

Palau

Palau is one of those idyllic-sounding countries that a TCC member dreams of when traveling through some dusty, godforsaken country somewhere else. Anybody else at home thinks you're talking about some kind of rice dish, and if those same people are really astute, they might recall several unlikable people traipsing about the jungle in the reality show: *Survivor: Palau*.

Like many islands in the Pacific, the first thing that strikes you outside the airport is the lushness of nature. Indeed, nature in its wild, bursting glory—deep in the jungles and under the sea—becomes the compelling theme, as you decide on what to do from day to day. High on most people's lists is a visit to the Rock Islands. More than two hundred limestone islands, covered in deep emerald-colored vegetation rise like a series of mushrooms from an aqua sea. Or, depending on your mood, the islands seem to bear a resemblance to giant Chia Pets. It has not escaped the boat operators that a day trip out here is a moneymaker. Expect to pay a minimum of \$105 to ride along in a dive boat, with another \$25 for the permit to even be in the same area as the Rocks. Divers I was with said Palau excels for its abundance of sharks and rays. If you're a snorkeler, and depending where the boat drops you, you'll spot the usual brilliant tropical fish and coral. If you're on your own and want to visit a particular spot, you either must wait until a group forms with the same agenda or take your chances for the day with the divers. One of the more unique attractions in Palau is Jellyfish Lake, where you can snorkel with golden and moon jellyfish whose sting is either nonexistent or barely noticeable. To visit Jellyfish Lake, you must pay an additional \$10 along with the \$25 for the Rock Islands.

If you wish to take a break from the water, you can rent a car and drive around the mountainous island of Babeldaob, the second largest island in Micronesia after Guam. A new road circling the island has just been completed, and you have it pretty much to yourself. Car rentals are easy, but be prepared to spend a few minutes adapting to a right-hand drive car on roads where you drive on the right. The most fun place to visit on Babeldaob is Palau's largest waterfall, Taki Falls. This is no ten-minute stroll from the car along a path. Plan on a minimum three-hour slog through stunningly beautiful jungle, along steep descents, through vines and mud, and across one small river where someone has thoughtfully strung up a rope that you can hang on to. Walking sticks are provided (good for measuring the depth of the mud), and diving booties are helpful, although I managed in flip flops. The nature is as intense as you'll find anywhere, and the good news is there are no biting insects (at least when I was there). The reward is a dazzling, 100-foot tall, 120-foot wide veil of water. You can walk behind the falls or enjoy the view from a few traditional structures in front. A few friendly, betel nut spitting Palauans are on hand to make sure people find their way back across the river, through the mud, and up the hill.

They say that Palau is the most heavily governed country on the face of the earth. Its government is based on a federal system, with sixteen states. Each state has a governor and a legislature. The population of the country is only 21,000, and 14,000 of them live in the single state of Koror, which leaves some states of only a few hundred people entirely made up of government workers. Impossible to miss is the federal government's capital at Melekeok, which boasts an immense complex (funded by European Union taxpayers), rising incongruously out of the jungle with nothing around it and nobody to be seen. Palau has also made the news in the last few months for taking in several Uighur detainees from Guantanamo Bay. The Palauans told me that they lived in an apartment in Koror and recently had their pictures in the paper at a beach barbeque on the Rock Islands with the president of Palau.

Elsewhere in Palau, you can easily spend a day hanging around Koror, chatting with the Palauans and checking out their shops. Further south and reachable by boat or plane is the island of Peleliu, notable for its relics left over from one of the more vicious battles of WWII, and the island of Angaur, famed for its monkey population.

To Palau's credit, the country does not charge for visas; however, be prepared for a good shakedown upon departure. You can expect the normal \$20 departure tax—and you're warned about this; however, you must pay an additional \$15 environmental tax. This is an oxymoronic "mandatory contribution," which goes to keeping Palau green.

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