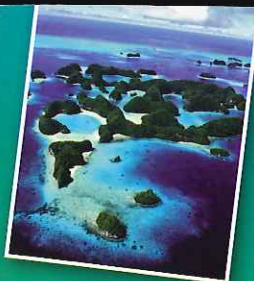


PALAU

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Marine growth smothers
the wrecks

The best dive shop in the world...



When Howard Sawyer's planned trip on a luxury liveaboard to the Sudanese Red Sea fell through, due to insufficient numbers, it wasn't a disaster. There was always Plan B; a plan so simple, so brilliant, it's a wonder why any diver would need Plan A in the first place.

Photographs by **KEVIN DAVIDSON**



The wrecks sit in
perfect visibility

Now there's a tech diver, built like a Cornish tin mine, who'll happily tell you that the best diving ever involves thermals, a pee valve, four torches, and is in North Utsire, or one of those equally inhospitable waters from the shipping forecast. In January. And if he ever gets together with 'Big_Don50' and the other like-minded slapheads off the internet, there'll be standing room only. In a revolving door. For us less-hardy souls there's Palau, a tiny splatter in pale Pacific blue, down and to the right from the Philippines, up from the 'A' in 'INDONESIA'. It's so in the middle of nowhere there's not even a destination posted on the departures board in Manila, just a flight number in the middle of the night. Reassuringly, the Continental Airlines check-in staff know enough to charge an extra 30 bucks for the dive kit.

Mexico is renowned for spectacular caves, the Philippines for critters, Dahab the Blue Hole, Chuuk the wrecks, Bahamas the sharks, and - with apologies to Dexter, one of Palau's legendary dive guides - there's at least one wall in the Solomons that beats his hands down.

But only in Palau will you find all this diversity, and more. And all within 50 minutes of the dock at Koror's Malakal harbour. Even in comparable exotic locations, such as Papua New Guinea, you still have to fly between draw card dives. In Palau, you simply dump your bag, set up your kit, and the world of diving from 0-40m is served up on a plate.

I've thought about this long and hard, and the only thing that's missing is an installation: a submerged sculpture park of lifelike figures, so in vogue in the Caribbean. There again, only Palau has Jellyfish Lake. And did I mention Blue Corner? This is world-class diving, or even better.

Some may crave the pampered prison of an exclusive island resort, where you'll have to bribe a boat boy every time you fancy a donut. Rest assured, Palau has a variety of swanky retreats if you simply must pay top dollar for bottled water, but there's also budget accommodation, which is why I'm here.

In the dive hub of Koror, eateries cater to every palate and you can walk the streets, day or night, without hassle. Try that in PNG and see how far you get. Indeed, Palauans habitually engage visitors to discover where you come from, and what you think of their country. You might have a local bark at you like a dog on a Friday night, but I'd suggest we've all been there...

Sam Scott started his diving business with a small boat and five bucks from his stepfather, one of the paramount high chiefs of Palau. He cut a door in a shipping container to make an office, and lived in another next door. 'Sam's Tours' was born.

The waterfront base has subsequently undergone

four major renovations and now boasts a flotilla of 13 vessels, including nine dive boats, and caters for everything from kayaking and land tours to tech dives. There's a retail shop, photographic and video centre, and a superb bar and grill that serves everything from pancakes and bacon at sunrise, to sushi and tequila at sunset.

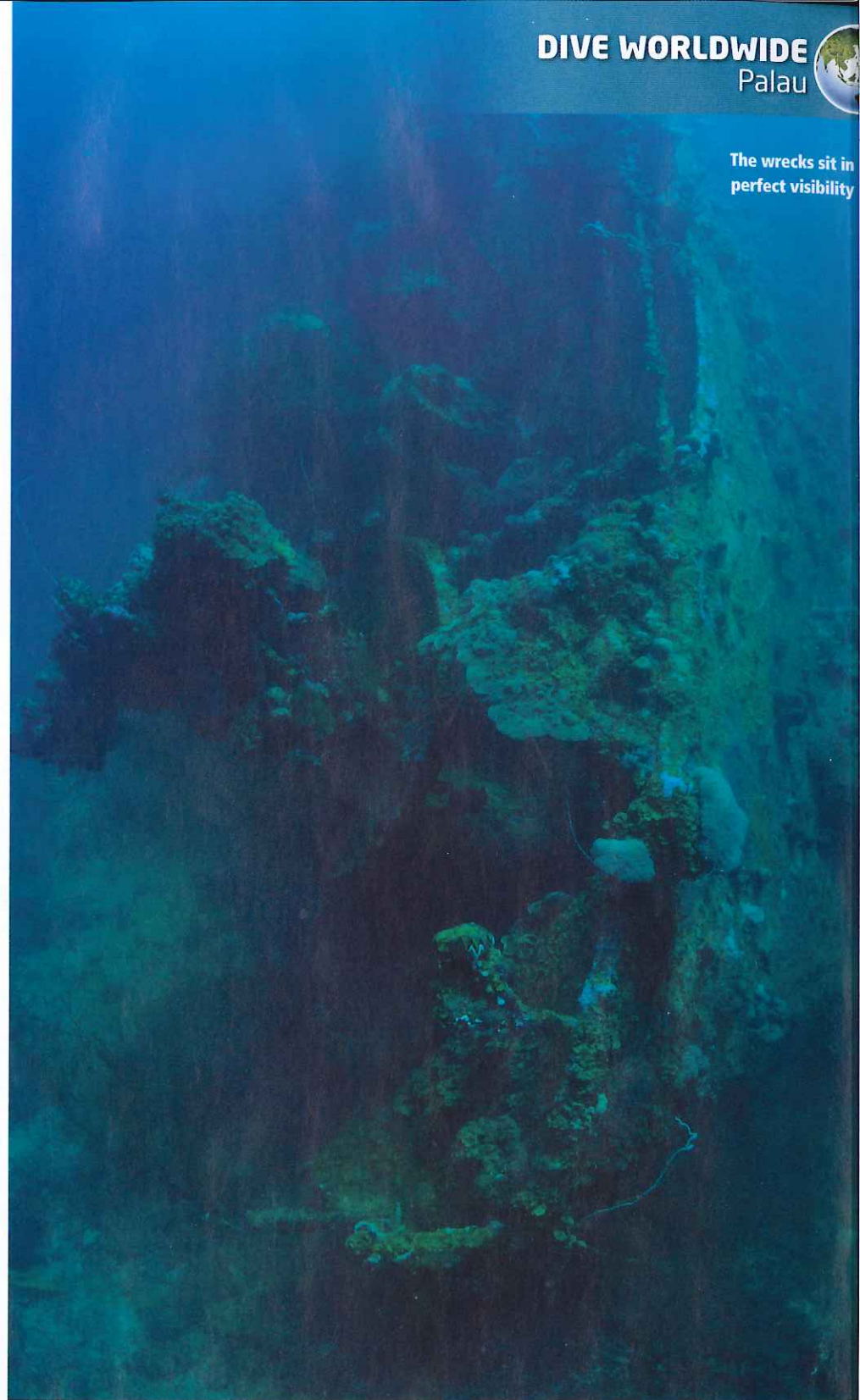
But that is just what you see on the surface, before you dive. It's not what you feel. Marketing manager Marc Bauman articulates what makes this shop so special.

"I coined the phrase, 'It's the Sam's Tours Family'. Once you dive at Sam's you become part of the

family. A lot of places you go it's very corporate, very clinical, and you're a number. With smaller operators you feel like family, because they only handle a small amount of clients, and Sam's still has that feel. That's really rare for a company of this size. We're no longer a dive shop. We're an international brand - and we fight every day to make it not like a corporate thing."

Time to dive

The staff are already at work in good humour when I arrive for breakfast just after 7am. I'm introduced to my guide, Marc Cruciani,





I'm on a boat...

You don't have to be land-based to explore Palau's underwater delights, there are also several liveaboards operating in the area.

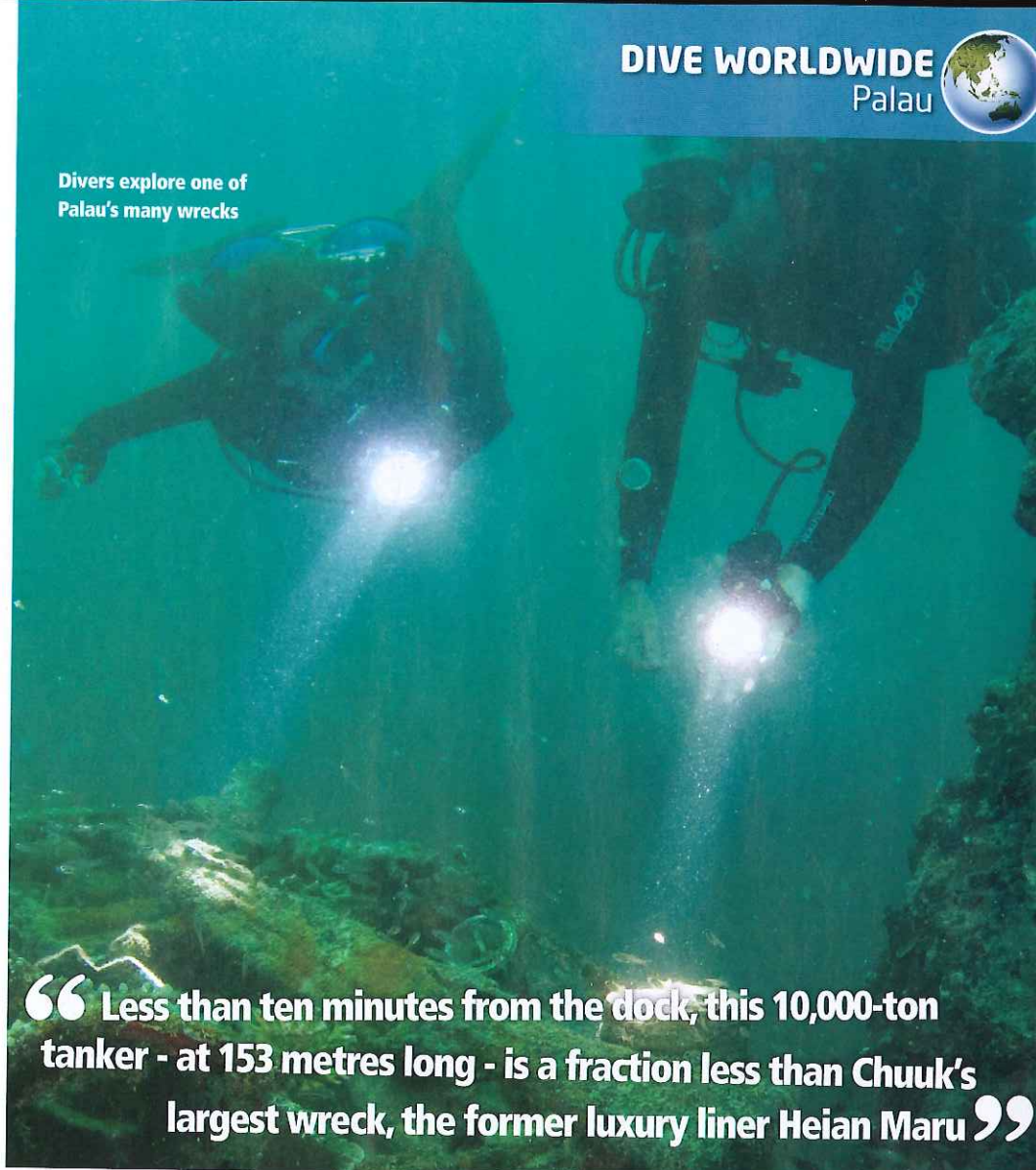
Ocean Hunter - There are two Ocean Hunter vessels, I and III. Ocean Hunter I has three cabins with private bath and a/c, and accommodates up to six guests. Ocean Hunter III takes 16 guests in three standard cabins, three deluxe cabins and two master staterooms, all with private bath and a/c. www.oceanhunter.com

Aggressor Fleet - The Palau Aggressor II is 32 metres long and accommodates 18 passengers in nine staterooms. It was built in 1994, but extensively refitted in 2009, offering plenty of space, comfortable dining room/salon, airy ensuite cabins and big dive deck. www.aggressor.com

Dancer Fleet - The Tropic Dancer is 32 metres long and takes 18 passengers in nine comfortable staterooms. Diving is conducted from a high-speed dive skiff, and the boat itself offers all the amenities you'd expect from the Dancer Fleet. www.dancerfleet.com

S/Y Palau Siren - Sam's Tours have teamed up with Worldwide Dive and Sail to build the luxurious 40-metre sailing yacht Palau Siren, which will be starting charters for 16 guests in November 2012. www.samstours.com and www.worldwidediveandsail.com

Divers explore one of Palau's many wrecks



“Less than ten minutes from the dock, this 10,000-ton tanker - at 153 metres long - is a fraction less than Chuuk's largest wreck, the former luxury liner Heian Maru”

Aircraft engine lying on the seabed



from Virginia. He's a full-blown techie, rebreather, cave and wreck specialist, with an easy-going manner to compliment his leisurely Southern drawl. Most of the wrecks I'm interested in, the aftermath of Operation Desecrate One during World War Two, are seldom dived.

"I don't know these wrecks personally, but I do know wreck divin'!"

Ladies might even describe Marc as 'fit'. He'll have to do.

The day boats leave and the hubbub subsides. We saddle up Black Tip, the tiny cockleshell Sam built his empire on. A 15-minute slalom through the picturesque rock islands and we're bobbing over Iro, the Japanese navy fleet oiler and supply vessel. We drop down the mooring to the bow, then over the port side to 35m to examine the torpedo 'bite', taken from the prow on 22 March 1944, when en-route from Balikpapan, Philippines. The watertight forecabin saved the ship on this occasion, and she limped into Palau. It was a brief stay of execution. She was hit by the opening aerial salvos on the first day of Operation Desecrate One, eight days later.

The following day she was set ablaze by further sorties from the carrier-based dive bombers of the USS Yorktown, and sunk upright on the





Aircraft lie on the bottom fully intact



Lanterns emerge from the silt

“ A 15-minute slalom through the picturesque rock islands and we’re bobbing over Iro, the Japanese navy fleet oiler and supply vessel ”

seabed at 40m. Returning to the deck at 30m we traverse the huge radial gun platform decorated with hanging coral; a sister gun sits aft. The entire wreck is stubbornly encrusted with clam and coral along its 120-metre length, the fire seemingly sterilising every exposed surface, encouraging the prolific growth.


Before us, the king posts and cat’s cradle mast work stretch skywards and the superstructure invites a slightly creepy dog-leg swim-through. The companionways yield a row of bare cabins, golden silt piled and flecked against the dark walls. A solitary beer bottle, conveniently atmospheric, stands on a ledge in the forward hold. Gnarled, gargantuan, eerie; Iro is a magnificent sunken Mary Celeste.

Local knowledge says visibility decreases towards the stern, but as we climb aboard Black Tip I assure Marc I’ve experienced visibility twice as good on the wreck as the eight metres we’ve enjoyed today, and although I sense his scepticism, by the end of my trip he’ll believe me.

Ian Mills of Cardiff Scuba joins us and provides another pair of eyes for the afternoon’s exploration of the Teshio Maru, an aquarium wreck just under 100 metres in length, lying on her starboard side on a sandy bottom at around 25m just off the Palau Pacific Resort. A Japanese army cargo ship, she was attacked by Grumman Avengers, single-engine torpedo bombers, launched from the USS Bunker Hill.

She stuck on a reef in the chaos of the attack, but was later refloated, or slipped off, depending on which account you read. Although salvaged, this is a beautiful carcass that enjoys stellar visibility by Palauan wreck standards, and frankly I don’t know why she’s not dived more often.

While Iro sits aloof, like some Gothic Dowager Empress, the perfect backdrop for a horror film, the Teshio by contrast is sunlit, airy, and an ideal wreck for the novice and the experienced alike, with little or no current, and plenty of features; rudder, ladders, winches, derricks, a brightly encrusted pulley, mosaic floor tiles, an exposed boiler and ornate deck gun mounted on the bow. Teshio affords an easy 20-metre swim-through for first timers, with a superb specimen of staghorn coral at the end. Indeed, the wreck boasts a variety of pretty marine life with whips, soft, plate and black coral supplemented by a variety of reef fish. But for sheer scale, both Iro and Teshio rest in the shadow of Amatsu Maru. Less than ten minutes from the dock, this 10,000-ton tanker - at 153 metres long - is a fraction less than Chuuk’s largest wreck, the former luxury liner Heian Maru.

Hit several times along her length, Amatsu went down by the stern. Upright and intact at approximately 43m on the seabed, this would be an ideal tech or rebreather dive, but even on air you’ll still want to see this wreck. 

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Palau



How to get there

Continental Micronesia is the only airline providing regularly scheduled flights to and from Koror International Airport in Palau, with daily direct service from Guam, USA and service twice a week from Manila, Philippines.

When to go

You can dive all year round, but the best diving is considered to be between late-November and early June.

“The massive four-blade propellor, some six metres in diameter, is visible at 39m”

Entry requirements

Valid passport with at least six months left to expiry and a return ticket.

Currency

US dollar (£1 = US\$1.62).

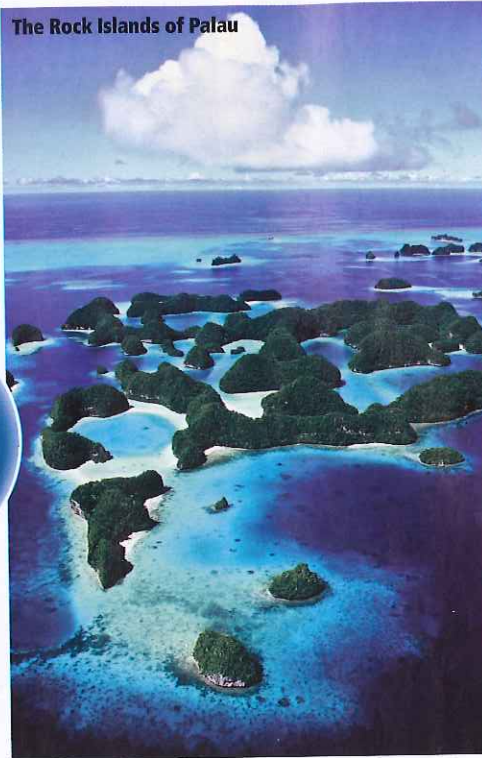
Where to eat and meet

Sam's Tours have a great bar and grill right on site, and when the staff stick around after work, that gives you an idea of how popular it is!

SPORT DIVER VERDICT

Palau offers great diversity to all levels of diver, with wrecks, colourful marine life, ripping currents, vibrant corals and pelagic encounters

The Rock Islands of Palau



Jellyfish Lake

One of the wonders of the aquatic world, Jellyfish Lake is a must, and is usually fitted into the week's diving schedule during a surface interval. This enclosed marine lake is accessed with a short steep hike up and down through verdant forest. There are uneven steps cut into the rock, so you'll need dive boots or suchlike.

Thankfully, the Palauans have constructed a rope rail to minimise the risk of breaking your neck.

You'll need to show your Jellyfish Lake permit, which you can buy from your dive shop, at the gatehouse before the trail starts. There's a small dock lakeside where you can don mask, snorkel and fins and you'll find the jellies in the sunshine. They instinctively migrate and bloom away from shadows cast by the forest.

Their only predator are white anemones, so these jellies don't 'sting' in the traditional sense, although this depends on your skin sensitivity. Fin slowly. This experience is initially akin to the nightmare of smashing everything in a china shop, but the gentle pulsing creatures just bounce off you.

Two or three dives will give you an appreciation. The massive four-blade propellor, some six metres in diameter, is visible at 39m. Salvage began post war, with the removal of 8,000 gallons of oil, but a subsequent explosion, reportedly when a diver using a cutting torch hit a pocket of trapped gas, killing himself and a colleague, convinced the Japanese to abandon further operations.

The wreck is smothered in black coral trees, giving Amatsu the aka moniker of 'The Black Coral Wreck'. The bridge area can be penetrated through the ceiling beams, where a small empty safe can be found. The superstructure is as big as a house and there's a beautiful intact catwalk leading from the pump house roof.

We tick off the list of wrecks one by one. The LST 1 landing craft, twisted midships, with AA guns, a rectangular swim-through hatch, and a lively-looking shell lying on the seabed just off the starboard side; the picturesque Japanese Aichi E13A reconnaissance seaplane; and probably Palau's best treasure trove, the unidentified 'Helmet Wreck'.

Named after the fused Japanese tin hats that lie in the aft hold, 'Helmet' also contains numerous deep charges, now corroding, and slowly seeping picric acid. Dive here at your own risk, if you can find a guide willing to take you. You will be exposed to the chemicals even if you touch nothing. Most of the nicknacks are on the upper deck, including a gas mask, rifle, and a box of fuses. But the gems lie forward; three aircraft engines in the hold, and in the forecastle locker, a collection of beautiful storm lanterns.

By the end of the week the daily schedule board shows a growing list of other divers wanting wrecks, including Ken, from the UK, and his buddy Ryan from Nebraska. They've eyes the size of dinner plates after an exceptional encounter with 80-plus sharks at Blue Corner, but Ryan's dived there four times already this trip.

"Do I have to dive it again, man?"

I turn to Marc with the immortal line: "You're gonna need a bigger boat."

So we upgrade, and although I play down the visibility and the lack of encounters with pelagic species, so no one's disappointed, to my surprise everyone has a great time. It's something different, a side of Palau many divers don't get to see.

Marc grins: "I was telling the other guides, I ain't had no more n' 15 metre vis this week, an' I'm as happy as a pig n' s***!"

"Chuyo Maru this afternoon?"

"Sounds like a plan, dude!" ■

Howard Sawyer dived with Sam's Tours (www.samstours.com)

Tour operators
Dive Worldwide www.diveworldwide.com