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Discovering Yap: A remote Pacific island protects its culture and traditions

What's it called again?

Yap. Y A P. Yap.

Where is it?

In Micronesia.

Oh....Indonesia.

No. Micro...Micronesia.

For anyone traveling to the remote island of Yap in the western Pacific Ocean, most conversations begin this way. The exception is World War Two historians who know about the air battles that took place between American and Japanese war planes over the main island. The wreckage of those battles is still visible today with twisted scraps of bombers, rusting cannons and bomb craters among the memorials that tourists can visit.

But Yap has much more than war memorials to offer the adventurous traveler intent on experiencing a unique culture.

Yap led the world in 2008 when it created the first government-backed big animal sanctuary with manta rays, sharks and turtles among its inhabitants. Renowned as one of the top dive sites in the world, the legislation protects the marine ecosystem and provides a year-round habitat where divers can experience manta rays almost every day of the year as they feed and mate and wait in line at "cleaning stations" to be groomed by reef-dwelling cleaner fish.

Other activities for visitors include kayaking through mangrove forests; deep sea fishing for yellowfin and skipjack tuna, wahoo, mahi-mahi, rainbow runner, barracuda, red snapper, grouper and trevally; hiking on ancient stone paths; riding in a hand-carved canoe and learning about the ancient art of celestial navigation from a master navigator; visiting traditional men's, women's and community houses to gain knowledge about time-honored building techniques and village customs from a chief; attending a dance that is hundreds of years old and tells the stories of times long before the first colonization in the sixteenth century.

A cluster of 134 islands and atolls that stretch for 600 miles across the Pacific Ocean, Yap proper is a group of four main islands within a barrier reef. Approximately 500 miles southwest of Guam, Yap lies just nine degrees north of the equator and has around 11,000 residents.

Two flights a week from Guam and one from the neighboring island of Palau bring visitors to a pristine environment and way of living that is steadfastly protected by its inhabitants.

Traditional Yapese culture is based on the sustainable use of the land. For thousands of years, these islands have produced all of the food, medicine, clothing and building materials needed. Although some of these items and many others now arrive twice a month on container ships from Guam, islanders still rely on what is made, harvested or fished from the jungle's coconut and banana palms, the mangrove, taro, breadfruit and tapioca trees and the surrounding coral reef.

Yap is a combination of strong traditional values mixed with modern, 21st century life. By maintaining deeply revered traditions, the Yapese enjoy the most intact culture in Micronesia. While they straddle two ways of life with jobs in government and business, traditional community values are stronger than modern expectations. When a community member is required to gather or work in his or her village, everything else must wait. Nonetheless, they always have time to extend a warm welcome to visitors.

IF YOU GO:

United Airlines offers two flights a week to and from Guam and one flight a week to and from Palau.

Accommodations: A surprisingly wide variety of hotels includes dive resorts, an historic inn, economy and business hotels.

Language: English

Currency: American dollar

Voltage: 110

Getting around: Rental cars are available for approximately \$38 - \$60 per day. There are several taxi companies and the typical fare is \$1.00 anywhere in Colonia and about \$12 to the farthest point on the island. Taxis are not metered.

Climate: Sub-tropical year round with average temperatures in the high 80s (F) to low 90s during the day, and low 80s at night, with high humidity.

What to bring: Loose cotton clothing and sandals are appropriate. Women should cover their thighs when in public places. Long shorts to the knee, jeans, slacks or sarongs are fine. Men should not wear shorts that are too short. Bathing suits should only be used for swimming or when on a boat or poolside. Sunscreen is available at hotels and dive shops. Hats are worn by just about everyone to keep out the sun, and good sunglasses are essential for boating.

Time zone: GMT +10

For more information: www.visityap.com

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