



island adventure

Give Me A Break

*P is for Pohnpei,
P-pass and Paradise*

The Federated States of Micronesia have been home to a secret for some time, don't tell anyone, but it's SURF, plenty of it, perfectly formed and almost completely deserted. Keri Algar finds herself alone on breaks from heaven.

His dream begins with an aerial photograph in a National Geographic magazine printed over thirty years ago.

"It was a stunning shot, taken looking down at a new runway built on top of the barrier reef, surrounded by beautiful ocean. There was a perfect right-hander peeling off the runway. I thought, what the heck is this place? Where? There's nothing like this in Brazil!"

For 12 years while living in Hawaii Alloys Malfitani continued to wonder about this mysterious island in Micronesia. Then, as fate would have it, years later he rediscovered the same magazine. Alloys took the cue, packed his bags and landed on Kosrae's legendary airstrip.

"I thought Kosrae was idyllic and it's probably more of an untouched paradise than Pohnpei, but it was a little too peaceful for me. So after a month I travelled to Pohnpei where I came across Palikir Pass."

Good luck finding a surfer in the world that wouldn't give their right arm to surf P-Pass. It ranks in the top 10 waves in the world, regarded as one of the most perfect right hand reef breaks on the planet.

The walls of Alloys' office at the Pohnpei Surf Club (PSC) are covered with framed magazine covers. Elite surfers fly in from around the world when big swells hit to score the cavernous barrel of their lives. But Alloys reveals a little secret.

"It's not always like that, you know, like 8-10 foot and crazy. Mostly we have fun-sized swells, three to six feet and P-Pass is not a difficult wave. It's very user friendly,



Above: Pohnpei's deep blue waters are a playground for fishermen ... bringing an appetite for fish. Above right: Alois' smile is contagious,

a mechanical wave with a perfect wall and a really makeable barrel." His eyes light up.

It's amusing to watch his excitement as he raves about P-Pass. "Oh yeah, I love it, you know. I don't take it for granted. Not a single day."

On The Water

We speed out of Pohnpei's harbour, flanked to the west by Sokesh ridge and its massive rocky outcrop. It recalls Hawaii's Diamond Head. Actually, the vibe in Pohnpei is a bit Aloha-like.

"This is what I imagine Hawaii could have been like fifty years ago," I yell over the sound of the outboard motor.

With a wry smile Alois replies, "Yeah right, more like a hundred years ago!"

Despite its geographic proximity to Australia and the Philippines, Micronesia is rather inaccessible. Until June this year when Nauru Airlines expanded into the region,

flights were prohibitively expensive and required at least one overnight stay flying in either from the north or south Pacific. Isolation is a double-edged sword: it limits progress but at the same time curbs unchecked development that has so swiftly changed other Pacific destinations. And what can I say, at the cusp of the surf season I'm, incredibly, the only visiting surfer on Pohnpei.

Happily I've jagged the last day of a small summer swell at the end of September. There's a brisk onshore wind at P-Pass, but don't worry, says Alois, this is an island, it's always offshore somewhere. Out of the harbour we head southeast and 15 minutes later arrive to another break in the reef with a peeling right and left-hander. We surf the right, it's a lazy two to three feet and there's time to enjoy the scenery and chew the fat.

"When I think about it now, it's as if it couldn't have been any other way. I'm here because of this mix of inspiration and



and proof of a dream realised. The Mangrove Hotel and home of the Pohnpei Surf Club (below) and surf over a 'fish tank' (above).





Above: Pohnpei is a lush volcanic island with a tonne of natural beauty. It offers reefs not beaches, waterfalls not hotel pools, and

intuition.” Plus work – the PSC is one the more organized and efficient operators I have come across on the island so far. Alois partners with the newly built Mangrove Hotel to accommodate his guests, which is also conveniently located at the harbour and boasts a typically tropical harbour-side bar. PSC’s ocean-going fleet in total packs over 1,000-horsepower, including a jet ski. Of course, it’s taken Alois over a decade to get to this point.

“I’ve had my battles, everyone does. Sometimes someone tries to bring you down. But then you remember your dream and just get on with living it.”

Today we are the only surfers on the island. I take it all in, the warm water and verdant mountains, the isolation, the cooler brimming with Budweiser and coconuts on the boat. We agree his efforts are worth it.

Pack a sense of adventure

“It’s not for everyone,” he says. Girlfriends are warned: Pohnpei is a lush volcanic island with a tonne of natural beauty. It offers reefs not beaches, waterfalls not hotel pools, and culture not shopping.

When we arrive back at the harbour Alois asks if I’m in a rush, he’d like to show me something special. I sit behind his girlfriend, Valentina, on a jet ski, and hang on for dear life as he tears out of the marina. Whatever adrenalin we missed today in the waves Alois is making up for fast.

We fly past a flotilla of tuna purse seiners, along the causeway that connects Pohnpei’s airstrip to the island, duck under a bridge and sweep into a mangrove forest. He loosens his grip on the throttle and we cruise through the canals of the dense jungle at dusk.

If the swell is lackluster there are back ups to choose from. Mangrove wetlands are a must see, there are impressive hikes and waterfalls, the PSC also offers diving, snorkeling, stand-up paddle boards, ocean based tours of Oceania’s oldest archaeological sight Nan Madol, and big (read: big) game fishing.

Coincidentally, I’m in town to catch the Eight Annual Blue Nile Fishing Tournament. The weigh in is at the Mangrove Bar. Valentina takes the lady angler prize for reeling in a 40kg blue marlin, a baby, she admits, compared the winning fish, an 87kg marlin. She also snags first for the biggest



culture not shopping. The swell season is from October to March, with the most consistent months being January and February.

species category, a 36kg yellow fin tuna. “Ah Keri,” she says, “you won’t get to taste Alois’ tuna poke before you leave tomorrow.” I fantasise about missing the flight.

Then as Alois takes leave of the bar I’m served up another torturous remark that sparks an inner crisis. “So,” he says, “tomorrow we have waves again and the wind drops off completely. It’s going to be like tap water out there. Head high and so clear that it’s like surfing over a fish tank. And I’ll be the only surfer out there...”

Can I miss my flight? Forfeit the new desk job that awaits? On this occasion I decide to avoid the regret of leaving on the condition that I return.

When to go

The swell season stretches from October to March, with the most consistent months being January and February. At its busiest there may be an average of around 15 surfers on the island. That’s 15, not 50. And no, there’s not a single surf charter boat in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Getting there:

see Nauru Airlines at www.ourairline.com.au •

