

# Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Micronesia; the little islands in the northern Pacific



## Chapter 10 B

28. March - 28. April 2005

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As even well travelled people don't exactly know, where **Micronesia** is, let us explain: it roughly covers a vast region of pacific ocean with thousands of lush tropical islands and atolls scattered between the Philippines and Hawai'i. The name means "little islands" that sums up in a total landmass of only about 3'225 square kilometres dotted over an ocean area of 11,66 million km<sup>2</sup>. The region of Micronesia includes the island groups of the **Caroline Islands**, which form today the Federated States of Micronesia, the **Marshall Islands**, **Palau**, **Kiribati**, **Nauru** and the American territories of **Guam** and the **Northern Marianas**.

After Spanish seafarers "discovered" them in 1521, little changed for the next 150 years but after that, they have gone through a troublesome period, when one island after the other was colonised and forcefully christianised, often by murderous means. After persuasion failed, the Spanish resorted to force and sent even troops down, in order to support the christian missionaries who carried out forced baptisms. The local population was dramatically reduced further by disease brought in by missionaries and invaders - sometimes down to 5%. Afterwards, the Micronesian islands were re-occupied and traded mainly between the Germans, British, the Spanish again, then the Japanese and finally fell to the Americans after WWII. Towards the end of the last century, most islands became more or less independent. Despite self governing, they still rely heavily on subsidies from their last colonial power, the USA.

The surviving Micronesians rebounded a bit in population numbers but have lost most of their ancient culture and religion today. Despite the western influence, Micronesia is still different. A visitors handbook, published by one of the island's governments, outlined: "we hope our visitors will appreciate the values we consider important: family, hospitality, peace and tranquillity, time for conversation and sharing, time to relax. We put those values ahead of TV - we have none, work - we do work, but we have not become slaves to it and the pressures of modern life."

This and all the rest we've read about these remote islands sounded very interesting to us and we were curious, whether **Kosrae**, **Pohnpei**, **Yap** and **Palau**, the 4 islands we chose with our 'Continental Micronesia airpass' from Guam, still reveal some of this spirit.



## **Kosrae**

Island hopping via Guam over Chuuk and Pohnpei, we saw many impressive atolls and islets from the plane, before reaching the island-state of **Kosrae** in the  **FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA**, called FSM for short.

As it was Easter Monday, many island people returned from visiting their relatives and therefore wore head-wreaths or necklaces made of fresh flowers, which they got as a farewell present. After landing at Kosrae, airport personnel wanted to re-direct us twice to the transit area, as it seems that not many tourists choose this island as a destination to stay. But our adventure started right here! On the simple baggage claim, with no conveyor belt, we were the only ones fetching such small luggage. All the islanders arrived with huge carton- or plastic boxes and cooler boxes (50x50x100cm) containing all sorts of gifts, including life-seafood. Not the flight, but the gifts are the main expenses when they visit family on a neighbouring island.

Outside the airport, the returning were being greeted by local singers and relatives and everybody, including us, received a fresh flower head wreath (called lei) as a welcome present.

**Kosrae**, with its widely visible landmark, a mountain crest resembling a "sleeping lady", is only about 110 km<sup>2</sup> big and home to about 7'500 people, but there was no compact village. Everyone lived scattered along the road that circles "ú of the





volcanic island. Even Tofol, the so-called capital, was just a collection of government- and service buildings. For us, the main attraction was the people, who always returned a smile, even when passing by in their cars. Children were often almost posing in front of us, seeming disappointed if we didn't take their picture. As it was the easiest to get in touch with the people while walking along the street, we did so until our legs hurt. Otherwise, we often used taxis as the few restaurants were all pretty spread out. Taxis were cheap, but hard to find, as they were high in demand. The number of cars was amazingly high for such a small island. Someone in most families owned one, although many cars were often a bit crashed or had smashed windows, if they were not missing altogether. Apparently they were being imported from Japan or sometimes from Australia. Traffic drove on the right side but steering wheels could be on either, right or left, nobody minded. Traffic was still very safe, especially thanks to the low speed limit of 15 miles per hour (24 km/h) in urbanized areas and 25 m/40 km/hr outside the hamlets. At night, many big crabs were being run over when they came up from the beach, but that was because they had a tactic of standing still, instead of running, when a vehicle approached.

It was not uncommon to see drivers opening the door while driving and we learned that they did this to spit out the red juice resulting from chewing betelnut. This habit was widespread among all island folks; even one immigration officer had a clump in his mouth when we arrived at the airport.

We almost never saw wooden houses, either they were built of bricks or more often: they were just simple shacks, assembled from rusty roofing material and anything else people had found. Just a few had still thatched roofs, most used tinroof again. As it never gets cold here, only wet, it was not necessary to have solid walls and the penetrating danger here. Quite a lot of how many people had left the only visible "wealth" locals had, the population is growing half of the population is expectancy is around 61.



Today's Micronesians are a bit contact with westerners. They Polynesians but are a unique darker Melanesians and the Polynesia, big is not beautiful, common either. Among men,

Pohnpei, mostly were dressed in the same type of skirt sewn in three tiers with frills, decorated with big ornaments of flower or fruit embroidery. Almost every girl and woman had long hair, but they never wore it open - except for traditional dancing.

An uncountable number of sometimes tiny little shops were dotted all around Kosrae's inhabited parts. Sometimes every other house sold a few things, often only some tins, chips or rice. With such an abundance of stores, it was hard for us to find out who sold what, as for example bread or water bottles, because tapwater was not drinkable.

We stayed at a guesthouse next to the Lelu-Ruins, which were the reminders of an ancient high culture. We were very lucky to be invited to a traditional Kosraen feast, organised by the owners of our guesthouse. We could sample many kinds of local food, offered on a big buffet with almost 40 different items. Most of them, like taro-root, breadfruit and cassava, another starchy root, were special to us, but the spaghetti, spareribs and fried chicken-wings we left to the others, as there was also lots of seafood and meat prepared the traditional way.

The serving order followed a pattern order in which we, the foreign guests were allowed to help ourselves first from the buffet, followed by the permanently staying (and working) guests, then the children of which the boys came first and then the girls. Next were the hosts and afterwards the invited family members.

As it is the custom on any celebration or other occasion like "first child births" or funeral, the inviting family did entertain their guests after the meal by singing and playing the



more of a mixed race than before look not quite as big and strong as blend of Asians and Polynesians, the European races. Here, unlike in but being very slim is not very western clothing with long trousers, Women on Kosrae and also later on

"Ukulele", a Miniguitar. Very cute was also the traditional dancing performed by six small girls in the age between 2 and 5 in a hula style belly dance.

The easiest way to explore the island, was by taxi and together with Ivy who arrived the same day at our guesthouse, we took a cab to two waterfalls. We were happy that the driver also guided us the way to the rivers and that he stopped for us in a hamlet for an hour, whilst we wandered around and exchanged smiles with all the locals.

Ivy is a young and incredibly well travelled lady from Hong Kong. At 35, she has already been to 80 countries all over the world and seen contrasts like Greenland or the naturist grounds of Croatia. To meet her, was a very big coincidence as the number of genuine tourists to Kosrae totals only about 150 per year, as we were told at the tourist office; that's three per week!

She came here to dive, like most other tourists to Kosrae do. Another 1'500 - 2'000 foreigners are coming either for business, as **Peace Corps** volunteer workers or, unfortunately even today; as missionaries, that are invading all Pacific Islands still in huge numbers, despite the fact that they all have been christianized long ago. Not only catholic and protestant, at least seven other christian sects are represented here, all trying to lure people to their definition of faith and sucking money out of the pockets of those already converted. About 25 churches serve the 7'500 Kosraens. The churches are so wealthy; they can even afford their own airline, which is called "Pacific Missionary Airways" which gives them the possibility to reach the most remote inhabited islets.

In a tourist brochure, it was mentioned that "we do not develop film and we do not X-ray film". Back at the airport, there was really only manual checking - no sophisticated scanning. Every piece of luggage was carefully searched by hand. We watched with amusement how long it took the safety inspector to find out how to open Brigitte's very compact sleeping bag and then put it back in place again. Obviously, we carried some unknown and unnecessary things to this island.

## Phonpei

After an hours flight over some beautiful atolls, we reached **Phonpei**, which is also part of the FSM. Again, we seemed to be the only tourists to disembark. After learning that in these islands there is usually neither an airport bus nor taxis waiting upon arrival of the few planes, we had this time made a reservation for a guesthouse and were now being picked up by the owner. We were pleased that the accommodation was centrally located and everything could be reached on foot.

The main village of **Kolonia**, with 3'200 inhabitants, was small but way bigger than any place on the last island. Pohnpei is one of the bigger with a landmass of 334 km<sup>2</sup> housing 31'000 people.

On our first impression, it looked like the people here were poorer than those on Kosrae. We saw more simple shacks and it was dirtier, but still there were many cars driving around.

The cleanest place was **Palikir**, the capital complex of the FSM. The nine buildings were completely modern, but the rooflines, the colour and shapes were reminiscent of traditional meeting houses.

All over the FSM, two out of three paid jobs are government jobs, as the American payments are mainly used to maintain a bloated bureaucracy.

As the islanders love to travel and are very social minded, it seems just normal that a delegation of 22 would go to a congress to a foreign country or another island, even if two of them would be enough to do this job.

The intention of the American payments was to give the local government the funds needed to create new industries in order to become financially independent. However, today the working moral is very poor, the





islanders are not really interested to work hard, just to have a government job, where they arrive late but leave early, sounds more appealing.

On the other hand, Micronesians who got the chance to study abroad often did not return as they found better employment opportunities in the United States. Even family members that had emigrated, joining others that had left the islands, were apparently quite sought after as employees and enjoy a good reputation as reliable and cheap labour. That way, whole communities of Micronesians have sprung up in various US Cities. Thanks to the compact agreement of free association they can stay and work in the USA as long as they like.

We heard from an Australian advisor, that a police officer in the FSM earns about USD 3'000 annually, whereas the highest ranking government officer would get paid USD 35'000 annually and most others something in between. Together with privileges, discounts and benefits like travel allowances, almost everyone gets up to five times more.

After America changed its law to motivate productivity on the Micronesian islands and allow fabrics to be imported duty free, not the locals, but clever businessmen from Taiwan and mainland China took the chance and opened a few textile factories. The happiest were those up in the US territory of the Northern Marianas, where they were even allowed to tag the textiles as "made in USA". They were also importing the workforce from Asian countries through traffickers, so the locals have (taken) almost no advantage of the business at all. We don't know whether the poor working ethics was caused by suppression from colonialisation and christianisation that always dictated something else than what the people here wanted to do. Maybe they have just given up and now they want to take it as easy as possible and just smartly do as little as is being tolerated and take as much advantage of the system as possible.



Strong reminders of past high cultures, like **Nan Madol** here in Pohnpei are still visible and before invasion of the white man, all islands had been self-sufficient. Now, less and less food is being planted and the traditional Taro and Breadfruit is now mostly replaced by imported rice. Almost all vegetable and meat is imported as well, and this year, the people complained that they didn't get the delivery of easter eggs in time, as the cargoship was delayed. Not many chickens were running around the island these days!

Considering that everything is being imported and that all meals are made of western products, we were surprised that it was not very expensive to eat in a restaurant. It was also pretty obvious, that the locals love to eat out as well. Often we were surrounded by big families with children. For an average of USD 7, we usually got soup, salad and a Japanese bento box with a variety of tuna sashimi (raw fish), plus meat, fish and vegetable in tempura batter with rice. That was certainly the part of Japanese influence we've liked that it had survived. During the 30 years before the end of the Second World War, most of the residents were from Japan. Today, the only Asians left, are some business-people and workers, mainly from the Philippines, but in the meantime the population is again overwhelmingly Micronesian.

One afternoon, we went to Sokehs Island, which was connected by a causeway. This was the most densely populated part of Pohnpei and the children came all out again greeting us curiously. Houses and shacks lined both sides of the road which followed the shore. A thick belt of Mangroves sheltered the houses from the sea but unfortunately a lot of rubbish was trapped there. Probably people did not yet realise that tins and plastic doesn't decompose as the scrap did from the food they ate in the past. As all over Micronesia, old cars are laid to rest in the owners' garden until they rust away and get covered by plants. Also old construction machinery and ferry boats "rust in peace" dotted all over the islands.

In a similar way, we saw many war relicts like tanks, bombed planes or shipwrecks. Those that lie underneath the water have become a money making attraction for the (foreign owned) dive operators. The interior of the island is an inaccessible jungle of thick vegetation with mountains rising as high as 772 meters. Clouds often get stuck on them and therefore Pohnpei and also Kosrae are among the wettest places on earth. As the downpours are often short but hefty and occur during the night, it's not that bad and as usual where we go; there was more sun than rain.



During our strolls around the villages, we noticed that dogs hardly ever barked at us, but we wondered why the locals advised us to take a stick along, to protect ourselves from the dogs. In the meantime we know the truth, that the saying bears: "dogs that bark, don't bite!" Heinz had to experience one that didn't bark!

On the outskirts of Kolonia was a settlement of Polynesians that were relocated there after a drought on their island. They had specialised in producing handicrafts, which they tried to sell to the few foreigners visiting. Unlike in Asian countries, no-one; not a single person tried to lure us into their handicraft shop, that all were set up so modest, most bypassers would not have noticed them at all.

What we did notice, not only here, but also in Kosrae and later sometimes in Yap, were the graves, people had in their gardens. Here the family stays together even after death.

Another similarity with Kosrae and later in Yap, alcohol was not a problem at all, contrary to the next island: Chuuk (which we didn't visit) that has a very bad reputation for this.

Pohnpei is famous for another drink: Sakau. It's mildly narcotic but powerfully paralyzing the muscles, but not necessarily the brain. Apparently it is much stronger here, than its Polynesian counterpart Kava, made from pepper shrub root that is pounded on a stone and squeezed out, then served in a coconut half.

When we got to taste some of the milder stuff in Tonga years ago, we found it pretty awful, but the funniest was the description of this brown broth in our travel book: "Kava looks like used dishwashing-liquid, but dishwashing-liquid would probably taste better, as it has at least some food content in it!"

Again, after a week we went on. As there were no control towers on the airports of those small islands, they reduced the risk of collision by communicating by phone with the other islands. So, if a plane had taken off from one, no other plane was allowed to leave the neighbouring island for the next 15 minutes or so.

Our flight stopped briefly in Chuuk and then in American Guam. Even though we just changed plane there, we had to go through US immigration once more, giving finger-prints and smile for the camera, once we were in front of the slow moving queue. The lack of transit areas in US airports might be a blessing for those with so much time in transit, that they can leave the airport, but for those with only an hour to change planes, it's certainly an annoyance. At least, we could check our luggage through.

## Yap

After another hours flight, we reached the State of [Yap](#), which is considered to be the most traditional part of the FSM. As soon as we had passed immigration, we were greeted by a teenage girl, wearing only a colourful grass-skirt and a flower necklace. She placed the traditional flower wreath on our heads as a welcome sign. Two minutes later, we got a second one, this time from the young lady that represented the guesthouse we were booked in and who had come to pick us up - in western clothing!



On Yap, contrary to the other Pacific islands, the missionaries had only been able to convert the people to a new faith, but they had been unable to change their inhibitions. Before the Missionaries arrived, nudity was just normal on most Pacific islands. Apparently, on one island, when the ladies were given bras, they cut holes out in order to have the nipples free to feed their babies. After that, the Missionaries gave up, at least on that island and just accepted the fact to have

Christians wearing the traditional "next to nothing" dresses!

On Yap, toplessness is still normal for both genders, but it is considered as highly offensive for a woman to show her thighs in public. Apparently, almost everybody living in the outer islands still wears this traditional clothing that used to be made of hibiscus and bananatree fibre, but now was rather made of cotton. Today on the main island, most people, especially the young, prefer to wear casual western clothing. But we have seen about 5-25 bare breasted women every day and just as many men in the usually blue "thu" the loincloth. This is worn around the waist and elaborately twisted. In the front it looks like a loincloth and behind, it can form a tanga-like brief, exposing the bum. The colour and the way how the man wore it, indicated the age, status and where he was born.

At first, we were surprised to find men and women wearing this traditional dress not only walking on the road, but also in shops, restaurants and banks or driving in their cars. It's just their normal way! We found it delightful, that the natural way of wearing "next to nothing" could survive at least in some westernised corners of the world and not only in some remote hill-tribes. Apparently, if it comes to ceremonies and



traditional dancing, the loincloth, lava lava and western clothing are being replaced by a grass-skirt only by everybody, also for the main-islanders - no T-shirts there! Westerners often joined in as well, we heard. Through some other tourists that were brave enough to attend catholic church at 8 a.m., we learned that even the teenage girls assisting the priest as "Ministrant", wore only a grass-skirt and flower necklaces. As not many people had shown up at eight, the churchbells were rung stronger and stronger and an hour later the mass could start with quite many people dressed the traditional way. It seems that people are late not only for work, but everywhere.

As the same dress code applied to foreigners and locals alike, Brigitte could have taken her T-shirt off, not only when we went to the beach, but she always kept her skirt on, so nobody was turned on by her 'sexy thighs'. To protect their valued traditions, the islands of Yap remained closed for tourists up until 1989. Today, it is necessary to obtain a permit to visit any outer island and some are still off limits. On some it is a condition for all foreign visitors to wear the same as the locals do and to go topless, but it would really be better to leave them alone we feel. The opening up has indeed changed the main-island in regard to people's dress-preferences; now more and more locals wear western clothing in every day's life. Today, on the main island, only the 1'000 people strong outer-island community wears traditional dress daily. The main-islanders themselves, use the traditional "around the hip clothing" for festivities only.



The government recently started to encourage all of its citizens to wear traditional clothing again every day.

The state of Yap's four main islands, which are connected by causeways, have a landmass of 100 km<sup>2</sup> and are inhabited by about 7'000 people. Spread over 1'000 km to the east, there are another 15 inhabited islets that are home to an additional 4'500 still very traditional people on a total landmass of only 18 km<sup>2</sup>. The Yapese speak four different languages and as more other languages are being spoken in the other FSM Islands, it is English, that's being used as a shared tongue, which was also handy for us of course. What Yap is also very famous for, is it's stone money, called 'rai'. These circular flat stones that resemble a millstone with a hole in the middle have been in use for the last 2000 years. They measure between 40 cm to 4 meters in diameter. Although important, size is not the only factor in determining the value of a "coin". A smaller piece may be worth more for

it's age and history. The quarries for these precious stones were on Palau, a six day trip away by raft, a perilous undertaking, which of course, gave the stone money its value.

To the Yapese society, it was as important as gold is of ours. Although US Dollar cash is used today for most commercial transactions, **stone money** and also shell money, are still of considerable value to the Yapese. Today, it's mainly in use to trade land or as an exchange-gift between parents of a young couple when they start to live together, which here is equivalent to getting married.

A collection of stone money around a meeting house, as found in every village, is called a money-bank. Stones are seldom moved, because who owns what, is common knowledge. A particular piece of money might be owned by someone of another village, just as shares or gold in the West only change ownership but not location. Often the little path to a house or the entrance, were decorated by stone money and we got the impression it was everywhere, sometimes even lying in the bush. According to statistics, there were only about 7'000 pieces left today, but there were many more before, as the wars and missionaries destroyed a lot of them.



Another characteristic of Yap was the system of scenic ancient stone pathways, many of which were raised, that linked the villages and taro patches. The paths have been so well engineered, with stones holding up the edges and a system of culverts allowing drainage, that they have withstood centuries. It was delightful to walk along these uneven stone tracks that usually were lined with hibiscus-scrubs and shady palm trees. They led past exotic plants and birds and every now and then, a bitter odour from the betelnut palm was in the air. Even more than on the other islands, betelnut-chewing was a continual habit of the people, even among children. Almost everyone carried little baskets like handbags woven of coconut leaves, in which they carried the three necessary ingredients: nuts, lime and leaves. A green nut, the size of a walnut is split open, sprinkled with dry lime powder made from coral and wrapped in a piece of pepper leaf. The bundle is inserted into the mouth and chewed for about 20 minutes during which the resulting red juice is being spit out various times. Therefore, all pavements and roads have red stains. Well, why are they so fond of this? According to a description, the first experience will produce a sense of well-being, accompanied by light-headedness that lasts for about 15 minutes. As with tobacco, after habitual use, the pleasure is less but the absence of the drug may lead to feelings of deprivation and in some cases depression. We didn't need to go through this experience here, as we have tried it once 12 years ago on Flores - and threw it all up with a big grimace on our faces, long before it could turn red - and to the amusement of the curious Indonesian crowd watching us. We often had difficulties understanding what people said because everyone always had such a clot in his mouth, even those working in offices or on the phone. But when they smile, they expose a nice row of red teeth.

We went out again to stroll through the villages to meet the people, but we were almost a bit disappointed. Contrary to the previous islands, here most houses were concealed behind bushes or fences and so were the people. Most locals were rather shy and nobody came out smiling and waving when we passed. They didn't have quite the same charming mentality and we remembered having read, that they had different customs and looks, because they originate from a different tribe than the people of the other FSM islands. The skin of the Yapese was quite a bit darker and this was the only state, where they had a rigid caste system, even if the matrilineal inheritance system resembled the one of the other Micronesian islands.

As most of the islands in reef around them, this well from a rough sea. quite rare in this region, hitting Yap one year signs of it as many buildings were without a looked abandoned and the mess. We heard that compensation from an and built now new moved away to the Talking of solid houses: neighbours we have had lucky to get a two room building that usually only consultants or government guests. The complex housed several offices, two banks, a supermarket and restaurant. This building was literally *the* village centre of Colonia. The whole village was superbly set in a beautiful landscape surrounded by water and connected by causeways around various bays.



the Pacific have a coral protects the little land very But not of winds. Although there was a typhoon before. There were still houses and storage roof. Many of those nobody had cleaned up people got direct American disaster-fund houses, but they had interior of the island. thanks to the help of our in Pohnpei, we were very apartment in a modern goes to foreign

Just 100 meters up the hill was the telecom office, which offered telephone and internet access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as in each FSM capital. This was pretty amazing, considering that restaurants mostly closed at 8 pm and that at this time, everything got real quiet for the night.

As Yap is surrounded by superb corals, it attracts 5'000 tourists annually, mostly divers. As diving is an expensive pass-time anyway, most tourists are willing to spend lots of money within a short period of time. That's why the foreign owned hotels and diveshops can be successful finding customers for their overpriced rooms and services. Normally, all over Micronesia, we paid between USD 35-65 per night (in average \$ 43) for quite nice and big air-con rooms with en-suite. Some hotels charged more than \$ 300 per night and \$ 5 per person for airport pick-up, whereas some of the cheaper accommodation provided airport transfer for free or here, our taxi cost only \$ 2 for both.



On the small airport building, the traces left by the typhoon, were still visible. The only thing that was repaired, was the tinroof, but even the lamp necessary to inspect the luggage, was just put in position above the table prior to inspection. It wouldn't have needed much money and effort to fix the small airport properly, but probably they were just waiting that the Americans or another nation would give them the money to build a new, more sophisticated one.

Whereas the first few flights were called "Island Hopper" and 80% of our fellow-passengers had been islanders, the flights from Guam via Yap to Palau were named "Resort Shuttle" and 95% of passengers were now tourists.

## Palau

Upon arrival in  [Palau](#), we noticed that Continental Micronesia was not the only airline serving this destination. The airport was also much bigger and equipped with modern finger-docks, air-con, proper immigration booths, restaurant and duty free shop. Last year (2004) Palau was visited by more than 80'000 foreigners, a steep increase of the years before. Again, most visitors came here to dive, but as many Asians were among those tourists, many also came just to shop and relax. The recent production of a "reality TV show" recorded on one of Palau's uninhabited islands, made the destination also popular amongst non-divers. Apparently, after each screening out in North America and Australia, the website of "[www.visit-palau.com/](http://www.visit-palau.com/)" registered 2 Mio. clicks.

Palau has about 18'000 inhabitants that live mostly in and around the capital Koror. The total land area amounts to 500 square kilometers, but on its largest island, Babeldaob, only 4'500 people reside, 95% of them just next to the causeway leading to Koror. This might change however, if in 2006 the capital will be moved out there.

We wonder how exciting this place feels to those "reality show tourists", but for us, who compared it to FSM islands, it felt too western and not romantic at all! There was often 'bumper to bumper' traffic and too many big shops. Almost all businesses in the private sector, were held and operated by Asians, that made up  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population, most of them came from the Philippines but also from China, Japan, South Korea and expat's from the USA. Even though Palau is independent, as in the FSM, locals relied on government jobs supported by American payments. Normally, the

government employed only Palauans, but as soon as reliability was required, as to operate a power plant, they also preferred Philippino workers. In every store, the biggest department sold "souvenirs from Palau" as chocolate, nuts, tea or soap and T-shirts, all exclusively made and packed for the local market in countries as China, America, Australia or Germany. The only locally made handicrafts we saw, were the [storyboards](#)

carved by prisoners.

Also here, the entire native population would starve to death if they didn't get boat-loads of imported food. Unlike in the Polynesian und Melanesian parts of the Pacific, there were no markets where we went in Micronesia.

Planting fruit and vegetable on these tropical islands would have been so easy but it seemed too much of a hassle to them. Despite all this, we could find good and reasonably priced food in those restaurants that were frequented by the locals and the Asians who settled here. The luxury resorts gearing for divers and package tourists from Asia were more than just a bit overpriced. The same applied to the snorkelling and canoe tours out to the famous [Rock-islands](#) that are considered among the wonders of the world. These limestone formations covered in green, stretched for 40 km between Koror and Peleliu island. Even for a short 5 km tour, there was a charge of USD 95 including a \$ 15 Rock-island-visitors fee. As we didn't like Koror too much, we figured out, that the USD 110 that bought us a return-flight to **Angaur Island**, 65 km to the south, was a



much better investment, especially as it was most scenic to see the Rock-islands from the air. It was absolutely worthwhile for us to escape as we found a quiet paradise on this island that was only 7.8 km<sup>2</sup> big and home to 200 islanders plus 8 Philipinos that kept the island running...

There, we got a whole house by the beach to ourselves, and as there was no restaurant, we could order meals that were cooked by the owners. Initially, we were told that the meals were being cooked with ingredients *available* on the island and naively, we meant to have heard "ingredients *from* the island".

So, we secretly hoped for some local food. But after getting boiled sausages and army-biscuits for breakfast, we realized our misinterpretation. Soon we knew that the only thing we

would get fresh, were fish and crab - if someone caught any. Everything else was imported. After a boat had called in the next day, our nutrition got healthier and improved even more after a full moon night made it almost too easy to catch crab. So, about a dozen landcrab and a delicious coconut-crab landed on our plate.



We did several walks all around the island, which was very pleasant as the roads were well shaded and there was almost no traffic. We passed through a forest of many impressive fig trees and pandanus and also many porous limestone formations. We were impressed by the huge number of landcrab that appeared before sunset. We also spotted some monitor-lizards and small monkeys, which are unique to this island. It is believed that they were brought here as pets but after they outnumbered the humans several times over, they became a pest!

As Angaur is Palau's only island that is lying outside of the protective reef, the waves were thundering up some blow-holes in various places, except on the west coast, which had an own small reef.

After drinking the juice of a coconut, we cracked the nut open (easy, if you know how) and put it in front of our veranda in the hope to attract some coconut-crab. It worked out surprisingly quick. An army of small crabs arrived, protected with a shell borrowed from sea snails, in which they could hide if in danger. As they grow, they change shells until their own 'shell' is hard enough. Unfortunately, the biggest we had seen, was the one on our plate, which was about 25 cm long. The ones we

saw in the garden, were 0,5 - 10cm long, but apparently full grown adults can get as big as 1 meter.

During WWII, Japanese and American both thought that this tiny island was important in order to win the war. The local population was at least evacuated before fierce battles occurred. Americans built a 2,2 km long

airstrip into the jungle within 30 days only. This is almost across the entire island. At least it leaves some space left and right of the runway, not like on Johnston or Palmyra, where the airfield covers almost the islands entire landmass.



Today still, many of Angaur's beaches and jungles were littered with war relics rusting away slowly. On one spot, there was such a concentration of crashed war-planes,

they called it "plane cemetery" but as they were made of aluminium and plastic, the material does not disappear.

After another wonderful scenic flight over the Rock-islands, where Heinz could even sit next to the Aussie bush-pilot, we spent another two days in the hustle and bustle of Koror, before catching a plane to Guam. On





the check-in counter, we were already being informed that our plane was at least 6 hours delayed, because of a bird that flew into an engine earlier this morning when the same plane had taken off to go to Manila first. The good thing was, we could check our luggage through all the way to Cairns, even though we stayed one night in Guam. Amongst the waiting crowd, we met the Dutch couple that had been staying at the same hotel as we did in Koror. They had been sitting in the returning plane and were now waiting for the last six hours for a substitute aircraft. That arrived soon thereafter, but to our surprise, we - the passengers of the second flight to Guam, were called to the check-in counter. However, who hoped that we could leave without delay, was wrong. It was indeed the others that could leave now but instead of waiting all that time at the airport, we were all being brought back to town by bus. There we got a nice room with a view in the luxury hotel Palasia for three hours and a good feed from a big buffet. After that, we were driven back to the airport, where the plane came to pick us up after another two hours waiting. So, we couldn't complain about the service of Continental Micronesia Airline, which had the following slogan placed on all its counters right across Micronesia: "We serve the friendliest, most breathtaking islands in the world. If we are dreaming, please don't wake us!"

## Guam

By the time we landed in the US territory of [Guam](#), it was already 03:30 h in the morning, but we were glad that we arrived in our hotel room only 7 hour later. After a short, but good nights' sleep, we went out to discover that half of the island, which is an upmarket holiday resort, mainly for Japanese, Koreans and Chinese. The other half is a US military base. There were huge hotel towers and wide streets, big shopping centres and duty free shops all just for tourists. There was neither a pedestrian area in between them, nor a boulevard along the pretty, but empty beach. A shopping-bus connected the hotels with the malls and duty free shops, no-one was walking along the pavements of the 6 line streets, as everything was too far apart.

Those who want to shop till they drop, won't be disappointed. It was certainly not a holiday destination we would choose and now we were glad that, later the same day, we could board a plane back to Cairns.



Brigitte & Heinz



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