

Micronesia Seeks More Tranquility

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MOEN, Caroline Islands.—If you're looking for a relatively unspoiled, untraveled and accessible place offering a rich native culture, Micronesia is it. But be prepared to rough it, and to pay a good deal more than seems justified for the few available amenities.

Micronesia is comprised of four island chains—the East and West Carolines, the Marianas and the Marshalls—spread out over an area the size of the continental United States and lying roughly between Hawaii and Guam.

The area is officially known as the U.S. Trust Territory, administered by the U.S. Department of Interior under a special United Nations mandate.

Micronesia is rich in World War II history, and a listing of individual islands conjures up memories of some of the most important and bloody battles in the Pacific Theater: Kwajalein, Saipan, and Truk, where the back of the Japanese fleet was broken in 1944, to name a few.

THE ISLANDS are served by a single airline, Air Micronesia, which is owned jointly by Continental Airlines, Aloha Airlines and the United Micronesian Development Association.

The islands can be included on round-trip flights to Asia, or on a round-the-world ticket, at little or no extra cost. In addition, "Air Mike" has a 21-day package, touching down at each of the six administrative centers of Majuro, Ponape, Truk, Yap, Palau and Saipan, home of the territorial government, for \$1,131.50 per person, round-trip from Honolulu.

The primary route stops at Majuro, Ponape and Truk on the way to Guam, there are connecting flights from Guam to Yap, Palau and Saipan, and this flight is an experience in itself. Flying time is long, the minuscule airports are uncontrolled, necessitating a low pass so the pilot can check wind conditions, and the stewardesses walk through the cabin before every landing spraying what smelled like

ice is excellent, the food good, and the pilot and steward give a delightful history lecture as each island is approached.

We arrived at Truk a bit early, so the pilot banked the jet slowly around the 40-mile-wide lagoon, giving the passengers an unequalled view of some of the 60 Japanese vessels sunk there.

YOU CAN GET off at any of the three district centers along the primary route and stay there until the next flight through. Our trip took us to Ponape for four days, Truk for three, and on to Guam.

Kwajalein, like Midway, is a military base. The boomerang-shaped atoll is used for practice in intercepting guided missiles, which are launched from Vandenberg AFB in California.

Majuro is also an atoll, a large, 117 square miles of high strip of coral reef enclosing a coconuts, breadfruit, papaya, mangoes, cacao and bananas abound.

Ponape, one of the lushest islands in all Micronesia, is mountains and unbelievably beautiful rain forest where roughly elliptical lagoon.

Your thrill on approaching the island diminishes somewhat, however, when you discover that the entire shoreline is fringed with thick growths of mangrove, and there are no sand beaches.

AS ON ALL the islands with the exception of Saipan—which is a major resort for the Japanese—tourist facilities are sparse.

The main Ponapean town of Kolonia is a primitive place with squat, ugly shacks and administrative buildings, and rutted dirt roads that send up thick clouds of dust when it is dry, and change in places to muddy bogs when it rains, which is every day on at least some part of the island. The high temperature and humidity make it a place Washingtonians will feel uncomfortably familiar with.

There are three main hotels in Kolonia, the Kaselehnia Inn (kaselehnia is the Ponapean word for "hello"), the Cliff Rainbow and the Pohnpei (the original spelling of the island's

clean but rather forbidding looking place, is several miles outside the town center.

We stayed at the Pohnpei, which is charming, but at the same time a good example of inflated island prices. The hotel is made up of several individual island-style huts, each with a private toilet and shower and a covered veranda.

The showers in the hotel, which was designed by a woman Peace Corps architect, are actual little gardens.

The hotel has no electricity, but uses kerosene lamps, which add to the charm. But the price brings you back down to earth: \$12 a night for two, which is exorbitant for so primitive a town.

The other hotels charge the same or more, with the exception of the Kawaii Inn. Cars rent at \$10 per day, and the Pohnpei and Cliff Rainbow are 15 or 20 minute walks from town, although it is easy to hitch a ride with the extremely friendly islanders, who buzz around in all manner of modern and makeshift vehicles.

THE PRICE of food is similarly high, although there are relatively inexpensive restaurants such as Stewo's (pronounced Stay-woes), which complements its steak and chicken with island specialties like freshly caught tuna, breadfruit cooked with coconut milk, and taro, the potato-like root which is pounded into poi on Hawaii.

Nightlife in Kolonia is limited to a couple of theaters showing old movies, a pool hall, and 26 bars.

The other islands each have their own flavor, and their own amenities. Moen, the center of the Truk district, is even more expensive than Ponape, although the Maramar hotel—\$15 per night for two—is quite nice, with a screened dining room that affords a view of the spectacular island sunsets.

Moen and Palau each have a Continental-Travelodge charging Hilton prices, and the one on Moen sits on the only sand beach on the island. Saipan is well developed, with a number of nice beaches.

With all these drawbacks, then, why visit Micronesia?

some traveller, is finding a place with a primitive culture largely intact, a place which hasn't been visited by untold millions of tourists before you.

The way to see the islands is to get out of the major towns into villages or adjoining islands. Majuro, Ponape, Truk and Yap all have Peace Corps offices, and in the two districts we visited we found the volunteers more than willing to take up to their villages life.

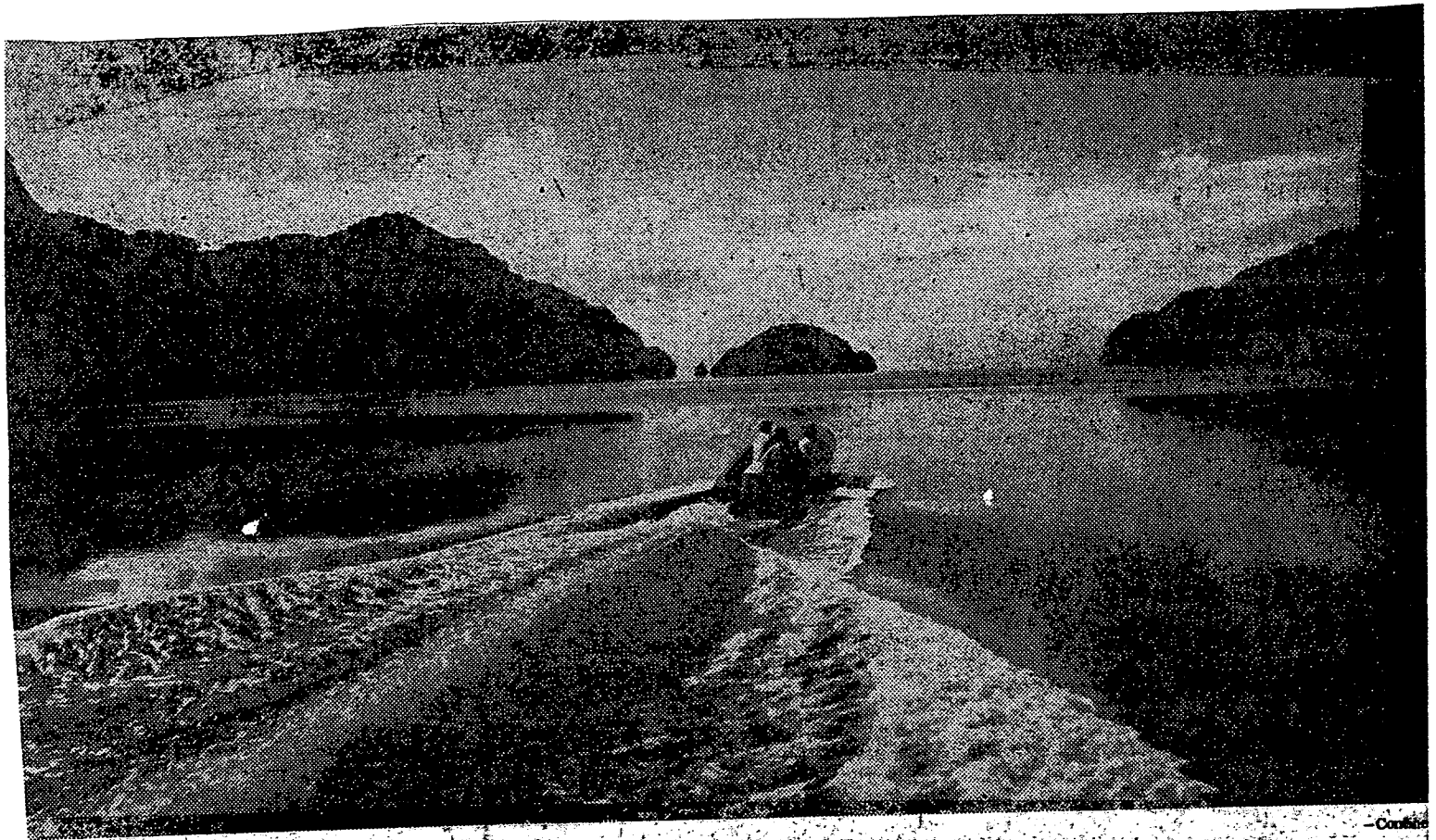
Our best experience, one of the most rewarding in all our travels, came on Ponape.

James Walsh, a Peace Corps volunteer from New Orleans, took us for two days and one night to Awak, a village a half-hour's boat ride from Kolonia, where he teaches English at a mission school.

We stayed at the home of his "family," trekked through the lush mountains, attended a "nopwei," a Ponapean feast celebrating the picking of the first fruits of the season, and drank the island intoxicant, a slimy, vile-tasting liquid called sakau.

It is made from a pounded root, it numbs your body and relaxes your mind, and if you can stomach it, it's worth a try.

IN TRUK, we visited another Peace Corps couple, Bill and Dianne Nelson, on the island of Dublon, which the Japanese spend on something different, headquarters before and during World War II. The extensive Japanese facilities on Dublon were largely destroyed during bombing by the Ameri-



Tranquility among the Rock Islands in the Palau area.

If you want to take the time, you can board one of the government field trip ships that make regular tours of these lands in each district. These trips take a minimum of a week, and in some cases much longer. But when you do have a chance to see what life is like on any Pacific islands, hundreds of miles from anything approaching a modern town.

So the next time you find yourself with several free weeks and a couple of thousands dollars you want to spend on something different, give Micronesia a try. How else can you travel half-way around the world without a passport (a birth certificate will do for American citizens) and without having to change your money into foreign currency? You'll find it fascinating. But luxurious, it isn't.