

Yap

with Charles Fenner

The first time I visited Yap was in 2001 a few months before 9/11. I enjoyed my week there and always intended to return but life kept getting in the way. Thankfully after retiring I was finally able to return for two weeks in January 2023. I was glad to see that while the islands have continued progressing along with the rest of the world (wifil!), it still had generally the same sleepy island.

Yap was basically closed off from the world for 2 1/2 years due to Covid travel restrictions before beginning to re-open in mid-late 2022. Given how long the island was closed due to Covid travel restrictions I was more than a little nervous about how things might have been maintained after such a long time with no tourists. I was actually thrilled with every aspect of my stay in Yap. I decided to write this article just as a way of reminding people that that this off the beaten track destination is still something to consider, especially if you will be in the Micronesia area.

Yap is a state in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Yap State actually includes several outer islands stretched out over hundreds of miles, but the core Yap Islands are about 500 miles SW from Guam (about 2/3rds of the way from Guam to Palau). Roughly 8,000 people live on the core Yap islands with another 3-4 thousand on the outer islands. The FSM used to be a US trust territory and still maintains strong US ties via a compact of free association. The currency is the US dollar, with two ATMs on the island (which were repaired while I was there after being down for years during Covid). Yap



Sony A1, with Nauticam Housing, Sony 16-35mm F2.8 GM, Nauticam 230mm Dome Port II and Retra Pro X Strobes. ISO 100, f/8, 1/200 sec

is generally viewed as having maintained more of its original culture than many other islands. It is also famous for stone money. They used to send canoes to Palau to quarry rock that wasn't found in Yap and then returned to Yap across hundreds of miles in the open ocean. The stone money is still there displayed in gardens that some people may call banks, but they don't seem to actively use the stone money as currency.

Yap has had a manta ray focus going back a

few decades now and those are still the primary attraction. Decades of diving has allowed dive masters to build up a lot of knowledge regarding manta behavior. This trip I primarily saw them at a cleaning station called Stammtisch in 15-20 feet of water at a site well inside from the main reef. Evidently the mantas moved to this shallower site several years back from deeper cleaning stations they were using when I was there in 2001. We saw Mantas probably about 70% of the time we went



Sony A1, with Nauticam Housing, Sony 16-35mm F2.8 GM, Nauticam 230mm Dome Port II and Retra Pro X Strokes. ISO 100, f/11, 1/160 sec

looking for them at the cleaning station. While the most individuals I saw was 4 on one dive, the individuals did tend to linger for a bit making multiple passes. I think I spent 15 or 20 minutes with one individual ray the first day (and saw 3 others that day). There had been a lot of rain so the visibility wasn't that great in the channel (25-40 feet in the channel probably). All of the channel diving is tide dependent. I believe the manta rays use the cleaning station on the northwest side of the island where we were during the winter, but use a cleaning station on the opposite side

during the summer.

We also dove many dives on the outside reefs that ring the islands looking for things other than mantas. Visibility was also slightly variable due to winter surge, some days it was probably only 60 feet but on the best day I think it was well past 100+ feet (clearer than my Cozumel home on a really good day). They have a site called Vertigo where they sometimes feed the sharks, we saw a decent mix of various reef sharks there. The highlight was probably the Magic Kingdom site near the southern tip of the island where a few times we



Sony A1, with Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm F2.8 Macro G lens and Retra Pro X strokes, ISO 100, f/22, 1/250 sec

saw a school of 12-14 baby eagle rays hanging out near what is evidently a cleaning station for them. We saw the eagle rays on 3 different days, but unfortunately I had a macro lens on the day they provided what would have been the best photo opportunity.

Like most places, Yap does have some macro opportunities. The macro sites tended not to be that diverse (we would see a multiple individuals of one nudibranch/slug species, but not multiple species). The best macro dive is the mandarin fish twilight dive 5 minutes by boat from the town. It is pretty easy to see mandarin fish there,

getting a good macro photo is a bit trickier since they tend to hang out at the base of a maze of coral and only climb out every so often. Evidently to get the true "money" mating shot you have to wait to the side and pray the pop up to the top of the coral to mate. Awesome shot if you can get it, but I had no luck on that one. You can shoot down on to some of the individuals as the climb the coral, but if you are hovering over them it reduces the chance of your getting a true "money shot" with a couple mating.

Aside from mandarin fish and



Sony A1, with Nauticam Housing, Sony 16-35mm F2.8 GM, Nauticam 230mm Dome Port II and Retra Pro X Strobos. ISO 100, f/8, 1/160 sec

night dives, most diving seems to be on 3 tank boat dives. There is a channel (“German Channel”) that cuts through the island that isn’t passable at low tide so that is part of the reason they tend to plan on 3 tanks since it isn’t always possible to get back to the resort at low tide.

I stayed at Manta Ray Bay Resort (MRBR) and dove with its Yap Divers affiliate. Manta Ray Bay Resort/Yap Divers is the most well-known operation in Yap and weathered the Covid shutdown storm surprisingly well. The hotel and dive operation were in great shape. I am not sure how, but they managed to maintain everything in good condition despite a long period without tourists. My room (think it was a deluxe waterfront category) was spacious, well furnished and very clean. All the dive boats were well designed and ran perfectly. The two divemasters I used (Nico and Ferr) were extremely experienced and helpful in achieving whatever my photographic goals were on each dive. Yap divers provided sandwiches on the boat for lunch. They



Sony A1, with Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm F2.8 Macro G lens and Retra Pro X strobos, ISO 100, f/18, 1/250 sec

also offer hot tea, water, and hot towels after every dive.

There are definitely other hotel options on Yap post covid for those seeking to stay elsewhere. There were one or two other diver operators pre-covid, but I am not certain the status of those.

The MRBR has a floating restaurant called ‘The Mnuw’. It is a 170 ft wooden schooner from Indonesia. Depending upon the number of guests they will evidently do a buffet in the restaurant or a just serve individual breakfasts in the lobby if only a few guests are in house. I am not a big breakfast person, so primarily just had fruit but they seemed willing to do all the normal breakfast things. Lunch was usually on the boat. We did 3 tank dives, so they had several hearty sandwiches they could make. They took your lunch order either the night before or at the start of breakfast. I had dinner at the top-deck bar of the Mnuw most nights. They had a few nightly specials, not a particularly wide range but it was fine. One thing is that they evidently can



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make pizza and sandwiches (including hamburgers) every day, but they don’t necessarily list them on the menu chalkboard. If you don’t see what you want on the chalkboard I would ask what else they have on offer.

I also ate at the Oceania Restaurant a 5 minute walk from the hotel a few times. The hotel/bar/restaurant is evidently owned by an expat (or expat couple). They had a pretty broad menu that was pretty good. I had the ribeye a couple of times, cut quality wasn’t that great (ribeyes are pretty variable in the states, then you layer in a tropical island so you do have to temper your expectations), but the restaurant prepared and seasoned it quite well. I enjoyed my meal both times. It was nice to add some variety into a two week trip. The Oceania has a good reputation among the ex-pat community--a woman beside me on the shuttle from the airport to the hotel was raving about it. I saw many ex-pats and tourists enjoying their meals at Oceania (also saw pretty much the same people at Mnuw when



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Oceania was closed on Saturdays and Sundays.

United Airlines is now flying to Yap once per week from Guam (it was only flying every other week in January and even less often during the heart of the pandemic). I did want to note that several guests used Pacific Mission Aviation (PMA) to get between Palau and Yap (making shorter Yap stays possible no, especially in conjunction with a Palau leg). I think PMA uses a 9 or 10 seat puddle jumper. Evidently they don't have a formal schedule

but are making fairly frequent flights (you have to email them evidently). They seem to be pretty well known in Micronesia. A non-diving guest thar had worked in the islands for years swore by them.

Great manta photo opportunities, good overall diving, great hotel on a quaint island with very friendly people--What's not to like? I look forward to returning to Yap. I think my two week stay is not practical for most vacation-limited people, but a one week add-on after Palau (especially if you don't



mind the PMA puddle jumper) could make a great deal of sense. If using only United, it will probably mean spending a day on Guam in between. Please note I am just an amateur photographer with no ties to Yap--I just felt the island could use a little attention after such a long period without tourists so I wrote this article as a way of showing my support.

Charles Fenner

