

January 25 – Feb 1, 2004

This report is part 2 of our two-week trip to Yap and Palau. Whereas our first week was land-based in Yap, our 2nd week was on a live-aboard on the Big Blue Explorer. On this leg of our trip, we completed the better part of 25 dives.

### **Bottomline**

Palau is breathtaking both above and below the water. The rock islands are covered in dense, green vegetation and the waters and reefs are decorated in all of the colors of the rainbow. From the ever-present Gray Reef Sharks, to the occasional Manta or Marble Ray, the sea life was plentiful and diverse. At times the [currents were quite strong](#) and sometimes even a bit treacherous. This is not a place for the new diver, but for those with good buoyancy skills, strong leg muscles, and good air consumption. Palau certainly proved to us why it is one of the seven diving wonders of the world!

Due to the distance from Malakal Harbor to the good dive sites (50-60 mins), Palau seems best suited for a live-aboard. If you require high-end facilities, the BBE is not for you. However, if you want great service, clean rooms, and a little extra ‘space’, the 167’ BBE is the ship for you.

### **Facilities**

The BBE is a converted Japanese commercial fishing communications vessel. While it has undergone significant improvements for the comfort of its diving passengers, it still retains its practical design. Much of the physical characteristics and amenities of the ship can be found on their website, so I will elaborate on a couple of areas of interest to those contemplating diving from the BBE.

Nitrox is readily available and they were generally right at 32% ( I had to change my computer once to 33 %). They also have four AL-100s for air hogs (or buddies of gill breathers) otherwise you are diving AL-80s.

Diving is done from one of their two 30’ chase boats. At the beginning of each day, your tank, BCD, and regulator are moved from the ship to the chase boat and setup for you. At the end of the day, they REALLY do take your equipment up and rinse it and hang it up to dry. During the day, you need only take care of your wetsuit, booties, and camera/video equipment. Everything else stays on the boat. They even bring a whip down to the boat to fill the tanks. On board the chase boats, they have water, towels, and O2. There is a small dry storage area but NO fresh water rinse bucket for cameras on the chase boat – a minor issue given that most dive sites are no more than 5 minutes away from the BBE.

Back on board the BBE, there is a separate camera/video room. It was at capacity with all 16 of the divers on board this trip having camera or video equipment, but with a little planning and forethought, we generally weren’t competing for space.

We booked the least expensive staterooms, which at times were a little cramped. Most of the time, a little informal scheduling prevented toes from being stepped on. The rooms had air-conditioning, which was very important at the beginning of the trip, but as time wore on, I became much more acclimated to the warm, humid air. There is very limited space, so don't bring a lot of things into your room. We left much of the extra clothes and dive gear in our cases, which were stored below (and accessible with just a quick request).

My favorite part of the ship was the forward upward deck. Near the hot tub, comfortable lounge chairs allow you to stare up at the stars, enjoy the warm breeze, and contemplate life. The Captain will even turn off most of the lights on the bow so you have a better view – all you have to do is ask.

### **Dining**

While the food was abundant aboard the BBE, the quality was good to good+ depending on your tastes. We joked often that if you are on the ship (BBE) you are either eating or sleeping. The cycle started with the morning chimes to call you to light breakfast (which by the way was not always regular – set your alarm watch) of juice and toast/bagel, followed by the morning dive, followed by regular breakfast, then dive, then lunch, then dive, then snack (a light cake), then dive, then dinner, then a night dive.

Each meal is designed to have two meats (fish and either pork/chicken [or eggs]/beef), two starches (rice and potato), a vegetable dish, soup/oatmeal and for lunch and dinner a salad. My only complaint was that, despite me mentioning it twice, they consistently left the salad dressings out. Given one of our groups past experience in Yap with food poisoning, we didn't take any chances – I skipped the salads for the remainder of the week. From a beverage perspective, alcohol was not included in the package, and for us Diet Coke fans, they had real Diet Coke (not Coke Light), other non-diet carbonated drinks, water, and juice. I don't remember seeing milk

No report would be complete without covering desserts. While I don't have a strong sweet tooth, I did break down two nights. One night they had a very good cheesecake. The other they had ice cream. There was (what I was told) a very good Chocolate Cake dessert and some others. Everyone should find at least one dessert that they will like during the week.

A quick comment about the food in Koror. On our last day, we ended up staying on land before our 1a.m. flight. We went into the main town to shop, sightsee, and eat lunch and dinner. Lunch was ok, but dinner was rather poor. We had tried to get into “The Penthouse“ which is located above the Etpison Museum. Unfortunately, a private group from the Aggressor booked it. On my return flight, a Flight Attendant confirmed that the best place in town was The Penthouse. Everywhere else is a distant second.

### **Sightseeing / Other Interests**

On the one day the ship moved, we headed to Peleliu. As we were out on the bow, we saw a pod of Spinner Dolphins off in the distance. A few minutes later, the Spinners were

playing in the wake of the BBE. Afraid I would miss something, I didn't retrieve my video camera, but instead reveled in their fun. As if saying good-bye, a lone Spinner did a 720 spin plus summersault and then they were gone. The only way it could have been better would if we would have been in the water! (or maybe if I had had my camera!)

At Peleliu, we opted to skip one of the dives and do the land tour. For those of you unfamiliar with Peleliu, it was the location of Operation Stalemate during WWII where 3 US Marine Divisions staged an amphibious assault against the well entrenched Japanese forces (in addition to the link, the BBE has a video from The History Channel which talks about Operation Stalemate; be sure to view it before going to Peleliu). Our only source of disappointment on the entire trip was that somehow communications got crossed and the land tour never showed up at the dock. I have heard from others, including SB's own Albatross, that it's definitely worth skipping a dive.

As mentioned above, due to the fact that we had to vacate the BBE around 9a.m. Saturday morning and our flight didn't leave until 1a.m. Sunday, we reserved two day-rooms for our group. We opted for the more expensive choice at the Palau Pacific Resort (PPR). The PPR is beautiful and for those who are into the resort scene, it is top-notch. It's a ways from town, but only \$3-\$4 for a taxi so that was a non-issue. The BBE even delivered us to their dock.

No dive report about Palau would be complete without mentioning Jellyfish Lake. While technically a snorkeling trip (and hence why it is in this section) it is an interesting and fun excursion to do once. The Living Sea has a nice sequence on Jellyfish Lake, so if you want to know more check it out.

## **Diving**

Dive Sites: Big Drop Off, Blue Corner, Blue Holes, Chandelier Caves, Fern Wall aka, Turtle Wall, German Channel, Iro Maru, Mandarin Fish Lake, New Drop Off, Ngedbus Coral Gardens, Peleliu Express, Peleliu Pocket, Peleliu Wall, Siaes Tunnel, Turtle Cove, Ulong Channel.

As I said above, the diving in Palau was awesome. Soft [corals](#), sponges, pleurobranchus, fans, gorgonians, and vibrantly colored fish adorn the steep, vertical walls. Macro enthusiasts and big fish photographers will enjoy the incredible diversity of life in Palau. Gray Reef and White-tip Reef Sharks were on every dive. We saw several friendly [Napoleon Wrasses](#) who had an appetite for hard-boiled eggs (we didn't feed em, just tempted em). Towards the end, we saw a school of [Moorish Idols](#) in a synchronized swim across the reef.

The water temp was similar to Yap and ran between 82F and 86F Suunto degrees. Median visibility was about 60 feet with the worst being 40 feet and the best being 80+. The swift currents will thrill Adrenalin junkies. Hook up to a rock and watch the action come to you.

Out of my 22 dives, there are three very different dives that stick in my mind: Ulong

Channel, Peleliu Pocket, and New Drop Off.

For roller coaster/speed enthusiasts, nothing compares to 'shooting the *Ulong Channel*'. Basically, you fly down the channel orienting your feet so that you can kick to remain in the middle of the channel. At one point, you fly over patches of huge lettuce coral, but don't even try to think of stopping to take a picture. The current has you and won't let go until you are out at Predator Point – what a ride!

Probably the single most rewarding dive from sea life diversity was *Peleliu Pocket*. The entire dive was a 'big fish' smorgasbord. We dropped down and about a minute later came upon a [Leopard Shark](#) sleeping on the bottom. After tolerating our flashing strobes and our ever-intrusive video cameras, it decided it had had enough and swam off into the distance. About a minute later, we came upon a [Hawksbill Turtle](#) going about eating its morning meal. Completely oblivious to us, it let us have our fill of pictures and video before we thanked it and continued on. No sooner than my buddy and I had continued on and catch up with the group had they already discovered a Nurse Shark under a large coral mound. A few minutes there and we headed off only to encounter a sleeping Green Turtle. We shot even more pictures and video and eventually, much to my chagrin, it woke up and decided that we were jerks for waking it up and it took off. Who said turtles aren't perceptive – I still feel bad about stressing Mr. Shell out. At this point, I am seriously thinking to myself that well, it's been 2 minutes since I have seen something worth videoing; what is next? While pondering what could possibly show up that would cap off a dive as great as this; suddenly, headed straight at me, is this large [Marble Ray](#). I had seen a glimpse of my first Marble Ray in Yap, but wasn't able to get a good shot. Now this guy is headed right at me. It decides it is going to go right underneath me and gives us all a great photo opportunity. Nice end to an awesome dive.

The last dive that really sticks out in my mind was back at the New Drop Off. It was one of our last dives of the trip and our one diver who was the most inexperienced had decided to sit this one out – in retrospect, a prescient decision. As we approached the mooring buoy, it was obvious that the current was running pretty strong. It looked like a river with the mooring buoy being nearly submerged as water ran over the top of it. We were going to repeat the plan that had worked well several times before: drop down quickly, swim towards the edge of the wall, hook into a rock / dead coral at about 55fsw, and watch for a while, then release and drift along the wall and the shallower area where we could do our safety stop.

As we rolled in and dropped down, we encountered a moderate upwelling causing us to kick as hard as we could in order to get down and close to the wall. I ended up at about 80 fsw, and as we began nearing the wall, the upwelling began to quickly push me up the wall. I aimed for a rock on the edge of the wall and successfully hooked in.

Now that we were hooked in, and as I reflected back on the story of the poor female diver that had lost her life when she was unable to unhook while having equipment problems, I continued to test my ability to pull myself towards the rock. No problem, the current was never that strong and if all else failed, I had shears and a knife to cut loose. All the while,

the current was going in all kinds of directions. I was spun 270 degrees, thankfully I had selected a point where the hook would hold unless I went a full 360. Doing 270s I was largely trying to do two things. First, I was watching my buddy and the other divers to make sure they were ok and secondly, I was trying to keep off of the surrounding coral. Watching the fish for a few minutes, it was clear that they weren't fairsing much better than we were. While it was a 'wild ride', there wasn't much to see as even the sharks had headed to calmer waters. After about 10 minutes hooked in and no fish and wild currents, Gat (the closest DM to us) gave the abort dive signal. There was no use sticking around here.

We unhooked and quickly began heading out over the top of the reef and on into the blue. As we floated together, we noticed that the other DM and one of our divers were not around. I had kept my eye on my buddy while we were hooked in and followed him with the group; I figured if we were going to float out to sea, it would be together. At this point we did the only thing we could do and ascended to begin our safety stop. I am at about 24 feet, so I start to kick up. I notice that I am not really going anywhere. I kick a little bit harder and I am still at 24 feet and I notice that if I stop kicking, I begin going down. Ok, so I am in a little bit of a downdraft, so I kick and add a little bit of air and finally I hit 20 feet where my Cobra informs me I have a mandatory safety stop of 4 mins – no doubt a result of my quick ascent coming up the wall earlier. I empty a little air out of my BCD and stay right about 18 fsw.

We are all in a group in blue water doing our safety stop as Gat inflates his SMB on his reel. Pretty soon I notice that our air bubbles aren't going up, they are going 'out'. We are just staring at them as they appear to be suspended in time. I look over at Gat and his line. He is going around and around me. We appear to be in a whirlpool with Gat circling us. I think, this is pretty interesting all the while closely watching my depth gauge to make sure that I don't end up getting pushed up/down. All of the sudden I feel an upwelling literally pushing up on my fins and body and the next second I have shot (according to my profile) from 18 feet to 8 feet and the surface looks darn close. I turn over and kick back down where my Cobra again informs me that I have another mandatory safety stop of 4 minutes due that last rapid ascent. We floated out of the whirlpool, finish up our safety stop, and hit the surface. I never felt in any danger, but was glad that our more junior diver had opted out – one less thing for me to worry about. Once we were on the boat, we kept an eye out for the other two and eventually saw them about ¼ mile away from us. Thankfully no one was hurt, but it was interesting to see air bubbles suspended in the water and the DM circling us. I am sure by some standards, this was a non-event, but I considered it a valuable experience.

The only thing I personally would change on a return trip to Palau was the elimination of the dives to Chandelier Caves and Mandarinfish Lake. If you have dived any caves, or even the Cenotes, then you have seen more than this very brief dive into the 4 different chambers. As for Mandarinfish Lake, we saw more Mandarinfish in Yap and the condition of the coral in that little area is pretty poor – no doubt from the hordes of divers touching and laying on it. I wouldn't be surprised if it is completely devoid of life in 5 years – too bad.

Diving in Palau is incredible. While not for the inexperienced diver, it offers much in terms of both macro and wide-angle photography. Getting to Palau can be long. It took 23 hours from the time we left the hotel heading to the airport to the time I arrived at home. But, I would return in a heartbeat and would stay on the Big Blue Explorer.

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*"Otters are the Guardian of the Kelp Forest"*

**The Blue Planet**

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