a sudden a 12-foot black manta came on the scene. He stopped at a cleaning station to get worked on. Then the most wonderful dive experience of my life happened. Mr. Manta swam over to me and we spent two minutes just swimming together and playing. He liked my bubbles when they tickled his underside. He stayed directly above me and just about encircled me with his wings. The rest of the group got some great photos

of this event and I had a new number one dive. The next day we had some new divers on board and they wanted to do the Channel to see the manta. My friend did an encore performance of our swim together. Only in Palau. Most dives had an additional DM along and he would trail the group and stay with photographers while they completed their pictures. When in a drift, the dive keeps going. The extra DM would also take air-challenged divers to the surface for pickup. I averaged 57 minutes per dive out of 28 dives. Daniel would get the group together once a diver reached 750 psi and we would surface after completing a mandatory 3-minute safety stop. Be prepared to do live boat entries and exits. The captain always goes to neutral when the divers are near the boat and there is a line attached to the boat that divers hang on to while individuals climb aboard. Peleliu saw one of the bloodiest battles of WW II in 1944/45. Dive the Express, Yellow Wall, and also do the shore tour. Put yourself in the shoes of an 18-year-old Marine fresh out of Kansas and making a landing on Orange Beach. It gave me shivers and made me extra proud to be a free American. Diving Palau gave me my first international dive experience since I dove with Brits, French, German and Belgian divers. There was a Japanese diver but none of the large Asian groups that one would expect. One will get more bang for your dollar by doing a live-aboard, but I enjoy the camaraderie of a local dive shop. Sam's has a bar and grill, and we all sat around and watched the sun set after logging our dives. After two days, everyone will know your name and you will be considered another local diver.

**Sam's Tours, Palau Pacific Hotel,  
April 2007, Chip Kamin (ekamin@  
verizon.net), Pittsburgh, PA. Experi-**

ence: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy, currents. Our 8 divers had about 6,000 dives accumulated, but mainly in the Caribbean. We visited Palau and then Yap, an 18-day adventure, about the minimum time considering the long air flights. Tina at Island Dreams [www.divetrip.com](http://www.divetrip.com) helped us with making reservations and figuring out how to put this complicated trip together. Palau Pacific is a wonderful resort. We were met at the airport at 8:00 pm and within minutes made a stop to pick up liquor, sodas and, of course, a beetle nut kit. The Palau Pacific has beautiful grounds but it is a bit spread out. Our particular room was at the far end of the resort and required a 6-minute walk, many times a day. Ocean view was not terribly important since the view to the front was limited by the small deck. We opted for the breakfast package \$22 per breakfast and it was the best meal of the day. An incredible buffet of just about anything you might want with many Japanese and American delights. Dinner was a different story. When the buffet (\$30) was good (seafood night) it was a treat, but normal meals were on the expensive side. We ended up eating in town and found many good, inexpensive restaurants. A short \$7 cab ride got us into town. Emamelei was cheap, had a great menu and great air-conditioning. We did a customary stop at the local jail and bought storyboards. Sams Dive Tours was selected based upon reader comments in Undercurrent and we were not disappointed. We had Dexter as dive master and Jake as boat captain. They were knowledgeable as to the marine life, dive locations, and above-water life. Our group of 8 was perfect for the twin-engine outboards they use to move quickly between dive sites. Lots of cold sodas and a varied

lunch. Diving in Palau is a bit tricky due to currents and wind. Dexter grew up diving on the Island so he knew currents and locations. He rarely guessed wrong as to the time and direction of the dive. We opted for three-tank dive days with Nitrox (it is free). The rides could be long, up to an hour, but they were always fun since we were high speed cruising between the rock islands and discussing local fauna and flora with both guides. Diving was some of the best we had ever done. Visibility was good to excellent and the water was warm. I ended up diving with a shorty wet suit. The group quickly figured out the use of reef hooks after the first stop at Blue Corner. Our favorite dive was Ulong Channel, which started off with a reef hook shark fest, followed by a fast cruise up the channel catching huge lettuce coral, anemones, turtles, giant clams and the most incredible ending to a dive we had ever seen, a huge (25 feet in diameter) ball of swarming fish that was being herded by resident sharks. Dexter told us this fish ball had been around for years and could be found at the end of this dive. We made it out to Peleliu and did two dives on Yellow Wall and then did the 2-hour land tour. The dives were worth it but no better than what we had on the main Island. The land tour brought home the magnitude of the war and was well worth it. In general we saw a lot of big fish. Sharks and turtles were everywhere, lots of small stuff, and schools of fish. Things looked pretty healthy and we never had a disappointing dive. We did the Chandelier Cavern dive on a two-tank rest day and although it was a short, shallow dive, it was fun to visit the three caverns and just relax a bit. We did 17 dives and averaged over one hour per dive. We did a land tour and spent some time

at the Ngardmau Waterfall. This was a great waterfall; the rest of the land tour was just OK with one other highlight, a restored Mens House near the new Capitol building. On our other rest day we did a kayak Rock Island tour that included Jelly Fish Lake. We went straight to Jelly Fish Lake to beat any other boats and had the place to ourselves. It is better to do the lake on an off day than to try and squeeze it in at the end of a dive day. The kayaking was fun but a little kayaking goes a long way. We were off at 3:00 am to Yap to complete the dive trip.

**Sam's Tours, July 2007, James Knieling (cooltravelnews@aaahawk.com), Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, no currents. They have excellent fast, covered boats. The dive crew catered to their American clients. They used Neco Marine Boats, no restroom or padding, and had mainly twin 150 Yamaha motors, which really moved. Most of the other operators used twin 100 Yamaha motors. They have free nitrox! Free hotel pickups! This turned the Neco Tours hour ride into 30 minutes average and made the long daily runs as short as possible. They offered packages with local hotel operators. They got me a nice room at the West Plaza Maras cal Island that was surrounded with 4 tempting dance bars. Lots of night life there, but it can be expensive. The food at the adjacent restaurant was good. Sam's Tours is a 5-minute walk. Their facility is well run and has several large vans to make pickup fast and easy. The Blue Corner is where you use a hard coral blunt hook and 4' of line. You float up and watch the parade of dozens of sharks, about 100 barracuda, and schools of 40-100 different kinds of fish racing by as the waters swells up and mixes with the warm and cold water. They went to Jelly

Fish Lake and German Channel, but Blue Corner was the best of the best! I Get an American Express Card and you can take advantage of their great Baggage and Trip Delay Insurance for \$12. I really needed it since Continental trashed all three of my bags and has jerked me around with their "we might pay you something after you wait for 90+days policy! AMEX paid me for 3 new bags 14 days from receiving my claim!

## Pohnpei

**Village Scuba, The Village, February 2007, Jeanne & Bill Downey (travelexpert@comcast.net), Baden, PA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, choppy. Pohnpei was an optional add-on to our Chuuk trip. We stayed at The Village, an eco-tourism lodge set on a hillside 5 miles from the airport. There are 40 rustic cottages, each with two double beds, sitting area with couch, chair, coffee table, sink with plenty of counter space, shower with good water pressure and hot water. The cottages are perched privately throughout the property, some with fantastic ocean views. There's no TV, telephone, or AC; there are screens on the window, mosquito netting over the beds, and ceiling fans. Although warm during the day, it cooled down nicely at night for sleeping. The office, bar, and dining room are centrally located. Telephone and email access is available in the office. Breakfast ranged from \$3.50 for oatmeal to \$7.00 banana pancakes. Dinners averaged \$12.00, including soup, salad, and rolls. The food was good, and the ice cream was excellent. Since we were diving, we had lunch between dives consisting of sandwich choices or bento, which was rice, sausage, hard-boiled egg, and a

large portion of tuna, all wrapped in a banana leaf — delicious! We made six dives over three days. The coral was not impressive and there was some coral bleaching. One of the three dives we enjoyed was Manta Road, a manta cleaning station where half the group had an excellent 15-20 minute view watching angel fish clean a manta. The manta made a large circle, making eye contact with each one of us. With poor visibility in the pass, a manta can be nearby, yet not be seen. Another good dive was where the wall made a sharp turn, so there was literally a corner. The sharks hang out and play in the current here, plus there were lots of anemone fish and tropicals to play with when the current died and the sharks departed. Our last dive was a long drift dive. One small drop-off around 80 had 40-50 mostly gray reef sharks facing into the current, just hanging out. We also saw a lion fish and a school of squid. We drifted by a mini-wall with lots of holes for things to hide. There were many crowns of thorns. The diving was a bit arduous, as small 6-pack skiffs with pop-up covers were used. We sat on cushions on the bottom during the boat rides. Upon arrival at a dive site, we put our gear together and backrolled into the water. Between dives we were taken where we could get out of the skiffs and stretch our legs. Pohnpei is not a world-class dive destination and The Village does not have a lot of divers stay there, but it is a great place to stay, do a little diving, kayaking, hiking, and touring, especially to Nan Madal, 700-year-old ruins. The staff went out of their way to accommodate our wishes. UW Photography Comments: Cameras either bounced around on cushions in the bottom of the boat, or you held them. Rinse container put on boat second day.

## Truk

**Blue Lagoon Resort, Truk Stop, February 2007, Steve (steve@davis-constructors.com), Fairbanks, AK.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The Island state of Chuuk is dirty, with the roads lined with wrecked and junk vehicles. The poverty is evident, and though we had no altercations, we felt uncomfortable when walking in the public areas. All of the guide books suggest that visitors do not venture out after dark. Evidently a combination of unemployment and alcohol creates an atmosphere of rowdiness amongst the young men. I made arrangements to stay at the Truk Stop Motel, a three star facility. Airport transfers are \$10 to \$15 each way. Rooms were large and comfortable and went for \$100 per night. They have a dining area with a large patio area and internet access. The food was local fare and good. There is a bar but the main attraction is a pool table. The dive shop barely had enough weights for a boat of 10 divers and dives were \$100 per two-tank dive. They did not offer Nitrox. I met the new dive shop manager who had arrived from the US only three weeks before. I boarded their larger (cabin-style) dive boat that could easily handle 12 divers. Their other boat had engine problems. There were 8 of us on board as we went off to dive the Nippo Maru. I had to stack 8 2-pound weights to get my 16 pounds. They had nothing larger than 2 pounders at the time. The trip was a disaster. The boat had one engine out and we could only get make about 7 MPH. The boat made a serpentine course due to the one prop running and we were engulfed in black diesel smoke. Before we left, I told the dive manager that I did not want to do decompression diving and I would

dive my own profile and stay above the DM. This was {allowable since the DM would not go into deco. The dive plan was inefficient due to the fact that the DM did not speak competent English and the new dive manager did not know the sites. I, however, made the dives and used my computer backed up by my trusty old dive watch. I did a 90-foot for 25 minutes dive and spent 10 minutes at 15 feet. As we started our 2-1/2-hour journey back to port, I had made up my mind to leave Truk Stop and go to the other facility. I will give Truk Stop one credit, though. They let divers dive their own profile if they desired. There were 4 Scots onboard and they were all competent deco divers. They were also disappointed in the whole operation but they were leaving in a few days. They did ask for and received a credit for the poor performance of the operation. I checked out after telling the owner that he had a facility that needed serious attention if he desired to stay in business. I went to the Blue Lagoon Resort. This is the only resort with a small beach and encompasses about 15 acres. It is self-sufficient with everything that you need right there. Talk to Gloria at Blue Lagoon and she will take care of you. All of the staff were great and they gave me the same price per room as the Truk Stop did (\$100 per day) and the rooms were better. All are ocean view with a lanai. The dive shop was local, with small outboards that had a cover for protection from the sun. They took good care of me and I went on my first dive with just the DM. I spent the rest of the week diving the famous wrecks of Truk. Nitrox was \$19 per tank but they gave it to me for \$15. I made 7 dives at the Blue Lagoon and the total for diving came to \$455. I made a couple of dives without Nitrox and rented a backup computer for two days. I will not do

deco diving, but I did enjoy the sight of these sunken ships and the artifacts that the local divers had placed on the decks. I left Truk wishing that I had spent that week in Palau.

Truk Stop, July 2007, James Knieling (cooltravelnews@aaahawk.com), Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 200 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm, surge, currents. This is a basic operation. Friendly, courteous, helpful and open to divers who want doubles and nitrox. Room is basic, but oh, the a/c is great! No outside TV, but it has a VCR and TV. I don't recommend the Sunday buffet. This is a really poor island that makes most of the Caribbean look rich. The San Francisco Maru is a great dive at 180' with 3 tanks pointing their guns up like they are ready to fire. The Fujikawa Maru is incredible — a must-see for coral and small fish lovers! The best corals and schools of fish I have ever seen in one place. It is a shallow second dive. I did hit the best weather day in six months with vis of 200 feet. My last day with their competition on a tanker was rotten. Vis of 10 feet and bad current. I was a single and stuck being last off the boat. Everyone had gone down when I was allowed to go. I could not see anything so I headed down 100 feet to the bottom. I got caught in the current and missed the boat. I surfaced behind the boat and kept signaling with my whistle and 9' New Zealand Sausage for the boat to pick me up as I floated farther and farther away. For 15 minutes I struggled without a snorkel not to use up my air, because I wanted to finish this dive. I kept having leg cramps from my torn knee and hamstring, which I had operated on when I returned home. I could not get a last-minute refund of my trip. Take out early accident trip insurance! He finally picked me up and I jumped in and

went down to the wreck. It has nice corals and small fish. I recommend diving Truk Stop using a double setup, which they rented me for their deep dives.

## Yap

**Manta Ray Divers, Manta Ray Bay Hotel, July 2007, James Knieling (cooltravelnews@aaahawk.com), Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm, choppy. This is a quiet and peaceful island. The hotel is beautiful, with a great bar (a floating Malaysian junk complete with canons) and excellent service. No TV! The Traders Ridge resort is also beautiful, but a long way from the harbor up on the hilltop. It has fabulous food! Great mangrove and, if ordered and tracked down prior to arrival, the ultimate delight coconut crab! Fresh grown and picked daily unique sweet baby spinach and other spices. I hit the typhoon season — one hit the Philippines and we had two days of rain, so I was only able to dive two of four days. The food became my diving trip. The sharks were unique, the 10-12' black tips just kick back in the sand and chill. I was able to get up to about two feet on one local hang out shark. I saw about a dozen in the area and 6-turtles and a few unique soft corals. Mainly hard corals here.

**Trader's Ridge, October 2006, Steve Dussault (steve@awuwi.com), Dover, NH.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. We were the only two divers at Trader's Ridge so we had our own boat and were able to pick the dive locations and times. The boat captain and dive master were very accommodating. 32% NI-TROX available for free but you should bring your own analyzer — theirs was broken. The diving in Miil Channel is

awesome! The Mandarin Fish night dive may not be as great as lead to believe. The Trader's Ridge resort is very nice but the food is better and cheaper at Yap Divers. The restaurant at Yap Divers on the M/V Mnuw is a wonderful place to go at the end of the day.

**Traders Ridge Resort, April 2007 Chip Kamin (hkshop@veriozn.net), Pittsburgh, PA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 125 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy, currents. Our group of 8 experienced divers (6,000+ dives accumulated) was stoked from great diving in Palau with Sams Tours and a great hotel with the Pan Pacific. Our expectations for Yap were not as high. Tina, at Island Dreams Dive Travel, had helped with all the travel arrangements. We were met at 3:00 am at the airport and driven a short distance to the resort. Dive master Mike Kuiper met us as we checked in, along with Brenna, the manager. We had no desire to do an early morning dive scenario and Mike explained he would take us out in the afternoon and then we could do the Mandarin fish dive at dusk. He told us to just bring our dive gear to the lobby at 1:00 pm and he would take it from there. Yap has managed to let most of the modern world pass it by. They practice many of Micronesias traditional lifestyles. Traders Ridges motto on their web site sums up the facility well: Where Adventure and Luxury Meet. I have never had such an attentive staff from manager to chef to bartender. Rooms were styled in true Victorian architecture and were spacious and cool. Refrigerators in every room and room service available 24 hours a day. Ladies note: bring pants or a skirt. You can walk around with nothing on top but you need to cover the knees (only when touring the island). The pool was secluded, as were the beautiful gardens surround-

ing the resort. They even had an ethnic art institute that showcased various art forms practiced on the island. We opted for the breakfast package at \$16.50 per day. The restaurant was in a separate building with two open-air floors, one more casual than the other. We tried a few other restaurants in town but always came back to chef Anthony's cuisine. Our first two dives were not spectacular. We did Semakai Wall (great visibility 100-foot+) and 1 to 2 Macro (less visibility but lots of lion fish). Then we headed out for the dusk Mandarin Fish Dive. We found a coral head minutes from the dive shop and basically hung out for 90 minutes watching the beautiful little critters find each other and finally mate. We were told the mantas were on the other side of the island from the standard Mill Channel dive area. We headed out to the Valley of the Rays the next morning, and after a quick descent to about 50 feet we attached our reef hooks behind a big rock. I was fumbling around with my camera wondering why we had stopped here when a big shadow fell over me. I looked up and there was a 10-foot manta hovering over the feeding station. Another one came in and then another. The exit for the dive was tricky since the current was strong. You had to drift out the channel and then catch the mooring line. With the current dragging, I did a slow and strenuous hand-over-hand to the surface and then caught another rope from the mooring line to the ladder and then with difficulty back in the boat. This was not an easy exit and missing the ladder would mean a swift cruise out to sea. We all made it and for our second dive went back to 1 to 2 Macro, seeing a lot more stuff since we knew the site. Mike Kuiper is Dutch and had worked for years in the Maldives before coming to Yap. He

seems to be doing a great job organizing the diving. For the balance of our dives we had two locals; Fair captained the boat and led the dives while Matt helped out on the surface. The dive staff was excellent, catering to every need we had. After our second dive each day we had a choice of coffee, tea, cold water and fresh banana nut bread from the kitchen. We went back to the manta site (seeing even more mantas), then spent a day on the southern tip of the island doing Yap Caverns, Lionfish Wall, and Magic Kingdom. All great dives. A trip to the south is a must-do for a Yap dive trip. More fish, better coral, and great visibility. Back at Traders Ridge, we opted for a private island dance that included sampling native food, crafts and, of course, a colorful dance by over 25 natives. Well worth the \$50, which goes to the tribe. We also did a couple of land tours, we had two full days built into the package but really two half days was plenty. Stone money banks, more mens houses, another mangrove kayak tour, World War II relics, etc. The resort has bikes for free anytime and they are new bikes, a first for all our many dive trips. No rinse for cameras or masks. Every diver given individual baskets for gear. It worked OK for small digital cameras.

**Yap Divers, Manta Ray Bay Hotel, December 2006, Laura Cook, Westfield, MA.** Experience: 300+ dives. Vis: 10 to 30 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, strong currents. We dove the channel looking for mantas on the first day. Four to six showed, one at a time. The next two days, nothing, and visibility and currents difficult. Did their mandarin fish dive — additional \$55. One dive in 10 to 12 feet of water done in the late afternoon to view mandarin fish mating. Forget it. Was not worth the time or money. We dove nitrox the

rest of the dives. Yap Divers were lax about checking/testing tanks prior to dives. Guides seemed bored and so were we. I would not bother to go to Yap again. We were told other dive operations on the island chase the mantas so they are not as visible as they once were. Good food at the hotel restaurant, hotel was clean but smelled musty, damp and many of the rooms were tired-looking. A new section was just renovated but we weren't in it. My husband was here two years ago and never saw a manta. Three days of diving and zilch. He was year at same time of year.

## NEW ZEALAND

**Dive Tutukaka, March 2007, Roger Cooper (rcooper@aga.org), Washington, DC.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 21 to 22 C, calm, surge. New Zealand is said to have more divers per capita than any other country and the diving at Poor Knights Islands (on the East Coast of the North Island) helps you understand why. Poor Knights is a series of volcanic peaks some miles off the east coast of the North Island. It is a complete sanctuary — no boats are allowed to land on the islands and the animal life is totally protected — something like the Galapagos without the people. We encountered huge stingrays cruising the channel and tunnel between two islands. They looked like battleships but swam like eagle rays. Also saw large schools of fish, eels, scorpionfish, etc. A large manta ray that passed below me just after I surfaced. I believe it was Cousteau who said that the Poor Knights offered “the best sub-tropical diving in the world.” Air at a lovely 79 degrees in early March (end of their summer).

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Some of the world's finest diving is in this land just north of Australia. While there are several dive lodges with excellent diving, it's a dream destination for live-aboards. Unique critters abound. Muck diving is great for macro photographers and there are plenty of sites with big fish, big coral and brilliant coral. It's also a naturalist's paradise with beautiful topography: volcanoes, steaming jungles, butterflies as big as birds and walking-stick insects a foot long, and splendid Birds of Paradise. Most rain comes in heavy afternoon downpours. Take a week to stay in fine lodges like Karawari or Tari to visit indigenous, still primitive cultures, among the most interesting on the planet. Port Moresby is an unsafe city, although the big hotels are fine, as is a cab trip to the superb giant crafts market. Loloata Island Resort, which has fine diving, is 25 minutes from the airport and they'll arrange round-trip transportation. Malaria prophylaxis is still essential. English gets you by everywhere.

**Loloata Resort, March 2007, Nannette and Bill Van Antwerp (nannettev@gmail.com), Valencia, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Loloata Resort on Bootless Bay is on a small island about 30 minutes by car, then 15 minutes by boat from Port Moresby. The resort itself has 21 rooms, 15 without air conditioning and 6 with. We had a deluxe queen bedroom that was a good 5-minute walk from the main lodge where we had breakfast and dinner. The grounds of the resort were rustic with several dozen wallabies freely roaming