

HIDDEN PALAU

DISCOVERING THE
EVOLUTION OF **MICRONESIAN**
REEFS ON A DIVE
JOURNEY BY KAYAK

PHOTOS BY TONY WU
STORY BY TERRY WARD

Deep in the heart of Nikko Bay in Palau's Rock Islands, there's writing on the wall. Moments earlier, I'd left my kayak in a cove and ascended a ladder up a sheer limestone face to find this haunting place, an ammunition shed built by the Japanese during World War II. I'm struggling to wrap my head around the cryptic messages.

"You're looking at words echoing out of the past," says biologist Ron Leidich, the founder of Planet Blue Sea Kayak Tours and my guide during a seven-night kayaking, diving and camping expedition through the Rock Islands.

Scrawled on the concrete are messages in several languages: English, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Palauan pictographs. Leidich tells me the writings came from two authors — a Korean prisoner of war and a Palauan fisherman who happened upon this place sometime after the Japanese abandoned it, leaving behind the shell mounds of their meager sustenance and piles of Kirin beer bottles they used for

Molotov cocktails when their weaponry ran out.

Both men, Leidich tells me, were saying *Sayonara*. Goodbye.

One of Leidich's many finds in the Rock Islands, the pillbox was discovered by chance in 1996.

"I was leading a kayak tour here, and a customer noticed this island and wanted to see if we could cliff-jump from it," he tells me. "So we walked up here to scout it out, and this is what we found."

That spirit of adventure is how Leidich discovered many of Palau's least trafficked underwater sites, which I've come here to experience.

While the mushrooming Rock Islands appear on nearly every Palau postcard and guidebook cover shot, the aquatic areas in between are mostly neglected by divers, who hightail it for the action-packed outer reefs instead.

During a previous trip to the Micronesian nation, I too had sped past the Rock Islands on my way to legendary dive sites like Blue Corner — close enough to pluck a bloom from a tropical vine at points, but too



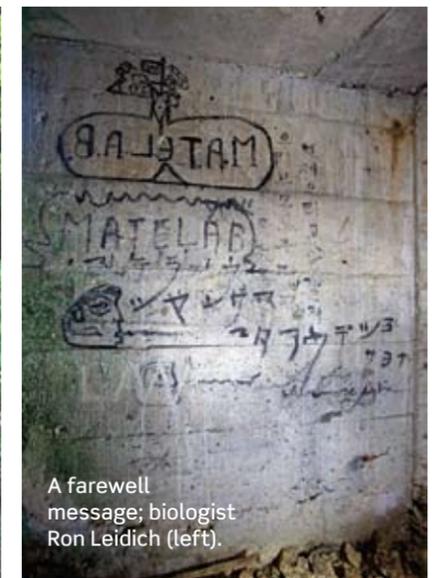
Travel by kayak affords writer Terry Ward an up-close view of Palau's mangrove nurseries.

"THE POPULAR SITES ARE AWE-INSPIRING, BUT THEY

ARE MISSING SOMETHING. THERE ARE NO BABIES."



Protected mangrove lagoons give way to patch reef, which in turn leads to blue water.



A farewell message; biologist Ron Leidich (left).

hastily to inhale the humidity of the jungle or hear the bird calls percolating from deep inside.

"If you want to understand Palau holistically, you miss something just jumping off at spots like Big Drop Off or Blue Corner," Leidich had told me during our pre-trip briefing at Sam's Tours in Koror, Palau's largest city.

This adventure would be a different sort entirely. We'd be donning our BCs alongside our kayaks to dive through tunnels in the Rock Islands — accessing hidden marine lakes home to ancient coral colonies and finning alongside fish that had never known the fear of predators. Some of the sites we'd be diving had nev-

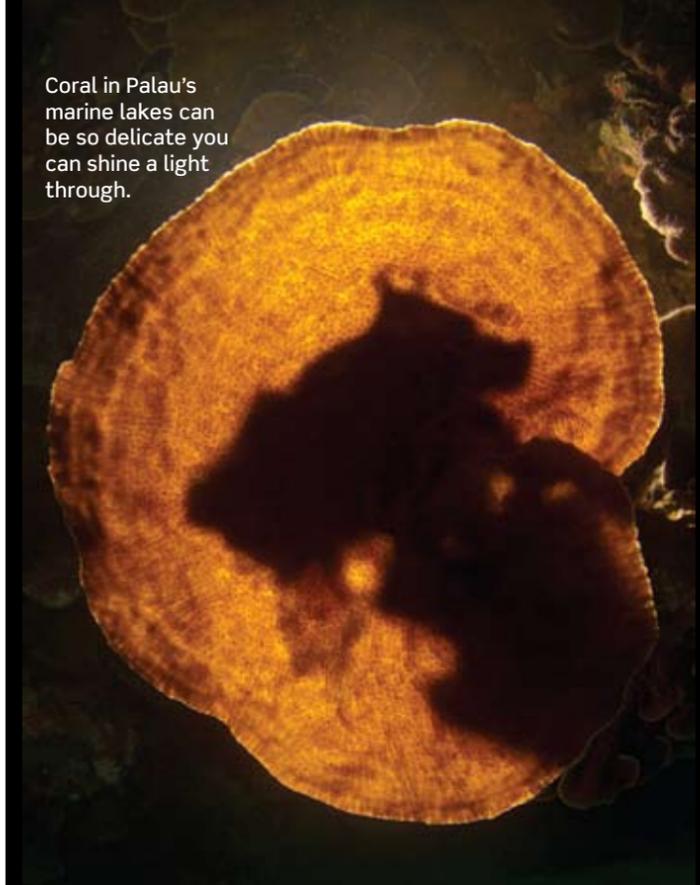
er seen scuba tanks.

With a support boat ferrying supplies to our beach camps and shuttling us over the rougher patches of water, the expedition would take us from the marine lake nurseries where baby fish flourish to Palau's patch reefs and beyond.

Where It All Begins

"The popular dive sites are awe-inspiring and the grandeur is amazing, but they are missing something," Leidich says as we slip from our kayaks in a protected area of Nikko Bay he calls Disney Lake. "There are no babies."

Coral in Palau's marine lakes can be so delicate you can shine a light through.



We gear up and fin into the maw of a 50-foot-long tunnel. Green light spills from the exit and we emerge into an enclosed lake surrounded by steep jungle. One of Palau's 72 marine lakes, it's fed by sea water flowing through the tunnel and seeping through the limestone island.

"If you're a baby fish and the currents pull you into Disney Lake, it's a good day," he says.

Paired with the lake's extreme physical protection is a constant flow of nutrients that nourish the juvenile pajama cardinal fish bobbing up from the coral, baby titan triggers and an immature Picasso fish that swims inches from my mask. Since few predators have found the place, even the gobies in the sand are hard to spook. But it's the bizarre coral formations here that are truly unique. This coral clock has essentially never been re-set — the lake is so sheltered that it's practically immune to damage from typhoons, wind and waves that can devastate less-protected areas.

Basket corals — some thought to be as ancient as four and five hundred years old — have formed unique shapes in Disney Lake, curling into one another, forming baskets within baskets unlike anything I had seen before.

The coral structures have grown so delicate in the

"Some scientist had fun naming that."

A few minutes later, when a sound like Pan's flute erupts from the jungle, we lift our paddles and listen to a Palauan bush warbler's song.

We guide the kayaks into Black Tip Lake in Risong Bay, a protected area where pregnant sharks come to bear their young. June and November are the prime months for pups, but the odd baby shark can enter the world outside of that period. Tropical birds, their tails fluttering like contrails behind them, crisscross the sky. But there are no sharks, so we move on to Mandarin Fish Lake and don our dive gear.

Before we head under, Leidich briefs me.

"In all of the 300-plus Rock Islands in Palau, there's nothing that approximates the bizarre relationship we see here between a collapsed tunnel system leading into a marine bay that's connected through a series of siphon tunnels," he says, my mind struggling to paint the picture.

We dive through the collapsed tunnel — essentially an alleyway bisecting rock islands — and emerge into a lake shaded by walls dripping with greenery.

The abundant shadows encourage shade-loving mandarin fish to emerge earlier than they ordinarily would, and we watch a few peering from a patch of

Deco Stops Scout for saltwater crocodiles and listen for cooing fruit doves along the Ngerdorch River aboard the **Jungle River Boat Cruise** (palaujunglerrivercruise.com). See a mini, to-scale version of the outer reef at the 5,500-gallon aquarium inside the **Palau International Coral Reef Center** (picrc.org). Snorkel with stingless polyps during a daytrip to **Jellyfish Lake**. Toss back a locally brewed Red Rooster beer with off-duty divemasters at **Kramer's Cafe**, where the German owner is just as adept at whipping up a wiener schnitzel or a fresh mackerel steamed in banana leaf with tangy ginger sauce.



CORAL STRUCTURES AS FINE AS BONE CHINA ARE

AS UNIQUE A SIGHT AS EXISTS IN THE DIVE WORLD.

protected waters that we can shine our dive lights through them — they are as fine as a piece of bone china, as unique a sight as exists in the dive world.

Finding a Rhythm

It's easy to fall into the rhythm of the expedition, dining on freshly caught fish and land crabs at a table under the stars and sleeping on a cot inside an oceanfront tent to the tune of lapping waves.

The next morning, I'm deep in the cadence of paddling, mesmerized by the tiny tornadoes swirling off my blade as I dip into the intensely blue water, when Leidich draws my attention skyward.

"Wow! A bridled tern!" he shouts, as though it were his first time seeing the masked bird. "When it flies close to the water, the oil in its white feathers reflects green."

I quickly grow accustomed to his enthusiastic directives.

"Look! It's booger algae," he exclaims as we paddle under a limestone overhang to inspect dripping orange algae with a very specific consistency. "*Chlorops Boogerensis* — it grows in reflective light," he says.

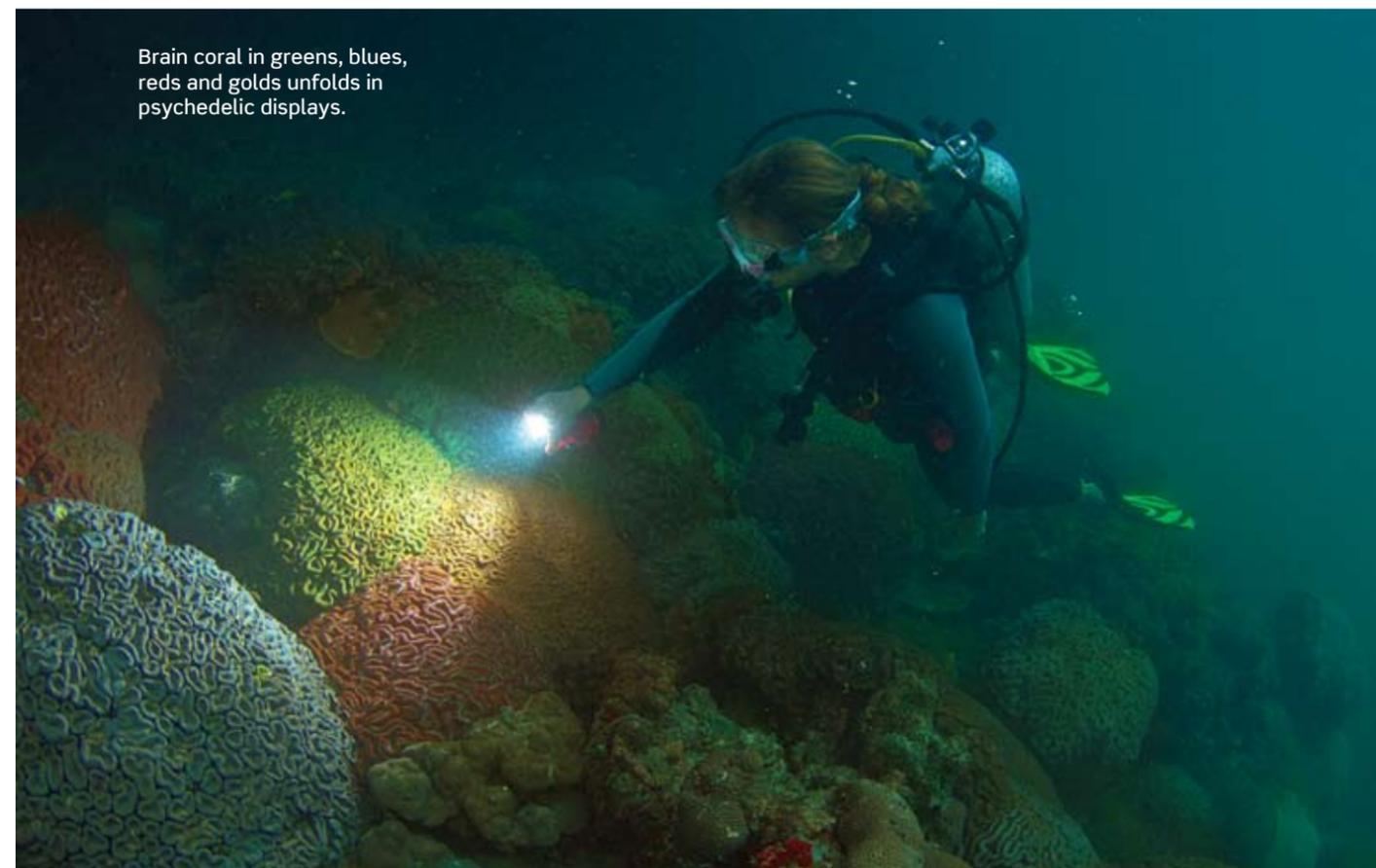
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Ancient coral forms unusual baskets within baskets.



Brain coral in greens, blues, reds and golds unfolds in psychedelic displays.



pink coral. In the deeper water nearby, a baby bump-head parrotfish and juvenile big eye trevally cruise past. I notice a white fish with a pink face guarding a patch of sand nearby; it shimmies my way, obviously on the defense. Leidich and I surface from the shallow bottom so he can explain.

“Farmer fish. You’re crossing his farm — that patch of sand is his algae field. That’s why he’s getting so feisty,” he says, “Point your finger at him and he’ll retreat.” I spend the next few minutes doing just that, then we continue to the mouth of a tunnel at the far side of the lake, where the water flowing out is as clear as a spring thanks to the artesian well effect of the island’s interior.

Back at camp on Ngeremdiu Beach, after a dinner

of unicorn fish and pumpkin simmered in coconut sauce, I join chef Malcolm Maltel and our boat captain, Jefferson Nestor, to look for land crabs in the jungle.

“Koror is so much like the U.S. these days,” says Nestor, referring to Palau’s main population center. “The Rock Islands are where Palauans go to feel Palauan.”

The chattering of fruit bats and frogs fills the air, and Maltel stops to point out a flower on the Fish Poison Tree — a soft pink firework of a bloom that will fall to the sand by dawn. Maltel, who moonlights as an ethno-botanist, is working with Leidich to compile a book cataloging the Rock Islands’ flowering plants. The guy knows a thing or two about catching crabs



Blue Corner delivers the action for which it is justifiably famed.



Coral fingers reach unusual size; shade-loving mandarins emerge early in the shadows (above left).

The Guide to Palau

Average water temp low 80s year-round **What to wear** Lycra skin or 3mm wetsuit **Average viz** 100 feet-plus
When to go year-round; November to May are considered the best diving months, with peak crowds January to May; June to November is the rainy season, but conditions are still good.

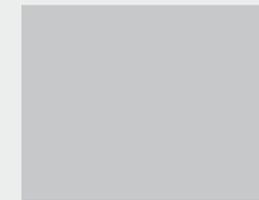
Must Do

Explore exotic **Babeldaob Island** during an all-day land tour (samstours.com) that takes you to ancient stone monoliths and World War II sites and allows a look inside a traditional men’s meetinghouse called an *abai*. Stop in at Palau’s largest waterfall, **Ngardmau**.

Must Dive

Blue Corner Use a reef hook to anchor onto the rocks at Palau’s draw-card dive, where squadrons of sharks and schooling pelagics converge.

Blue Holes Descend into a large cavern, a cathedral-like space with windows that exit onto the outer reef. Look for cleaner shrimp and nudibranchs inside.



Ulong Channel Ogle grey reef sharks and schooling jacks at 60 feet at the mouth of the channel, then let the incoming tide sweep you past towering coral walls and lettuce coral colonies brimming

with fish.

German Channel Settle amidst the hard corals on the sandy bottom and wait for the mantas.

Peleliu Express Ripping currents make the vertical wall here one of the world’s most thrilling drift dives, with Napoleon wrasse, rays and sharks.

Local Flavor

Try the mangrove crab cooked in spicy chili at a Koror favorite, Indian restaurant Taj (tajpalau.com).

Bring Back

A traditional Palauan storyboard carved on island hardwood denoting a cultural scene — some of the best are made by prisoners at the Koror Jail, and available at the prison’s gift shop.



More on the Web sportdiver.com/palau

too — he thrusts his hand blindly into a hole in the sand and pulls out a massive land crab with pincers splayed.

Tomorrow night, he promises, already scouting for the next hole, we will feast.

The Next Step

Just as a fish’s life progresses from the protected marine lakes to the greater feeding options of the sun-drenched patch reefs and the outer reefs, our tour follows suit.

“I’d completely given up on this place,” Leidich tells me at a patch reef called Calvin’s Playground that had been devastated by coral bleaching during the 1998 El Nino event. When he visited a few years ago, he was stunned by its recovery.

As we fin over healthy plots of staghorn and table corals in 15 feet of water, we spot ornate butterfly fish and Meyer’s butterfly fish, two sure indicators of a thriving reef. Nearby, a baby popcorn shrimp sits in the sand next to an anemone, and industrious goatfish dart about in cliques, using their whiskers to find worms in the sand.

For a coral comparison, we head back into a shel-

tered bay later in the day, to a sun-deprived area Leidich has named Four Corners. “This place lights up like a velvet Elvis poster,” he tells me. “I’ve been around the world, and I have never seen a multi-color lobophyllia-dominated coral garden like this.”

When we enter the water, boulders carpeted with brain coral in greens, blues, reds and golds unfold in a psychedelic display, each color representing a unique coral colony.

The days follow with more kayak explorations — every foray onto land a surprise and every underwater view something I didn’t expect to encounter in Palau.

One dive takes us into a marine lake that sees very few visitors of the human variety. “We are the bulls and this is the china shop,” Leidich warned me top-side. “This is the first time divers are entering this place.” Inside, the physical protection is so complete that species that normally grow as flat encrusting corals have curled into enormous baskets. The most unusual formations are coral fingers more than two meters high, reaching nearly to the surface of the water.

In another cove, we climb onto rocks that Leidich recognizes as a haul-out for banded sea kraits (the

reptiles lay their eggs on land instead of bearing live young in the water, as sea snakes do).

The kraits are curled atop each other. A large female inhales and expands her body as we approach but doesn't move a hair, letting us know she's aware of our presence. "They're highly toxic so they don't have to be aggressive," says Leidich, doing a Mr. T. impression to explain how tough the reptiles are — and dispelling a common myth. "Their fangs are right up front — not in the back of their mouths like people say." Amazingly, we can get close enough to see the milky molting material covering their eyes.

Another day, while paddling through a seagrass-

strewn bay at low tide, we spot the disappearing flukes of a dugong, one of Palau's most endangered residents. We lift our paddles and drift for several minutes before a pair of the massive animals surface a short distance away. It is a fluke in every sense of the word, the luckiest of all encounters — though they are rebounding in recent years, Leidich says, dugongs are still hunted for their meat in Palau, and remain an extremely rare sight.

The Big Finale

For all the revelations of the inner lagoons and bays, Palau's outer reefs are waiting. And I'm ready for the adrenalin blast that big ocean upwellings and tides screaming through sandy channels bring to the iconic dive sites Blue Corner and Ulong Channel.

We leave our kayaks in camp and take the dive boat, a twin-engine speed demon, out to the reef. As we gear up at Blue Corner, Leidich remembers his first time diving the site, 16 years ago.

"It pretty much cemented my future in Palau," he says. "I came up and said to my group, 'That was the underwater Serengeti of planet Earth — this is the wildebeest migration of the underwater world.'"

Blue Corner delivers on our dive too, as we fin along the sheer wall, watching a school of orange spine unicorn fish move in a black cloud over the reef. Where the corner juts into the ocean, we use reef hooks to anchor into a patch of rock and, tethered like balloons, settle in for Palau's signature dive spectacle — squad-



Chef — and ethno-botanist — Malcom Maltel works on dinner.



The sheer wall at Blue Corner is a prelude to thrills to come.

A BABY SPOTTED EAGLE RAY WINGS BY, AND IT HITS



Schools of soldierfish mass at Ulong Channel.

ME THAT I MIGHT HAVE SEEN ITS VERY BIRTH SPOT.

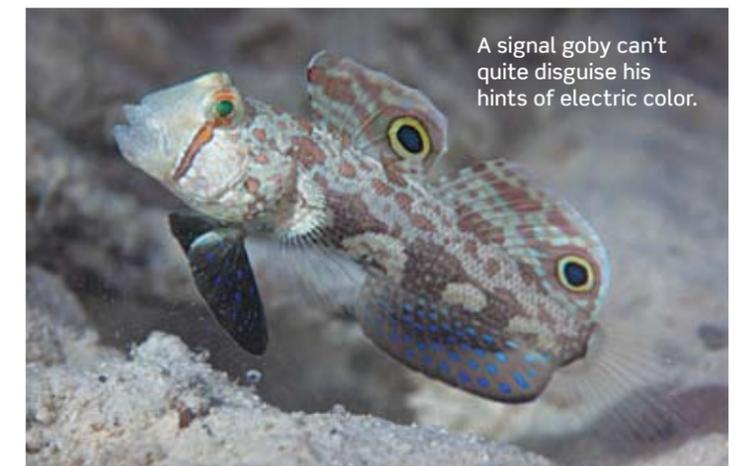
rons of grey reef sharks cruising in and out of the blue within a few feet of our masks. Schooling midnight snappers and giant trevally obscure the overhead view, and in the middle ground a bazillion redtooth triggerfish get their plankton fix. A baby spotted eagle ray wings by, and it hits me that I might have seen the very birth spot of this creature Palauans consider to be a god, in one of those Rock Island lagoons.

The trip's grand finale comes the next day at Ulong Channel. After watching the sharks at the channel's mouth, admiring the minimal fin adjustments they make to surf the current, we unhook and fly over the sandy bottom on the tidal push. Patches of lettuce coral pass in a blur, then Leidich grabs hold of a rock in the middle of the channel and I follow suit to scope a rock mover wrasse and flowery flounder braced against the current. Schools of soldier fish are massing, eyes bulging from their brick-red bodies, engaged in a pre-spawning display. Where the channel widens, a school of golden trevally carpets the sandy bottom and two reef sharks patrol overhead. I sway in the current with the trevally and get a sense for how it feels to have a hunter stalking above.

For the sharks, however, isolating one of these fish from the school for a feed will be no simple feat — the

trevally didn't come this far to go out that easily.

"Out here, it's the winners of the winners," says Leidich when we're back in the boat. "The fish you saw, their mothers might have spawned hundreds to thousands of eggs, only a few of which would have fertilized and eventually recruited to a place like Disney Lake." Instinct, of course, had guided their journey from there.



A signal goby can't quite disguise his hints of electric color.