

The Real Deal - Palau

by Tim Rock

Stretching more than 100 miles from tip to tip, Palau is called one of the world's seven underwater wonders.

This rich archipelago in the southern part of the northwest Pacific Ocean has become known as a diving haven that attracts scuba buffs from all over the world. The anchor of a geographic region called Micronesia, it is part of a rich triangle that includes the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Palau in one of the most diverse undersea places on Earth. The coral reefs, deep dropoffs, sheer walls, enclosed marine lakes, wartime shipwrecks and a plethora of other marine attractions make this a place that any skill level of diver can enjoy.

Palau has both land-based diving and live aboard. The live aboard scene is for the hardcore who want to dive, dive, dive in the south at the walls and coral gardens. The land-based people get two to three dives daily and have fun at the nightlife in town. Palau's restaurant scene is good with varied cuisines to include Thai, Indian and even Italian so it makes for an enjoyable way to see and meet the local people. There are local photo pros who know where the critters are and can do excellent guiding on the live aboards and at the better land-based dive shops.

Palau has been a leader in regional conservation and programs to protect the reefs in general and the grouper and shark populations in particular are seen as model programs for the world to follow. The leadership of Palau President Tommy Remengesau has brought Palau to the forefront in the banning of shark finning, a practice



The Rock Islands in southeastern Palau - D100, 24-120mm lens w/polarizer.

Right. Diver along a steep Angaur Wall (D100, AD100 Housing, 10mm Nikkor Lens, Twin DS 125 strobes)

that threatens the very existence of the upper end of the ocean food chain. The government has seized and burned tons of shark fins and declared fishing for sharks in Palau territorial waters illegal. Many international conservation and reef research programs and facilities are based or maintain offices in this progressive and aware community. Palau's array of Rock Islands (more than 700) is also a natural wonder. Palauans created the first nature preserve in Micronesia in the late 1950s establishing 70 Islands Conservation Area.

The big attractions in Palau are the wall dives, and there are a bunch of them. For photographers, most of these dives are considered wide angle territory. There are also lots of sharks and turtles, so lenses ranging from 24 to 50mm or a zoom work well for portraits. I use a Nikon D100 in an Aquatica housing and use the new 10mm fisheye for walls and for getting in close to big fish schools.



The water is generally clear and the use of strobes, in my case Ikelite DS 125s, at half or quarter power is all I need to bring out color in most cases. The topside scenery and sandy beaches are also great for half-half work, again getting the 10mm a good workout. Select a high incoming tide and overhead sun for the best half-half results and work your subject close. Topside scenery in the Rock Islands is also great for above water work. Bring a polarizer for that.

The entire southern part of Palau has sheer dropoffs falling to 300m or more. Divers get there generally by taking an awesome trip through the Rock Islands to the legendary islands of Ngemelis and Peleliu. Here, submerged points at current-fed sites allow divers to see the ocean at its finest. Shoals of jacks, snappers and rainbow runners course the reef. Dozens, even hundreds, of gray reef sharks patrol the dropoff edges. Eagle rays, giant groupers, sea turtles, shoals of blackbar barracuda and lots of other desirable critters are found daily along the top sites. Reef fish number more than 2,000 species and include everything from pygmy seahorses to large Napoleon wrasse.

Must-do dives

Blue Corner

Lenses - There lots of marine life here but most people go for the big stuff which means sea fans on the walls, schools of fish and sharks. Use the 10mm Nikkor for the walls and barracuda & jack schools. Use a 35mm or zoom for the gray reef sharks which can come portrait close at times. There are even some orangutan crabs in the bubble coral near the Blue Holes for macro freaks so a 55mm macro lens



Gray reef shark at New Dropoff. (D100, AD100, 17-35 Nik zoom, Twin DS 125 strobes)

will also work.

The Dive - This is one of the world's best boat dives., A true corner jutting out into the sea, this place is very nice when the tide is slack and spectacular when the current is moving. Consistently active, see whitetip, nurse and gray reef sharks on the move. There are tame Napoleon wrasses, big schools of fish and turtles. While the big stuff is the major attraction, there are many cleaning stations here and everything from barracuda to pyramid butterflyfish come in for a stop. Great for fish photographers to capture behaviour images.

New Dropoff

Lenses - Again good for sharks and schooling fish 10-15mm lenses and also a portrait lens for fish like eagle rays and Napoleons that may come in close.

The Dive - Once upon a time, New Dropoff was a new site, but it is now firmly established



Boarding Ocean Hunter 2. (D100, AD100 Housing, 10mm Lens, DS125 Strobes)

and known to many as the "other" Blue Corner. The action here can also be fast and furious at tide change. This site actually has a couple of fingers rather than a pronounced corner and barracuda can often be found at one, sharks at the next and perhaps eagle rays at the next one. It's a great spot to use a reef hook and watch the action.



Manta at Devilfish City (D100, AD100 Housing, 10mm Lens, Twin DS 125 strobes)

Devilfish City

Lenses - Definitely 10-15mm use here for big mantas that come in to clean. The rock at the cleaning station is also colorful and there's a school of sweepers.

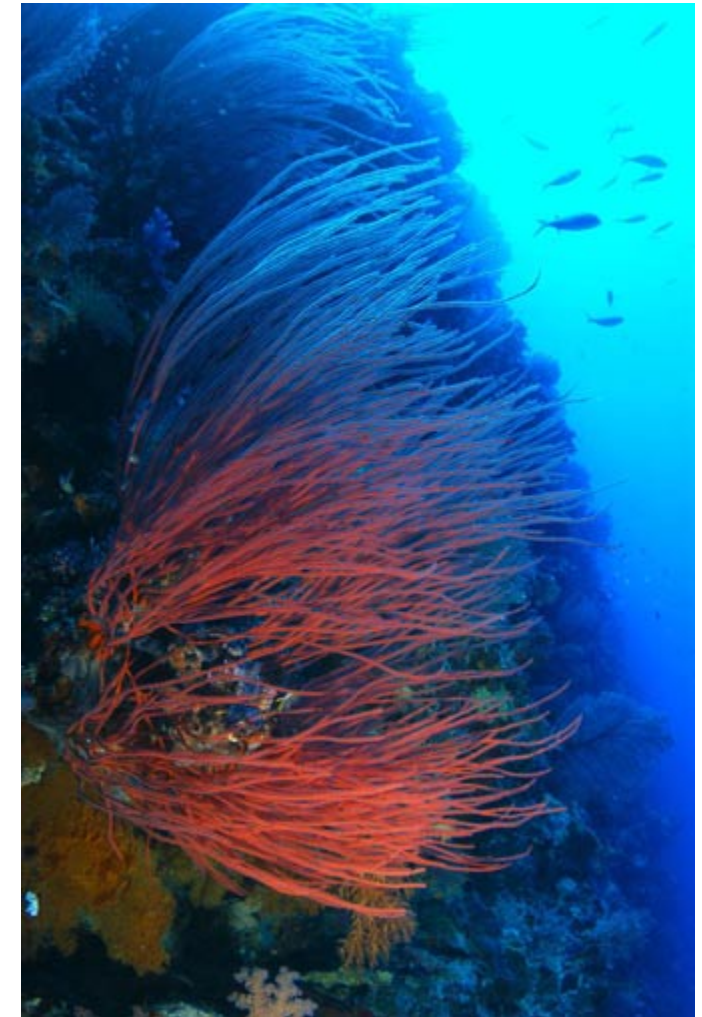
The Dive - A northern site, this place is a cleaning area for a pelagic group of manta rays that come in through the nearby pass and like to come in to a colorful cleaning station. They are preened by small wrasse and butterflyfish that come up from the sea whips near a couple of large rocks. This place is best when the tide is moving as the mantas may clean and feed at the same time.



The tranquil water deep in the Rock Islands near Jellyfish Lake. (D100, AD100 Housing, 10mm Lens, Twin DS 125 strobes)

Peleliu Tip

The Lens - Shark people love it here so anything from a wide lens for the beautifully adorned walls to a fish portrait lens for the numerous gray reef sharks and even bigger species.



Sea whips at Turtle Wall - (D100, AD100 Housing, 15mm Lens, Twin DS 125 strobes)

This place can also produce a billfish but currents here can be a hardship for photography once past the tip.

The Dive - Located at the southern tip of the archipelago, this site produces pelagic sea life like sailfish, great hammerheads and even a tiger shark

or occasional marlin. It is located at the southern tip of the archipelago where two big currents meet. Consequently, lots of big stuff meets here as well. The Peleliu Wall leading to the tip has beautiful soft corals and sea fans. When the current is strong, this dive is not for the faint of heart.

German Channel

Lenses - There are mantas to be seen here, so bring a wide lens if you want to get shots of them. But this area is good for macro in the lush corals, A 50 to 60mm lens will capture disco clams, leaf fish and egg-laying cuttlefish.

The Dive - This place is a seascape coral garden. A narrow channel and shallow area highlighted by coral-covered bommies empties into a deep bay between two southern islands. At the sandy dropoff is a manta ray cleaning station and sharks and even whale sharks have been seen here. It is an excellent night diving area with leaf fish and electric scallops.

Siaes Tunnel

Lenses - Adorned with black coral and fans, a 10mm fisheye can be used to capture the enormity and beauty here. But, there are rare fish here so a macro lens can also be a rewarding piece of glass.

The Dive - The “tunnel” is a gaping hole in the sheer wall that extends high and deep back into the reef. Three windows to the sea are adorned in black coral at the top, white coral on the sea floor and lots of gorgonian sea fans. Look for sleeping sharks and roaming jacks inside the tunnel and pygmy seahorses on the Muricella fans outside the cavern.



Palau's famous Rock Islands (D100, AD100 Housing, 10mm Lens)

Iro

Lenses - This is 10 to 15mm wide country for the big guns, masts and other beautiful ship parts now adorned in marine life.

The Dive - Not as famed for its wrecks as it should be, Palau has over four dozen W.W.II ships and planes resting on the sea floor. The Iro is a large converted freighter that was sunk while at anchor. Razor clams, batfish and sea anemones are prolific on the ship.

Jellyfish Lake

Lenses - To get many jellies in one shot, bring the superwide and a nice model. But there are small anemones here as well. Few people try macro here but the marine lake life can produce some rewarding shots close up.

The Dive - Palau is famous for having more marine lakes than anywhere else in the world. Most



Sunset at the Rock Islands near Metyuns ((D100, 80-400mm VR Lens)

are extremely hard to get to or are protected. But one that can be visited and enjoyed is Jellyfish Lake, home to literally millions of non-stinging jellyfish in two species. Go there when the sun is strong to be able to swim through the clouds of jellies that gather to get energy through photosynthesis.

Jake Floatplane

Lenses - Go wide here with a 15mm or wider. This plane is wonderfully intact and wide works well, even for the razor clams under the wing.

The Dive - This plane is in great shape, in shallow water and has a nice reef around it. Few W.W.II era floatplanes that were sunk during air raids are found upright and with their floats intact. So this one for that reason alone is special. The glass is still in the cockpit windows and there's even a nice growth of encrusting sponges and razor clams under the wings. The take time to also explore the nearby reef and look for a school of squid as you



Jim Watt checks his gear aboard the OH2 at the dedicated camera table. (D100, 12-24mm nikkor)

head back up the buoy line.

Also consider:

Chandelier Cave, Short Dropoff, Big Dropoff, Ulong Channel and Helmet Wreck

Getting to Palau: Fly to Guam or Manila and connect with Continental Airlines to Koror. Soon, Palau Micronesia Air may also be operating through the same hubs. If coming through Guam, there's the option to stop in Yap for some good diving as well.

Best season for diving : December through June but actually good most of the year. Water temperature : 26 - 30C

www.visit-palau.com

Dive Operators

Fish n' Fins

E-mail: fishnfin@palaunet.com

Website: <http://fishnfins.com>

Sam's Tours

E-mail: samstours@palaunet.com

Website: <http://www.samstours.com>

Carp Island Resort/Palau Diving Center

Telephone: 680-488-2978

Neco Marine

E-mail: info@necomarine.com

Website: <http://necomarine.com>

Live Aboards

Ocean Hunter I & II

Email: info@oceanhunter.com

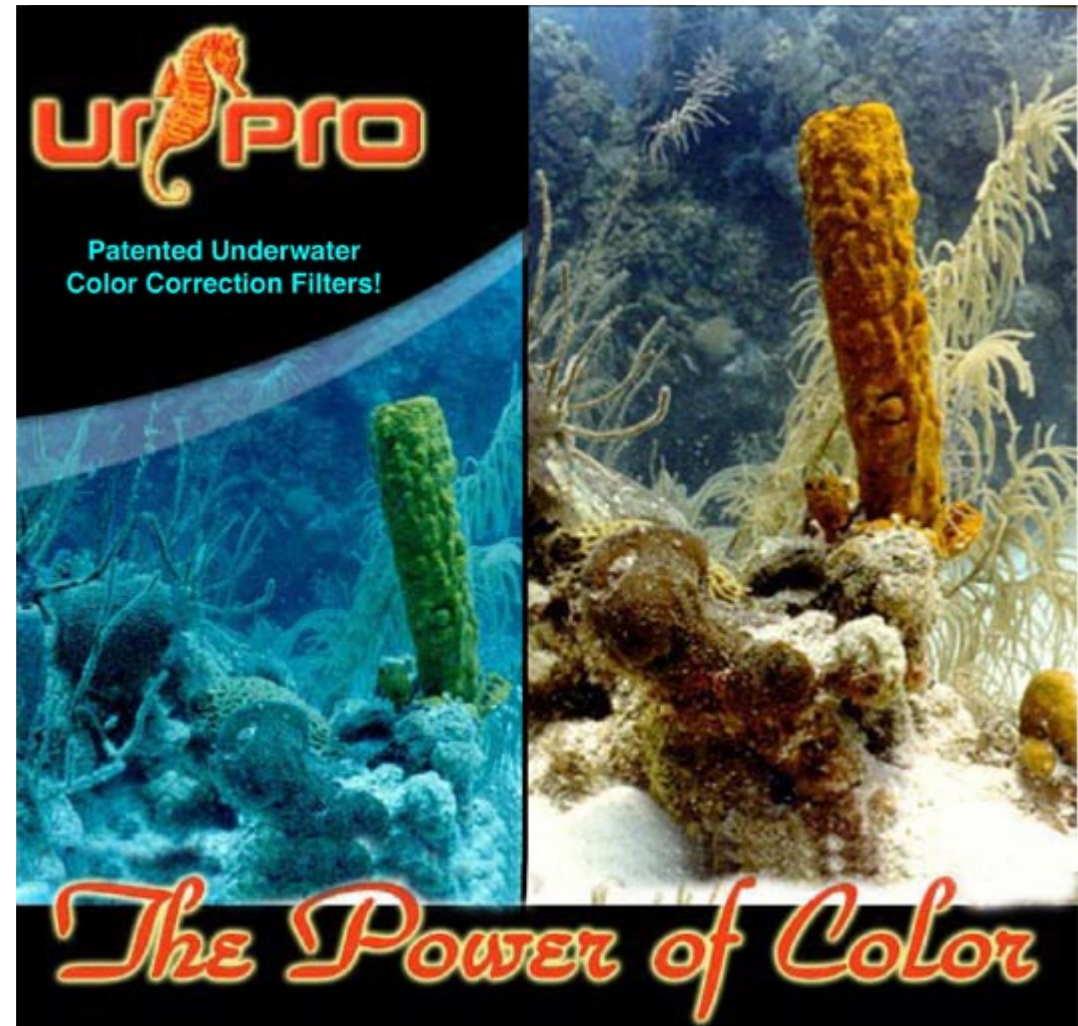
Website: <http://fishnfins.com>

Palau Aggressor II

Email: paggessor@palaunet.com

Tim Rock

timrock@doubleblue.com



URPRO Correction Technology

www.urprofilters.com

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