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Paddling the Perilous Paradise

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The extreme intensity of the sunlight as I walked across the tarmac at Koror International Airport was my first impression of Palau, after arriving just two weeks after September 11, 2001. Koror is 8 degrees north of the Equator between New Guinea and the Philippines. I’d come, like most visitors to Palau, to enjoy a week of scuba diving in one of the premier dive locations in the world. Unlike other visitors, I planned to spend a second week solo sea-kayaking in the Rock Islands (well known now from the TV show “Survivor 2005). My plan was to paddle from Koror to the ecological wonder, Jellyfish Lake, on Eil Malk.

For a week the fantastically beautiful under-water world of coral, anemones, sea turtles, mantas, and reef sharks at the dive sites of Blue Caverns, Peleliu, and Blue Corner were my mornings. In the afternoons I explored on foot the causeway-connected islands of Koror, Malakal, and Arakabesan. The former US protectorate of Palau has a resident population of about 25,000. Only half of the residents are Palauan; the others are guest workers and expats from all over the world.

My first week in Palau was a delightful experience of gracious hospitality in a remarkably cosmopolitan society. I was invited to dine in the homes of American expats, Palauans, and resident Filipinos. I was charmed by the friendly openness of most everyone I met.

Although independent since 1994, Palau was a possession of the U.S. after the islands were taken from the Japanese in World War II. The country is still financially dependent on the U.S. government under a treaty that provides $425 million to be paid to Palau over fifteen years. A peculiar outgrowth of this post-colonial relationship is that one-third of resident Palauans work for their government. The government is modeled on the US with twelve state governments, a bicameral legislature, a judiciary, and an executive branch -- all for a population of 25,000! It has the government of a nation-state for the population of a small town. The only significant industries are tourism (primarily scuba diving) and fishing.
Tourist literature about Palau describes it as a paradise, and, for the tourist, it comes as close as any place I’ve visited. But the Bible teaches that there is no Paradise on earth, since the Fall.

An unknown graffiti artist warned me. I would soon learn he or she was correct and that a seeming paradise can be quite perilous.

Eddie, a Palauan boat captain, told me that Palauans used to be the greatest outrigger sailors in the Pacific, but now “we’re all too lazy to use anything that doesn’t have a motor.” The Filipina staff at my hotel laughed out loud at the idea of coming half way around the world to paddle a kayak in the open sea under a burning Sun and pay to do it. Why leave paradise for the uncertainty of the sea?

Tony could not find the key to the lock on the expedition kayaks of Blue Planet Outfitters, so I had to settle for an open two-seater, which is fine for day tripping, but a bit worrisome for the open sea. Sea kayakers typically wear spray skirts to keep water out of the kayak and life jackets to float out from under a rolled boat. When I asked about a life jacket and spray skirt, Tony said he’d heard I was a good swimmer, so he hadn’t reserved one for me. Tony’s “No worries, man” attitude was infectious, so, despite my reservations, I tied the dry bags filled with my tent, clothes, and food, onto the kayak and pushed it off the dock.

The 18 inch drop into the water and an unhelpful wave knocked everything out of the kayak that wasn’t tied down; camera, binoculars, water bottle and snacks went overboard. I fished my stuff out of the water with the paddle, said good-bye to Tony, and paddled off red faced.

After two hours of easy paddling, I was across Malakal Harbor and into the Rock Islands. I skirted the east side of Ngeruktabel, a 15-mile long twisted serpentine-shaped island and the largest landmass in the Rock Islands.

The waves had been breaking a mile out in the Pacific from the jagged northeast coast of the island, but as I neared the northeast point where I would turn south, the waves were breaking closer and closer and pushing the kayak toward the dangerously rocky shore. So, I turned the kayak sharply left and paddled directly into and over the breaking waves and then, pumping the steering peddles as fast as I could to keep from getting rolled, reversed direction to surf the four
foot waves past the rocky point. The kayak didn’t roll, and I found a long sandy beach about a half-mile past the point.

"Margie's Beach" was handwritten on the map I borrowed from Tony. Sitting on the beach drinking gin tonics and enjoying the view out to sea from “their little slice of paradise” were Margie herself and her friend Bill. Margie was a handsome Palauan woman in her mid-fifties, and Bill, her American friend, a retired truck driver about a decade older. They welcomed me to camp on Margie’s private beach, offered me refreshments from a well-stocked cooler, and fed me grilled fish and ribs. We watched the sun set, told stories of travel and adventure, and laughed till the tears ran at Bill’s truck-driving jokes.

I was packed and ready to push off by 9:30 the next morning. Bill warned me to keep the northeast point of Eil Malk to my left and just cruise down its mile-long inlet to the dock below Jellyfish Lake. He pointed toward a gray hazy speck beyond the rock islands off the southeast point of Ngeruktable, "That is the northeast tip of Eil Malk, you can’t miss it." The wind was blowing slightly against me, but I had the tide going out, so I paddled straight for the hazy speck. According to the map, the dock at the end of the inlet to Jellyfish Lake should be a ten-mile paddle. If the weather held, it should be a six to eight hour paddle with generous rest and snack breaks.

But the winds grew stronger and after an hour of paddling storm clouds were building ahead. Three and four-foot waves slapped the prow as the storm closed in. I steered a course between two rain clouds and only took a mild soaking, but fighting the wind and waves was draining me. I’d only traveled three miles in three hours without a break. “Long Lake Beach” was indicated on the map at the midpoint of the long concave coast of Ngeruktable, so I steered toward land. It was misty and little rock islands obscured my view of the shore, but I found a sheltered inlet and rode the waves over a shallow reef onto a wide sandy beach.

I took an hour-long nap under a lean-to, while the remainder of the rainstorm blew by. It was after 1:00 p.m. when I walked the kayak back over the reef with the tide going out. Given my slow progress in the morning, I was slightly concerned about reaching Jellyfish Lake by sunset at 6:00 p.m. But surely, I thought, I could cover seven miles in five hours.

Crossing the Yoo Passage between the southern tip of Ngeruktable and the north side of Eil Malk required paddling through choppy waves and a heavy crosscurrent. As the tide goes out, water is
sucked between the two islands out into the Pacific. I paddled hard all afternoon taking only two short breaks; because there were only two beaches on the many little Rock Islands I passed.

Most of the Rock Islands don't have beaches, because they are limestone mounds covered with heavy vegetation. They were formed from a gigantic ancient reef, which eroded leaving a maze of little islands clustered around the two large landmasses of Ngeruktabel and Eil Malk. Pictures from the air and travel brochures liken the Rock Islands to a scattering of emeralds on the deep blue Pacific. At sea level, they look like hundreds of green umbrellas or otherworldly green mushrooms sprouting from the water’s surface and ranging in size from a rock with a shrub on it to the Super Dome with a green top.

By 5:00 p.m. I was wearing out from pulling against two to three-foot swells and fighting the tidal current. It was an hour before sunset. I was bothered as much by doubt as weariness. It had been cloudy and misty all afternoon, and as sundown approached, visibility was getting worse. The closer I got to Eil Malk the less sure I was that I knew which point of land I was supposed to keep on my left. On the map Eil Malk looks like three fingers extending north from the palm of a hand, but, with rock islands sprinkled all around the fingers, in the misty dimness of early evening I wasn't sure which points of land were fingers of Eil Malk and which were other rock islands.

As I started down what I hoped was the inlet to Jellyfish Lake, the sun began to set. I hadn't planned on paddling in the dark. I had never paddled after dark before, not even on my own White River back home in Indiana. The moon had been full the last few nights, but tonight clouds blotted out the moonlight. I paddled for an hour and the land on my left disappeared in the darkness. Not because of the darkness, but because it was a long rock island I had mistaken for the outer finger of Eil Malk. I could now hear the surf breaking on the outer reef as the vast grayness of the Pacific and the darkness of the sky enveloped everything to my left. The lights of a freighter moving slowly toward Koror blinked through the darkness miles away.

I could make out the tree line on my right and could clearly hear the slap of waves against the limestone wall of the Pacific side of Eil Malk. I cradled the paddle on my knees, opened a dry bag and got out a headlamp. I scanned the shore for a place to beach the kayak, but there wasn’t any. I paddled on desperate to find a place I could beach the kayak and rest.
Eventually, a white spot appeared in the dimness ahead, so I paddled toward it. The white spot took the shape of a thirty-foot fishing boat half sunk on its port side with waves slapping against its hull. A small beach was visible just beyond the sunken hulk. Happily I steered past the white hull and rode the waves onto the beach.

As I pulled the kayak up onto the sand my joy quickly dissolved. There was less than 20 feet of sand between the water line and impenetrably dense vegetation. It was past 7:00 p.m., but high tide wouldn't crest until about 9:00 and then there wouldn't be any beach left. I considered tying the kayak to the trunk of a palm tree, and riding out the high tide in the kayak. But I was afraid the wave action would roll the kayak and tumble my gear and me into the surf.

Louder than the slap of waves on sand was an eerie groaning noise coming from the half-sunken boat. It sounded like the wheezing of an ancient bellows or the death rattle of some giant monster. The mournful groaning of the white hulk was too much - I retied gear onto the kayak. Although I felt weak in the knees, I pushed the loaded kayak back into the surf. I'm not sure my thought process was very clear, but the only way out of the predicament I could think of was to try to paddle back to where I missed the turn for Jellyfish Lake.

Heading north, I could hear the surf breaking on the outer reef fifty or sixty yards to my right. I could see a dim outline of trees and could hear the slap of waves on limestone on my left. I had to steer a course between the surf breaking on the outer reef and the waves breaking on the wall at the base of the island. I was scared and crying and cursing myself for my navigational stupidity and the perversity that would take me from hearth and home to be paddling a kayak by myself in the Pacific Ocean at night! I was physically exhausted. I did not have the energy left to make the hard two-hour paddle to reach the safety of Jellyfish Lake dock. Suddenly, I felt something bump the bottom of the kayak, and shark terror entered the mix of roiling emotion, recrimination and exhaustion.

My arms were trembling from the exertion of pulling through three-foot waves against a head wind. My chest was heaving as my lungs tried to replenish my spent muscles with oxygen. My heart was pounding with fear – fear that I could not continue paddling for two hours and fear that the kayak would tip and I would be in the dark water alone, like Jonah, except for the monster that bumped the bottom of the boat.

I stopped paddling, rested the paddle on my lap, began to try to control my breathing and calm myself. The kayak rose and fell with the rolling waves. I started singing the two hymns we sing in church every Sunday, the Gloria Patri and the Doxology. Hymns I have sung since I was a small child pressed warmly against the side of my Great Grandmother in the hardwood pews of our little church in Goshen, Indiana.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. A-men, A-men

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On mountaineering expeditions in Nepal, Sherpa guides taught me to chant the Buddhist mantra, om mani padme hum. Chanting a mantra frees the mind of nervous energy, allows the body to move spontaneously, and takes one out of time to reduce the drudgery of a long trek or climb.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

I applied what I’d learned from the Sherpas, but used the Christian mantras of my childhood. The panicky buzzing in my mind began to ebb, the tightness in my muscles relaxed, and I let go of the self-abuse I'd heaped on myself. An incredible lightness entered my body, and I felt as fresh and strong as if I'd just started paddling. I was infused with what I can only describe as a divine, inhuman, energy. A spirit greater than my own was with me, in me. It felt like I could paddle all night long.

Ninety minutes later, as I rounded the point I'd earlier missed, the clouds opened like a theater curtain being drawn back. The moon made its first appearance of the evening, lighting up mangrove roots overhanging the limestone edge of the island and shimmering on the surface of the rippling water. As I entered the inlet to Jellyfish Lake, it felt like two arms of Eil Malk embraced me. The water in the inlet was as calm as a pond in Indiana. I was lost and now, by what seemed like an amazing grace, I was safe. I straddled the kayak with my legs and let my feet dangle over the sides, while I slowly paddled the last half-mile to the dock by Jellyfish Lake.

That night my tent was lashed by a violent storm. But calm returned in the morning. So I stuffed my snorkel gear and snacks in a daypack and picked my way up a rocky trail through thick vegetation and over a hill to a pier at the side of Jellyfish Lake. I pulled on my mask and fins and giant stepped off the end of the pier into the 80-degree water. I spent the morning swimming among the jellyfish. The jellyfish are either oblivious or attracted to swimmers, because they kept bumping up against me as they glided about in their peculiar humping motion. I ate lunch on the pier around noon and then hiked back to my tent.

The three-day paddle back to Koror was fairly easy. I spent the final night in the Rock Islands camped on the north side of Ngeruktabel on a crumbling limestone dock, built by the Germans before Palau was taken over by the Japanese in 1914.
Before sundown I explored bunkers dug into the hillside above the dock and the rusted remains of Japanese World War II armaments. My tent was pitched in a secluded cove, so I celebrated the final night of the kayak adventure by swimming naked and then sitting on the edge of the dock in the moonlight listening to birds calling from the surrounding jungle.

Jellyfish Lake is emblematic of the perilous paradise that is Palau. Swimming in the lake I bobbed and weaved with the gentle jellies for two hours -- they bumped and nuzzled me and left no welts, because they do not sting. They are simple beauty, like most of Palau. The beauty of the moonlit inlet with the arms of Eil Malk embracing me and the pacific water in which I dangled my feet as I leisurely paddled past mangrove-lined shores. The generosity and kindness to strangers, the sensitivity and care for their strangely beautiful Rock Islands and unique ecology, and the many diverse peoples living peacefully together in this small island nation -- this is the revelation of Palau.