

PALAU

From Raja Ampat, Indonesia sailing towards Palau, as an intermediate stop, we visited **Helen Reef**.

Helen's Reef lies about 200nm North of Waigeo, Raja Ampat and 320nm SSW of Palau. Located almost on a direct course, Helen's Reef is a convenient place to rest and/or repair on the way. We had gathered conflicting info on how yachts are welcomed there so we were not sure if we would stop or not.

Our sailing from Waigeo was good: after a few hours of motoring in calm seas around Waigeo, we finally got some favorable wind as well as a favorable current. During a short squall, we somehow broke 4 of our plastic main sail sliders so we decided that this was a sign to check out Helen's Reef. Dropping our main sail was not enough to slow down enough to get there by daylight (we did not want to arrive in the evening) so we furled some of our genoa and reefed our mizzen sail (first time ever!). We arrived outside the pass at about 8am with good light to enter the pass. We were prepared, as we had checked the topography on Google Earth (in case we decided to stop) and took exact GPS positions to negotiate the winding channel leading into the lagoon. The GE photo is spot on the entrance and channel. Entry outside: 02deg52'50N-131deg43'84E. The channel is wide, at least a few hundred ft across, and the 4 times we visited the Pass, there was never any strong current.

Call the Ranger station on VHF 16. If no reply, try several times, as they might not be right at the radio. With good light, it is very easy to see the channel and the passages inside. No need for the rangers to come and help you in! But if you arrive in bad light at high tide with no wind and a lot of reflection of clouds, (as we had going out), follow the GE image exactly. Hopefully there will be buoys marking the channel with yellow reflective tape on port as you enter, and blue reflective tape on the right. While we were entering, they saw us on their radar (used to spot any illegal fishing boat in the vicinity) and welcomed us. After the twisting channel we followed the west side all the way north to the tiny island where the ranger station is located. You have to go around some shallow reefs to get into the inner lagoon nearest the island to access the 3 moorings available for visitors. (As always, check the integrity of the mooring personally after you are secure). There is a large mooring (or marker) showing the start of the passage into the inner lagoon. Shortly after we settled we had the visit of the rangers in the patrol boat. We invited them aboard and asked them permission to stay a few days. The 4 Conservation Area rangers are very welcoming! Any boat wanting to stop to fix some technical issue or just to take a rest and visit the Conservation Area is welcome. We arrived just in time, for the next day the weather was black and rainy. Not the best conditions to enter the reef. But it was nice to receive the heavy rain; we all had a chance to refill our water tanks! Bright sunshine since then!

Helen's Reef Conservation Area prohibits all sorts of fishing and taking of any resources, but recreational activities are encouraged. The rangers have a radar to scan the area and they patrol periodically ...The rangers' main mission is to keep Indonesian and Filipino fishing boats away, as they like to come inside the protected lagoon and use their nets and spear guns to take all fish and whatever they can get money for. Often they use dynamite and net, killing everything indiscriminately :(The rangers are living among thousands of birds (nesting now). You can see turtles laying eggs at night if you are lucky. Great snorkeling close to the anchorage and scuba diving in the pass and also outside of the barrier reef all around the lagoon.

We ended up a week here, fixing a few technical issues, filming, diving and waiting for a good wx window to head to Palau! The good thing is that the Marine Conservation Park encourages visitors to come and snorkel, dive and visit ... but poachers are not welcome! Few visitors come here, as it is so remote! Some charter boats come from Palau a few times a year and a few sailboats stop here on any given year and they are welcome. No one is allowed to fish or take live animals, but the Rangers are more than happy to share their catch with you. They will even take you to good dive spots if you can give them fuel. Any spare materials that you have on board that can be used to help them, such as old pieces of chain, or line, or Gerry cans, will be so greatly appreciated as donations. What is nice is to see that they all are happy to stay here for 3-month stretch at the time, often extending their time to 9 months. Young people that are happy to live in primitive conditions with nature at their doorstep... not even that, since birds fly in their kitchen and office area all the time! :) They do not miss mobile phone, Facebook and the rest! They have 2 dogs to keep them company and do not feel lacking of anything! Twice daily they have a SSB radio schedule with the office in Koror so they can report anything happening. We were so lucky to meet Louis, Matthew, Jamos & his wife, Samrina, the very welcoming rangers on duty at this time. It is nice to see young people dedicated to their job of protecting this area. When we first arrived, they repelled an Indonesian fishing boat that threw dynamite in the water to keep them off during their escape at sea ... but that is very rare behavior; normally they go away peacefully or surrender and pay the fines if caught after their illegal fishing!

The rangers are also protecting and studying the turtles that come year after year to lay their eggs. They tag them and see them coming back to lay eggs several times a year and then again years later. The rangers also protect the birds living and nesting on their tiny island. Last but not least, they protect giant clams, sometimes even displacing them for better areas to thrive. When I told the rangers that we produce videos to promote activities and countries on the internet, they asked us if we could film and make a short film about the Conservation Area to post on their website. We accepted with pleasure and we are pleased to see their enthusiasm at acting in the different shots we are taking to illustrate their different activities. By the time you read this letter, that video is already posted on

www.Youtube.com/Sloepmouche

While filming their activity of installing marker buoys to assist other boats coming thru the entry channels, we also helped out with scuba to secure the floats in the deeper areas.

One part of the lagoon is reserved for the ranger's own subsistence so they catch some tasty fish for meals. We had some meals with them including a potluck where they loved the pasta and meat/tomato based sauce that we prepared... we enjoyed the different fish. Our last day was also Jackie's birthday, so the last evening, she made pizza, and they made fish and sashimi, and we had chocolate cake and frozen banana sorbet! They said it was the first birthday they had celebrated with any visitor. Jackie was very touched by the presents: beautiful cowry shells and a "lava lava" sorong, made by Samrina.

We are glad to have visited the Conservation Area of Helen reef on our way from Indonesia to Palau. We enjoyed the snorkeling and the diving in the area. Great memories and videos! We recommend a visit here to all cruisers passing in the area!

Despite GRIB files showing us forecast of E-SE wind 10-15, we ended up motorsailing in very light wind all the way to Palau.

Knowing in advance positive and negative things gives us the choice to skip a destination altogether or to decide that the positive sides are worth visiting the place, or at least we avoid a nasty surprise. Forewarned is forearmed ☺

During our 3-month visit to Palau, we met several visiting cruisers more than happy to leave for other cruising destinations ... at the end of a few weeks. As always, we have to take any comments with a grain of salt and realize that we all perceive things differently. This is the reason we appreciate best the letters that give a maximum of facts and leave interpretation to the readers... This is what we try to do in our letters. With this in mind, we'll tell you now our own experience in Palau.

We arrived in **Koror**, from Indonesia/Helen Reef, during regular business hours - avoiding overtime fees - and docked at the commercial dock No choice in the matter as all officials will come separately and board your vessel for their inspection. It took us over 3 hours to finally clear in with the last officials (Immigration) but the wx was fine and we did not mind to tidy up our boat there and then before motoring to Sam's Tour anchorage, just around the corner. Cost was \$20 to tie to the dock (as the dock is privately owned, you get a receipt, no difference if someone helps you handle lines or not). Plus the Govt charges a \$50 water tax. US citizens get 1 year free visa, Non-US citizen get 1 month free, then pay up to 2 one-month extensions at \$50 each, then you have to leave the country! If your vessel is not US flagged, then you also pay \$50/per month. When you leave you will also have to pay a departure tax of \$50/pers. These fees, for non-US citizen add up and if it is any consolation, they tax incoming tourists as much (except they don't have a boat so they will pay an expensive hotel instead). Several boats stopped here on the WE to avoid forming typhoons in the vicinity so they all had to pay overtime to the officials ... no way to avoid that and 2 boats together will not be able to share the overtime. So keep that in mind to time your arrival. We heard that the current Palau President is raising all kind of fees to balance government budget, and visiting yachts are once again targeted for increases. Fees go up and down as decades pass by ... when many visitors come, fees are increased...when visitors shun the place, then fees are lowered.

Try to get a copy of the "Palau Cruising Guide" (by Randy & Hideko, cruisers like us), before your arrival so you have all the navigation info to enter the outside reefs and proceed safely into the harbor. Their guide is very well written and quite detailed about cruising the Rock Islands and the other anchorages anywhere around Palau.

When you arrive at Sam's Tours, you can pick the welcome mooring close to the dive center. (Marked w/ letters: RBYC) Later you can rent a Royal Belau Yacht Club mooring for \$2/day or \$50/month. Good idea to email your arrival details, at least a few days before to Sam, at the RBYC so he can inform Port Authorities 24h in advance as required. Sam will email you an info package and also inform the officials of your ETA. Sam is the SSCA cruising station as well as the Commodore of the RBYC and you probably read several cruisers reports about Sam's Tours.

Things did change recently so an update is necessary. For a while now, Sam has managers running Sam's Tours diving business and these have changed the way they do business. The whole organization is a lot more rigid ... if you like to go diving with them, you follow the same procedure that regular tourists ... no more picking you up from your yacht in the Rock Islands, no jumping on the dive boats at the last minute (reservation by 730am the latest or the evening before). In order to use the dinghy dock, get fresh water, use the showers, dispose of your garbage, and receive packages using their PO Box, you have to join the

yacht club for the yearly membership of \$35. The RBYC is a non-profit association; Sam's Tours is not. Many board members of the yacht club belong to Sam's Tours but the relation between the 2 entities has been uneasy during this transition period. There are an incredible amount of employees at Sam's Tours and the office and boutique staff are not always clear about, or happy to help with, RBYC related things. For instance, on arrival, one yachtie couple filled out the forms and paid fees to join the yacht club at the cashier at the boutique. When they later went back to the boutique to pick up their membership cards, the employee there exasperatedly exclaimed, "Why are you guys always coming here? That's Yacht Club business!" No one had told the yachties anything different, so they assumed to get the cards where they had applied.

The RBYC has a "Port Captain" to greet and orient arriving yachties about the club and Sam's. Logically, this is an employee of Sam's since they are there anyway. Up til recently, this person was the manager of Marina affairs, a nice guy named "Q" (yes, as in Bond, James Bond). Q was the one person at Sam's who we felt honestly wanted to help yachties. But the changing relationship often also tripped him up between Sam's and RBYC. There was always confusion about who picked up packages and where they were to be picked up. Sometimes it was at Sam's Tour office and sometimes at the YC office, and often times the responsible person was "not here right now, so come back later, because we don't know anything."

Our personal experience was that the people at Sam's as well as the long-time resident yachties were largely indifferent to visiting yachts. Even when greeted nicely and attempts were made to engage people in friendly conversation, there was very little reaction, and often very little reaching out to also be friendly. Only a gal named Charlie, who runs a small charter, and sells organic vegetables, was very friendly and fun.

The RBYC fees might change because Sam would like to commercialize the Yacht Club so it would be able to offer more and better services (and that will require bigger fees). Not sure, paying more would improve things, though!

Sam's anchorage is well protected and we felt safe when under threat of a coming typhoon, that by luck went far north of us!). There are several protected anchorages nearby as well in the Rock Islands. You are welcome to cruise and dive in the immediate vicinity of Koror Harbor and Neco Bay without any special permit but that's about the only area you can do so! We did explore Neco bay by dinghy and enjoyed the scenery ... but felt no desire to come and anchor anywhere, as visibility is poor within the lagoon for snorkeling or diving and not much to visit on the bushy rocky islets. We did take our dinghy to go diving the nearby WWII wrecks. Honestly, compared to Chuuk, they are not very colorful neither full of artifacts ... but again Chuuk is hard to beat! But any dive is always fun and we did have some interesting bits here and there. According to locals, the real diving is in the Rock Islands, outside of the lagoon.

Now, to enter the Rock Islands, you are required to buy a special 10-day-only permit: \$50/pers (or \$100/pers if you like to also visit Jellyfish lake) as well as a vessel permit at \$40/month. Extra fees if you plan to do any photo/video for any commercial purposes. When we first arrived, I contacted the Koror State Park office as well as non-profit organizations to offer our services of video productions as we always enjoy promoting tourism and positive initiatives. With Xmas holidays everyone had the best reasons to procrastinate and postpone any decision or plan any work. With over 10 millions dollars in annual tourist fees, Koror State bureaucracy is more focused on collecting money than managing services. We

attended a Belau Tourism Assoc meeting, and they announced that there would be over 130,000 tourist visits in 2014! Almost all, if not all, of them will go to Rock Islands and pay the fees! The Park Rangers, having a low working budget, were at first interested in getting some awareness videos made but too many department heads made it impossible to get anything happening in just 3 months! So after 2 months of wasting lots of time in meetings, calls, etc... we decided to go on our own and finally enjoy the scenery of the Rock Islands without any obligations.

Our first anchorage was Swiftlet Lagoon on Ulong Island, well protected and scenic. We made the 3-6 nm dinghy ride to the Ulong channel and other dive sites outside, seeing lots of day and live-aboard dive boats in the area. We drift-dived in the Ulong channel but visibility was not great because the tide was going out. The wall diving just outside the pass was good but we liked Siaes Corner and Siaes Cave better. The Cave diving was very scenic and we enjoyed going first at 40m on the bottom of the big entrance and going out thru the two higher up entrances. Easy to get disoriented, as the entrances are actually about 90 deg angle so it feels as you went on the other side of the wall (but you are on the same side!) You can access the cave right under the base of the mooring. We also dived Shark City with incredible currents during one dive and almost nothing 40 min later!

Our second anchorage was on the West side of Mechemechar at Broken Rock. Anchored in 15m in the middle ... did not find the 6m spot the guide mentioned (perhaps it is too close to the rocks? By dinghy we explored the scenic rock formations near the anchorage. Earlier in our stay, we went to Jellyfish Lake to film the Conservation people monitoring the lake condition and we saw some of Mechemechar lagoon during that day. It's fun to dinghy through the maze of islets discovering new sights or eroded caves and caverns around each turn.

Our third anchorage was Dancer, in Omekang. Nice breeze in this wide anchorage but fairly calm seas, even with 15-25kts from NE. We filmed the rock formations around here too. Swam in the hidden lake by snorkeling thru the arch at mid to low tide. But there again, we found a lack of corals and fish life as well as poor visibility, common thru the inside of the whole lagoon. We decided to keep the big boat here in this nice anchorage and go from here out to the famous dive sites via the German Channel. We were glad again to have a big enough Caribe RIB with a new Yamaha 15HP to carry us with our 4 tanks and 2 sets of scuba to the iconic dive sites of Palau, between 3 and 8nm away. We took our lunch with us so we could eat during our surface intervals. For safety, since no other yachties were around, we had portable VHF, laser flares, EPIRB, ... You will meet so many dive boats (about 20-30) at the dive sites as well as on the way to/from that you could call their attention if you had a dinghy problem. The 5 live-aboard dive boats anchor in the area for days and days so we could also call them on ch16-or their monitoring channels ...if needed). Best time of the year for diving Palau is the NE season during which you dinghy downwind to German channel and once behind the corner, you'll be behind the small islands and protected from the seas on the dive sites there. We had a few days of a heavy southerly swell that created big surfing waves on the top of the reefs. The mooring buoys were just about IN the breakers (very impressive and some times scary!) The last 3 upwind nm back to the anchorage was pretty bumpy, watch out for your back. Some dives, we dove together and came back to the dinghy, (either tied to one of the moorings, either anchored nearby a mooring)... or did drift dives, we dove solo with a surface float the whole time so the other could follow with the dinghy. Most divers make drift dives with their divemasters inflating a sausage during their

safety stop so the surface tender can come by ... amazing how 12 groups of divers were picked up by the right tenders!!

We did about 12 dives on a 5 day-period. We dove along the wall at Ngemelis, Ferns, New and Big drop-offs ... mostly with little current. Did explore the caves of Blue Holes, Temple of Doom (no turtles skeletons there anymore) and Virgin Blue Hole. Saw myriads of school of fish at Blue Corner and even saw some mantas at German Channel. Saw sharks (black & white tips, once a hammerhead) and turtles (Hawksbill and Green) on most dives. Some soft corals but mostly hard corals.

Several cruising friends, when asked to describe Palau diving, told us that Palau offers a great selection of very nice wall, drift, cave and other diving types but that none of them was the best worldwide. After 25 dives in the area, we agree with this generalization. We did better wreck diving in Chuuk, better mantas in Raja Ampat, Indonesia or Rangiroa, Tuamotus, better soft corals in Raja Ampat as well as in the Red Sea and Maldives.. But in Palau you have a great selection in a small area.

Diving with any dive center is quite expensive here at around \$120/2 tank-dive and \$170/3 tank-dive ... (does NOT include the Rock Island fees!) you end up in big groups ... spend long day commuting to the dive sites and some interval times in not so inspiring beaches. If you are experienced divers with good dinghies, best if you are 2 teams of 2 together, you will have much more flexibility and what you save on dive trips will justify your compressor costs. (NOTE: at the time of this writing, there was talk that Palau was going to require all divers to go with Dive Centers...no more independent diving!)

Internet is expensive but working ok. You have 2 options: With the national phone company you have 3G on your phone (a brand new service in Feb 2015) but at high prices. Now that the speed is better, the rates are no longer based on time but on volume! Or with Palau Telecom, you get a 7h-wifi card for \$10: less expensive and easy to capture onboard at Sam's Tours moorings if you have a Hi-gain wifi antenna. Internet café nearby at \$1.5/h with good speed: walk out of Sam's Tours to main road and turn right, it's just passed the Mini Mart. Beware of local sim card for your mobile: you do pay to receive calls and you will use up your credit if you forget to turn off your 3G data as it will keep using internet data automatically. A SIM card cost \$25 with \$10 airtime (no low rates like Philippines & Indonesia). Competition is trying to come in, so rates might improve when that happens. US Post Office works well and at domestic rates, it is a great place to get any mail and online orders from the US. If you ship out, you have to use locally bought stamps and flat rate boxes do not apply. Mail from US can take from 2 weeks to several months ... As a RBYC member, you can get mail addressed to and picked by Sam's Tours. For local fresh greens & fruits, we ordered directly from Charlie (s/v Eclipse, John's wife). She delivers to Sam's, has great organic produce and offers good prices ☺ The 2 main supermarkets in town have a good selection of foods and general merchandise. Surprisingly, there are no public buses here so you walk about 45min, bike, hitchhike or take a taxi (\$3-5 to supermarket). Restaurants tend to be on the expensive side (tourist area) but some hidden away places, frequented by locals, offer great value. We enjoyed several meals at Emaimele, right behind WCTC supermarket.

In conclusion, did we enjoy our 3-month stay? Yes, because we focused on the good sides. Would we go back? No, because there are many other cruising destinations where cruisers are much more welcome, with better activities to enjoy and better prices. We personally think that Raja Ampat in nearby Indonesia offers better diving at half the cost and less nickel and dime-ing fees by the local bureaucracy (especially for non-US boats and Crew).

Islands, in Raja Ampat, are completely unspoiled by mass tourism like here and cruisers can enjoy that area much better. FSM offers a free and easy way to get cruising permit of 3-month per state.

Palau is in uproar now at the invasion of cheap Chinese tourists coming in on pre-paid tours and spending less money with local business than the Japanese, Korean, US and EU tourists they normally get. Since the number of hotel rooms is limited and the ecologic impact could be bad, the tendency is to start to emulate French Polynesia and cater to a smaller number of tourists ready to pay premium price for the privilege to visit. So if you sail by Palau consider all the above to make the choice to stop here or not and not being upset or disappointed! The bureaucracy in Palau is invasive, slow and paralyzing ... even private businesses seem to vibrate at the same low frequency!

The one Mega Positive thing about Palau is their Recycling Center. With help from Japan, they put in facilities that recycle bottles, aluminum and tin cans, PET beverage containers, mylar and tetrapak cartons, and best of all, all kinds of plastic, like wrappers, bags, milk carton, bottle caps, cosmetic, soap, and petroleum oil containers and more. All these otherwise landfill-choking junk are turned back into oil and fuel with a special machine from Japan!! The process is 70% efficient (30% powers the machine and 70% is surplus fuel to be used for cars or other power! We were SO excited to hear this. ALL island nations need this technology and this kind of recycling program. Also SO exciting is that they compost paper, cardboard and food garbage from restaurants, and offer compost to the public for gardening! Kudos to Palau for that!
