

The New North

Exploring Palau by Open Road

Story and Photos by Tim Rock

Drive and Dive in Palau? There's a new road on the second largest island in Micronesia and with it is a new path to possibilities. Caribbean isles like Bonaire are popular places for divers to get in a car or truck and head to the dive or snorkel spot. While Palau's extensive reef may preclude this, it is possible to now get to places that were difficult at best prior to the new highway that spans the island of Babeldaob.

The Palau islands are without a doubt one of the prettiest places on Earth. Spanning more than one-hundred miles from one tip of the archipelago to the other, this region features an amazingly beautiful atoll, a high island that is second only to Guam in Micronesia landmass, 700 Rock Islands and two southern limestone islands.

Babeldaob holds what many feel are the unexplored attractions in Palau both on land and along the outer reefs. With the new 53-miles of "Compact Road" it now vies for attention from the south.

The south holds the famous

dropoffs and has been widely dived. There is a world class dive site called Blue Corner. This is considered one of the world's best boat dives. The south also has German Channel, which is favorite spot to watch manta rays feed and big schools of jacks and snapper congregate. Plus, there's the Rock Islands, one of the most beautiful natural formations in the world. Can the North compete?

Well, many feel the answer is yes. One of the most beautiful atolls in the world and one of the most photographed is Kyangel in northern Palau. It is the quintessential Pacific atoll, with a school of spinner dolphins living at the entrance channel mouth. This is still a boat ride. But by car, the entire rest of the north is now open.

We hopped in a car and in less than a half hour found ourselves at the newly developed parking area for the spectacular central waterfalls. The drive itself is pleasant as the highway rolls over high vistas and down into deep island valleys. This road is a great bike ride as well. Traffic is





minimal so far and the beauty of this island, which had only coral and mud roads in the past, can now be easily appreciated. The jungles hold fruit bats, small wood owls, lots of different birds and some odd insects like walking stocks.

The hike to the Ngardmau Falls used to run up a river along a canopied jungle path. Now its all down hill. You can grab a hiking stick at the path entrance and trudge on. We hiked past the remnants of the pre-WWII bauxite mining area. Rails for the trains run through the jungle along steep valleys. An experienced guide may even be able to show you one or two of the trains that hauled the ore. We had possibly the most experienced in Palau. Francis Toribiong is the founder of Fish N Fins and found and explored the reefs, wrecks and land sites here starting in the late '60s. He joined us and led us through a heavily overgrown ridgeline and rail track that ended with two locomotives greeting us. We marveled at these blasts from the past that have been sitting in jungle for over 60 years.

There's an overlook where the falls is clearly visible down in the jungle. A steep trail heads down

toward the falls. Along the way a feeder river flows across a broad rocky area where you can jump in and cool off as smaller falls and deep pools. Tiny fish and freshwater shrimp scurry through here.

With the exception of a few ropes strung to make the descent along this part of the river safer, the river and falls area is left pretty much to nature. Some steps and a few shelters are found near the falls so it not a simple trek but better developed now. There's still a swatch of trail that can only be described as "Chocolate Avenue" where zori-sucking mud is a fact of life.

The last leg is across a knee deep river and over to the falls. They flow from Palau's tallest peak, 713-foot-high Mount Ngerchelechuus. The falls are at their best after a rain and the hiking is the coolest when it is raining, so moisture from the sky shouldn't deter the eager hiker. The falls can massage you, refresh you and amaze you. We ran through the spray and got behind the falls. Its for a natural atrium and is truly one of the Pacific's best attractions. Relax, cool off and store up some energy. Bring plenty of water as the hike back up is

all uphill.

There are also other falls on this island, like the popular Ngatpang Waterfall. There's also a freshwater lake yet to be explored rumored to be chock full of crocodiles.

Out on the reef, the Devilfish City at Ngardmau Channel is an intriguing dive site. It channel diving with some visits to some cleaning stations that are frequented by oceangoing manta rays. Again we decided to use the road to enhance the experience. We wanted to dive at dawn so we arranged for a boat to be left at the Ngardmau village pier.

We drove through the hills as the sun rose and got to the pier at sunrise. The way to the reef is down a river. Birds flew overhead and we looked at stingrays resting near the river mouth. The river was clear and the water at the mangroves was glassy smooth. Instead of taking an hour-long boat ride, we were at the site in five minutes and happily watching mantas ten minutes after that. The channel is like most that lead from mangrove to the sea in that visibility shifts with the tide changes. A high, slack tide will see the least current, best visibility



and probably a good congregation of mantas.

There is one large coral head in the channel and another set of sea fan adorned coral heads in a flats area above the channel. At the far coral head in about 45 feet of water (15m), the mantas come in to clean. The diver can see this easily as there are hundreds of copper sweeper baitfish in the coral head and it is adorned with both gorgonians and soft corals.

We saw one manta that had a mandible missing. It probably got caught in a fishing line or net. Our guide Yoko Higashide said she knew this manta and that it cleaned here a lot. It probably used this station to

clean and heal its wound and, now healed, has become attached to the site. Four other rays joined at various times, including one with a snow white belly.

As the current increased, we saw rays chasing around and cleaning. It was a great way to start the day. We had finished diving twice by nine when most dive boats were just heading out. So we took the opportunity to see what the river holds. Gnarly roots and an overhead canopy make this winding route fascinating. Snorkeling, we saw archerfish and odd root formations. Flowers also floated down the stream as we snorkeled past. The upper part

of the water is fresh and clear but below there's a halocline of sea water. It strange to look through and at fascinating habitat.

Back on land, you can drive all the way up to Ollei to some famous ancient monoliths. The Badrulchau Stone Monoliths sit way up north on the grassy flats along the eastern coastline of Ngarchelong. There are 37 ancient stone monoliths here, origin unknown. According to one version, the pillars are actually the foundation of a Bai meeting house that was being built by the gods.

Heading back to central Babeldaob, take a boat or kayak out from Ngeremlengui village. The

Ngermeskang River is a unspoiled beauty. Ranging in habitat from a mangrove forest at its mouth to a dense jungle farther inland, this river is wonderful for nature lovers and adventure seekers alike. Here we jumped out of the boat and swam to shore. We hiked up the banks and found the remnants of the Japanese pineapple cannery. Wild pineapples still grow there. This is where kayakers can sneak up on saltwater crocodiles.

Another great northern dive rarely done in Palau is that of Ngeremlengui Channel or The West Passage off West-Central Babeldaob. This has been the only place that a



mesekiu, or Palauan dugong, has been photographed underwater.

The north also has some other great cultural and historical sites. The Ancient Ruins of Imeungs are found on a hill embraced by a ridge of mountains. There are stone pathways, stone foundations and a natural amphitheater where young warriors once tested their mettle by trying to leap a meter-high stone.

At the Metuker ra Bisech, a short climb into the rock islands of Babeldaob come to quarry Yapese stone money. These wheel-like pieces of stone sometimes measured more than a meter in diameter. Some still sit in the jungle.

Nearby the war past comes into play again and we spent a lazy afternoon exploring the final resting sites of Jake-Aichi floatplanes. They sit barely beneath the water on the Babeldaob side of the new bridge. One of the Jakes sits near the cave where the last crocodile to kill a man in Palau was hunted down. The plane

is scattered but the prop and engine are visible.

We ended our week of northern exploration with painted legends and a glimpse into the past. Meeting houses were once extremely common and found in every village and community. The Arai Bai is the last remaining Bai from the period when the traditional political system was still in effect. Both have painted gables tell of past glories and sometimes poke they even fun at other villages.

Most of the major tour and dive operations now offer various forms of land tour to the north. Diving here and snorkeling is bound to also increase as an alternative to the popular southern dive sites. But the beauty of the place is that its still largely untouched and the exploration is in its infancy.

In the evenings the last call of native birds echoes down the valleys. Clouds hang low over the jungle and they glow with the warm gold of the sunset. We sat high on a hill and listened to the breeze blow over the northern hills. "Palau is full of surprises," Toribiong told me. The north will surely produce more of them as the years go by.

Tim Rock

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