

MICRONESIA: Martin Popplewell, who made news living as a castaway, returns to the islands as a tourist

# Where jellyfish never sting

■ I was 15 years old when I first saw the film *The Blue Lagoon*. From then I had one aim in life: to live on an uninhabited Pacific island, with just one woman for company. Six years ago, when I was 18, in my year out before university, I realised that dream.

The story caught Fleet Street's imagination. We were chased across the world by reporters who invaded our "desert island". I even gave a live TV interview from the Pacific on *Wogan*. It was that adventure which first introduced me to the islands of Micronesia.

After six years away, I returned to Micronesia last month, this time as a tourist.



MAIL NEWSPAPERS



Going native: The author in 1989. From the air, the shimmering islands of the Palau group look immediately inviting, and beneath the sea a wonderland of corals and fish is waiting to be explored

## PALAU

I WAS 60ft foot below the surface of the Pacific, clinging on to a coral outcrop and forced to forget all the rules about never touching the reef. I, and my fellow divers, had no choice: the current was racing over us so fast that I was convinced my mask was going to be torn off.

It didn't take me long to decide that my trip to Palau was going to be worth it for this one dive alone. I was at

Blue Corner — the reef dive many consider to be the best in the world.

The exhilaration of the racing current only added to the spectacle around me. Dexter, my friendly Palauan guide, had told me to look above, behind and below when diving Blue Corner. I did. Never have I seen so many fish. Someone once said that it was as if a bomb had gone off releasing millions of fish in the process.

Triggers, butterfly fish, snappers and a school of moorish idols clouded the

water; I saw so many different species within a few minutes that it was difficult to keep count. Just off the coral shelf, a large school of more than a 100 silvery barracuda hung effortlessly in the current which rendered me so helpless.

But it was the big fish, the sharks, that were the most impressive. Not two, three or even four of them, but at least 15 6ft-long grey reef sharks above, below and to my left and right. Like Tomahawk missiles, they cruised menac-

ingly back and forth, often just feet away, looking for prey.

My Japanese dive buddy, hanging on to the reef beside me, tugged eagerly at my elbow and pointed behind us. Suspended in the water, a few inches away from where my fins lay, was a giant Napoleon wrasse: a huge but harmless fish almost the size of a man, its green and turquoise colours shining from the sunbeams penetrating the surface above. A huge eye swivelled in its socket, studying us inquisitively. I later learnt that it was

accustomed to being fed, and was probably expecting a boiled egg.

After ten minutes of gazing in wonderment at the sharks, barracuda and wrasse, Dexter signalled that it was time to move on. The moment we let go of our rocks we were plucked up by the current and swept away.

The islands of Palau are a Mecca for divers from around the world. Blue Corner is one of 30 dives, many of which are world-famous.

But it's not necessary to don scuba gear to appreciate Palau's marine life. The islands contain 70 marine lakes. Each has a unique ecosystem but, perhaps, the most intriguing are the jellyfish lakes. There are five of these, one of which is regularly visited by tourists.

To get to the lakes, you have to drag yourself up and over a steep hill, picking your way over jagged limestone and through thick jungle for ten minutes. Wear tough shoes or your feet will hurt. Then you swim out through a tangle of mangrove roots, which encrust the shore, towards the middle of the lake, to encounter what will be one of the most bizarre experiences of your life. Centuries of isolation from the outside world have caused every one of the thousands of jellyfish in this lake to lose the ability to sting. As a result, you can snorkel through a pulsating sea of completely harmless translucent blobs of jelly.

It's amazing. With each breast-stroke, your hands pass over their soft, gelatinous bodies. You can cup the baby ones, the size of a 10p coin, in your hands and watch them pulsate in temporary captivity.

The tranquil beauty of Palau makes it difficult to believe that these islands were once the site of some of the most bloody battles of the Second World War. The island most veterans visit is Peleliu. It has a population of 600 but, during the war, 20,000 Japanese and American soldiers died here in two months. Today, a visit to Peleliu is worth it just for the flight and the aerial views of what must be the most exquisite islands in the Pacific.

South of Palau's capital, Koror, all the way down Peleliu, over a twenty 20-mile stretch of ocean, are scattered the Rock Islands. Like precious green jewels they rise out of a shallow, calm sea made up of a patchwork of turquoise and azure. Erosion of the limestone at sea level makes many of the islands appear like giant green mushrooms.

Between dives, you'll be dropped off at one of these miniature paradises for lunch. My recommendation then is just to lie back under a coconut palm, listen to the chatter behind you, and keep your eyes open for one of the giant fruit bats which float with a lazy grace among the islands.

The only thing that will tear you away from your reverie is the thought of an afternoon's diving at Blue Corner.



On Yap, traditional dress is still worn by the islanders

## YAP

IT IS only a 45-minute jet flight from Palau to Yap. But the moment you step off the plane you know you have arrived somewhere altogether different.

All the locals have bright-red teeth and spit blood-red saliva, coloured from their addictive chewing of betel nut. A number of the women greeting the plane will be topless; wearing only the traditional wrap-around skirt, the *lava lava*. More often than not the friendly immigration officers will wear a garland of fresh flowers in their hair. A few years ago the island's first governor proposed legislation banning the wearing of ties.

If you want high-rise developments and snazzy beach resorts, Yap is not for you. If you want to see traditional Pacific island culture intact, with sleepy coastal villages and homes built out of bamboo and palm thatch, this is the place to visit.

In this forgotten corner of the world you can see traditional dances put on for the enjoyment of the locals, not for the tourists.

However, for many people it's not the sailing canoes and legendary navigators or even betel nut which draws them to

Yap, but the opportunity to dive with giant manta rays. It takes 50 minutes of skimming across Yap's dolphin-crowded waters to reach the Mi'l Channel where the main dive operators, Yap Divers, guarantee the presence of mantas.

Our chain-smoking Swiss guide, Freddie, gave us our briefing between puffs on his cigarette. Dive to 50ft, drive up the channel and then wait. The mantas, he assured would come to us.

Ten minutes into my dive I was sitting patiently, 50ft down among the rocks and coral, by the side of the channel, trigger fish darting in and out of the crevices around me. Rough weather had made the water cloudy, and scepticism about my chances of seeing mantas had begun to creep in. But I needn't have doubted.

Through the hazy water I began to detect the outline of something massive. Slowly, almost like something out of a horror film, a gigantic bat-like manta soared into view. It was huge — more than 10ft across — and heading directly towards me. It wasn't alone.

I sat spellbound among the rocks as 15 enormous rays cruised one after the other, in a train, up the channel. It was like watching a silent under-

## Getting there

□ The author was the guest of Kuwait Airways (0171-412 0007) on his flight to Manila, Philippines; return flights from London cost from £530. STA Travel (0171-361 6262) paid for the flights with Continental Micronesia from Manila to Palau and Yap; return flights to Palau cost £290. The flight from Palau to Yap costs £160 return. STA can arrange tailor-made schedules and advise on hotels.

□ On Palau, the author was the guest of the Sunrise Villa (00 680 488 4590, fax: 00 680 488 3155). The Palau Diving Centre (00 680 480 4590, fax: 00 680 488 3155) charges \$85 (about £55) for a two-tank diving session, with lunch.

□ On Yap, rates for the Manta Ray Bay Hotel (00 691 350 2300, fax 00 691 350 4567) start at \$110 a night. A two-tank dive with Yap Divers costs \$95.

□ Rates at the Pathway's Hotel (00 691 350 2066) start at \$85 a night.

# Beyond the Great Wall

A remarkable travel opportunity to the People's Republic of China including a stopover in Central Asia

Following the inauguration of the weekly service from London Heathrow to Peking via Central Asia, we are able to offer just 20 seats per departure at this introductory low tariff. The arrangement commences with a flight from London Heathrow via Tashkent to Peking, followed by seven nights at the 4-star Xiyuan Hotel situated in the northwest of the city which is well located for making both independent and organised excursions to the Great Wall, Ming Tombs, Summer Palace, Forbidden City and Peking Zoo.

During your stay you may select one of the options of visiting China's ancient capital, Xian, to see the Terracotta Warriors, or to visit Shanghai, Suzhou and the Grand Canal. Our return journey is via Tashkent where we transfer for a two-night stay with an optional overnight trip to Samarkand, the glorious former capital of Tamurlaine the Great, before the return flight to London.

**The Xiyuan Hotel, Peking.**  
The Xiyuan Hotel is an impressive international 4-star hotel, located in the northwest part of Peking city, only 30 kilometres from the airport and a 10-minute drive to the city centre. Facilities on the complex include a shopping centre, beauty salon, gym and swimming pool. The Xiyuan Hotel combines traditional Chinese garden architecture with modern deluxe construction. It has 1,300 rooms, all en-suite. There are a number of assorted restaurants and bars, including a revolving restaurant and a grand banquet hall.



10 nights from £550.00



## Samarkand

Everything I have heard about the beauty of this city is true," wrote Alexander the Great after his capture of Samarkand in 329 BC "except that it is more beautiful than I could imagine".

The city of Samarkand, one of the oldest in the world, lies on the banks of an irrigation canal just south of the River Zeravshan. Excavations on the outskirts of today's Samarkand have revealed the site of its 25 centuries of existence when it was the capital of the mighty state of Sogdiana. In 1369 Tamurlaine made it the capital of his huge empire; he called it "the capital of capitals". The buildings created by Tamurlaine and his successors still astonish with their fantastic richness and beauty.

## Itinerary

**Day 1** We depart London Heathrow in the evening for Peking and fly overnight.  
**Day 2** Arrive Peking and transfer to the Xiyuan Hotel. Stay of seven nights.  
**Days 3-8** At leisure in Peking with a wide choice.

of local sightseeing available in and around the capital such as the Great Wall, the Valley of the Ming Tombs, the Summer Palace, and the Forbidden City, plus optional excursions to Xian (to see the Terracotta Warriors) or to Shanghai and Suzhou.

**Day 9** Evening depart Peking, arrive in Tashkent on an overnight excursion to Samarkand.

**Day 10** Today there is an optional city tour of Tashkent or an overnight excursion to Samarkand.

**Day 11** At leisure in Tashkent. Depart in the evening for London Heathrow.

## Departure Dates & Prices

Tuesdays - per person in a twin room	
1996	
Feb 20, 27	£595
Mar 5, 12, 19, 26	£595
Apr 2	£595
Apr 9, 16, 23, 30	£595
May 7, 14, 21, 28	£595
Jun 4, 11, 18, 25	£595
Jul 2, 9, 16, 23, 30	£595
Aug 6, 13, 20, 27	£610
Sep 3, 10, 17, 24	£635
Oct 1, 8, 15	£635
Oct 22, 29	£635
Single supplement	£135

Tashkent, price and breakfast in Peking, transfers and transportation, room and breakfast in Tashkent. Not included: insurance, visa procurement fee, sightseeing (bookable locally), airport taxes, optional excursions, tips. All prices are subject to change.

## Optional Excursions

per person in a twin.

These must be booked in advance.

### 2-night Excursion to Xian

Fly to Xian for a two-night stay including breakfast, city sightseeing and a visit to the Terracotta Army. Tariff £250 (Single supp. £35).

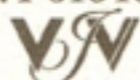
### 3-night Excursion Shanghai & Suzhou

Fly to Shanghai for one night then travel by rail to Suzhou for two nights. Sail on the Grand Canal to Wuxi and continue by rail to Nanjing to connect with the return flight to Beijing. Including breakfast and full sightseeing in Shanghai and Suzhou. Tariff £295 (Single supp. £35).

### 1-night Excursion to Samarkand

One night from Tashkent with guide. Tariff £75.

0171-616 1000



VOYAGES JULES VERNE

21 Dorset Square, London NW1 6GG

Travel Promotions Ltd. ABTA V1661 ATOL 8838

Our offices are open for telephone reservations weekdays from 9am to 5pm and at weekends from 9am to 5pm. For personal visitors, the office hours are 9am to 5pm weekdays and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays.

