

The Palau experience

By **Bernardo Sambra**

Over the past twelve years, my wife and I have dive intensely in the Caribbean and the Pacific Coast of South America. This time however we decided to go to the other side of the world (we live in Peru); to the coral seas. Not being able to go on such trips frequently it was difficult to decide where exactly in the coral seas we wanted to go.

Over a period of several months we set out to find the precise spot. We were looking for unspoilt reefs, good weather, excellent visibility, few tourists and lots of marine life...a difficult task indeed.

Finally, we were left with three stunning alternatives: Sulawesi, Papua New Guinea and Palau. The latter however had an added incentive, during May (the time we had planned to travel); the Palau Underwater Photo Festival. We contacted the Palau Visitors Authority and the organizers, Tova Har-El and Navot Bornovski.

The opportunity couldn't be better, imagine an Underwater Photo Festival in paradise with breathtaking reefs, being able to dive with James Watt and Tim Rock and meet David Doubilet, Sammy Tanaka and Stewart Westmorland.

We were left with no doubts. This was a golden opportunity to literally immerse ourselves in the world of underwater photography, burn lots of rolls and talk photo jargon 24 hours a day! We decided to go for three weeks, leaving the last week to coincide with the Festival. This would allow us to



Jake FloatPlane. This plane is an AichiE13A or Jake type reconnaissance plane, one of the most intact plane wrecks in Micronesia. Nikonos V, 15mm fisheye lens, no strobes, Fuji Provia, Speed on Automatic@ 2.8.

Trumpetfish over red coral (Aulostomos chinensis) Nikon N90S, Nexus Master Housing, 60mm, YS120 + YS60 both at Full power, Fuji Velvia, f32@1/60.



acclimatize with the location and of course to take tons of photos.

However, three weeks is very little time to get to know Palau's underwater beauty and I completely agree with

Constantinos Petrinis when he says "...you need to spend many hours underwater to familiarize yourself with the particular habitat and the species present in order to be able to capture



Anemone Fish. (Amphiprion perideraion) at Turtle Cove. Nikon N90S, Nexus Master Housing, 60mm, YS120 TTL, Fuji Velvia, f32@1/60.

behavioural scenes on film". Any way, such is life, time is never enough when you are doing what you love.

The Republic of Palau lies east of The Philippines and north of Papua New Guinea, on the western extreme of the Caroline Archipelago. It is made of nearly 350 islands distributed in six clusters over 400 miles. Our location lies in the Palau cluster which's made up of 200 islands, 8 of which are inhabited. Few destinations offer such a mixture of unequalled marine diversity with world renowned dive sites. Palau is also the youngest nation in the Pacific showing an incredible ethnic mix.

For the good fortune of visitors, this translates itself to superb oriental cuisine ranging from Thai to Japanese. After a 40 hour journey we arrived at Koror, the capital of Palau. We were greeted by members of Sam's Tours, our excellent diving operator, whom we agreed to meet the following morning.



Two divers in the base of the main gallery at Blue Holes. Nikon N90S, Nexus Master Housing, 20mm, no strobe, Fuji Provia, f2.8@1/250.

During our first dive day, we met Kevin Davison an excellent underwater photographer who has been documenting Palau over the past few years. Meeting Kevin was undoubtedly a stroke of luck which allowed us to understand underwater photography from literally a completely different angle.

Every evening we would hand Kevin our rolls of film so that he would develop them and give us a constructive critique the following morning. After a fortnight we had accumulated more than 2,000 photos. We managed to compile a huge photomontage that reflected, from a personal point of view, Palau's underwater beauty. We dived in nearly 40 of the most spectacular sites: Blue Holes, the famous Blue Corner, Big Drop Off, Peleliu Express, Ulong Channel, German Channel and many more.

The variety of fishes and invertebrates we managed to shoot ranged from manta rays, white, black and silver tip sharks, bumpheads



The organizer Navot Bornovski and Sammy Tanaka giving his speech.

parrotfishes, napoleon wrasses, anemone fishes, cuttlefishes, fire gobbies and dozens of corals. The waters around Palau are really an enormous underwater photo studio with lots of willing models. This is due to the relatively short time the tourist industry has operated here and the care that dive operators take looking after the sea bed.

Personally I never thought that any one place could harbour such variety of marine life under and on the water. Each dive site contained an incredible array of marine flora and fauna. The most astonishing thing was the sheer density present. We did not find one or two sharks but several dozen in every dive. Hundreds of Black Bar Barracudas and schools of Bigeye Jacks furnished, like metallic curtains the underwater horizon. Enormous coral structures formed virtual living islands and infinity deep walls contained fantastic gardens under the sea.

The eleventh hour was finally upon us. We showed up very early at The Coral Reef Centre where Mr. Tommy Remengesau Jr., Palau's President blew the starting whistle to the Photo Festival.

By now, many of the judges (UW photography photo pros) like James Watt, Stewart Westmorland, Sammy Tanaka and Tim Rock had arrived. We had from that moment on, six days in which to dive, take pictures and go to seminars. Our Sam's Tours package include six day "all you can dive". We went in all day, every day, our computers allowing. Using up three, four and sometimes five tanks a day. It was difficult picking our dive sites especially considering that each photographer could submit a maximum of four images, one for each category: wreck, wide angle, macro and creative.

The second day was perhaps the most intense



David Doubilet during his talk

Whitecap Shrimp (Periclemenes sp.) over a bubble anemone founded at the entrance of Chandelier Cave. Nikon N90S, Nexus Master Housing, 60mm, YS120 + YS60 both at Full power, Fuji Velvia, f22@1/60.



and interesting. Kevin invited James Watt and Tim Rock to dive with us. That morning's dive was at the Siaes's Tunnel, the deepest dive we undertook, 140 feet. This place is photographically speaking incredibly challenging. Light inside the cave is practically inexistent, interesting shot angles are numerous and we could only stay down there a

Chandelier Cave illuminated with HMI Lights during my short 30 minutes opportunity. Nikon N90S, Nexus Master Housing, 20mm, no strobe, Fuji 400, f2.8@1/250.

maximum of seven minutes.

I used up this first time in the tunnel observing how Tim, James and Kevin analysed the site, moving their strobes and shooting without stop. We had to plan our dives and shots very carefully so that at the end of the six days of competition we could have at least one or two satisfying images for each category. One of the festival's high points was the opportunity each diver had diving alone in the famous Chandelier Cave lit by the hugely expensive HMI lights. These were used by David Doubilet to shoot the cave for a 2000 National Geographic articles...what a chance!

On the third day it was our turn to be in the marvellous cave. We used Fuji 400 film so that we could take full advantage of the conditions inside the cave. It was a good decision as this film allowed us to capture the dramatic atmosphere inside the cave. The sour point, as always, was that we only had 30 minutes dive time and 36 shots.

Each evening we had to rush back to the PPR (Palau Pacific Resort) to attend talks each on the judges would give that night. I was personally impressed by three of the talks. Stewart Westmorland gave an excellent exhibition on why we had to surmount our photographic pre conceptions so



that we can get optimum results when experimenting with speed, light and developing. He showed a series of photographic prints which resembled abstract paintings.

Sammy Tanaka showed what he described as the best of his work and, by jolly, it was, drawing ooohhhs and aaahssss from the crowd. All were wide angle shots and I have seldom seen such fine technique. Sammy is undoubtedly what I call a photo engineer. As he said, he use to spend 80% of his time analysing the scene and 20% taking the shot.

Last but definitely not least, David Doubilet brought, as expected a breathtaking array of images from Tasmania, Indonesia, Cuba and Australia which showed what you can achieve when intelligently harnessing such uncontrollable element as light.

The festival wining shot was by the German Jan Abadschieff, a spectacular 50/50 image of the Chandelier Cave titled "Chandelier Cave with a model".

Palau is a challenge for our capacity of abstraction. The diverse seascapes, living things

and underwater geography can be overwhelming. Undoubtedly staging a Photo Festival in a place like this sets off real fireworks.

Lets hope the authorities can keep the fragile equilibrium between this beautiful location and the ever growing and sometimes threatening tourist industry.

For further info.:
www.visit-palau.com/uwpalau.html
www.samstours.com
www.fishnfin.com

Diving & Snorkeling Palau.
Lonely Planet 2000. Tim Rock/
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