

AS A DEVELOPING
DIVE DESTINA-
TION, THE
MARSHALL
ISLANDS OFFER
SOME EXCITING
CENTRAL PACIFIC
ALTERNATIVES.

THE UNDISCOVERED (DIVE) COUNTRY

IN 1565, when the mutinous crew of the Spanish ship *San Lucas* altered course a few degrees to avoid capture, they discovered the Marshallese atolls.

Today divers are just beginning to rediscover these central-Pacific islands. Lying west of Hawaii and in the path of well-known destinations such as Truk, Palau and Yap, the Marshall Islands can be an excellent add-on to a Micronesian dive excursion.

As yet, there is little in the way of dive infrastructure. And while the outer islands of the atolls are often quite idyllic, with white sand beaches and palm trees, the visual appeal of the more densely populated islands is marred by overcrowding and waste-disposal problems.

But for the adventurous diver looking for a "pioneering" experience, the atolls of Majuro, Arno, Mili, Jaluit and Kwajalein offer some phenomenal opportunities to dive pristine (and in many cases virgin) reefs, as well as the chance to experience a plethora of topside and underwater World War II relics.

THE CAPITAL ATTRACTION

Home to nearly half the island group's total population, the capital atoll of Majuro is your first stop in the Marshalls. You can start your day here or at the neighboring atoll of Arno on a deep dive encountering large pelagics and then spend your afternoon or evening on the shallower reefs experiencing the hundreds of tropical species that reside there. Napoleon wrasse, honeycomb grouper, Moor-

ish idols and humphead parrotfish are just a few of the exotic species you'll find.

This rich diversity of marine life is a stunning complement to the varied reef formations of Majuro and Arno. But unlike the South Pacific's Fiji or even areas of nearby Micronesia, soft corals are not found in abundance. Instead, the substrate is dominated by a lavish variety of hard corals displaying the full Central Pacific color palette of lavenders, baby blues, pinks and mint greens.

Shark sightings are also quite common, with white-tipped reef sharks, gray reef sharks, silver- and blacktips as well as the occasional oceanic white-tip as the sharks *du jour*. On any given dive, it's not unusual to see two or three individuals swim gracefully by — showing no aversion to bubble-blowing "intruders," yet uninterested in making closer inspections.

BY VINCE RHODES



While many of the dive sites around the atoll of Majuro are unnamed, a notable exception is the "Parking Lot." Located only five minutes from Majuro Island's main hotel, it contains some 20 different World War II vehicles (tanker trucks, an ambulance, jeeps and an LCU) lying

cance (unlike Kwajalein, which is a virtual underwater museum).

CLAM DIP AND THE NEWEST OF THE NEW

Mili Atoll is a 25-minute plane ride from Majuro Atoll — luggage is sent ahead via boat. A private com-

dacnas that grow close to 4 feet in length. Nearby at Rhyer's Pass, a 130-foot dive, huge sea fans and turtles are quite common. Frank's Corner is good for white-tip shark encounters and photography opportunities.

The Northern Passage features a wall that drops to 80 feet and becomes a gently sloping sand floor. Eels, anemones and jewfish abound.

Wau's six-cottage, solar-powered resort has the advantages of solitude and close proximity to the clam farm. And a big push is being made to keep the resort and the island as a whole ecologically responsible. All trash is burned, batteries are recycled, and old landfills are being unearthed and disposed of properly.

The resort also has all the modern conveniences such as toilets and hot and cold running water — not something to be taken for granted on the outer islands of the Marshallese atolls.

Nearby Mili Island provides a memorable offgassing interval before the return flight. The island is littered with WWII relics including zeroes, bombers and big guns. Craters dot the landscape, the result of heavy bombing by U.S. forces



ERIC HANAUER

Majuro's "Parking Lot" is home to 20 World War II vehicles.

in about 70 feet of water. Visibility here will vary depending on conditions in the lagoon, but it's definitely worth a visit. There are a few other wrecks located around the atoll, but none of historical signifi-

cance. The resort on Wau Island, the location of the only resort in Mili Atoll, and runs a giant clam farm that caters to the food and aquarium trades.

It's possible to dive the clam farm and see giant neon-mantled *Tri-*

GETTING THERE

Served by Continental Micronesia and Air Marshall Islands (AMI), Majuro is a five-hour flight from Hawaii. Flights leave every day but Saturday from Hawaii and Guam. There are airstrips on 26 of the 29 atolls served by AMI planes.

Once on the islands, there are few choices for accommodations. On Majuro, the most reliable place to stay is the RRE Hotel. The hotel features 40 air-conditioned rooms; a bar and restaurant on premises; and most other modern amenities including a fax machine and color TV. The RRE is centrally located in Majuro and right next door to the RRE-operated dive

shop and sportfishing facilities.

Currently, the only option on Ebeye is the Anrohasa Hotel. The Anrohasa has 26 air-conditioned rooms as well as a bar and restaurant on premises.

While neither hotel could be classified as a "luxury" location, both are clean, comfortable and offer friendly service. Island-style accommodations are available on Wau Island in the Mili Atoll and can be booked through Marshalls Dive Adventures. Dolphin Divers has plans to offer either a live-aboard or a small land-based resort, which will also service the Mili Atoll.

Majuro has several dive operators, the most organized of

which is Marshalls Dive Adventures. Marshall Island Aquatics, run by local professional diver Matt Holly, also offers dive charters with advance notice. In Kwajalein, the only operator is Kwajalein Atoll Dive Resort located on Ebeye. Two-tank dives in Majuro and Kwaj run about \$75 including tanks and weights. A night dive costs \$65 and a day trip to Arno will cost about \$110 to \$125 per person.

A resort for Kwajalein Atoll is planned and construction set to begin later this year on Ebwoj. The complex will include eight duplex cottages, a restaurant/bar and a dive shop. Ebwoj is more picturesque than

Ebeye with palm trees, sandy beaches and less crowding.

Since the diving industry in the Marshalls is relatively new and the stream of tourists sporadic, advance planning is essential. It might be easiest to use a travel wholesaler such as Layne Ballard of Central Pacific Dive Expeditions.

Ballard can help match you with other travelers to the Marshalls, cutting dive costs and ensuring that service is available. For more information on local dive operators and accommodations, and background on the Republic of the Marshall Islands, contact Hilary Kaye of the U.S. Tourism Office. —V.R.

THE MARSHALL ISLANDS



The 1,225 Marshall Islands lie in two parallel chains stretching roughly 800 miles from north to south. The eastern chain is called *Ratak*, which means "sunrise," and the western chain is *Ralik*, or "sunset."

The summer months are the best time for diving, as January and December can bring bad weather and the trade winds can make boat travel to Arno more difficult.

The total land mass of the Marshall Islands is approximately 70 square miles, but the inhabited area is actually much smaller and supports nearly 43,000 people. As a result, some islands such as Ebeye are struggling with the problems of overcrowding, and fall short of the idyllic vision most visitors would expect of a Pacific paradise.

attempting to prevent the Japanese from using the landing strips.

A little farther from Majuro lies Jaluit Atoll. According to local dive-master Fabio Amaral and travel wholesaler Layne Ballard, this is the newest and most exciting area of the southern Marshall Islands. A mere 40-minute flight from Majuro, Jaluit's reefs lie waiting for exploration. Plans are in the works for constructing a resort in Jaluit, but currently you need to make special arrangements to sample the dive fare here.

THE CROWN JEWEL

Kwajalein Atoll, the largest atoll in the world, has historically been a difficult destination for non-military personnel. Until the fall of 1994, there were no real accommodations or dive operators for visitors to utilize.

The United States rents Kwajalein Island from the Marshallese government and the Department of Defense maintains a missile testing installation there. Fortunately for would-be "Kwaj" explorers, a small dive operation has sprung up on the Ebeye and plans are under way to build a new resort area.

While the reef diving around the northern atoll of Kwajalein is excellent, with plenty of opportunities to

encounter a variety of fish and invertebrate life, this area's strength is its plethora of submerged wrecks — over 30 planes and ships. From a sunken flying boat located just off the sea plane ramp to the German heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, the wrecks of Kwaj are rife with the history of World War II.

The *Prinz Eugen* was part of the United States' atomic testing program. It survived both an air burst and underwater burst only to be towed to Kwajalein Atoll, where the vessel's structure weakened and the ship eventually capsized and sunk. Fortunately, it settled within the range of recreational diving. Many of the other 50 surviving test vessels were scuttled in deep water.

Devoid of any radiation threat, the *Prinz Eugen* now lies upside down with its stern above water and its bow at a depth of 110 feet. The wreck is a 20-minute boat ride from the dock and probably one of the best dives in the area.

As a result of past accidents, penetration of the *Eugen* is no longer allowed, but there's plenty to see without entering the ship. The crumpled remains of the foretop structure lie next to the ship in the sand.

Divers can start their exploration

there, move forward to the bow in slightly deeper water and then work their way up toward the stern. The hull is covered with anemones, sponges and juvenile fish of all descriptions, making safety stops a fish watcher's dream.

THE PRICE FOR BEING FIRST

The Marshalls will appeal to a special type of diver. Those seeking luxurious creature comforts, resort-style diversions, abundant duty-free shopping and wild nightlife should look elsewhere. But if exploratory diving on near-virgin reefs is more important than five-star service, the Marshalls could be for you. At present, the islands host a mere 10 to 15 divers a month, and with no immediate plans for large-scale development in the works, the reefs face no immediate threat from man.

Perhaps the best way to experience the Marshalls is during a lay-over en route to other Micronesian destinations. Getting there is no longer a matter of chance, and the underwater rewards are great. ■

CONTACT INFORMATION

Republic of the Marshall Islands U.S. Tourism Office

Hilary Kaye

4000 Westerly Place, Suite 210

Newport Beach, CA 92660

Phone: (714) 851-5150

Fax: (714) 851-3111

•Hilary can provide local addresses and phone/fax numbers for dive operators and hotels if you choose to not use a wholesaler.

Central Pacific Dive Expeditions

Layne Ballard

29 Blazing Star, Irvine, CA 92714

Phone: (800) U-GO-DIVE, (714) 551-1167

Fax: (714) 851-3111

Continental Micronesia

(800) 231-0856

Air Marshall Islands

(800) 543-3898

•Office hours are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Honolulu time.