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## **Keeping the Culture Alive: The remote island of Yap celebrates with dance** by Joyce McClure

Driving along the one main road that loops around the small, remote island of Yap, I notice a young woman heading toward the dance ground of her village, her voluminous dried hibiscus fiber skirt making a gentle rustle as she walks. She is on her way to join the other women as they practice the traditional dances they will perform on Yap Day, the annual event that takes place around March 1<sup>st</sup>. Rarely performed for tourists, the dances are the highlight of this special time when culture, tradition, food, family and community come together in a joyous celebration.

Everyone in Yap is expected to know how to dance, learning the storytelling movements and songs from their village community as soon as they are old enough to understand the instructions. Consisting of 134 islands and atolls of which only 22 are inhabited by fewer than 11,000 residents, Yap is renowned as the best at maintaining the art of dancing throughout the Pacific.

Each year, a different Yapese municipality hosts Yap Day. Sitting dances, kneeling dances, standing dances, and stick dances are on display. The women are dressed in red, green, yellow and blue banana leaf and hibiscus fiber skirts while the men wear loincloths called *thu'us*. The dancers' upper arms, necks and heads are encircled with woven coconut leaves, flowers and dried hibiscus fiber and their skin is rubbed down with turmeric and coconut oil to give the skin a golden shine.

Now in its 49<sup>th</sup> year, Yap Day activities are aimed at preserving the unique culture. Known as "The Land of Stone Money", the opening ceremony features a parade of men carrying large, heavy, round discs of hand-carved stone money on long poles as the emcee explains the value and history of the unique form of currency.

In addition to the dances, the art of canoe building, rope making, net tying, bamboo raft making, tattooing, basket weaving, coconut husking, betel nut tree climbing and many other demonstrations and competitions are on display. Booths line the perimeter of the dance area offering for sale traditional food, crafts and more.

As I continue on my way around the loop road, I see other ceremonial grounds where more dancers are practicing. With March 1<sup>st</sup> only one month away, the rehearsals take place every weekend as excitement for this important holiday celebration builds.

For more information on Yap Day and visiting Yap, go to [www.visityap.com](http://www.visityap.com).

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