

## Yap

January 18-24, 2004

It's difficult to summarize 17 dives and a week's worth of experience into a succinct summary. Hopefully, I have accomplished this here while providing useful information for those contemplating a trip to Yap.

### **Bottomline**

While the Mantas were awesome, the rest of diving was just ok. I wouldn't fly the 18 hours to go to Yap alone, but it works well combined with a trip to Palau and/or Chuuk. Because of schedules we were there 7 days; 4 days would have been plenty. The people were friendly and facilities comfortable.

### **Facilities**

We stayed at the Manta Ray Bay Resort and dove with the associated Yap Divers. There really aren't too many choices – which was fine, as we were quite satisfied with MBR/YD with a few exceptions. Despite their web page, they haven't had E-6 processing in two years – a bummer for the one member of our group not digital. They also didn't have Nitrox “this week”. I never asked and so never got a straight answer if they still pump Nitrox, but in reality, with 3 dives per day pretty much the maximum, there wasn't really a strong need/benefit.

MBR's rooms were clean, nicely decorated, and air-conditioned. The beds were very comfortable.

The town of Colonia is quite small. The “Mall” (a YCA store, a few drugstores, and other specialty stores) is within walking distance and carries a reasonable assortment of food, snacks, over the counter meds, etc.. The downside is most of Colonia closes at 3pm on Saturdays and is closed all day Sunday. The exception is a store across the road from the MBR, but the variety of goods is quite limited as compared to the YCA store.

### **Dining**

Places to eat in Colonia are quite limited. The Mnuw, MBR's ship-based restaurant, was certainly the most convenient. It was on the high end of local prices, but the service was great and the food quality varied between good and very good with breakfast being a strong meal (their omelet is very good). All but one of our dinners were at the Mnuw, primarily because of proximity to the water and convenience.

The one dinner exception was when we went up the hill to eat at Trader's Ridge. This is a very nice restaurant and we felt a bit underdressed in t-shirts and shorts, although there were others in the restaurant who were in golf shirts and shorts. Most everyone ordered the Catch of the Day, where I decided on the Seafood Jambalaya. While their portions were rather small, mine was both tasty and plentiful. For spicy food lovers, I highly recommend it. It was also the only place I ever found Diet Coke. YCA was the only store to sell cans of diet anything – Diet Pepsi. The Mnuw was out of Diet Pepsi the first few

days, so I was 'forced' to drink their locally brewed "Manta Beer".

Lunch everyday (but Sunday -closed) was at O'Keefe's. It's a quaint, outdoor little place very close to MBR and the prices are very affordable. The menu is not large, but everyone found something they liked. Sashimi was a big hit and usually we began the meal with 3-4 plates as an appetizer (@\$3/plate!) to get a good wasabe rush ( we did notice that after we left Yap, our incidence of in-water heartburn dropped – as we weaned ourselves from the wasabe). Definitely give it a shot – especially on those days where you aren't real hungry (just get the sashimi for \$3) or the days where you are REAL hungry – where you can pig out for \$10. There is one caveat. While not confirmed, one member of our group came down with what he believes was a mild-case of food poisoning from the incompletely cooked egg in his Special Ramen. Needless to say, after that we stayed with the normal Ramen, which is identical sans egg, just in case.

### **Sightseeing / Other Interests**

Unfortunately, we missed the 3-hour Yap cultural tour. It is only available on Tuesdays and Saturdays. We somehow missed that fact on Tuesday (with diving, I am not sure we would have parted with 3 hrs of dive time anyway) and as we were departing Saturday, we didn't have enough time to pack and go on the tour. I definitely would have liked to have participated in it.

As a minor proxy for the cultural tour, we did the kayak tour of the area. This was great way to spend our pre-flight no-dive day and afforded us the opportunity to visit a real Yap village. On the way back to the MBR, we stopped at the Yap Museum, which had various kinds of watercolors and carvings from local artists for sale.

### **Diving**

Dive Sites: Big Bend, Fanif Wall, Gilman Wall, Magic Kingdom, Mi'l Channel, O'Keefe's Island, One Two Two, Vertigo, Yap Caverns & Lionfish Wall.

I believe it is safe to say that Yap is predominantly about Mantas. The quality and quantity of fish life around the outer reefs pales compared to what I have seen in most other parts of the world (Palau would strongly reinforce this feeling as life was incredible plentiful there). El Nino seems to have done a fair amount of damage to the reef with a lot of dead coral covered in algae. That being said, the Mantas are incredible.

Mi'l Channel is the Manta place in Yap. We encountered Mantas on every dive to Mi'l Channel. Mantas are usually found at two cleaning stations. The deeper one is at about 75fsw with the shallower one at 45fsw. Generally the approach is to go to the deeper cleaning station and wait out for a bit and if there is no action, head to the shallower. Because we were in Yap during the Manta mating season, the Mantas didn't hang around the cleaning stations very long....basically in for a cleaning and then back to making baby Mantas.

On two of our dives, both at the 45fsw cleaning station, we experienced a 'squadron' of at least 6-10 large Mantas 'flying' in formation in the current 'posing' for us. It was truly

awe-inspiring. A couple of us were lucky to have [close flybys](#) where we could have reached out and touched their huge undersides as they let our exhaust bubbles tickle their undersides (at least that's the theory). Towards the end of the week, we would skip the deeper cleaning station and just hang out at the shallower one and wait. I struggle calling this diving, as we would drop down and wait patiently either flapping in the current or huddled down in the sand, rock, and dead coral (undoubtedly from divers before us) with our cameras poised. Several us broke 100 minutes on an AL-80 in silent anticipation of Mantas; remarkably the time passed very fast. A few times while we were waiting, we would see Gray Reef, White Tip Sharks, or Eagle Rays coming and hanging in the current.

While I have seen video to the contrary from the local video pro, Mark Thorpe (be sure to ask him to see his latest video), visibility in the channel ranged from 10-15 to 40-50 feet. While I guessed that Mi'l came from 'middle', there were times when I suspected it came from 'milk' as the water had a milky quality. But the water was a warm 82-84F.

In an attempt to moderate the number of divers in Mi'l Channel at any one time, the second dive was usually on the outside of the reef. These dives were all drift dives and despite the relatively strong currents, visibility was not Cozumellian; probably in the 100-foot range. As we gained familiarity with the areas, we were successful in convincing our DM to do multiple dives in Mi'l Channel and skip the outer reef.

The final treat of Yap was my first encounter with Mandarinfish. They are incredibly decorated and their antics are quite amusing. Mandarinfish come out of the holes at dusk to mate. Males are about 2 inches long with females about an inch. The mating ritual that we witnessed had the male flittering around, weaving through the coral until he found a suitable female (in our case, two females). During this time, taking a picture of them is quite challenging and they tend to shy away from flashlights. However once the male/female pair has been determined, they will rise about 2 inches above the coral in open water, do their thing, and in a blink of an eye they are gone. It is during the actual mating when you have the best opportunity for a clear shot. Look at [this picture](#) that one of the Oly-5050 guys in our group took and you can see the eggs underneath their bodies.

### **Summary**

Yap doesn't offer the variety and diversity of sea life to motivate me to make the 18-hour flight to experience Yap alone. However, the contrast of two beautiful fish -- the large, monochromatic Manta Ray and the small, psychedelic Mandarinfish -- make Yap an interesting and worthwhile place to dive in combination with Palau and/or Chuuk.

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

**The Blue Planet**