

Travel and Adventure: The islands of Yap are a part of the Pacific that few have seen

by Richard Carroll

YAP, Micronesia - Yap, a speckle of gold dust floating on the far western Pacific Ocean in the heart of the Western Caroline Islands, is an inspirational step back to the cultural magnificence of Micronesia. For those exhausted by 21st century commercialism, Yap, an island state of the Federated States of Micronesia, 541 miles southwest of Guam, has maintained a glorious tranquility, proudly celebrating the ancient traditions of the Yapese languages, cherished legends, olden handicrafts and an exceptionally exciting music and dance legacy.

SACRED STEPS - Yap, opened to tourism for the first time in 1989, is the most authentic island in Micronesia. Shown are cultural dancers in Colonia, the state capital. CNS Photo by Laura Weston.
FORBIDDEN NO MORE - Forbidden Island has long been off-limits for visitors, but is now accessible with a guide and prior permission. Its only roads are ancient stone pathways. CNS Photo by Laura Weston.
TRADERS' RIDGE - The Chamorro Lagoon fronts Traders' Ridge Resort in Colonia, Yap's state capital. CNS Photo by Laura Weston.
CRAZY CURRENCY - A village meetinghouse is ringed with stone money in Kaday. For centuries, the stone money was used for exchange, trading and island business. CNS Photo by Laura Weston. Hundreds of Yapese islands extend across the Pacific like an illogical jigsaw puzzle, featuring four major volcanic islands anchored by the main island of Yap, which greets visitors with an exotic maze of tropical inlets, channels, waterways, atolls, pristine coral reefs, thick mangroves, lush pockets of vegetation and, unique in the world, enormous slabs of stone money. Seen throughout the islands and used for centuries, the stone money - shaped from limestone and resembling a full moon with a hole cut in the center for carrying - was quarried in Palau, transported 350 miles by canoe and used for exchange and trade.

Opened to tourism in 1989, Yap Island is actually four elevated islands, three connected by bridges; the fourth, Forbidden Island, is another step back in time. Access is by speedy motorboat with a trusty guide leading the way, and prior permission must be both sought and granted. In place of roads, the island has century-old, stone footpaths lined with stone money, some pieces weighing more than a ton. Thatched-roof meetinghouses take the place of the town hall. Built on a large stone platform, they appear like ghostly creatures eager to take flight.

English is the official language, with four major indigenous languages, but most pre-eminent are the distinctive social graces and strong traditions that unify the incredible diversity of the island. Colonia, Yap's capital, found near the center of the island, is compact and earthy, having no street signs or signals. Bare-breasted women wearing lava lavas and colorful woven skirts from the Outer Islands arrive by boat daily to shop for staples and sip ging-gong juice, a savory tang of honey and melon with essences of lime.

Life is slow and easy - not a Wal-Mart to be found, no ATM machines, no short shorts (hips are always covered). If the plane flies over, it must be Wednesday. Outside the store, shirtless, barefoot men clad in classic loincloths lounge about exchanging and chewing Betel nuts, a slash of crimson smiles masking teeth gasping for air. The Betel nut smiles are not unlike the smiles of someone who has been brushing with pomegranate seeds or gargling with licorice. A revered custom within the South Pacific Islands, a crimson mouth with lips, gums, teeth and tongues tainted with the prized Betel nut is a mark of status.

Yapese carry woven betel nut baskets like a purse at the ready, complete with pepper leaves, lime juice and often a touch of tobacco, a soothing concoction for them and a custom that is reminiscent of a peace pipe, or an icebreaker. Smiling, they say, "Boys chew their way to the girl's heart, not a bad thing."

Betel nuts or not, throughout the years, Yap was a pawn to the powers of the day, often tossed about like a forlorn, windblown coconut shell by the Germans and Spaniards. The Japanese sailed in and occupied the islands with an iron hand throughout World Wars I and II. The Americans arrived in 1945, establishing a close and ongoing relationship with the Yapese that stands today.

An icon in the nation's history was the robust David O'Keefe, a valued and clever Irish-American trader who made the television "survivors" of today look like children at play. He was shipwrecked on Yap in 1871 on a pearl diving expedition and was rescued by the Yapese people. O'Keefe later returned as the skipper of a large Chinese junk and began his trade of stone money in exchange for Yap copra, the dried meat of a coconut.

He was lost at sea in 1901 during a typhoon, but his status on the island remains high. O'Keefe Island, where his home once stood, is just offshore, and onshore the popular O'Keefe Waterfront Inn greets visitors.

A delight above and below the water, Yap is a widely noted and highly developed dive destination. Visitors can dive with the manta rays, explore caverns and teeming coral reefs, enjoy a sunset dive to see the mating mandarin fish, or book a night dive under a blanket of stars sparkling low in the sky.

In the early morning, guests can walk along the ancient Familyog Trail, stone paths laid hundreds of years ago that cross the island from east to west in the brilliant stillness of nature broken only by the songs of chattering birds. Often a soft wind rustles the thick foliage growing in a tangle of tropical chaos washed shiny green by the heavy squalls that blow through on their way to the open sea.

Tilus, a guide with the trained eye of a hawk, pointed out a gregarious black and white Yap monarch feeding her chick, and with throaty birdcalls Tilus attracted others who answered his call. He said that the bird's song tells the Yapese when it will rain and when the sun will shine. The path leads to villages where huge pieces of stone money are propped up in front of meetinghouses and along the path.

The five-star, 22-room, plantation-style Traders' Ridge Resort, overlooking Chamorro Lagoon and the Pacific, was created to promote the Ethnic Art Institute of Micronesia. A complete resort, the property offers Yap's first freshwater swimming pool and pool bar, the two best restaurants in Yap (one a former Japanese command post), romantic, candle-lit dining for two in the garden and service fit for a village chief.

The property also has one of Micronesia's top dive centers and has sailboats, windsurfers, bicycles and kayaks available to its guests. Customized packages that include eco-tourism, dance, art and culture, and open-air massages featuring a Betel nut facial are also available.

Mercifully, there is no in-room television in order to capture the character of the most authentic of all Micronesian islands. As the Yapese say: "Arrive as a visitor and depart as a friend."

It's a pleasurable challenge.

IF YOU GO

For information visit www.visityap.com.

Traders' Ridge Resort, www.tradersridge.com, 877-350-1300.

Visitors fly eight hours from Honolulu via Continental Micronesia to Guam, and then one hour to Yap. High season is November to April.

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