

Kayakers in Pinchers Lagoon

# MICRONESIA

The region known as Micronesia, meaning tiny islands, is in fact a vast area that includes over eight nation-states and thousands of islands ranging from uninhabited atolls to overcrowded coral outcrops. Stretching from the Marshall Islands just west of Hawaii to the Caroline Islands east of the Philippines, and from the Marianas Islands to the north and Gilbert Islands to the south, Micronesia has less combined land area than the smallest state in the United States, yet more ocean area than the entire mainland USA.

Located north of the equator, Micronesia sits on the fringes of the epicentre of marine biodiversity, making it a tropical diving paradise second to none. For scuba divers, the islands of Palau (or Belau), an independent republic since 1994, and the island states of Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae, which make up the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) are of the greatest interest. From the magnificent mantas of Yap, to the fascinating WWII wrecks of Truk Lagoon (Chuuk) to the schooling sharks of Palau's renowned Blue Corner, Micronesia ranks among the world's top high-voltage dive destinations.



Aerial view of Pinchers Lagoon, a favorite spot for dive training due to its shallow waters

## FSM Fact & Figures

The Federated States of Micronesia comprises 607 islands extending across 2,900 kilometres. The four constituent island groups are Yap, Chuuk (called Truk until January 1990), Pohnpei (known as Ponape until November 1984) and Kosrae. These four states are each represented by a white star on the national flag. The capital of the FSM is Palikir on Pohnpei.

The country has seven official languages: English, Ulithian, Woleaian, Yapese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean and Chuukese.

Micronesia was under European domination as far back as the 17th century when Guam, the Northern Marianas and the Caroline Islands were governed from the Philippines as part of the Spanish East Indies. Following the Spanish-American War, the United States took control of Guam in 1898. Germany governed Nauru, the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Marianas, while the British ruled over the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati).

After World War I, much of Micronesia fell under Japanese rule and remained so until the end of World War II, when the region became a United Nations Trusteeship, governed by the United States. Today, most territories in Micronesia are independent states, with the exceptions of Guam and Wake Island (both US territories) and the Northern Mariana Islands (a US Commonwealth).

### :: KOSRAE ::

Kosrae is the most eastern of the Caroline Islands, located north of the equator between Guam and Hawaii. The remoteness of the island has kept tourism to a minimum, but it's slowly gaining interest from adventurous scuba divers looking for pristine conditions and unexplored reefs.

The island is densely vegetated and largely undeveloped. Kosrae is where the notorious pirate Bully Hayes was shipwrecked in 1874, and rumours still abound of his buried treasure, although nothing has ever been recovered.

Kosrae's waters are clear and clean with extraordinary hard and soft coral attracting an abundance of marine life. Large numbers of turtles and rays are found here.

### :: POHNPEI ::

Pohnpei, the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is the largest, tallest, most populated and most developed island in the FSM, and one of the wettest places on earth, with annual recorded rainfall exceeding 7,600mm, which flows into more than 40 rivers that feed the lush upper rainforest.

Pohnpei's waterfalls range from pleasant to spectacular, creating a refreshing and breathtaking experience for those venturing to the base of the falls. The streams are great for cooling off after a hike in the hills.

Pohnpei is perhaps best known as the site of the ancient ruins of Nan Madol, though in recent years it has also begun to develop a reputation as a great surf spot. Much is still to be learned about the mysterious Nan Madol ruins. Called the Venice of the Pacific, this man-made city with ocean-filled channels once housed a thriving, royal civilisation. Huge basalt pillars form the residences of kings and sorcerers. These remnants of an ancient Pohnpeian civilisation are still being studied and explored. They can be visited as part of an overall nature tour or studied in-depth with the help of one of Pohnpei's knowledgeable history guides.

As is the case throughout the rest of Micronesia, the waters of Pohnpei are pristine and clear, and home to vibrant corals and healthy reefs, which makes the area an excellent dive destination. Limited airline service and lack of media exposure keeps Pohnpei off the beaten track for most divers.

Like that of its neighbours, Pohnpei's history includes periods of Spanish, German and Japanese rule before becoming a UN Trust Territory. For travellers with time on their hands, Pohnpei is a definitely a destination worthy of exploration.



a.



b.

- a. There are many waterfalls on Pohnpei due to heavy rainfall throughout the entire year.
- b. An adorable little girl from Pohnpei with a priceless smile
- c. Nan Madol is the mysterious set of ruins from an ancient culture in Pohnpei. The ruins can only be reached at certain times of day when the tide is correct, and the help of a local guide is required.

c.





a. b.



c.

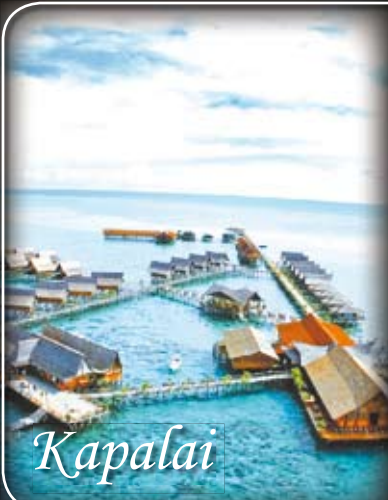
- a. Seabirds nesting on small atolls way out in the ocean between Chuuk and Pohnpei
- b. Some of Chuuk's wrecks lie in deep waters, and diving them requires proper training, experience and a knowledgeable local guide.
- c. Artefacts can still be found on many wrecks in Chuuk, also known as Truk Lagoon.

**:: CHUUK ::**

Although the island has now reverted to using its more traditional name of Chuuk, it's known to many scuba divers as Truk, a destination world-renowned for its a vast collection of intact WWII Japanese shipwrecks, sunk during Operation Hailstone by aerial attacks launched from US Fast Carrier Attack Groups in 1944.

Catching much of the Japanese fleet by surprise here, the US Navy dealt a heavy blow to the Japanese Imperial Navy, a battle which hastened the end of the Pacific War. Today, the amazing shipwrecks of Chuuk Lagoon attract divers from all around the world, as it's one of the world's most spectacular collections of WWII shipwrecks.

In Chuuk, the pace of life slows and tropical nature can be easily observed and appreciated. Many of the islands offer lush vegetation that harbours rare and migratory bird life. Wild orchids and other flora are found in the scenic and sometimes rugged terrain of the islands. Travelling by ocean kayak from island-to-island is one way to enjoy Chuuk. Often overlooked are the outer reefs where a large variety of fish, both pelagic and reef dwelling, venture near cascading coral walls that stretch into the blue abyss of the Pacific Ocean.




*Kapalai*

No matter where we build our world-class dive resorts, we always emphasise Mother Nature's needs, and that of our divers, first.

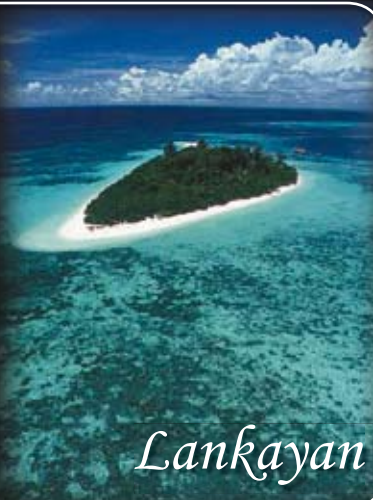
So, long before the decision was made to give Sipadan a breather by disallowing overnight visitors, we had already begun building other resorts where the interests of divers and conservation are unified.

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**:: YAP ::**

The sleepy islands of Yap (considered the most "traditional" of the territories in the FSM) have managed to let most of the modern world pass by, practicing Micronesia's most reserved and traditional lifestyle.

Many Yapese men still wear traditional bright loincloths and women grass skirts. The people of Yap marry according to custom and still practice traditional handicrafts.

Most intriguing to visitors is the famous stone money of Yap, massive wheels of solid stone quarried in the islands of Palau and then transported across the open ocean to Yap to be placed outside men's thatched houses and family huts to denote wealth and status.

In 1874, an Irishman named David O'Keefe began trading stone money with the Yapese for other commodities such as sea cucumbers and copra, and the remains of his home are still visible in Colonia Harbour. The book "His Majesty O'Keefe" chronicles the adventures of Captain O'Keefe, and is a great read for anyone headed for Yap.

Today the big draw in Yap is mantas, mantas and more mantas! In fact, Yap is often referred to as the "Kingdom of Mantas". One of the most popular manta dives sites, Mi'l Channel, offers a truly amazing experience, as giant but gentle manta rays glide ever so gracefully one after another just inches over your head. More recently, divers have also been discovering the fabulous critter dives and macro subjects at Yap's dive sites, making Yap a "must-dive" destination in Micronesia.

- a. **Two people having a chat at one of the government buildings in Yap.**
- b. **Yap is the most traditional and colourful island within Micronesia. Visit during Yap Day and you'll be amazed by the sights and culture.**
- c. **Yap is well known among divers for its resident manta population.**



a.



b.



c.

## Show Me the Money

The island of Yap is notable for its "stone money" (Rai stones), large disks usually of calcite, up to four metres in diameter, with a hole in the middle.

There are five major types: Mmbul, Gaw, Ray, Yar, and Reng, the last being only 0.3 metres in diameter. Their value is based on both size and history, many of them having been brought from

other islands, as far as New Guinea, but most coming in ancient times from Palau. The islanders don't necessarily move them when ownership changes. Approximately 6,500 of them are scattered around the island.

You can find a large example (approximately 2.4-metres high) of Yapese stone money in the village of Gachpar.



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a.

a. In some areas of Palau, you can see WWII wrecks in very shallow water.  
 b. Diver descending into the famous Blue Hole at the Blue Corner, a "must-do" dive in Palau  
 c. An encounter with a thorny ray



b.

c.

**:: PALAU ::**

Palau was first brought to world attention when Captain Henry Wilson of the English vessel "Antelope" was shipwrecked on Palau's barrier reef near the island of Ulong in 1783. With assistance from Koror's High Chief Ibedul, Captain Wilson and his crew used wreckage of the Antelope to build another vessel and sailed away three months later.

Joining them on their journey back to England was Lebuu, son of the high chief. Word of Captain Wilson's voyage spread, leading to further European contact, and in 1885, Spain was granted control of Palau by Pope Leo XIII. In 1899, Palau was sold by Spain to Germany, which quickly established mining and other operations to tap Palau's abundant natural resources.

Following Germany's defeat in World War I, Palau was granted to the Japanese under the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and by 1922, it had become the administrative headquarters for Japanese-controlled territories in Micronesia and the South Pacific. Japan closed off Palau (and other areas in Micronesia) from the rest of the world and began heavy fortification of the islands.

Palau endured heavy fighting during World War II, including massive aerial bombardments of Koror, particularly during the assault of Peleliu Island by US Marines that resulted in horrendous casualties on both sides. Remnants of WWII are still visible throughout Palau today, including many ship and plane wrecks resting at the bottom of Palau's inner lagoon.

On 1 October 1994, Palau became the last of the UN Trust Territory islands to gain independence, following the signing of a Compact of Free Association with the United States, and it became a member of the United Nations.

Palau is located at the crossroads of the Pacific Ocean and the Philippine Sea, which is one of the world's richest zones of tropical marine biodiversity. This makes Palau a world-class scuba diving destination that few places on the globe can rival. Palau's marine ecosystems include barrier reefs, fringing reefs, seagrass beds, marine lakes and mangrove forests.

Palau's marine biodiversity includes over 1,300 species of fish, an abundance of large pelagic animals and over 700 species of corals. Palau was chosen by the National Geographic Society as the first Underwater Wonder of the World and was featured on Discovery Channel's "Living Edens" series. It is home to one of the highest number of marine species in the world, and its marine habitats support an enormous density of coral, fish and other invertebrates. Seven of the nine species of giant *Tridacna* clams are found in Palau, along with the world's most remote population of dugongs.

Palau's signature dive is Blue Corner, a shallow reef-top promontory with vivid corals, huge schools of fish and ever-present schools of patrolling sharks. Without a doubt, Blue Corner consistently lives up to its reputation for "adrenaline diving" and is a dive that can be repeated time and again without fear of boredom! ☺



a.  
b.

a. Bird's-eye view of the famous Three Coconut Island, a popular kayaking stop in the rock islands of Palau  
b. Nudibranch in Palauan waters  
c. The ever-so-amazing Jellyfish Lake in Palau, where no scuba gear is allowed, just snorkeling with thousands of jellyfish

c.

**SPECIAL THANKS** to Dermot Keane and Sam Scott from Sam's Tours in Palau, Bill Stinnett from Truk Stop Hotel and Dive Center in Chuuk, the Australian Embassy in Pohnpei, Bill Acker from Yap and the staff and management from the Traders' Ridge Hotel in Yap.

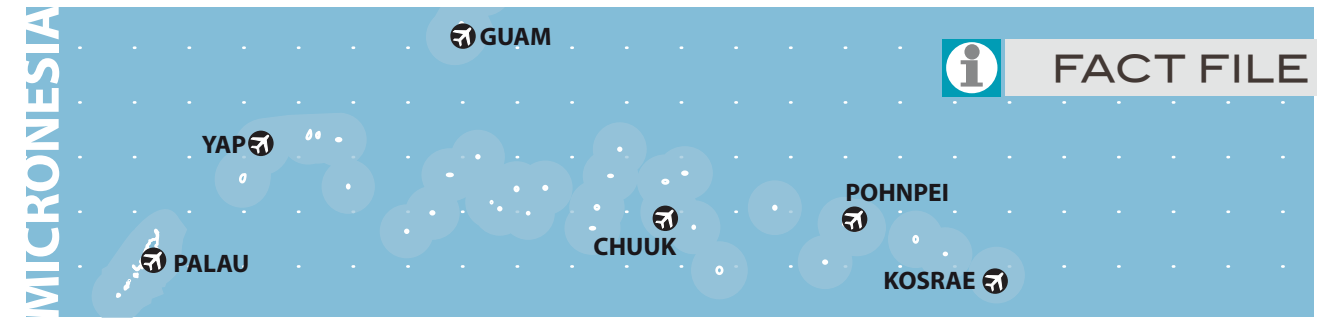


Gunther Deichmann

**FROM THE AUTHOR**

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"The whole of Micronesia is still relatively unexplored and a sheer paradise, with all its remote atolls and small islands covered with bird rookeries, and islands inhabited by only a dozen or so people."



**FACT FILE**



Guam is the travel hub for Micronesia. A newly expanded Won Pat International Airport serves eight air carriers and provides more than 100 flights per week from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Indonesia, East Asia, Hawaii and the United States. Asian Spirit flies direct to Palau from Manila (Please check with your travel agent prior to departure as this can change from time to time.) Continental Micronesia (a branch of Continental Airlines) covers all the destinations in Micronesia. Note that if you travel via Guam, you may need a transit visa, since it is a US territory.



The warm tropical waters of Micronesia make diving possible all year round. The average water temperature is 29° Celsius, so a 3mm suit or equivalent should be sufficient. The rain tends to fall more heavily between July and October but this isn't necessarily a hindrance. Typhoons are rare.



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