

KIRIBATI (CHRISTMAS ISLAND)

Christmas Island is situated about 1300 miles due south of Hawaii. That's only about a 3-hour flight, but Kiribati bends the dateline to keep all its islands on the same side, so you will arrive a full day later. One of the Line Islands, Christmas is the world's largest coral atoll, a full 45 miles long and between 7 and 25 miles wide, although lagoons make up nearly 2/3 of that area. The island was named after the day in 1777 when Captain James Cook first happened upon it, but it remained uninhabited until the 1950s, when the British chose it as the site for their nuclear weapons development project and induced a small Micronesian work force from the Gilbert Islands to relocate there. Once they'd detonated their H-bomb nearby, however, the British pulled out, leaving behind a few Micronesians and a great deal of debris. Today the island's 4400 residents are citizens of the Republic of Kiribati (pronounced cure-a-BOS).

MICRONESIA

Chuuk

This is the world's most diverse wreck diving on hundreds of Japanese ships sunk during a battle in WWII, with lionfish on the bridge, giant clams on the deck, and bottles of ink and erasers for students of the vanished Japa-

nese Empire still visible in the hold. . . . Most wreck dives—other than on superstructure—are deeper, in the 80'+ range, but there's fine diving even without wreck penetration. . . . Expect calm water, occasional poor visibility, little or no current, and temperatures that can hit the high 80s. . . .

Blue Lagoon Dive Shop, November 1999, Mike Hayes, Baton Rouge, LA. Vis: 70 to 100 ft. Water: 76 to 78 degrees, calm and flat, no currents. Dive restrictions: none. Great service, dive guides were excellent. Wrecks were in superb condition. Guides were protective of sites but understanding of diver's need to explore. Our group was made up of experienced divers allowed to dive their own profiles. Our one inexperienced member was watched from a distance, but with effective control. (800-843-8956, 800-348-0842, 800-527-5228 (CA), 691-330-2796; Fax 691-330-4307)

Blue Lagoon Dive Shop, February 2000, Charles Menbeck (aqua405@aol.com), Chicago, IL. Vis: 65 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 83 Fahrenheit, calm no currents. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: Followed the Dive Guide. Sunny 88 degrees. No current. Seemed to shower late every afternoon (4-5 pm). Resort was renovated recently with lots of new equipment, and it showed! Best ocean view I've ever had in a room. Brand new digital AC units. Good sat tv. Provided bottled drinking water in the rooms. Staff attentive and helpful. This resort has

the island's only beaches. One is perpendicular to land (sand bar). Therefore waves come from both sides. Resort beautifully landscaped with lots of palm trees on green grassy areas. Best layout island view of a resort I've ever seen. Picturesque right out of a postcard. What people dream about. 2-3 lagoons also on site. Dave was our local dive guide, a real professional and laid back. Treated us as the experienced divers we were. Favorite wrecks were the Shinokoku Maru, Nippo Maru, and the Fujikawa. Though all wreck dives were great. Clearly worth the package add-on cost. Can see why ranked #1 wreck destination. Were always anchored directly above the wrecks and simply followed the line down. Lots of soft corals. Prolific growth on the wrecks. Lots of colors and tropical fish. Warm water and no currents. Did penetrations and saw artillery, tanks, planes, china, gas masks, bombs, books, clocks and other things. Typical profile is the mast at 40 feet with the deck at 80-90 feet. Nice to see dive boat drop a 15 ft. safety stop line, an extra tank regulator setup at 15 ft., and an extra tank regulator setup at 90 feet. Visibility varied between 50-90 feet. Ate box lunch (may or may not be included in dive package price so check) on a beach on another island between dives. No snacks on boat, no drinks, no water. Could not understand. Deep dives and need to stay well hydrated to avoid the bends. Most sites within 3-5 miles of the dive shop. Saw the live-aboard boats either at the dive sites or from our hotel room. UW Photography comments:

No rinse tank on dive boats. Decent facilities on shore.

Blue Lagoon Dive Shop, March 2000, Julie and Dan McFadyen, Falls Church, VA. Vis: 20-40 ft.

Water: 82-84 degrees. Blue Lagoon Resort by far the best place to stay in Chuuk. The setting is beautiful and it looks like every room has a great view. The food was good, but there weren't many fresh fruits or vegetables. Made four dives with the Blue Lagoon Resort Dive Shop. Because I was not on a package, it was hard to decide in advance how much the dives would cost—they were very casual about arrangements and did not check C-cards. Visibility was Reduced due to heavy rains the week before. The wrecks were very interesting and there are many artifacts, such as telephones, lanterns, china, bottles, and helmets. There were easy swim throughs — if you don't want to penetrate, tell the guide ahead of time, Otherwise, he's going in and you're following or going on without him. There wasn't too much growth on the wrecks, but what was there was very colorful. Some wrecks seem to have a kind of weedy vegetation, killing the corals. Not as many fish as I had hoped, though the puffers, clown fish, angels, etc. were pretty. The surface intervals at Etan Island were nice, with interesting snorkeling on a Zero fighter. Also saw cuttlefish, squid, and a big, blue sea star. You can hike to a semi-destroyed Japanese communication center from WWII on the island. If I were a serious wreck diver, or WWII history buff, I'd go to Chuuk again to

dive the lagoon wrecks, but elsewhere in Micronesia is better for coral and marine life.

Blue Lagoon Dive Shop/Blue Lagoon Resort, July 2000, Uwe Haensch (uh@totacc.com), Alamogordo, NM. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 82-85 F. 2 sunny days during one week, otherwise cloudy/rainy. The water was calm and flat most of the times, occasionally choppy on the windward side of the islands. I would recommend a skin or a 1/8inch wetsuit for protection during wreck penetrations. Blue Lagoon Resort was newly refurbished and now has very comfortable rooms with lagoon view, brand-new A/C and TV. The food was very good, box lunch had to be ordered the evening prior. It included only sodas so bring your own water. 0900AM departure from dock for a 10 to 25 minute boat ride to the first wreck, afterwards lunch on Eten Island during 2.5 to 3.0 hours surface interval. Then off to second wreck and back at the dock between 0215 and 0300PM. Additional PM or night dives were possible. I stayed with the same (very good) diveguide and on the same boat for the whole week, 4 to 7 divers on the boat. No C-card/experience check. Most dives deep, a few even included decompression, so some experience required. Typical wreck dive would last between 40 and 50 minutes (80 c. ft./2750-2950PSI) with a maximum depth of 85 to 140 feet. Shallowest parts of most wrecks are between 25 and 45 feet. Beautiful soft corals on some wrecks (Shinkoku Maru, Sankisan Maru, Fumitsuki),

sharks and lots of schooling fish on others (Nippo Maru, Gosei Maru). On some wrecks algae seemed to have destroyed the corals. Still a lot of "technical" stuff to see, airplanes and their engines (Fujikawa Maru), torpedoes (Heian Maru/Fumitsuki), 18-inch shells (Yamagiri Maru), trucks (Nippo Maru) and engine rooms/crew quarters (Fujikawa Maru/Kensho Maru/Kiyosumi Maru). A few nice airplane wrecks (G4M "Betty"/H8K "Emily") in shallower water (25-65 feet) and a submarine (I-169) in 120 feet of water are also excellent dive sites. There is some reef diving near the outside passes of the lagoon available but if you are not interested in wrecks and the history associated with them, you shouldn't come here. I didn't dive the very deep wrecks (San Francisco Maru/Fujisan Maru/Amagisan Maru). There are all between 130 and 240 feet and I don't know whether Blue Lagoon Dive Shop has the necessary equipment or is willing to do it. There is no Hyperbaric chamber on Chuuk. Overall Blue Lagoon is an excellent combination.

Kosrae

This small, unspoiled island didn't get jet service until 1987, and it still hasn't changed much. . . . Its high volcanic peaks are lush and green, and a close, fringing reef makes the diving easily accessible, but it's not high-voltage diving on a par with Palau.

Kosrae Nautilus Resort,
Edward Tichenor,
 (edwardj@rosevillemidwayford.com),
 N. Oaks, MN. Vis: 40-100 ft. Water:
 80-82 degrees. Geoff Raaschou is the
 builder and operator of this resort. He
 is very capable, was a great host and
 dive guide and runs a very good
 resort, the best on Kosrae. The food
 was delicious and less costly than Truk
 Lagoon Resort. The diving does not
 compare with Palau but almost nothing
 does. Pleased with the service and value.
 (691-370-3567; Fax 691-370-3568)

Marshall Islands

After years of radiation monitoring
 and long months of negotiation,
 the historic shipwrecks of Bikini
 Atoll were finally opened up to
 recreational divers. Monitoring
 was done—and is still being
 done—by the U.S. Department of
 Energy to ensure that radiation
 levels in the lagoon are low
 enough to permit safe diving. This
 is a wreck diver's paradise, but be
 prepared: most of them are deep.
 . . .

Bikini Atoll

Marshall Islands Dive Adventures,
August 2000, Janice Fromm, Las
Vegas, NV. I have been diving since
 1956 and have never seen a better-
 organized and safer dive operation.
 My hat's off to Fabio Amaral who is
 the General Manager and chief diver.
 You have the chance to dive the ships
 that were sunk during the Atomic
 blasts in 1946. Among the ships that

were sunk are the Saratoga (the largest
 aircraft carrier in the world during
 World War 2, and the largest divable
 wreck in the world) There are others;
 such as the Lamson, Arkansas, Nagato
 (Japanese Imperial Warship) etc., but
 by far the most memorable is the
 Saratoga. The waters and marine life
 are free of contamination. The soil and
 the vegetation pose no threat to
 humans but you cannot eat anything
 that grows on the island so everything
 consumable must be shipped in. You
 do not have to be superhuman to dive
 Bikini! You do have to be comfortable
 at depth and have a good knowledge
 of decompression since these are all
 deep decompression dives. Naturally
 good buoyancy and air consumption
 goes without saying. Fabio gives a
 wonderful dive briefing as to exactly
 where you are going and what you are
 going to see. After the dive is com-
 pleted, he has a decompression setup
 that is literally foolproof and very easy
 to manage. The water is 84 degrees F.
 so you are warm throughout the dive
 and mandatory decompression. I wore
 a 3 mil wetsuit, hood and gloves and
 was very comfortable. No discernible
 currents or surge. The ships have a
 good amount of whip coral on the
 outside, but hard coral formation is at
 minimum You can see the ships in
 entirety almost like the day they were
 sunk. Bikini is an emotional experi-
 ence. I am old enough to remember
 the Saratoga during the Second World
 War and vividly remember the atomic
 blasts at Bikini. When the Saratoga
 came into view during the dive, all the
 history of that ship almost overwhelmed
 me. <http://www.bikiniatoll.com>. or

email bikini@ntamarxom. (+692 625-3250, Ext. 215, +692 29-3250; Fax +692 625-3505)

Midway Atoll

Midway Diving, September 1999, Bob Owens, Kailua-Kona, HI. Vis: 75 to 100 ft. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130' buddy, normal rules, system. Keoki Stender runs an outstanding dive operation. Keoki knows his marine life far better than most dive operators. We saw Galapagos sharks, eagle rays, huge jacks, etc. There are also rare fish such as the masked angel, boar fish, morwongs, knifejaws. A week at Midway will leave you a happy diver. Aloha Airlines flies twice weekly from Honolulu. (888-BIG-ULUA or 770-254-8326; fax 770-254-8329; e-mail edavie@midwayphoenix.com; website www.midwayisland.com)

Midway Diving, August 2000, Dave Marchese, Hummelstown, PA. During breakfast at the Clipper House on our first morning we watched a tiger shark make his own breakfast of a young gooney 100 yards out. I guess those warnings about not swimming alone or within an hour of sunrise or sunset were to be heeded. Later in the week, a fishing boat was trying to land a tuna when another tiger zoomed up and with one bite disconnected the fish's head. Unfortunately we didn't get to see one tiger under water. Similarly, "hauled up" monk seals were a common sight on the beaches and large dolphin pods were fre-

quently seen, but we weren't lucky enough to have any seal or dolphin encounters under water. Galapagos sharks (some up to 6') were common. They usually appeared alone or in pairs. During a wreck dive on the U.S.S. Macaw we had a school of about 20 come up close look. Tropical fish were in abundance and many are never or seldom seen elsewhere, but the schools of tropicals seemed the same on every dive and I found myself getting a little bored. There just was not enough big-animal action. When I arrived, I thought that only 15 dives would not be nearly enough, but by the end of the week, I thought that 15 was plenty. The topography was monotonous dead, brown coral. However, the north side is rife with caverns and swim throughs that I enjoy. The water was a lot colder than I planned on. Below 50' it was 73, way too cold for the 3mm full suit. Above the thermocline, it was 78. The dive masters Keoke and Dan were fantastic. However, they really need a more accommodating boat captain. Overall, I'd say Caicos and Little Cayman were a little better than Midway. Midway was better when the big stuff appeared, but worse when it didn't. Not bad, but I expected more than Caribbean level diving after flying 13 hours one way.

Midway Diving, September 2000, Ed Pasini, Henderson, NV. Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 77-81 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130' Max Depth. I made the trip with a group from Dive Makai in Kona. The accommodations were very good. I occupied a two room

suite in “Charlie Barracks” which included a sitting room, bedroom and private bath. The suite was air conditioned and included a small refrigerator and a TV with about 10 channels including CNN and ESPN. I was on the “Clipper” meal plan which included most meals at the “Clipper House” a French Restraint on the beach. The food and service were very good. NonClipper house meals were at the “Galley” a cafeteria style facility. Food was good and there was plenty of it. 15 dive day boat package, including diving, accommodations, food and round trip airfare from Honolulu was \$3,390. Encounter with a curious monk seal on a muck dive under the cargo pier and numerous sighting of Galapagos Sharks, the largest 5'. Fish and critters that are rare in other parts of the Hawaiian Islands are fairly common at Midway. Marwongs, Masked Angels, Whiskered Boarfish and Dragon Eels were seen on many dives. Large schools of snapper, soldier fish and surgeon fish were common and the fish seemed to tolerate divers very well. We also had several fleeting sightings of Giant Trevally Jack's. Frequent currents and difficult exits due to wind chop.

Midway Diving, September 2000, Richard Meyers, New York, NY.

Water: 80 degrees. Some surge, some current. 3mm wetsuit + Polartec vest. Restrictions: NDC, 3 min safety stop, surface with 500 lbs. Sharks 1-2 every dive, turtles 1-2 every dive, Mantas and eagle rays 1-2, dolphins about 100 spinners, monk seals 2. Good boats, most dive sites terrific 30-120 feet —

plane wreck, barge wreck, pier, and natural terrain knowledgeable and helpful crew, 100 visitors max at any one time, one flight a week access, isolation (privacy) can be wonderful not much else to do, especially for a nondiving companion. Most of the hype about rare fish and large specimens is true.

Midway Diving, September 2000, Ming Peng (peng@hsc.usc.edu), South Pasadena, CA. Vis: to Feet. Water: 64 to 78 Fahrenheit, calm choppy.

Midway Diving, Charlie Barracks, September 2000, Ed Pasini, Henderson, NV. Vis: 50-75 degrees. Water: 73-81 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130' max. depth. I made the trip with a group from Dive Makai in Kona. The accommodations were very good. I occupied a two-room suite in “Charlie Barracks” which included a sitting room, bedroom and private bath. The suite was air conditioned and included a small refrigerator and a TV with 10 channels including CNN and ESPN. I was on the “Clipper” meal plan that included most meals at the “Clipper House” a French Rest. on the beach. The food and service were very good. Non Clipper House meals were at the “Galley” a cafeteria style facility. Food was good and there was plenty of it. 15 dive day boat package including diving, accommodations, food and round trip airfare from Honolulu was \$3,390. Diving highlights included an encounter with a curious monk seal on a muck dive under the cargo pier and numerous Galapagos Sharks, the largest being

about 5'. Fish and critters that are rare in other parts of the Hawaiian islands are fairly common at Midway. Marwongs, Masked Angels, Whiskered Boarfish and Dragon Eels on many dives. Large schools of snapper, soldier fish and surgeon fish were common and the fish seemed to tolerate divers very well. Fleeting sightings of Giant Trevally Jack's. I would rate the trip a strong 2 for experienced divers and a 4 for inexperienced divers because of frequent currents and difficult exits due to wind chop.

Palau

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 of islands. . . . Serious divers who want more dives prefer live-aboards due to the length of the daily commute from Koror. . . . Marine biodiversity here is among the greatest in the world, but major coral bleaching and commercial fishing is taking its toll. . . . Visibility can exceed 200', while currents range from nil to dangerously strong, with four Japanese divers carried away in 1994. . . . Water temperatures are in the low- to mid-80s. . . . The capital city of Koror, well along the way to being Caymanized by massive tourism, has excellent ethnic restaurants. . . . Check out the DW Motel or Sunrise Villa

Hotel for low-priced lodging options. . . . The best handicrafts are prisoners' carved wooden story boards for sale at the jail in town; hand-pressed coconut oil from street vendors is a good gift for your personal massage practitioner. . . . The College of Micronesia's bookstore offers printed signs that are useful back home ("No Chewing Betelnut" and "No Smoking Drinks"). . . . See Gen. Douglas MacArthur's old yacht, which is gradually sinking into the water at the dock in Peleliu. . . .

Anguar, June 2000, Ted Sledzinski (sledzin@spawar.navy.mil) San Diego, CA. Vis: 30 to 1500 Feet. Water: 84-87F. Anguar is an island separated by five miles from the main Palauan archipelago. Has a wall near the harbor area about 100 feet offshore. No dive shop, but arrangements can be made to bring in scuba tanks from Koror (via passenger ferry or via Belau Air ... you can fly in with full scuba tanks. Travel from Koror is \$40 each way by air, much less by ferry. No hotel, but there is a house and some rooms for rent. Rates are low, and the lack of air conditioning can be a problem. Hot and humid during the day, cooling only enough at night for condensation to form everywhere (saturating the bedding). No dive boats, but you could arrange use of a local boat. No car rental, but again use can be arranged. The harbor side of the island is protected from currents, making for relatively safe diving from shore. Similar fish life, including

sharks, to that of the Blue Corner, but not as prolific. I did not bring scuba gear, so all my diving was breath-hold. The channel area (between Anguar and the main archipelago) can be dived from shore. It, too, has a wall very near-shore. It is exposed to prevailing wind and waves. I didn't make it into the water in this area, though conditions would not have precluded shore diving. My impression is that much of the year this area would be too rough for diving. A real downer was coming across the butchered carcasses of half a dozen turtles (just off the beach area inside the harbor, in a few feet of water, perhaps 200 feet from the building that houses the government office).

Fish'n Fins, Carolines, June 2000, Ted Sledzinski (sledzin@spawar.navy.mil)
San Diego, CA. Vis: 30 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 87 Fahrenheit, choppy currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: None. Did four days of diving with Fish'n Fins over a two-week period. Was able to set up destinations the day ahead, and always made it to them. Diving with Fish 'n Fins was excellent. Always dove with Nitrox, and did safety stops with a pony bottle (my own) with 75% oxygen. Quite a bit of bottom time, though I could have had more if I had brought my own (larger) tanks. Not for the novice. On one dive a photographer stayed near where we dropped down, and ended nearly out-of-sight from where most of the other divers had drifted. Took us a while to find him. Currents occasionally running up or down the walls. Disappointed in the

lack of large animals. Along the walls would generally see half a dozen or so Grey sharks, five or six feet long. In shallow waters would see a few small white-tip and black-tip reef sharks. Few turtles, and those that I saw were small. Locals still consider them food, and size/season limits are not enforced. Almost no sponges. High point is the Napoleon Wrasse that comes for petting on the shallow reef above Blue Corner. German Channel, the "famous" cleaning station for Manta Rays, was disappointing. No Mantas, not a lot of anything else. Fish life along the walls peaks with maximum incoming tidal flow, when the upwelling pulls up nutrients. Not nearly as much action during slack tide. (800-245-4129, +680 680-488-2637; Fax +680 671-649-4221)

Neco Marine, Palau Pacific Resort, July 2000, Jeffrey R. Johnson (jrj72113@aol.com), Maumelle, AR.
 Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 85 to 86 F, choppy currents. Palau Pacific Resort was great! Excellent accommodations, good food, outstanding service and friendly service people. Paluans are lovely, friendly people. We didn't use PPR's dive shop, Splash, because they primarily focused on the Japanese. We used Neco Marine and were happy with their performance except a couple of times they would arrive by boat at our resort with the wrong equipment or had forgotten something. Day usually started at 9am with a 30 to 45 minute boat ride to first dive, lunch was provided and usually enjoyed on a sliver of beach, another dive and then boat ride home, arriving

at 3: 30 to 4: 30pm. We were a little disappointed in only two tanks a day but I guess the length of the boat rides dictated such. Still, surface intervals were lengthy. Weather conditions weren't great. Saw more sharks — gray, white tip, and black tip reef — than I ever would have imagined. Blue Corner is a must dive but be sure that you have a reef hook so that you can hang in the current and watch the sharks check you out. Being our first trip to this part of the world, we enjoyed the different coloring and shapes of fish species, e.g. Napoleon Wrasse, Bumphead Parrotfish, Moorish Idols, etc., etc. Lots of beautiful anemone and anemone fish. Huge schools of fish, much bigger than in the Caribbean. The Divemaster pointed out an Ornate Eagle Ray. Snorkeled Jellyfish Lake but most of the Jellyfish had been killed by warm waters. Did a couple of WWII wreck dives, visibility not great because the wrecks are in the harbor but still very interesting. (+680 488-1755, +680 488-2009, +680 488-2880; Fax +680 488-3014)

Sam's Dive Tours, Palau Pacific, February 2000, Kurt G. Schwarz, Potomac, MI. Vis: 30 to 100 ft. Water: 83 degrees, calm and flat, strong currents, no currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Sometimes limited to 60 min. or staying with dive master. Palau Pacific Resort has the most beautiful grounds of any place I have stayed, with bountiful orchids. Meal plan that consisted of buffets for both breakfast and dinner. My wife, who is a vegetarian, had a hard time finding something to eat some nights since the resort caters to the Japanese palate.

They are true carnivores. Nice beach and snorkeling lagoon with lots of giant clams and small tropicals. Took a day trip w/Francis, the resort service-one rep, for \$250 that consisted of 1/2 day tour of island museums, shops (didn't take long) and center where they raise giant clams and 1/2 day trip boat trip to Rock Islands and snorkeling soft coral arch. Sam's Tours has small fast boats that take a max. of 8 divers, a plus since it takes 1 hr. to get to best dive sites. They have become a little too popular and are stretching themselves too thin to cover demand. They had to charter extra boats and several divemasters told me they hadn't had a day off in several weeks. The final 2 days I dived with Ethan who has a Masters in marine biology from the U of Guam; he gave me the best 2 days of diving. The rest of the week I was given a different divemaster every day. None seemed too interested in giving personalized service. The last 3 days I requested a site where I could photograph large lion fish. No one was able to produce. The last 2 days I wanted to dive Big Dropoff a second time. They were unable to provide this also. The last day Mathew was the divemaster. I mentioned to him at least 6 times I wanted to go to Big Drop Off. Another diver wanted to go to Blue Corner, which I had been to 3 times already. Since both sites are close to each other, there should be no problem in doing Big Drop Off as the 2nd dive. Wrong. After telling Mathew again I wanted to do Big Dropoff, he said let's do Ira Mara, which I had already dived. It could be great site except the

visibility is about 30 ft. Matthew was more concerned about getting back to shore quickly than satisfying a customer. No tip for Matthew. El Niño has badly affected some sites. I'm sure that German Channel, used to be a great dive but now 80 to 90% of the hard coral is dead. We went there twice, on the third time I said no and we did go elsewhere. One afternoon the only 3rd dive they would supply was chandelier cave, which I wasn't interested in. They reimbursed me for the dive. Jelly Fish Lake was closed due to die off of jelly fish. Continental Airlines return flight leaving at 2: 30 is inhumane. Overall it was a good trip but could have been better. The animal life here is very much the same as Fiji, but Fiji's reefs are much more colorful and the dive sites are not crowded. (+680 488-1062, +680 188-1720; Fax +680 488-5003)

Sam's Dive Tours/Desekel Hotel, February 2000, Charles Menbeck(aqua405@aol.com), Chicago, IL. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 83 Fahrenheit, surge. Dive restrictions: Followed our divemaster. Hotel above grocery store in central downtown. A definite plus for getting food. Hotel built recently so rooms new, comfortable, quiet, satellite TV, great AC, close to other restaurants. Staff polite and friendly. Room view was that of a tropical auto junkyard. Winchell's Donuts across street. Close (2 -1/2 blocks) to Rock Island Cafe (American-Spanish-Italian-Oriental Food) which is a Sports Bar/Restaurant. Fish sandwiches and pizza. American style

atmosphere. Sam's Tours was everything as advertised and more. Never encountered a more well-run operation. Lunch choices always packed on boat every day. Nice dive shop/Bar. Good place to hang out after diving. They offer sandwich/oriental food choices. Had a gear storage shed to avoid hauling equipment around. Scott and Matt were our dive guides. Both were top notch. Never had better detailed dive orientations to the sites. Drew diagrams and discussed biology of the dive site. Photo/Video shop also on site. Kevin did a great video of us (\$60). Picked us up at 8:30 am and sometimes earlier depending on optimal tide conditions. Not the best dive boats around. Not much room but we had a small group and the boats were quite fast for 50 minute rides to the sites. Ate lunch on the world's most beautiful picturesque beaches in these Rock Islands. U-Long Beach simply magnificent! Photographers must bring Polarizer filter to capture all the water shades of blue/green. Tell boat driver to take you to "The Arch" for photos. Favorite site was Blue Corner. As great as advertised though currents were not as bad as originally feared. Schools of just about everything there (Reef Sharks, Gray Sharks, Mackerel, Barracuda, Snappers, Moorish Idols, Napoleon Wrasses, and colorful Tropicals) on all 4 dives there. Once hooked on the reef, schools come even closer and surround. Yes sometimes lots of dive boats there but room for everyone. Never disappointed. Dove 150 dives to date, #1 dive in my book. Good to have a Safety Sausage since dive boats

can be far away when surfacing. U-Long Channel was second favorite dive. Action like Blue Corner. In the channel at end of the dive, current very swift but no problem. Spotted 2 Manta Rays on the "cleaning station" at the less dived but beautiful DevilRay City site. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have booked Yap! This site, when Mantas present, is better than Miil Channel, Yap. Better visibility. Must do the Ngmartu Hike/Waterfalls day excursion if the adventurous type. Great waterfall for romantic couples too. Sun is hot and will burn a light complexioned person to a crisp so bring sun screen/sunblock! Sunny and 88 degrees. Water temp was 83 degrees. UW Photography comments: No rinse bucket on boats. Very little protected room on boats. Freshwater available on shore and tables available as well as film/repairs at their photo shop. Their Photo Pro was quite knowledgeable concerning Sea and Sea and Nikonos. Rental gear available for both those brands too.

Sam's Dive Tours, West Plaza Coral Reef Hotel, February 2000. Jane and Bob Goble, Lexington, SC. Vis: 40 to 80+ft. Water: 79 to 81 degrees, varied over 10 days. Dive your own profile: yes. Second trip in 2 years to Palau and it was as great as our first thanks to the friendly, helpful folks at Sam's who arranged everything. The coral is better than last year (when there was bleaching). The critters were in full force. Schools of barracuda, trevally and many more and large numbers of varieties of sharks and rays. Manta rays danced and glided

over us and around us off Babeldaob Island. Divemaster Jonas always found the good stuff. We did witness an example of rude diver behavior at Ulong Channel as our group began to drop into the water, Peter Hughes' live aboard boat pulled up close and after our group hooked onto the coral ledge to watch the shark show, Hughes' group, including Hughes himself, dropped right on top and in front of us. Instead of approaching the site from behind us or from the sides so as not to disturb the fish, they descended from all fronts and mingled with our small group creating chaos. Hughes must have been confused in the mayhem that resulted because when our group decided to leave and find a quiet place with critters, he joined our group and stayed with us for quite a while. A little courtesy and we all could have enjoyed one of nature's best shows.

Sam's Dive Tours, Carolines Hotel, April 2000, Mark Osin, (osin@methow.com), Winthrop, WA. Vis: 150 ft. Water: 84 degrees. Dive with buddy at your ability. Carolines Hotel was wonderful. Zenie and her staff were great. Sam's was first class. Dive guides were excellent and helpful (Fernando, Colleen, Jerry, Mathew, Laura. John (out of Sam's Dive shop) ran a fine sailboat charter. Good for family with some that dive and some that don't. Caught fish often and we had great sashimi. Very helpful (thanks for finding my glasses in 30 ft. of water). Nice boat. Jerry saved my dive experience by lending me a different smaller bladder for my diversity BC. The one I brought down

didn't get air out well and was too large. Don't recommend Padi Dive Travel.

**Sam's Dive Tours, Carolines,
June 2000, Ted Sledzinski
(sledzin@spawar.navy.mil) San
Diego, CA.** Vis: 30 to 150 Feet.

Water: 79 to 87 F. Decided try Sam's based on previous reader reports. Arranged trip the day before to Blue Corner. Day of trip was on panga — like open boat with one couple. Ride unpleasant due to heavy rain and lack of a windshield. The couple couldn't take being pelted, asked for a close-in dive. I protested, but was outvoted. During lunchtime we stopped at one of the rock islands, where the local guide spent an hour hunting turtle eggs. Later, he spent time getting the motors going. Sam's has invested in new, sophisticated outboard motors that, according to other operators, are not compatible with the humid climate. Wish they had invested in purchasing windshields for their boats. I complained about the change of dive site and requested but was not given any compensation. I did not dive with them again. Subsequent diving was with Fish'n Fins, which was excellent. Always dove with Nitrox, and did deco stops with a pony with 75% oxygen. Plenty of bottom time!

**Sam's Dive Tours, Carolines,
June 2000, J. and G. Carew,
Charleston, SC.** Facilities were modern and spacious with a/c and large baths. Breakfast is included in their weekly package. Each of the 7 cottages has a deck to view the gorgeous sunsets and the best 360

view on island. Cottages are among lush vegetation providing privacy to each dwelling. The staff is professional and accommodating. The resort is a short distance outside town, and transportation was provided whenever desired. Sam's Dive Tours was a great experience. They are full service, professional organized, and flexible, always willing to dive requested sites. Boats are limited to 8 divers max. Couldn't help but notice the large number of divers from other dive resorts using Sam's. Boat rides are long, however, boats are fast and smooth and the rides among the Mushroom Isles were varied and never dull. We were not disappointed by using the *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook* to plan this trip. Thank You! **(Sam's Dive Tours: samstour@palaunet.com; Carolines: carolines@palaunet.com)**

Yap

Yap is a very traditional island group: bare-breasted women, men in loincloths (thu), and huge wheels of stone money quarried in Palau and hauled to Yap in open boats. The people are extraordinary sailors, having navigated the Pacific for thousands of years. . . . Reputedly the best betel nut in the South Pacific, useful for trading or gifts for locals on other islands. . . . Inexpensive restaurants and hotels. . . . Guaranteed mantas with Yap Divers. . . . There are steep coral-covered walls and dropoffs and plenty of fish. . . . Expect clear water

except in the entrance of the lagoon where mantas pass. . . . Water temperatures are in the low- to mid-80s. . . . Yap is a good two- to three-day add-on to a Palau trip.

Beyond the Reef, Pathways, March 2000, Julie and Dan McFadyen, Falls Church, VA. Vis: 25-100 ft.

Water: 82-84 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: Do not touch mantas! Yap was fantastic. Pathways a little hotel (8 cottages) where everything is built on a hill and surrounded by vegetation. You can hardly see the place from the road because the paths and cottages are all made of natural materials and they blend in. The staff (especially John) is fantastic. We had a nice view from our cottage and we loved the homemade lemonade at the restaurant. Everyone was very helpful and accommodating. 14 dives were incredible. Lots of fish, beautiful hard and soft coral, and mantas! Saw our first one two minutes into the first dive. They ranged in size from around 7-13 feet and came close enough to touch. On one dive, we saw five mantas at once. Some stayed for 10-15 minutes. Sharks (white tip, black tip, grey reef), turtles, eagle rays and sting rays, lots of colorful reef fish (Moorish idols, butterfly fish, angel fish, parrot fish, etc.), clown fish (one of my favorites), puffer fish, lion and turkey fish, crocodile fish, a school (30-40 fish) of barracuda, moray and garden eels. Coral was in great shape. Lots of variety and colors. Current varied, but was never too strong. Some dives were drift dives, but

always low enough to see things. We went with Beyond the Reef. Great staff (Donna, Gordon, Joe, and Mario), reasonable boats, and never more than four divers (plus guide) per boat. Personalized, plus they served hot chocolate after every dive. Didn't use anchors and they didn't allow touching the mantas. We could either walk to and from the hotel, or they'd give us a ride. The included lunch (on dive days) is served at a variety of restaurants. We also visited a village to learn about Yapese traditions (and see the stone money) and went kayaking in the mangroves. Everything was much cleaner than Chuuk and the roads and food were better. (691-350-3483; Tel/ Fax 691-350-3733)

Beyond The Reef, Pathways, July 2000, J. and G. Carew, Charleston, SC. Pathways has 8 rustic Yap

cottages with thatched roofs. All units have decks overlooking a saltwater lagoon, a/c and full modern baths. Cottages are on a hillside, in dense vegetation, with connecting boardwalks. Location is quiet and private. There are a bar and restaurant on site with a varied menu. The facility is owned and run by a Yap family and has been successfully designed for their guests to experience the local culture. The staff was very friendly, warm and helpful. Diving with Beyond the Reef was professional and flexible. They were accommodating and dive sites were chosen by the divers. Boats are small and limited to 8 divers max. We were picked up and returned by boat on all dive days. The dive guides were

helpful and informative except for Donna. She didn't seem very informative or to care about her divers. With this exception, our week with Beyond The Reef was pleasant. Manta Dives were truly exciting and mantas were not hard to find. Corals at the barge and Sunset Reef were some of the best I've seen in over 20 yrs. Of diving. Fish were abundant. Vis. could have been better, but with 2 typhoons of the Philippines we still had 40-80 FT. Our entire trip to Micronesia was planned with the use of the *Travelin' Divers Chapbook* and we were not disappointed.

Yap Divers/Manta Ray Bay Hotel, February 2000, Charles Menbeck (aqua405@aol.com) Chicago, IL.

Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F. Dive restrictions: Followed Dive Guide. Lei welcome by Yap women (bare breasted) was exotic and nice. Hotel/dive operation welcome at the airport was quite good also. Representative checked our name, gave us our room # and told us to go directly to the van and then to our room with baggage delivered by staff. Went through Hotel Lobby and got a negative vibe when I saw all of the videotape rentals. Feared for the Satellite Channels. Sure enough, began to realize the "razor sharp marketing operation." Must have employed consultants. No tv channels available, just a VCR to play their tape rentals. Asked Owner/Manager Bill Ackerman about it and he said the system "was down" temporarily and that they would rectify it by morning. They never did nor did they intend to.

That might draw customers away from the later dives or the bar or the restaurant and that's lost revenue. Then he sarcastically stated that we came to dive, not to watch tv. Well, when I'm paying \$150/night for an American style room with amenities, I'll be the judge of that. Dive shop got us to get up for a 7 am departure for the dives to Miil Channel (Main Manta spot this time of year). Never did such early dives before. We were at the dive shop as the sun was coming up! This early departure was well timed so they could get us back to eat lunch in their restaurant and to book the additional afternoon macro dive and night dive (more revenue possibilities). Dive junkies will like this place because one can do 4 dives/day. They claimed the early wake up was due to "the tide." They served a "heavy snack" on the boat if that's what you call a bag of corn chips, hot unsweetened tea, and a piece of coffee cake. No soft drinks. It was apparent how they were nickel and diming us here too. Like I didn't pay enough for the dives. 55 cent sodas just down the street so they were available on the island. Tea is cheap. 1st floor ocean view room was great. Newest latest dependable AC units and ceiling fans. Needed AC here! Ate at the Pacific Marina Restaurant (2 blocks away) mainly for lunch. Less costly than the hotel's restaurant. Great view and very relaxed. Chicken Stir Fry terrific. Hotel's food also very good but could be pricey. Orientation Cocktail Party pushed their land-based excursions. Didn't need their \$50 pp 2+ hour tour into a village. Did our own for free. Terrific rock trail exists just 20 feet

south of the Ocean View Hotel (1/2 block up the road). Takes you through the jungle and villages. When rock trail splits, take left fork. Will come out to a road at the near the hill top. Go up it to the main road, look right 20-30 feet and there is a tall rusted out metal boxlike pigpen across the street, narrower trail then resumes at that point through tropical forest and ends at the cultural center. It's an easy 20 minute walk/hike. Hotel cocktail party briefing did not mention this,!! I wonder why? The trail practically hits you in the face just outside the hotel up the road! Saw Mantas 3 of 4 dives at Mail Channel. Great site but limited visibility. Hard to take clear photo shots especially with a strobe on. May want to take Manta silhouette pictures here. Macro dive appropriately named (1: 2) was great and found lots of colorful nudibranchs and lionfish sleeping under the coral ledges. Great dive for a rough weather day as site is in protected shipping channel. Dove Gilman's Wall (outer reef). Lots of swimthroughs but surges can test the ability to get through them. Lots of clownfish in the anemones and sleeping Lionfish in the crevices. We took a pounding with the boat ride back as there were 6-8 foot waves from a rainstorm. Alex (local) was an exceptional dive guide as was his assistant Henry. Both top notch and helpful. Temp was 86 degrees and water temp was 79 degrees. Periods of sunshine and clouds. UW Photography comments: No place to put UW photo equip on boat. Great facilities though at dive shop. Separate rinse tank and tables. Have photo/video pro on site too. (691-350-2300; Fax 691-350-4567)

Yap Divers, Manta Ray Bay Resort, January 2000, Walt Brenner, Wayne, PA. Vis: 15-20 ft. Water: 85-86 degrees. Stay in assigned locations so mantas are not disturbed. Yap is a tiny island between Palau and Guam where the round stone money is. (Round, American coins work pretty well, too). But it is also where the mantas are! On two successive mornings, both two tank dives, there were tons of them at their favorite cleaning and feeding stations. At least 6 visible at anyone time. Most were between 14 and 12 feet across. They swam so close to the immobile divers we could touch them as they slowly glided overhead. Their movements are in slow motion so it is easy to observe their activity. Other dives on Yap were quite good, also, especially at night, but the highlight is the mantas. This was an unforgettable experience that can be said about the entire trip. Micronesia certainty ranks high among those other wonder spots of the diving world — the Red Sea, PNG, the Great Barrier Reef.

Yap Divers, Manta Ray Bay Hotel, April 2000, Walt and Angie Redmond, Austin, TX. Vis: 60-100 Feet. Water: 83-85 F, calm. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: Depth limits. Great resort and dive operation. Bill Acker runs a 1st class operation. Food fantastic — kudos to gourmet chef Bill. Jeff, head of dive operations, made sure everything ran smoothly. Dove Miil Channel 4 times before we saw our first manta ray, then saw 4 more at cleaning station. Also dove Yap Caverns, Lionfish Wall

and counted 14 white tip sharks at a cleaning station. John, skiff drive, and Chomed, divemaster, always had warm towels, hot tea and homemade breads for us at surface intervals. Land tour took us all over Yap. We stopped to learn about the stone money, men's houses and to shop at the local art gallery/gift shop. The cultural tour was led by a Yap native. While telling us Yap's history, he led us down a 700-year old stone path to a village where we were treated to native foods, a demonstration of bamboo stick dancing, native crafts (lei making, basket weaving) and a chance to try beetlenut. Great addition to a trip to Palau.

Manta Ray Bay, March 2000, W. Alan Richardson (alanjane@cwo.com), Byron, CA. Vis: 10 to 100 ft. Water: 80 to 84 degrees. Dive your own profile: yes Dive restrictions: 130 ft. 1 hour. New dive shop manager very attentive and accommodating; only limited manta sightings, visibility in channels limited to 10-20 ft. 122 reef was an excellent macro sight, strong winds, choppy seas and ran every day (unusual). Excellent meals and overall attentive service at hotel. Cultural and kayak tours well worth doing. Shark feed dive needs work, sharks would not take bait.

NIUE

Niue Dive, Matavi, June 2000, Julie Spellman, Elk Grove, IL. Vis: 100+ ft. Water: 80-82 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130 ft — back to safety stop 500 psi. Small island with one flight weekly on Royal Tongan Airlines out of Auckland. "The Matavi"

is the largest (24 rooms) on the island, on a cliff overlooking the ocean where dolphins are plentiful and whale sightings are common June-Sept. Pool, restaurant and bar, laundry room, free bikes, and the staff was very helpful in setting up island tours or anything else. With a population of only 1,750 there is no crime and by the end of our week's stay we had waved to almost everyone and met a lot of great locals. Island juts up from the ocean, but who needs shore diving when Ian and Annie run a top notch dive operation. "Niue Dive" is the only dive operator. Pristine sites. They have wash and storage facilities and take care of your equipment. They are dedicated to making sure every dive is a spectacular adventure. A tractor pulls their Zodiac, with divers in it, through town to the main pier where it is winched into the water and away you go. All dive sites are easily accessible and with only 6 divers max. quick in and out. You get thorough briefings and the boat is fully equipped w/first aid and oxygen. Just an easy back-roll in and you land in some of the most consistently clear water I've ever experienced. Sea snakes everywhere, especially at "Snake Gully." One friendly snake followed my husband on a whole dive (at least an hour) and we got great photos. Another was awfully fond of my fins. We saw the usual tropicals, large schools of barracuda, reef sharks, 1 turtle, nudibranchs, at least 4 types of eel including a man-eating size Moray, lobster, sweepers, lion fish, anemone fish, rays, etc... Surface intervals were spent comfortably on board with