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Ben Davison's **In** **Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Aboard the *Sun Dancer* in Palau

Luxury above and adventure below

One of our editors made the statement that Palau was the direction that marine biologists face when they put down their prayer rugs. I consider Palau to be the benchmark for Pacific diving. In Depth readers must agree. Asked in a recent poll which dive destination they would most like to visit, they chose Palau as number one.

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Dear Fellow Diver:

The diving in Palau is superb; this point is not debatable. Palau has a plethora of sheer walls, some beginning in only 5 to 10 feet of water and plunging many hundreds. The reefs and walls are alive with a bewildering array of life, from tiny creatures to massive fish schools. Pelagics abound. The menu of dive sites is extensive, ranging from cathedral-like caverns (one with fresh air pockets amid stalactites) to 50-year-old wrecks.

What remains is to find the best dive boat. I don't believe resort-based diving here is the way to go: too few dives, long trips in small boats, swimming against the currents and killing coral with people who don't speak your language. Instead, cruising these picturesque "rock islands" in supreme style aboard Peter Hughes's 119-foot *Sun Dancer* is a sublime experience, yielding the profound pleasure associated with partaking of the finest things life has to offer. Spacious yet homey, the air-conditioned *Dancer* has a separate photo lounge and dive platform (used occasionally, since most diving is from tenders). The huge sun deck, blazing hot during the day, is the place to relax in early morning or evening and watch the white-tailed tropic birds. All cabins have picture windows, private heads, air-conditioning controls, and even volume controls on the stereo speakers. And, while there is luxury and service on board, the adventure and unpredictability is where it should be: underwater.

While the Cattleboats Are Away . . .

Diving the famed Blue Corner when cattleboats are absent – ah, the advantage of live-aboards – is mystical. At 60 feet, at the top of a vertical wall along a broad, current-swept shelf, I hung onto the bare reef, watching. The current and surges sometimes mild, sometimes ferocious, swept over me while dense

Just a few short years ago there was a choice of one live-aboard in Palau — the Sun Tamarin, a tiny weather-beaten sailboat with no dive deck and a reputation for breakdowns. The Tamarin is gone, but two major boats catering to the US market have moved in — the Aggressor and the Sun Dancer.

Palau has proven to be a difficult location for live-aboards. Both boats seem to have overcome their access problems by adding large, high-tech, high-speed, high-dollar launches. In fact, the Aggressor replaced their entire live-aboard with a new catamaran and added a high-dollar launch.

A third boat, the Ocean Hunter, is a 60-foot six-pack that has been getting favorable reports from our readers. The plus here is fewer divers, and most of the diving is done directly from the boat.

schools of trevally, black-finned barracuda, fusiliers, pyramid butterfly fish, and orange-spine unicorn fish fed in the intensely blue open ocean. Bluefin trevally, dogtooth tuna, Napoleon wrasse, and an occasional wahoo all materialized from the blue on a single dive, as did an enormous eagle ray.

A pack of 15 scowling gray sharks, harassing the schooling fish, paraded close enough for me to appreciate the metallic sheen of their skin. To get shark photos, you need someone to hold you down while you shoot, unless you have the nerve and strength to swim down the wall into the midst of the action. Ascending slowly through the clouds of fish while being swept over the plateau was not as unnerving as it sounds; the sharks become commonplace long before this dive is over. This is not a place, however, for the weak-livered.

Ulong Channel, off Ulong Island, is a rather small break in the reef through which huge volumes of water move with the tidal flux. We dived at twilight or in darkness; it was never the same twice. Along the 50-foot floor runs a narrow, sandy band resembling a creek bed. On either side, the coral is untouched, diverse, and vibrant. Dozens of sleeping parrotfish pack into the breathtaking, massive lettuce coral formations at night, transforming it into a parrotfish flophouse. Whitetip and gray reef sharks visit frequently. Large tridacna clams, pugnacious nesting yellow-margin triggerfish, Triton's trumpets, lionfish, moray eels, courier, nudibranchs, table corals, octopuses, basket stars — these are only a small fraction of what I saw here. A compulsive identifier, I was humbled on every dive by species of fish and invertebrates I'd never seen before. Unfortunately, the crew were not knowledgeable about species identification.

Of the two wrecks, the Helmet Wreck in Malakal Harbor was the most interesting, containing depth charges, stacks of Japanese helmets, and numerous machine guns. Encrusted with red sponges and large stone oysters (*Epondylus varius*), it was sunk, apparently, in 1944, but only recently discovered.

The Night Express

The notorious currents were almost nonexistent on our first 20 dives due to the lunar phase, well-timed dives near slack tide, and good karma. But one night we dropped to the quiet lagoon bottom, then entered the channel for one of the more exhilarating rides of my life — a roaring roller coaster at a good 5 knots! Gray reef sharks, their eyes flashing red in my light, zipped in and out of my field of vision as I raced along. The whitetips looked puny by comparison. I could pause only by hooking myself to substrate and surfing, although at one point I found myself dangling helplessly from my buddy's fin while he somehow held his wife, a camera, and the reef simultaneously. We hung on the edge of the wall at the other end, catching our breath while torrents of water tried to pry us off. Although my computer objected to my necessarily rapid ascent in the pitch-black open ocean, by the time we were in the tender I was ready to do it again.

A site off the southeast coast of Peleliu which the guides (and no one else) called Meluis Wallwas one of the jewels of the week. The reef at 40 to 60 feet has a dazzling variety of tiny gobies, fairy basslets, tiger cowries, Triton's trumpets, batfish, hawksbill turtles, ubiquitous sharks, and huge yellow sea fans. Choosing whether to explore this intricate reef or cruise the depths of the wall was a real dilemma – the kind I like.

Peleliu Cut, adjacent to the Peleliu Corner, is infamous for its currents – in May, four Japanese divers were swept away here, never to return. I detected no current during my dive, but the sharks, dogtooth tuna, huge humphead parrotfish, and hallucinogenic clouds of tiny redtooth triggerfish were impossible to miss. The captain called the site overrated; I thought it top-notch.

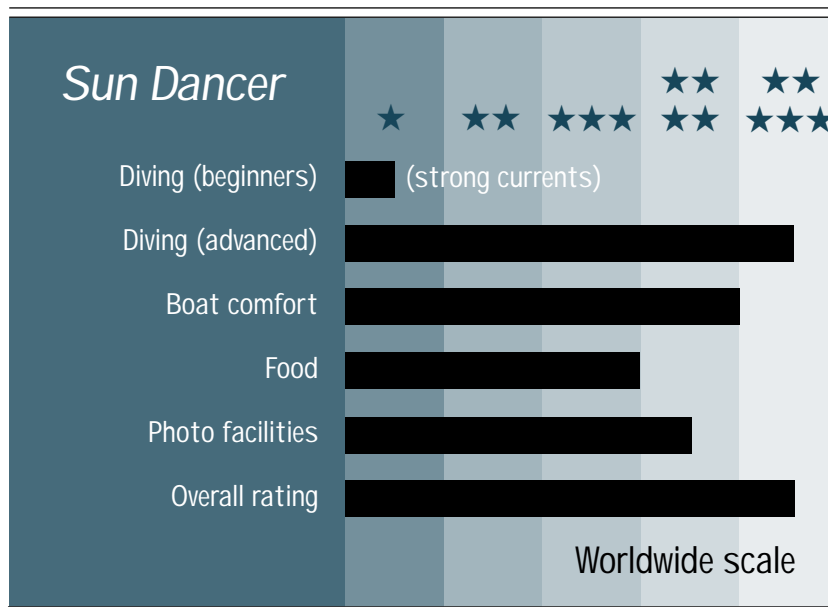
Picking Nits

With diving like this, my arduous journey was well worth it. After a tortured flight from the East Coast to Hawaii, I was stranded sans luggage for two nights in Honolulu due to a typhoon in Guam. I was treated with complete indifference by Continental Airlines. Because most of the *Dancer's* passengers were held up by the typhoon, we lost 2 days of the diving – days to be spent in the northern, largely undived areas of Palau, though the captain said we would still see the best of Palau.

Grumpy from jet lag and the false start, I looked hard for shortcomings on the *Dancer*. One day my apres-dive towel was not quite as warm as advertised. One of the hammocks on the upper deck had an annoying tendency to chafe the railing. The coffee was too strong. But I needed something more substantial to sink my critical teeth into. I thought I'd found it when the two dive tenders dropped us into the water in the wrong place. The crew were genuinely remorseful, but I merely endured yet another hour-long drift dive along a gorgeous precipice. They searched for the missed site while we ate lunch, took us there, and by sundown had a permanent mooring in place. Impressive, indeed.

Sometimes it was a bit of a trick climbing into and out of the dive tenders when they were brought alongside, but tanks remained in the tenders and were filled by passing a hose over

Unlike Truk, which has crime, filth, and poor hotels, Palau has excellent shore-based accommodations for land lovers. They run from your budget, basic-but-clean DW Motel to the luxurious Palau Pacific. Dive operations are abundant. Right now I would recommend Sam's for experienced divers wanting diving freedom and Splash for those seeking diving comfort.



Peter's new 400-hp, 35-knot-plus, unsinkable, jet-drive, \$150,000 launch is supposed to be on display at DEMA in San Francisco during January, then put into operation in Palau.

the side. Water entries from the tenders were backward rolls, and exits were via ladders.

Because of the currents, Palauan diving must be somewhat structured. The *Dancer* moved only during daylight, usually only a couple of hours at a time, allowing us always to get in our four wall dives a day. Compressors were located below, so noise was not an issue.

Praise the Boat and Pass the Tanks

These few nits aside, the diving operation was smoothly run and we were treated like intelligent divers. One or two of the *Dancer's* crew were in the water on all dives. They never engaged in any follow-the-leader nonsense, nor did they ever

tell us when to come up. Scuba sausages and Dive Alert horns were provided free to all divers. I dived the limit of my computer, with most dives lasting an hour. I received no rebuke when, on a rare occasion, I violated the stated depth limit of 130 feet. The crew were friendly and helpful, and I always felt safe diving with them. They had the rare ability to inspire confidence without being overprotective.

The *Dancer* often anchored in a calm lagoon, ferrying us by tender to the seaward walls, where the best sites were. We had only eight divers to divide between two tenders; had there been a full load of eight divers plus two crew per

boat, the trips would have been crowded. (I was told that a 16-passenger-plus crew replacement craft is on its way; I hope they won't always drop everyone on the same site.) Diving from tenders gave us four wall dives a day; when the sea was too rough, dives were made inside the lagoon. Although I returned to the *Dancer* between dives, one could be left on one of the islands to explore.

The meals were generally good, though a paucity of fish dinners resulted from our poor fishing luck. But we were well fed on vegetable lasagna, Mexican night, and lots of Italian by a chef from Belize. Breakfasts would also have benefited from more fruits and bread. With all beverages (including beer, wine, liquor, soft drinks, iced tea, and lemonade) included in the package, about all you spend extra on is tips, T-shirts, and the last day's meals at the elegant Palau Pacific Resort.

Ditty Bag

We had very fine weather the entire week, though I'd been told October is "not the best month" to go. No one seems yet to have developed an understanding of weather patterns, and the tide charts bore only a tenuous resemblance to reality. But this is the great Pacific Ocean, not an amusement park. . . . No checkout dive was required. Air fills were always 3,000+ psi. . . . Excellent setup for developing and viewing slides and editing video. . . . Remember, it's an all-inclusive package, the bar too. . . . Peter Hughes Diving, 800-932-6237 or 305-669-9391, fax 305-669-9475. . . . This year's prices for 7-night cruises run from \$1,995 to \$2,095, depending on the cabins. Ten-nighters are \$2,895 to \$2,995; add \$50 for port tax. Lowest published airfare from Los Angeles is \$1,486. We booked this trip through Tropical Adventures, 800-247-3483. Special discounted rates of \$400 less are available mid-July to mid-October, when the weather is a little shaky. . . . Indispensable for fish ID: *Micronesian Reef Fishes*, by Robert F. Myers, published Coral Graphics, P.O. Box 21153, Guam Main Facility, Barrigada, Territory of Guam 96921. For guidebooks, take a look at *Micronesian Handbook*, by David Stanley (Moon Publications, 800-345-5473) and *Micronesia* by Glenda Bendure & Ned Friary (Lonely Planet)

On a 7-nighter you get 5.5 days of diving, and on a 10-nighter it's 8.5 diving days. That's 55% more diving for only 45% more money.

Is This the Best Boat?

Captain Stewart is a placid, independent chap. He's young, like most of the crew, and loves to talk about the workings of the boat, engines, plumbing, compressor, you name it. Bring a cold beer and a chair if you plan on engaging him on any of these subjects. The obvious hard work, diligence, and research that have gone into his excursions are paying off in a big way. A good crew is trying hard to eliminate any obstacles to good diving

Between the Japanese wrecks, glorious walls, phenomenal reefs, and wild pelagic action, there's something here for everyone. The visibility was a clear 60 to 70 feet, the water a warm 81° to 84°F, the boat comfortable, and the islands idyllic. I'd head back to Palau anytime. The new *Palau Aggressor II* is going to have to shine to keep me off the *Sun Dancer*.

M. S.

With Continental losing money like a rube on a Las Vegas weekend, it may be a good time to cash in those frequent-flier miles, and Micronesia is an excellent place to use them.

Caribbean Coral Crunch

The Caribbean Explorer on the rocks in St. Kitts

The *Caribbean Explorer*, a 97-foot live-aboard operating out of St. Maarten, slipped off its mooring in the middle of the night on December 29 and ran aground in Frigate Bay, St. Kitts. Although it flooded below decks, no one was injured. Passengers were evacuated by inflatables. According to one of the divers aboard, it was definitely dark, wet, and a bit scary at times in the overloaded dinghy.

The *Explorer* sat on the rocks for 5 days until crews arrived from Tortola, BVI. She is now sitting in St. Croix. Owner Clay McCardell says he hopes to find a temporary replacement for the boat so that the cruise operation can be resumed, even though the *Caribbean Explorer* may be in drydock until early spring. [*Catch me if I'm wrong, but drydock work always seems*

to take at least twice as long as predicted.]

How the *Explorer* got loose is still a mystery. According to Clay, since the boat was moored over a wreck, depth alarms were not set

Are You Covered?

A live-aboard on the rocks brings up another issue we had to deal with when a boat went down in Fiji several years ago: insurance. If the boat goes down with all your dive gear, it could set you back several thousand dollars. It seems to be the rule of thumb that the boat's insurance doesn't or won't cover it. Check with your homeowner's policy to see if your coverage extends to dive equipment sinking in a foreign ocean, and if not, what you can do to get it covered.

because swinging back and forth over the wreck would have set off the alarm repeatedly. Nor was the GPS alarm on; its limited accuracy would not have been helpful due to the proximity to shore. A night watch was not posted because the weather was calm and the mooring had been checked.

The *Explorer's* owners can be commended for their straight-up business dealings with their customers. Several tour wholesalers have told *In Depth* that within a few days of the mishap they received full refunds for all deposits on future bookings. The divers aboard the vessel when it went aground missed 3 days of diving; their money was refunded in full within a week, according to the passenger we spoke with. ■