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Discovering the Real Pacific in Micronesia's 2,100 Islands

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(First of two articles)

YAP, Caroline Islands—If you're willing to sacrifice the luxuries of Hawaii and Tahiti for the thrill of discovering the real Pacific, then just change planes in Honolulu and head west until you reach Micronesia. Here, in a patch of ocean as large as the United States, you'll find plenty of islands that haven't changed much since the days when Melville, Maugham and James Norman Hall sailed the Pacific.

Micronesia means "tiny islands"—a well-chosen title. It includes more than 2,100 islands, but they are so small you could lump them all inside that reliable old comparative Rhode Island and have lots of surfing space left over.

Although Micronesia is located just north of the Equator, it would certainly fit anyone's concept of the fabled South Seas.

Consider these diversions. Swimmers can collect sea shells along an untouched coral reef or flirt with angelfish as they explore the mysteries of a barnacle-encrusted shipwreck at the bottom of an emerald lagoon. Landlubbers can soak up the sun on a deserted white beach, climb into the cockpit of a Japanese Zero that was peppered during an air raid in 1944, or maybe visit

an isolated island inhabited by happy people who have never seen a telephone or an ice cream cone.

Tourists may still be something of a novelty here, but in the past the Micronesians played host to an odd variety of visitors including planters, traders, missionaries, whalers, slavers and a few swashbuckling scoundrels.

The islands changed hands three times in the last 74 years—each time as spoils of war. The Spanish, who had moved in during the late 1600s, sold out to the Germans after losing the Spanish-American War in 1898. The League of Nations gave the islands to Japan following Germany's defeat in the First World War. The Japanese broke their lease at Pearl Harbor.

Most of Micronesia (except for Guam and some British possessions) is now officially known as the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, a designation dating from 1947 when the U.N. granted landlord status to the United States. The Trust Territory—or TT, as it is called—consists of six districts. The Mariana Islands and the Marshalls each constitute a district in themselves. The Caroline Islands are divided into four districts: Ponape, Truk, Yap and Palau. The TT's administrative headquarters is on the island of Saipan in the Marianas.

Each district has at least one language of its own, in addition to English, and a slightly different culture. Total population is about

100,000. The geography ranges from lush mountainous islands in the west to dry low-lying atolls—small islands perched on circular coral reefs—in the east.

Strict security kept tourists out of Micronesia during the Japanese and early American administrations, but now the area is virtually wide open and—thanks to a fairly new air service—more accessible than ever. Air Micronesia, a subsidiary of Continental, has two island-hopping jet flights a week between Honolulu and Saipan. The fare is compara-

tively low: you can fly all the way to Palau for less than it costs to get to Tahiti, which is only half as far from the U.S. mainland.

Since the TT is under U.S. control, Americans can stay for as long as 30 days without a passport or visa. Those who wish to linger awhile need an entry permit.

Negotiations on the future political status of Micronesia are still in progress in Palau, where the Micronesian Status Commission, representing the island governments, has been meeting with U.S. officials.

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Photos by Carl Purcell

A fisherman on Ponape, left, and Ponape girls reading American comic books.

that it is a conglomeration of new houses and stores mixed in with weathered quonset huts and shacks made from old shipping crates.

The next district center to the west is Ponape, a jungle-covered island with mountain peaks that poke through the clouds to a height of 2,000 feet. Ponape is noted for its ancient ruins and boisterous bars.

The ruins are those of Nan Madol, a city built of volcanic rock some 700 years ago. It is located across the island from the main town of Kolinia, but due to a lack of roads can be reached only by sea. Tours cost \$25 per boatload and the trip takes 90 minutes each way.

Ponape is the drinking capital of Micronesia. Kolinia boasts 15 bars—one for every 230 men, women and children. A footnote on law-breaking: it isn't uncommon in any district center to see a small work detail of convicts out cutting grass with machetes. Their guard is always a policeman armed with only a billyclub.

In the Truk district, the main island is Moen. The name Truk refers to the 40-mile-wide lagoon that surrounds Moen and half a dozen other large islands. Truk is a skindiver's heaven. The Japanese used the lagoon as a naval stronghold until American bombers "neutralized" it by sinking an estimated 60 warships.

To get to the rest of Micronesia, you must pass through Guam, a full-fledged U.S. island with no political ties to the TT. In

addition to being the economic hub of the western Pacific, Guam has a number of good hotels and restaurants that attract thousands of vacationers and honeymooners from Japan every year.

North of Guam is Saipan, a familiar name from World War II. Saipan has the finest beaches of all the district centers and is one of the few islands in the trust area with paved roads. War relics include a Japanese command post and a crumbling prison where some people believe Amelia Earhart was held.

Yap and Palau are linked to Guam by DC-6 flights. Yap—home of stone money—is perhaps the most interesting part of Micronesia, probably because it best fits our idea of what the South Seas should be like.

The stone money is easy to find, but Yap is grudgingly yielding to progress. Although many Yapese men still prefer loincloths to trousers, most women don blouses before venturing into the district center, Colonia, to do their shopping.

Yap's airport is a treat for World War II buffs. The remains of more than a dozen Zeros are scattered about the area.

Peleliu, scene of a month-long battle during the war, is a living museum. The concrete shells of a Japanese navy barracks and a communications center are still standing. Half-sunk landing ships in the harbor and tanks in the jungle sit just where they were when the fighting ended.

The hotels of Micronesia range in quality from deluxe to barely satisfactory. Half of them were built within the past two or three years. Room rates run from \$4.50 for a shared-bath single at the Kaselehia Inn in Ponape to \$28 for a plush double at the Continental Travelodge in Truk.

The most unique hotel is the Ponape in Ponape, where guests stay in modern thatched huts with private bath for \$12 double. It's located in a Polynesian village out of town.

The worst hotel has to be the very plain MIECO (Marshall Islands Import-Export Company) of Majuro. The minimum tab of \$7.50 during my last visit included running water several times a day and candles for use when the electricity failed.

Helpful hint: when sitting in the shade of a palm tree, make sure you aren't right under a cluster of coconuts. The same soft breezes that rustle the leaves can also loosen the nuts, causing them to streak to the ground like cannon balls.

The TT government has prepared an excellent guidebook loaded with useful information on all the district centers. Ask for it at any Continental Airlines office or write: Office of Tourism, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Saipan, Mariana Islands, 96950. Yes, each district has its own zip code number.

NEXT: Exploring the un-touristed outer islands by ship.

The eastern gateway to Micronesia is Majuro, an atoll that serves as the district center for the Marshall Islands. Majuro's main island is a crescent-shaped sliver of sand and palm trees about 30 miles long. It used to be a chain of islands until the U.S. Navy filled in the empty spaces to build a road—or, more accurately, a 30-mile string of potholes.

Majuro is short on tourist attractions, the chief point of interest being a village at the far end of the road. The "downtown" area resembles the other district centers in