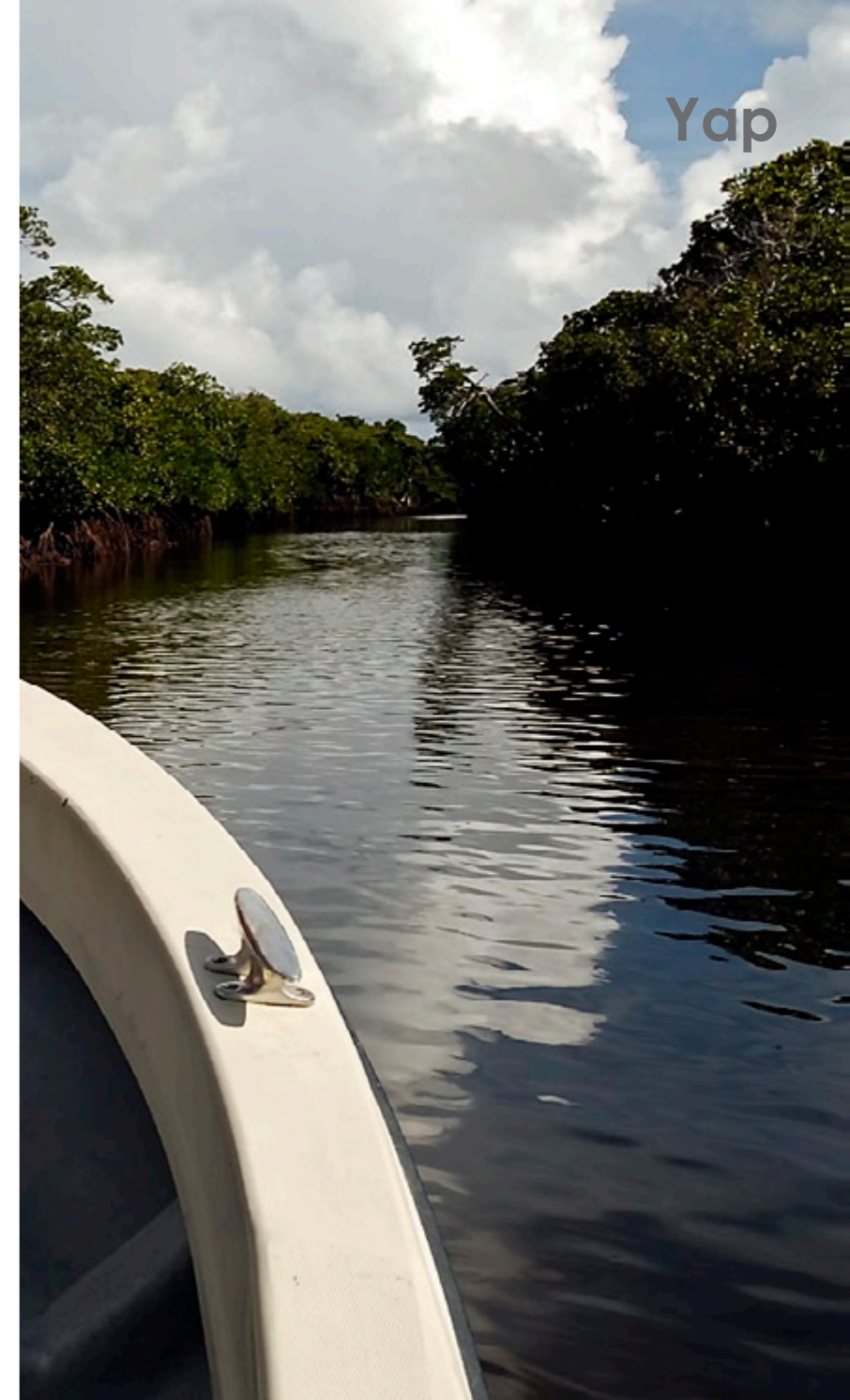


The Islands of
Yap
*Exploring
the Garden of Eden*
Text and photos by Scott Johnson





A Yapese girl (above) weaving a basket at Kaday village



Schooling Pacific barracuda in Goofnuw channel (left); Mangrove-lined German channel (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Leaf scorpionfish on Lionfish Wall

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. When He reflected on His handiwork, God thought, "Is there anything I can add to crown my glorious creation?" His answer, of course, was "Yap!" So, He added the lovely island chain, and then, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis, chapter one — journalist translation)

Of course, in the Garden of Eden, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." (Genesis 2:25). The naiveté and simple pace of the people in this island paradise were certainly refreshing, once one got used to the bared flesh, of course.

The Yapese are known to be a friendly, but traditional and shy people. Their shyness apparently does

not include their entire wardrobe (although, woman's thighs must be covered at all times, including visitors).

Confused. I admit it. I feel confused and yes, a little bit embarrassed. I am used to seeing canned foods, packaged goods, fresh vegetables and luscious fruit in a grocery store. But the situation here was challenging, as half of the women were fully dressed in

shirts and knee-length skirts, while the others were only covered from their waste down. I did not want to be rude by avoiding eye contact, but I also did not want to stare. Lauren Johnson, my wife, was obviously enjoying my discomfort, though I am sure she was perplexed as well.

Yap is not the land that time forgot, but more like the islands where



the past and present mix in intoxicating ways. We sensed no true clashing of times, where a digitally and mechanically driven world view was trying to forever cover the old, or where ancient ways were attempting to keep out any modernization. Instead, there seemed to be a tranquil blend of traditional village life with more contemporary social elements, such as schools, a hospital and grocery stores.

Yap, itself, is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and slightly north of the equator. If you mark a

diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk (formerly Truk) and Yap, are members of The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), which is a constitutional democracy. It is closely aligned with the United States as evidenced by the Compact of Free Association the two entities signed in 1986. Ultimately, the agreement provides the FSM with security and economic benefits, including regular coverage by the U.S. Postal Service, and the United States

maintains a valuable presence in the region.

Lost in translation

The Yapese absolutely cherish their roots and heritage, yet embrace “sensible” advances in education, medicine, communications and even name changes. The islands of Wa’ab became the islands of Yap due to a miscommunication. According to the Yap Visitors Bureau, “When the first ship to anchor at the central islands arrived. A canoe of local warriors from the remaining islands went out to greet the ship, and through sign language, communicated their desire

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver explores one of the many formations at Yap Caverns; Yellowfin goatfish in the shallows of Mi'l Channel; Pajama or coral cardinalfish and mandarinfish; Beautiful six-banded angelfish are common



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kaday village scene; Nudibranch at Slow & Easy; Living wall of big-eye jacks at Manta Ridge; Resting crocodilefish in Goofnuw Channel

to have the captain come ashore for discussions. As they boarded the warrior's canoe, the ship's captain pointed towards the shore and asked the name of the nearby landmasses. Thinking that the captain was pointing at a canoe paddle held by a navigator in the bow, the warriors responded proudly, "Yap." The name was duly recorded by the captain, and it stuck, so to this day the islands of Wa'ab are known to the outside world as Yap, which translated is *canoe paddle!*

Pocket change

If non-divers outside of Micronesia are aware of Yap, they probably think of it as the Island(s) of Stone Money. The Stone Money, or Rai, are doughnut-shaped disks that were primarily quarried from Babelthaob, Palau. Ranging in size from 4m (12ft) to .3m (1ft) in diameter, the Rai

are easily the largest coins in the world. The ancient Yapese admired the shiny properties of the Palau calcite, so they sent warriors with rudimentary tools in outrigger canoes to hew and transport the Rai over hundreds of kilometers (miles) of potentially treacherous water. Many Rai and the bones of even more warriors ended up on the sea floor between the two states. The difficulty of the journey, including the loss of life and property, that brought a piece of stone money to Yap is one of the most important aspects that determine its overall worth. Other key features that impact a coin's value are its size, shape and texture. The U.S. dollar is now the accepted currency in Yap, but Rai are still used for ceremonial and traditional exchanges, such as marriages and land transfers. Most Rai are never moved and stored in Stone Money Banks in the villages.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Reef octopus at Yap Corner; Male mandarinfish ready for a night on the town; "Just" another nudibranch at Slow & Easy

David Dean O'Keefe, an Irish-American sailor, was shipwrecked on Yap in 1871. His rescue by and subsequent stay with the Yapese endeared the people and location to him. O'Keefe left Yap only to return with a new ship and a grand business proposition. He offered to transport the Rai from Palau in exchange for copra (the dried coconut meat) and beche-de-mer (sea cucumbers). The Yapese not only accepted his proposal, but granted him a 30-year monopoly on the business. While "O'Keefe-money" was valued much lower than the Rai brought by canoe, it allowed more villagers to achieve the status of owning stone money without having to risk their warriors to

obtain it. O'Keefe's life even inspired the 1954 movie, *His Majesty O'Keefe*.

On wings of mantas

Let's face it, manta rays put Yap on the radar of the scuba diving world. Mexico's Revillagigedos Islands, the Maldives (Hanifaru Bay, in particular) and Yap are widely lauded as the hottest of the hot spots for these massive filter-feeders. Lauren and I have been to all three places and can validate the manta mania reputation of each.

What separates Yap from the other two is the same timelessness that permeates the rest of the island state. The Revillagigedos Islands and Maldives encounters are seasonal

events, which means divers have a limited access window each year. In addition, liveboards and a 28-hour crossing are the only way to visit The Boiler, the Revillagigedos renowned manta site. Yap, on the other hand, is open for business year-round and requires only a short boat ride each day. By all means, visit all three destinations and become the envy of manta aficionados everywhere. This will also help you best appreciate the simplicity and consistency of Yap's manta dives.

There are two types of mantas, worldwide: giant (*Manta birostris*) and reef (*Manta alfredi*). Giant mantas are pelagics that roam vast areas of open ocean, while the reef mantas

tend to take up residence in one area and stay put, though definitely not on the same sedentary scale as the Rai. The mantas seen around Yap are predominantly the resident reef mantas.

If the mantas get credit for putting a marine face on Yap, then Bill and Pat Acker—the owners of the Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers—deserve to be recognized as their chief publicity agents. In particular, Bill, a Texan from the United States who found Yap and then his lovely wife, Pat, via a tour in the Peace Corps in the late 70's, is credited as being the person most responsible for bringing recreational diving to the state. I have never met a better





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Lionfish are plentiful at Slow & Easy; Brilliant leaf scorpionfish at Magic Kingdom; Soft corals in Mi'l Channel; Fire dartfish hovering above the sand at Yap Caverns; Princess damselfish at Yap Caverns



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Jan Sledsens, a transplanted dive junkie from Butare, Rwanda, is Yap Divers' dive operations manager. He warmly greets us on our opening day of diving, asks if we need anything to get started and then introduces Alex Raimon, Gordon Keiji and Nico Erhieisap, our dive guides and captains for the day. There is nothing per-

functory about the process, though Jan has clearly performed the same ritual thousands of times before.

Nico's big smile displays gums and teeth stained bright red from chewing betel nut. The Yapese believe you should always carry a bag during the day (empty hands indicate pending mischief) and a light at night (only trouble makers walk in the dark). Areca nuts, betel leaves and lime, the essential ingredients in a good betel nut chew, are in the bags of most. You learn to watch where you step in the Garden of Eden or you will become a part of the chewing experience, one way or another.

Our three escorts put our gear, including my two Aquatica housings equipped with a pair of Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes

each, in the boat and then we were off. We slowly made our way through the mangrove-bordered German Channel until the boat stopped. The tide was still so low that Nico and Gordon jumped out





THIS PAGE: Some of the majestic manta rays that frequent Goofnuw and Mi'l Channel

Yap



on an incoming tide. This floods the channels with clear water from the open ocean, gives rays and other animals a jet stream to ride inside the barrier reef and carries divers in to the safety of the islands instead of out towards the unprotected sea. By the time we reached our drop point in Mi'l Channel, it was apparent that the tide had started to turn.

In the winter months, which is usually from December to April, mantas congregate in great numbers in Mi'l Channel to mate. During the summer, they tend to prefer Goofnuw Channel. When not mating or feeding, the mantas flock to cleaning stations in the respective channels so industrious Bluestreak Cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) and other small fish can rid them of parasites in their mouths, around their gills and on their skin. It is basically the manta version of a

manicure.

Yap Divers focuses on putting their guests on rocks and dead coral around the cleaning stations, so the largest rays can glide over the divers' heads and at times, around them, during the alternating circling and cleaning process. Since the cleaning stations are relatively shallow and the divers are given IMAX-like seats, the only thing preventing extended bottom times is the amount of air the excited divers waste while acting like children being presented with a parade of gifts on Christmas morning.

We suited-up, hit the water and followed Nico and Gordon to a site called Manta Ridge. We literally had to swim through a veritable wall of big-eye jacks, or trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*), in order to reach the coral formation at 16.8m (55ft), which is home to all the eager beauticians that keep the

and pushed us until it was safe to use the engines once again. The Germans who originally carved out the channel, and the Japanese who then refined it before

and during World War II, apparently could not do anything more to improve navigating the low tide conditions.

The best time to dive for mantas is



Yap



rays coming back for more. A three-meter (10ft) manta was already circling when we arrived.

Over the next hour, we observed and photographed rays gracefully gliding around us and taking turns being cleaned. This unique form of aquatic ballet was quite peaceful and certainly not the adrenaline rush one feels during a death defying stunt, like child rearing, or white-knuckling a roller-coaster. In fact, the mantas own apprehension appeared to be linked to our breathing rate and general state of calm. The more we relaxed, the closer they came.

Getting sharky with it

Hi. My name is Scott. I am a sharkaholic. I have hit most of the planet's celebrated shark dives at least once. If you want to dive with bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*), look-up Beqa Adventure Divers in Fiji. For tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), lemon sharks (*Negaprion brevirostris*) and Caribbean

reef sharks (*Carcharhinus perezii*), you should try a Little Bahamas Bank charter from the U.S. Cocos Island. Costa Rica and Ecuador's Darwin Island in the Galapagos Islands are your best bets for schooling scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*). Great whites (*Carcharodon carcharias*) are the featured attractions at Guadalupe Island, Mexico. And, the Southern Red Sea and Cat Island, Bahamas, are the last reliable footholds for oceanics (*Carcharhinus longimanus*).

My recommendation for grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) is right here in Yap. Where Bill Acker has succeeded in marketing the mantas, he has done a poor to average job of letting us know about his sharks. Maybe Bill was trying to keep it a secret, but the proverbial cat is out of the bag now. I have never enjoyed watching or photographing grey reef sharks more than at Vertigo Reef.

Vertigo, located on the eastern side of Yap Proper, features a reef that

THIS PAGE: Grey reef sharks at Vertigo





ety in a similar fashion. The slower my respirations and beating heart, the more the animals focused on the bait and less on me. This meant I could take shots at point black range without my flashing strobes causing the hungry creatures undue stress.

Sex, sex, sex

As the days of our two-week stay continued to melt away, Bill and his crew entertained us with sun dappled swim-throughs at Yap Caverns, macro-gone-amuck at Slow & Easy and thrilling drift dives through the channels. And yet, these daytime adventures simply could not scratch the itch that was only satisfied when watching the passionate sex of the locals in the light of the moon.

Night after glorious night, we politely declined Bill's generous invitation to join him in the *Mnuw's* Crow's Nest for a round, or ten, of beer. He brews the libation in his own 600-liter micro-brewery in the hotel's lobby. Bill is proud of his beer and a firm believer in its "Drink, Pee, Repeat!" slogan, so it is hard to turn



starts as shallow coral gardens and then plunges to more than 100m (300ft). The blue water drop-off is captivating and the perfect backdrop for the shark feed. Frozen bait is placed in impact resistant crates that permit water to flow-through, but keep the bait relatively intact as sharks try to get it. The crates are then secured mid-water by ropes attached to both a buoy and rock on the bottom. The result is an irresistible enticement for the sharks to come calling and to stick around as happy divers observe them in water that is not fouled by free-for-all feeding. Once the dives are over, the divers return to the boat and the sharks are finally rewarded for their patience. It is a win-win, all-around.

Forty or more grey reefs and a

hand full of blacktip reef sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) and whitetip reef sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*) greeted our arrival. Lauren knows I rarely need her services when I am dancing with sharks, so she found a nice comfortable piece of dead coral from which to watch the action. Meanwhile, I positioned my back to the crates, faced the blue and waited for the sharks to approach. Though there was a greater sense of urgency displayed by the sharks than the graceful mantas in the channels, the sharks clearly responded to human anxiety



THIS PAGE: Glimpses of the Manta Ray Bay Resort





travel

Yap



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giant feather duster worm at Lionfish Wall; Yapese dance during a Kaday village tour; Hawksbill turtle resting in Mi'l Channel



him down. Additionally, the *Mnuw*—the South Seas schooner that doubles as the hotel's restaurant and bar—offers a great view of the sunset over Tomil Harbor, so, it, too, is tough to pass-up. Still, the unbridled flirting and rampant sex that was soon to engage just a short boat ride away was too alluring for such seasoned voyeurs to stand.

Rainbow Reef was the scene of the unbridled debauchery. At dusk, we descended to the great depth of 6m (18ft) and waited for the players to show themselves. We used red filters in our Princeton Tec flashlights because our subjects, mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*)—the most exquisite fish in the sea—are leery of bright lights. In addition to the red filters, we have learned to arrive early, so we and the life around us can adjust to our pres-

ence. It took time for our eyes to get used to the dim light and even longer to finally notice the apprehensive little fish weaving through the coral, as its desire to mate started to consume it. We were learning to build patience during these dives just like a weight-lifter slowly added muscle.

When the sun finally bled into the horizon, the mandarinfish prepared for another early night on the town. Mandarins maintain complex social structures, as evidenced by these nightly mating rituals. Community members look for action in the same locations each 24 hours, which simply means mandarinfish have their own version of a local street corner. Males are generally larger than females and occasionally extend an elongated, pointed dorsal fin in a regal display. I suppose any male this pretty

needs to do something, anything, to advertise its prowess.

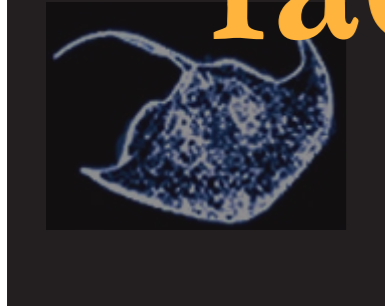
Mandarins throw caution to the wind as the courtship nears its climax. Once the female acquiesces to the male's passionate pleas for sex, these bashful, gentle creatures rise, side by side, from the top of the coral, shimmy against one another, release their respective cargos of eggs and semen, then flip their tails to scatter the combined offering before rushing back to safety. This unusual, frenetic boogie may be repeated multiple times. Each occurrence increases the possibility of offspring, but also places the fish at their most vulnerable position to predators.

Paradise Found

In the beginning—before we had met Bill or even researched the destination—

Yap was not on our bucket list of places to visit. In fact, we knew very little about the islands. While wrapping up a project for a client, my client shared details of his recent trip to Yap with me. His spontaneous testimonial on Yap started us on a path that ultimately led to underwater mandarin sex, will-work-for-food sharks, hygiene-conscious mantas and burn-your-bra shopping. Yap is not the "hand me down" offspring of Palau or the place to waste a few days at the end of a long holiday. It is an idyllic tropical paradise that is fortunately well off the beaten path. If one day you make your own pilgrimage to Yap, please remember to tell Bill we said, "Mogethin!" (hello) and be sure to look the locals in the eye when you go shopping. ■

fact file



Yap



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Both Germany and Spain claimed Yap in the mid-1870s. In 1886, Pope Leo XII settled the feud by awarding Yap and the other Caroline Islands to Spain, but granted Germany commercial rights. Spain made a tidy profit on the deal when it turned around and sold Yap and the remainder of Spanish Micronesia to Germany for US\$4.5 million 13 years later. As a result of World War I, Japan was awarded all the Pacific islands north of the Equator via the Treaty of

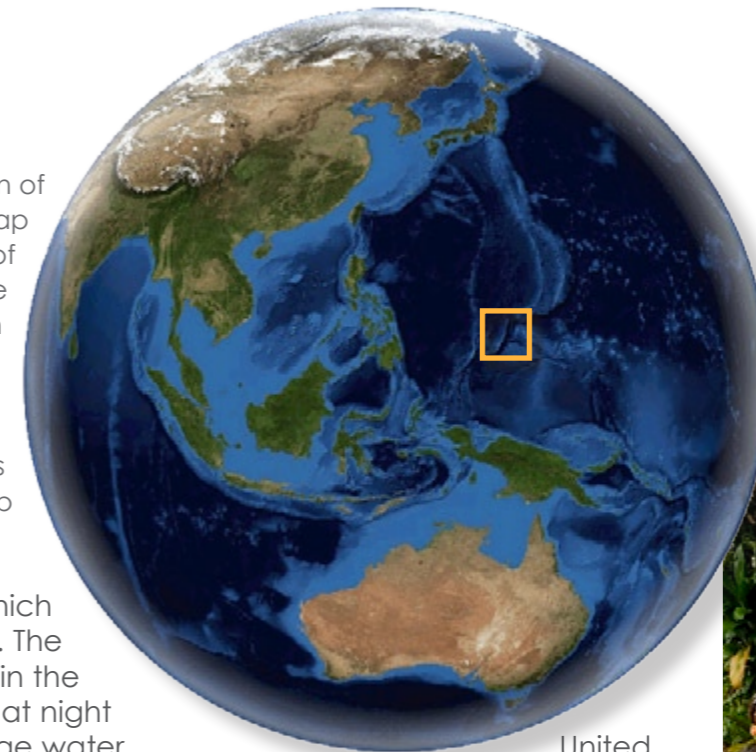
Versailles. Japan then surrendered Yap to the United States after a World War II battle in 1945. The creation of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was ratified in 1978. The Compact of Free Association between the United States and FSM went into effect in 1986, which formalized the relationship between the two entities.

Geography Yap is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and

slightly north of the equator. If you mark a diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the Web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Climate Tropical, which means hot and humid. The average temperature in the day is 27°C (80°F) and at night 21°C (70°F). The average water temperature is 28°C (81°F). North-east trade-winds typically blow from November to April, which results in slightly less rain and humidity.

Economy According to the U.S. State Department (www.state.gov), under the terms of the Compact of Free Association, the



RIGHT: Location of Yap on global map
BELOW: Location of Yap on map of the Caroline Islands in the North Pacific
BOTTOM LEFT: Children perform traditional dances for guests of Yap

Guest stands next to one of the largest coins in the world. Stone money, or Rai, is still used in traditional weddings and land transfers on Yap

United States provided the FSM with about US\$2 billion in grants and services between 1986 and 2001. The Compact's financial terms were renegotiated for the 20-year period 2004 through 2023, with the aim of encouraging sustainable development. The United States will provide almost \$100

million in direct assistance every year until 2023, which includes the systematic reallocation of a portion of the direct aid to a jointly managed Trust Fund. Additional federal grants to the FSM total approximately \$35 million annually. Tourism and fishing play key roles in the economy.

Currency U.S. dollar

Population Approximately 11,500

Language English is the official language of Yap State, but these four other



languages are also spoken: Yapese, Ulithian, Woleaian and Satawalese.

Hyperbaric Chambers The Yap State Health Department manages a recompression facility in Colonia Hospital. Volunteers from both the hospital and the diving community run it.

Websites
Manta Ray Bay Resort
<http://www.mantaray.com>
Yap's Visitor Bureau
<http://www.visityap.com>

