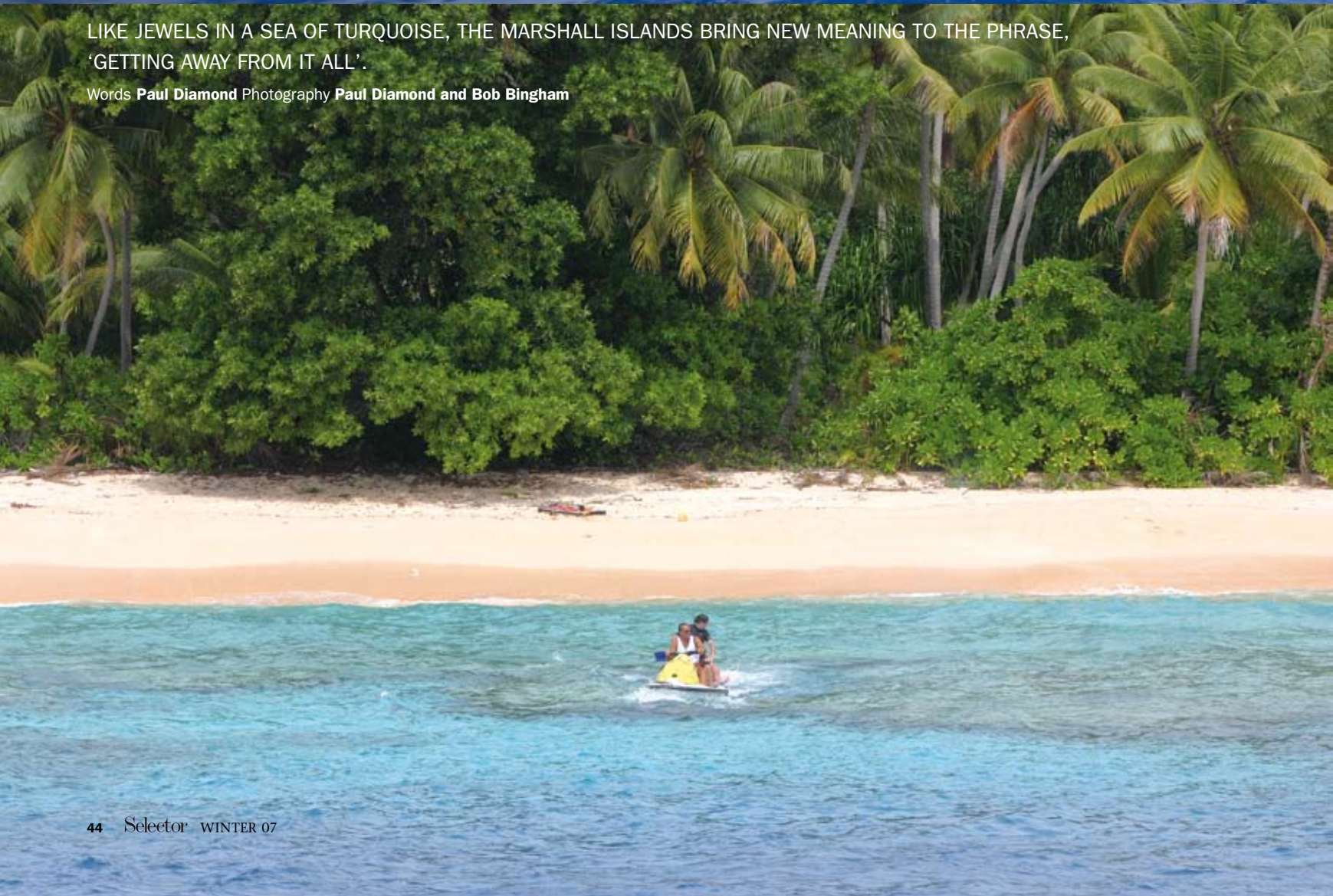




Waterworld

LIKE JEWELS IN A SEA OF TURQUOISE, THE MARSHALL ISLANDS BRING NEW MEANING TO THE PHRASE, 'GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL'.

Words **Paul Diamond** Photography **Paul Diamond and Bob Bingham**



Clockwise from top Scuba diving on the outer atoll; a view from the Indies IV sundeck; The "swanky" Indies IV; Young Marshallese are happy to pose; A final thank you on leaving; One of many magical sunsets; a young local passing time; the author with his Mahi Mahi haul; A surfer's paradise; Another striking view.

Top left Idyllic desertion.

Bottom left One of the island's few modes of transport.



“Wow sounds nice...where are you going again?!”...

I often lament how unfair it is that bragging, like science, maths, and anything I tend to be crap at has rules; in this case the desired effect can only be gained when the person you're trying to impress knows what you're talking about!

“The Marshall Islands...Micronesia...you know...in the Pacific?”

For a while now, with no idea why, I have prided myself on not being what you'd call an average tourist. Listening to people talk about spending their holiday lounging around a resort pool, “finding themselves” in India or Bali or “doing Europe” leaves me somewhat jaded. Call me cynical, but these stories often sound pretty similar and are usually defined by how good the hotel was, or how much they were fleeced by the locals.

But don't get me wrong; anyone who gets off their backside and does something different from their day to day certainly has my

side; there was a fresh sea breeze, palm trees, local warmth and the expectation of a completely new experience. I was listening to an excited Marshallese tell me that the teenager in front of me (he couldn't have been a day over 16) held the record for catching the biggest blue marlin on the atoll. Sure, I felt a little hazy from spending 14 hours island hopping, and had had a beer or three, but I couldn't imagine how on earth this 50kg kid had managed to land a 340kg monster.

Beyond a doubt though, the warmth of the people was affecting me; so friendly, their passion about their home was obvious. This was particularly evident in their traditional greeting, “Yokwe yuk”, which actually means “love to you”.

This open, peaceful approach of the Marshallese seems all the more amazing when you consider their turbulent history. A tug of war of occupation by the Germans, the Japanese and the Americans

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admiration. For me however, the idea of taking the time, effort and money to do something really different is what travel is all about.

As a water junkie I spend hours daydreaming of remote locations and pristine oceans. These dreams are heavily enriched with surfing, diving and fishing, as exploring these pleasures can take you to places that most will never even hear about, let alone get near.

So when a colleague suggested a boat trip to the Marshall Islands, I didn't really know where he was talking about, but I definitely knew that I wanted to go. The hook being that we were going to be spending a week on a swanky boat owned by a guy who had devoted most of his life to exploring the remote corners of the earth in search of unspoilt, uncrowded water Nirvana.

Faux explorer bravado aside, the problem with getting to remoteness is that you have to go out of the way to get there. One strategy was flying to Hawaii, back to Guam, finally arriving several planes later. Another option was flying to Singapore, waiting awhile, heading to Guam and then island hopping to the Marshalls. Either way, it was looking like an expensive couple of days.

Then miraculously, a solution; an airline called Our Airline, formerly known as Air Nauru, had re-commenced flying direct from Brisbane to the Marshall Islands, pretty much the only direct way to get there from Australia. Relieved, and with a lot of help from the Our Airline Australian office, tickets were sorted.

Not long after I found myself on the atoll of Majuro, the capital in a chain of 64 islands, standing on a thatched-roof balcony overlooking the Pacific. The reality of where I was suddenly hit and I had no trouble working out why.

From this strip of land I could see moonlit ocean on either

has had an incredibly detrimental impact on the traditional culture of the islands.

It's ironic though that the destruction created when the Americans kicked the Japanese out after WWII is one of the things that drives the local economy. The debris of the war has given rise to some of the most spectacular diving on the planet. Every year dedicated divers come to the Marshalls to explore the sunken planes, submarines, battle cruisers and aircraft carriers that litter the northern atolls. Of note are the Saratoga, a 900ft (bigger than the Titanic) aircraft carrier and the Nagato; Admiral Yamamoto's flagship from which he ordered the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Undoubtedly though, it is the Americans that have made their presence felt more than any before them. After Hiroshima Uncle Sam decided that the far northern atolls of the Marshalls would be a great place to test their new found toy: the nuclear bomb. Between 1946 and 1956, the American Military set off 67 nuclear bombs; the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima bombs being let off every day for 12 years. Thanks for that Messrs. Truman and Eisenhower.

After the healing of time however, the traces of this madness are all but gone. An extensive clean-up project has made safe all accessible areas.

At first I was finding it troubling how such destruction could occur on a place so remote, beautiful and peaceful. The people on Majuro and especially the outer atolls were so happy; most were poor but exuded a happiness long past the usual greeting smile. Spiritually they appeared as far removed from the harried, consumer driven folk of our cities as they are physically.

Later that night, after tucking into an enormous plate of the



How to get there:

- www.ourairline.com.au
- P:1300 369044

The Boat Charter:

- www.indiestrader.com/indies4/index.html

Where to stay:

- RRE, Hotel Robert Reimers
P:6253250 E: rreadmin@ntamar.net
- Long Island Hotel P:2476789
E: lihotel@ntamar.com
- Hotel Marshall Islands P:6253000
E: journal@ntamar.net
- Marshall Islands Resort Hotel
E: mirhtl@ntamar.net

Activities:

- Fishing: Marshalls Billfish Club
E: billfish@ntamar.net
- Diving: Bako Divers
W: www.bakodivers.com
Marshall Dive Adventures
E: mda@e-mit.net

Tourism Info:

- MIVA: www.visitmarshallislands.com



Clockwise from above
A huge haul of Wahoo and Mahi Mahi; Pristine tropical beauty; Another outer atoll inhabitant; The great surfing continues; More captivating smiles; Healthy reef life; Udo and friend; One of the atoll's "airports".





Top left Another sunset about to explode.

Top right A barbecue beach dinner.

Left Beachcombing.

Below Hitching a lift with a green sea turtle.

Below left Chewing the fat on the back deck.

Below right Fresh tuna entrée.



freshest yellow fin tuna I had ever tasted, (casually caught that afternoon by the cook in the hotel kitchen), I found myself sliding further into the relaxed Pacific haze that would stay with me for the duration of my trip. The clean, deep ocean was beginning to wash away my life at home. Listening to the tales of these amazing people made me realise that life here is so far away from my reality. Needless to say that night I slept very well.

Having a full day to spare before flying out to meet the swanky boat, we decided, on the advice of our new friends, to go game fishing. Given that we were in some of the best sport fishing territory in the world, I thought it best to get some practice in before heading to the outer atolls. That day we cruised through ridiculous schools of tuna, Mahi-mahi and sailfish.

As we left the relative civilisation of Majuro in search of nirvana, I realised I could have easily spent the week there, totally immersed in the activities and people.

We boarded a light plane, headed for Kwajalein atoll and the well-appointed boat that was to be our home for the next week. Arriving was a surreal experience. Kwajalein is a high security military base, at which the Americans have certainly made themselves at home. Manicured lawns and golf courses seemed out of place compared to the Pacific simplicity we'd just left.

Access to this atoll is restricted as it is home to the "Star Wars" missile testing program. The atoll is known as the "catcher's mitt", i.e. the splashdown point for missiles fired from the American mainland. I was blown away (metaphorically) to learn that America's newest weapons take only about 30 minutes to travel nearly 7000km.

On Kwajalein armed guards awaited us and we were "processed" for clearance, if only for 45 mins, onto the atoll; sniffer dogs, forms and passport clearances had to be done before we were allowed from the holding area of the airport to the boat, which was only 400 metres away.

Finally we got through and were met by Martin Daly, our captain, surf charter pioneer and part owner of the Indies Trader group. Martin is probably one of the ocean's last true explorers and is the envy of every sea nomad, as he continues to roam and discover remote and untouched areas of the planet. He is credited with discovering surf in the Mentawai Islands in Indonesia that now lure thousands of eager surfers to Sumatra every year.

When I got around to asking Martin why he had chosen the atolls of the Marshalls to start taking people to, his answer was simple. "This place, like no other I have found ticks all the boxes... The isolation and low population have allowed the marine environment to remain virtually intact – more so than just about anywhere in the world. The coral reefs are all in fantastic shape and the fish life in most areas seem to be about as untouched as anywhere I have been. "The locals are also a very big factor; on the outer islands they have had no contact with tourists. The people are shy, but hospitable and friendly. Instead of having their hand out like in most places, the

...this well-appointed boat was far from roughing it... a good percentage of the people onboard were couples. Some...had brought their kids.

local people are more likely to present you with a gift than a bill.

"This whole place is like being in a real life screen saver; lots of beautiful, uninhabited islands, powder sand beaches, blue water with 50-70 metres of visibility, palm trees, empty surf and some of the best fishing I have ever seen."

And how right Martin was; the first day we pulled up to a little island with an appealing right hand wave peeling around the reef contour. After the obligatory scramble for boards, suncream etc, I asked Martin what the wave was called. "Doesn't have one yet," he replied, "no one has surfed it before." The week that followed was truly an adventure through isolation. Being onboard such a tidy boat didn't hurt either; the Indies IV is 115 feet of pure sea luxury. Plasma screen, chef, leather lounge, dining suite, sun deck and deck bar were all words that were used daily and I often had trouble working out what to do when not in the water; ask the chef to make me a snack, watch a DVD or read a book on the sundeck? It was tough work dealing with such important decisions.

Chasing the elements in remote places is often a male affair

and this was what I expected on the Indies IV. Understandable considering remoteness, third world transport and toilet facilities, language and the countless unknowns that spring up can sometimes go against some people's idea of holiday travel. Not to mention that searching for fish and waves is hardly something that will hold the enthusiasm of an obliging partner for a week or more.

But this well-appointed boat was far from roughing it and the trip was surprisingly different in that a good percentage of the people onboard were couples. Some, including Martin, had brought their kids. The refreshing family energy this brought to the boat was fantastic; everybody bonded, conversations were broader than sport and I got to learn what's "cool" when it comes to pre-pubescent entertainment.

Every day, as we cruised lazily around this detached paradise, was spent chasing the surf /dive /fish trifecta with most days hitting the mark. The images and memories picked up whilst there are certainly helping me come to a new level of prolonged daydreaming... I can't wait to go again. ■

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