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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Catching a Lift on the *Palau Aggressor II*

II^{1/2} to Base: Beam us up, Shelley!

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Dear Fellow Diver,

It's one of the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. Why had I not headed to Palau, earlier? I'd long ago logged the other six. I believed the rumors, I guess: Micronesia would be too far away, too expensive. Currents would be too swift for all but the super-fit. The diving would be too regimented.

But if there were diving of such ballyhooed quality, I expected I could forgive much if I could base myself on a fine live-aboard. The *Sun Dancer* has had rave reviews (see *In Depth*, February 1995), but the publicity for the new *Aggressor*, launched in late 1994, had been impressive, and I had already enjoyed several trips on other *Aggressors*. I made an executive decision -- I'd do the *Palau Aggressor II*.

Cat Built to Dive

Unlike most sister ships in the fleet, which have been converted into dive boats from oil rig service, the new high-tech *Palau Aggressor II* was designed from the keel up for serious diving. The \$3 million craft is a sleek, white catamaran 106 feet long and 31 feet abeam. One giant step from the wharf in the grubby harbor at Koror brought me onto the main deck, about 10 feet above water level, where I found the dive deck and the cabins. On the level above I located the wheel house. I said hello to Captain Shelley Acuff, a handsome, quiet, fortyish bachelor of the sea, and his six young, personable crew members. I checked out the kitchen, then the salon, with its long teak bar and its dining and TV-watching areas. On a shaded deck stood a hot tub and more tables. In the library I examined the adequate fish-book collection and the videos. Climbing to the highest level, I discovered a huge sun deck well furnished with chaises and tables.

In 1989 the conservation organization CEDAM organized a committee of marine researchers to select the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. They chose:

**Belize Barrier Reef
Lake Baikal (Siberia)
Northern Red Sea
Galapagos Archipelago
Great Barrier Reef
Deep Ocean Vents
Palau**

The spacious dive deck was well laid out, with a roomy camera table. I dumped my photo tools into one of the mini bins and staked out a place at the ample charging station in the darkroom, where George Stauffer, divemaster and assistant photo pro, told us he would develop E-6 film every night.

Like the other seven, my windowed cabin was spacious even by new live-aboard measures. My buddy and I had ample storage space in the drawers, closet, and medicine chest. The cabin air conditioning worked fine except for the two nights in port. I appreciated the good-sized sink, the private shower with unlimited hot water, and the state-of-the-art marine toilet. Blue carpeting softened the walls and floor; cheerful fishy print spreads lay on the lower queen and upper single. But I was not fond of the high top bunk. It lacked a foothold or grab handle; I found it tricky to mount. Hostess Tina kept the cabins spotless in between her many trips to the dryer to restock the bottomless piles of warm, fresh towels. The cabins were stable and the compressor, engines, and water makers were well muffled.

Going Down — Watch Your Step, Please

J. Q.

The first morning I found that my BC had sprouted some new features: the crew had rigged an air horn to the auto inflator and a red-cloth safety sausage on a D-ring. (I never needed the air horn, but I deployed the sausage on nearly every dive.) As I suited up, my tank was moved to a slot on the *real* dive boat, the *Palau Aggressor II^{1/2}*. Much more than a skiff, this 30-foot launch holds 16 divers plus crew members. Tanks (always at 3,200 psi) stayed rigged on the boat, and a wide shelf under each diver's seat held mask, fins, and weight belt. Cameras rode on a padded back deck. Come time to dive, all I had to do was slip into my tank and do a back roll.

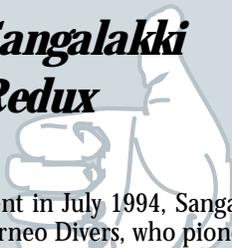
After surfacing, I waited for the skiff to find me; then it was just a three-step climb up a good ladder.

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Never before had I taken an elevator to and from a dive. We boarded the "*II^{1/2}*" on the dive deck. Then came the fun part: the boat was gently lowered into the water by hydraulic lift. Once in the water, the launch slipped free of the cradle and took off at high speed for the dive site.

Usually two of the crew were present on every dive, but after the first dive to observe everyone's skill levels, they disappeared to their own pursuits -- still photography or video. They weren't into pointing out rare critters, but when someone needed special help, topside or underwater, they were accommodating. One older diver had gear and buoyancy problems;

Sangalakki Redux



A dive destination with more turtles than Borneo's Sipadan Island? Hard to image, but nearby Sangalakki has so many nesting turtles you have to step over them to get to your room at night. After being closed down by the Indonesian government in July 1994, Sangalakki plans to reopen around June of this year. Borneo Divers, who pioneered diving on Sipadan and Sangalakki, has not only managed to persuade the government to let them reopen the resort but has again secured the rights to the turtle eggs, preventing their commercial collection and protecting what must be one of the largest turtle nesting grounds in the world. Sangalakki can be booked through most dive travel agents.

J. Q.

a crew member cheerfully buddied with her on every dive. "If publications made awards for 'Diving for the Geriatrically Challenged,' I'd give them ten stars," she remarked.

Bottom Floor: Mantas, Gobies, Rocket Rides, and Sundries

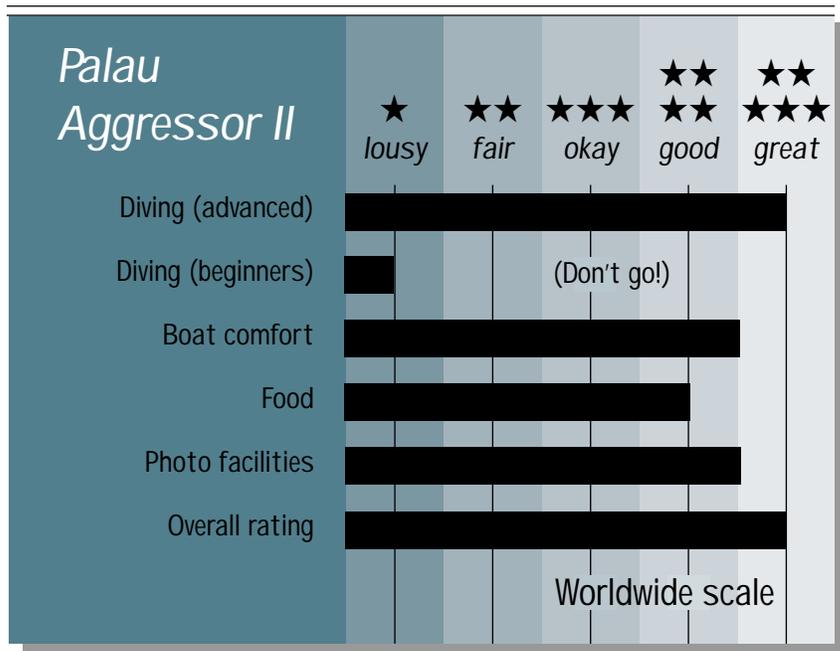
We cruised through the splendidly scenic Rock Islands. To me, these low, lumpy islets looked like huge turtles wearing coats of deep green palms -- or perhaps giant Chia pets. Our dives were usually timed to avoid the swiftest of Palau's legendary currents, but there were two exceptions. The first was Ulong Channel, where the current was even swifter than usual. As I rocketed through, it took all my skill to avoid slamming into coral heads and huge fans. It was a relief to emerge from the channel into placid clear blue and see several contrasting whitetip sharks moving just below.

The second overly swift dive was at Peleliu Tip, the southernmost jut of the archipelago. First my buddy entered the water -- and was carried swiftly away. When I dropped in, just a minute later, I couldn't find him. The next I saw of him was climbing aboard the boat at the end of the dive. During the dive I suddenly remembered that this was where in 1994 four Japanese divers were swept away, never to be found. Just then my strobe began to fire erratically. I took this as another cue to end that dive -- fast. It was a truly gorgeous wall, but not worth the risk on that day.

We devoted two dives to shipwrecks and one to a downed Japanese Zero. The *Iro*, an oiler sunk in 1944, stands upright in shallow water and is overgrown with breathtaking corals and zig-zag clams. I found a gas mask and a small shrine with a Japanese doll and a sake bottle. But the visibility was poor, and it was even poorer a day later on the *Amatsu*. If these were the two best wrecks on Palau, I was glad we hadn't been deposited on any of the others. Some of my sidekicks who hadn't been to Truk had fun; I was bored. Likewise for the broken-up Japanese plane.

It was not my luck to see a manta at Manta Rock. I settled myself quietly on the sand ten yards back from the giant mound, humming a manta call into my regulator. For 20 minutes I watched empty water. I noticed that within a yard of me were about a dozen small holes, each occupied by two skittish gobies and one furiously industrious shrimp shoving debris out of

. . . As I rocketed through Ulong Channel, it took all my skill to avoid slamming into coral heads and huge fans.



. . . We set our own profiles and followed our computers. We were asked to record depth and time after the dive. Once I admitted to exceeding 140 feet but only got a raised eyebrow.



. . . One afternoon at the Blue Corner, a popular site, a gang of eager Japanese descended upon us, heedless of the crowd already on the reef. Divers and sharks sped off in all directions.

their condos. (Suddenly, a discomfiting thought: Was I sitting on their cousins?) With no mantas in sight, my buddy and I swam over an eel garden and slipped back into the surrounding reef. I was later assured by Shelley and divemaster George that they see mantas on most trips. It was just my bad luck not to find any, but I was happy enough with the dive anyway.

Feed Me, Seymour

Erwin, the Belgian-born chef, produced a great variety and quantity of food, with plenty of meat and fish dishes, and ample veggies and salads at both lunch and dinner. Breakfasts were usually fruit and cereal or eggs to order. Pancakes, French toast, bacon, and sausages cycled through once a week. Hamburgers, spaghetti, and the like showed up at lunch. Dinners were served rather early to accommodate night divers, whose numbers dwindled during the trip because the evening forays were of only mild interest.

A Taiwanese fishing boat docked beside us one evening and was the source of a pristine tuna -- sashimi the first night, tuna steaks the next, and tuna salad later. Desserts usually came from a cake-mix box. Wines (freebies, like the beer and sodas) were non-memorable, jug-type California zinfandels and sauvignon blancs -- not my favorites, but better than usual dive boat standards. Snacks emerged post-dive. I especially enjoyed munching on popcorn and fruit while soaking in the hot tub in the shade after the last afternoon dive. My only problem with the kitchen was that it closely abutted the dining area and salon, making one enormous area where the airconditioning labored mostly in vain. Most afternoons and evenings the temperature there hovered between 85° and 90°.

Rolling Back the Fears

I was afraid I would find Palau boat diving too regimented. It was highly planned -- but not cattle-boat or follow-the-leader. I was asked for my C-card, but there was no formal check-out dive. We set our own profiles and followed our computers. We were asked to record depth and time after the dive. Once I admitted to exceeding 140 feet but only got a raised eyebrow.

I always find diving off the *Aggressors* (and other large live-aboards) a little like scout camp. In my cabin there was a souvenir water container with the motto "EAT SLEEDIVE." All three proceeded on schedules. To be tardy was to risk the loss of a dive or first dibs at a meal. On a few occasions people weren't cooperative about following reasonable bottom-time limits, screwing up the schedule. One woman decided she'd make every first dive a 100-minute shelling forage at 25 feet, forcing everyone to wait until she surfaced (I was thankful for the canvas canopy on the tender), so several times there wasn't time to make a second morning dive.

I had also feared that our 14 divers, almost a full complement, would be too much of a mob on any reef. But once on the bottom, everyone scattered. Captains seemed to have an accord not to "overbook" a reef, but sometimes another boat -- the

Dancer, the *Ocean Hunter*, or one from the hotels -- was already at our target site, so we'd politely hang back for a while. However, one afternoon at the Blue Corner, a popular site, a gang of eager Japanese descended upon us, heedless of the crowd already on the reef. Divers and sharks sped off in all directions. Fortunately, I'd been enjoying the sharks' parade for half an hour, tethered to the wall's edge with a reef hook.

What did I like best about Palau? The topside scenery? The breathtaking walls? The sharks? The fabulous variety of hard and soft corals? That I never touched a tank? Yes, yes, and yes. But most of all it was the diversity of diving. In diving around the world, I've never had in one location such a mix of walls, wrecks, sharks, caves, reefs, blue holes, coral gardens, and photo models like nautilus and nudibranchs galore. Would I return to Palau? Where's my ticket? Would I return to the high-tech *Palau Aggressor*? Depends -- there are three boats to choose from. Below is a review by another *In Depth* correspondent who has been on all three.

K. R.

The Other Palau Live-Aboards

The three live-aboards operating in Palau offer slightly different angles on diver comfort and activity. Whereas the spoil-you-rotten *Sun Dancer* may not seriously encourage night diving, the *Aggressor*, which does, won't bring a hot mug of coffee to your cabin in the morning. While the *Ocean Hunter* may charm you with its nautical feel and intimate accommodations, the *Sun Dancer* will make you forget you're even on a boat.

Peter Hughes's Sun Dancer

Six-thirty a.m.: a knock on my cabin door, usually grounds for justifiable homicide, signals the arrival of Captain's Coffee Service. Coffee service? Extra-thick Oscar de la Renta terrycloth robes? A staff in naval uniforms? A5-course, sit-down dinner with tablecloths? Peter Hughes's *Sun Dancer* is clearly going after a different live-aboard experience.

Clean lines, brushed aluminum paneling, color schemes reflecting Palauan sunsets: Peter Hughes has outfitted the fourth and most glorious pearl in his string of luxury yachts

Ditty Bag

All three boats, the *Aggressor*, the *Dancer*, and the *Ocean Hunter*, charge \$1,995 for 7 nights (5½ diving days) but the *Aggressor* knocks off \$200 for two weeks back-to-back (\$3,790). Special trips with celebs like Cousteau, Church, Waterman, etc., are more. The *Dancer's* 10-day trip is \$2,895 through agents or direct at 1-800-9-DANCER or 305-669-9391, fax 305-669-9475. Book the *Aggressor* through agents or direct at 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628, fax 504-384-0817. To book the *Ocean Hunter*, contact Sea&Sea at 800-348-9778 or 415-434-3400, fax 415-434-3409. . . . Diving is good year-round, although the rainy season is late summer through early fall and Japanese crowds arrive in winter. . . . Water temperatures can be as low as 76° in winter, a balmy 84° in summer; visibility 100+ feet in winter, a mite less in summer. . . . A string of extras — a costly overnight at a Guam motel, dinner off the boat one night, a crew tip, a day room at the Palau Pacific on arrival and departure days, and various taxes (\$85 in two weeks) — tacked almost four hundred bucks onto my *Aggressor* trip's total tab. Fortunately, plastic works on the boat and elsewhere. . . . Continental's Air Micronesia is the only way to go (from the West Coast, a variable \$1,500). . . . An overnight in Guam is unavoidable. If affordable, another overnight in Honolulu helps jet-lag recovery. . . . A nice, small guidebook: *Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Palau*, by Tim Rock and Francis Toribiong (Pisces Books), \$12 in U.S. dive shops, lots more on Palau.

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