

While I've had the good fortune to dive in Palau, among the Micronesian Islands in the Western Pacific Ocean, numerous times over the years, my recent trip in many ways was the most memorable of all. This time, rather than being off on an assignment, having to leave my family back at home, my wife and ten-year-old daughter were with me for a wonderful dive holiday, a trip structured in a way that allowed us each to enjoy the trip to the fullest, with every detail addressed.

For those families whose holidays may too often mean the difference between 'family holiday' and 'dive holiday', you may be wondering how my opening remarks could possibly be so - well, there is an easy answer: Kids Sea Camp (www.familydivers.com). KSC is the brainchild of PADI instructor Margo Peyton who, some years ago, as a single mum working for one of the USA's most well-known dive travel agencies, found her personal diving largely put on hold, even with the many opportunities her job provided. In talking to potential dive travellers every day, she came to realise that many families faced the same difficulty she did - that, no matter how much they enjoyed diving, figuring out how to conveniently take children along on an exotic dive trip was generally an insurmountable obstacle. So, in the year 2000, Margo's idea for Kids Sea Camp was born.

Today, it's remarkable, really. In 15 of the best dive locations around the world, every year there are some 20 KSCs conducted, each from one to two weeks long - with some 350 families attending. For dive families it's the most-enjoyable way imaginable to connect with each other and to create memories that surely will last a lifetime - small children have day care, young children learn snorkelling and SASY (Surface Air-Supplied Snorkelling for Youth - breathing from a small tank while completely buoyant on the surface), seven to ten year-olds learn PADI Seal Team, and ten to 15 year-olds learn PADI Junior Open Water - with full supervision, allowing the parents to be off diving as they choose. Older children and non-diving parents can achieve their Open Water certifications; certified divers dive, day and night, with non-divers not interested in learning to dive going on snorkelling trips or sightseeing (or simply relaxing at the-always nice resorts); and divers who have become rusty can take refreshers. And, with different boats available, there are ones for certified teens to dive together without mum and dad, boats for adults to dive together without their kids; and the ability for all to go together anytime they choose.

At each day's end, there are fully-arranged group dinners, often with photography, marine life, environmental and other dive-related presentations, as well as cultural and other entertainment. For families, it is such a delightful, seamless holiday that most families in our Camp - people from all over the world - had been on three to five camps together over the years, their children having become fast-friends and amazingly talented divers along the way.

And, as diving is the sum-total goal, each location's diving scheduled is designed to show the best dive sites the destination has to offer.

PALAU, KIDS SEA CAMP-STYLE

Al Hornsby finds that a Kids Sea Camp holiday in Palau is the perfect way for his entire family to indulge their passions

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL HORNSBY

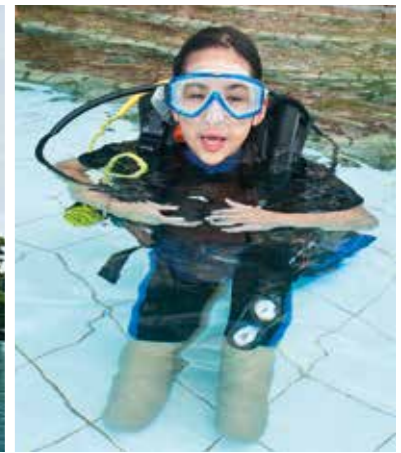


“Known for its therapeutic properties, it is claimed that bathing in the white limestone mud found on the shallow bottom will make you look ten years younger – and, even if it doesn’t, the sight of a boatload of divers fully coated in white, head to toe, is priceless”



SAM'S DIVE TOURS

With a multi-faceted programme such as provided by Kids Sea Camp and the complex (only to the organisers!) production required to operate it, KSC exclusively utilises the services of established, highly-rated PADI dive centres. In Palau, it's Sam's Tours. The original Sam's Tours was a dive, snorkelling and fishing tour company opened by young Washington state native Sam Scott. In 1996, he opened the dive centre, now a PADI five-star IDC centre and one of the largest, most-respected dive operations in Palau. With in-depth knowledge of Palau's waters and reefs learned over nearly 30 years of exploration, Sam's Tours operates from an ecological ethic with the goal of preserving Palau's marine environment and life. Located in Malakal harbour, Sam's Tours has a spacious, roofed, open-air hub, right on the water and just steps from its 12 boats, with all facilities, including office, classrooms, equipment rentals, guest gear lockers, restaurant, bar and equipment set-up area extending off the central area. A fleet of vans provides pick-ups from local hotels and resorts, and 12 languages are spoken among the staff. Divemasters and instructors are PADI certified, and a full array of PADI courses, through instructor training, are offered. www.samstours.com



cut that runs through the reef near Ulong Island. It is a wild ride in or out, depending on which way the tide is running. Grey reef, blacktip and whitetip reef sharks cruise the passage, rays lie about the bottom, turtles are frequent and schooling mahogany snapper and spadefish move about. On full-moon nights from April-July, huge numbers of grouper congregate for spawning, as marvellous a sight as any diver could ever want to see.

Another wonderful dive site is in the German Channel passage to the outer reef. Mantas feed at the narrow entrance to the channel, and also congregate around a cleaning-station coral mound located on the Channel's white sand bottom. Groups of huge mantas move in, hovering to be cleaned by small reef fish, mainly wrasse and butterflyfish, then move off, only to circle back around, repeating the pattern over and over. Divers and snorkellers alike, if they can remain calm and still, will witness these beautiful animals for many minutes as they carry out their cleaning behaviours.

Another of Palau's special dives provides a glimpse into the fierce fighting that took place in Palau during World War Two. One of a number of Japanese ships sunk during the air raids of Operation Desecrate One in 1944, the Teshio Maru, a 98-metre-long Japanese army cargo ship, lies on its side on a 21m bottom, its port side at only 15m. One of the most-beautiful wrecks in Palau, it is covered in hard and soft coral growth, with many gorgonian and whip corals, and clouds of swirling fish, including barracuda, grouper, jacks and fusiliers, in normally very clear water. The huge wreck is intact, a fatal torpedo hole in the forward hold gives testimony to its violent demise. The holds contain ceramic plates, electric fans and personal effects from its crew; a deck gun creates a dramatic scene at the stern. As a bonus, not far away, on the bottom at 15m, a crashed Japanese Jake sea plane rests among the corals.

A different sort of incredible dive is Chandelier Cave, located just minutes by boat from the dive centres in Koror's main harbour. With the bottom of the cave at 12m and the entrance at just 4m, there are five chambers festooned with huge, hanging stalactites, with four of the chambers having large air pockets at the top, and the fifth being completely above water. It's a beautiful, serene, well-lit place very popular for closely supervised dives.

Being in Palau, our trip had an incredible variety to experience.

Long Palau's most-popular dive, Blue Corner is like an underwater three-ring circus. At the top of a steep outer wall, at only 15m of depth, divers remain stationary (it's generally a reef-hook dive on a current that runs along the wall) while a marine life parade takes place, just over an arm's length away. Grey reef sharks and whitetips cruise by constantly, a huge school of blackfin barracuda is resident, and metre-long Napoleon wrasse are most always there to give divers up-close encounters. On the reef, there are many grouper, snapper and turtles among the corals.

Just 50 metres northward along the wall, Blue Holes is another of Palau's most-famous sites. On the reef top near the drop-off, in 1-3m of water, there are four openings that extend downward into a large, softly-lit chamber. The steep sides are thick with soft and hard coral and gorgonia, with tropical reef fish of every description moving about the vertical surfaces. The bottom floor is at 40m, with a small exit onto the wall-face at 15m and a larger one at 27m. Outside, schools of barracuda and snapper congregate about the openings.

One of Palau's most-exciting dives, Ulong Channel is a narrow, 15m-deep

SAM'S TOURS
PALAU
www.samstours.com
Palau's premier scuba diving and eco-adventure company.

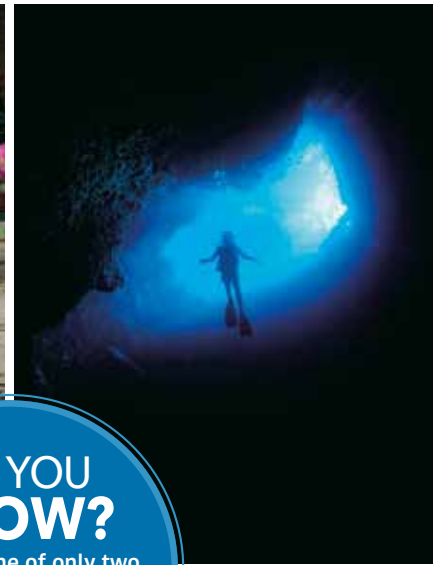
Scuba Diving • PADI Dive Courses • Liveaboard
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Contact our European office for a list of official tour operators to book your trip.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Palau has one of only two known Jellyfish Lakes in the world, where you can snorkel with harmless jellyfish



Beyond the huge list of great dive sites, Palau is one of those ecological marvels, where remarkable marine creatures can be seen most anytime, anywhere, including whalesharks, Pacific dugongs (one of our boats was lucky), tiger sharks, whales, tuna, sailfish and more – not to mention having one of the world's two known freshwater Jellyfish Lakes. For divers and non-divers alike, there are also a number of land and boating-tour options offered. These should not be missed, not only for the beautiful topography, flora and fauna that will be seen, but also for the fascinating World War Two wreckage.

A very interesting hike is up Ngeruktabel Island, to the site of an old German lighthouse. In the 45-minute walk, there are many relics from the war, including bunkers, large artillery pieces and destroyed buildings. At the island's south end, a small islet that can be reached only by boat contains a huge cavern. Inside, there are well-formed stalactites and stalagmites that glisten under a flashlight beam. Scattered throughout the cavern area hundreds of human bones; in ancient times, the grotto was used as a burial vault.

Another special site is Milky Way in the rock islands. Known for its therapeutic properties, it is claimed that bathing in the white limestone mud found on the shallow bottom will make you look ten years younger – and, even if it doesn't, the sight of a boatload of divers fully coated in white, head to toe, is priceless.

For our family, the trip to KSC was marvellous; for once, I got to take my wife and daughter on a dive trip where, by design, there were no conflicts or compromise decisions required that originated from different diving skill levels or different holiday interests. Moreover, we were in an amazing location, and we all – especially my ten-year-old daughter – made new friends and had an incredible time.

For me, getting to be with Juliet during her SEAL Team class and to experience her joy at learning scuba for the first time was remarkable beyond description. But... now, comes the hard part – our only (and very difficult) decision for one of next year's school breaks is whether we return to Kids Sea Camp in Palau, or choose one of the 14 other exotic locations. Now, that's what I call a really tough decision. ■