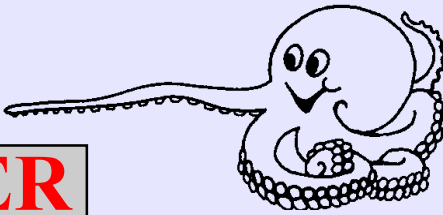


# THE REEF SEEKER



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October - 2024

## YAP 2024 TRIP REPORT

This was not the Yap trip we had expected or hoped for. That doesn't mean it wasn't good. But there were definitely challenges along the way.

The culprit in all of this was tropical storm Bebinca. When we plan our trips in general, we try to be aware of what the prevailing weather conditions will be. And anytime we're travelling, I'm always keeping a close eye on what weather might affect us. But weather prediction is as much of an art as it is a science and sometimes, it doesn't work out the way you'd hoped.

We were well aware of Bebinca but it looked like it was supposed to track across the Pacific and go between Guam and Yap about a day before we arrived in Guam. Shouldn't be a problem. This becomes significant when you remember that United only flies to Yap twice a week, on Tuesday and Saturday evenings. The flight leaves Guam at 11:30PM and arrives in Yap at 1:10AM.

Not on September 10. Bebinca drifted further north than predicted and then stalled right offshore from Guam. That brought continuous rain and some wind. But, even knowing that, it looked like there

was a window where we could make it out of Guam.

We made it to Guam no problem. I came through Tokyo. Others came through Honolulu. Some came from Denver through either Honolulu or Tokyo. Plenty of ways to get into Guam. It's getting OUT of Guam that can be tricky.

We landed – an hour late – during a pretty good downpour. But it still seemed like things would work out OK. So we confidently board the plane around 11PM and took our seats. Business was full (all of 16 seats) but economy was sparsely populated with maybe another 20 people total. We all settled in, got comfortable, they asked us if we wanted something to drink . . . and then around 11:30PM, the pilot came on the PA. He apologized but said the storm was intensifying and he wasn't sure we could make it to Yap and land. I talked to him afterwards and he told me that he was also concerned that his alternate airports – Palau, Saipan, and Chuuk – also would not be landable. So he pulled the plug. Now we were stuck in Guam for four days because the next flight to Yap wasn't until September 14.

For things out of their control, like weather issues, the airlines aren't obligated to put you up. Fortunately for us, four of us were flying Business and United agreed to pro-

vide all the Business customers with vouchers for hotel stays. (Initially that was two nights but we got them to extend that to four nights since we couldn't fly out sooner.) United also threw in some meal and taxi vouchers as well. And the hotel they put us up in – the Rihga Royal Laguna Beach – was very nice too. Plus it saved us about \$2,000 in hotel room charges. So it worked out as well as could be expected.

Fortunately, of the 7 people on this trip (Marlow & Audrey Anderson, Margaret Marschuck, Glenn Suhd, Paul "Doc" Anes, Laurie Powers, and me), 6 people were able to extend the trip four days beyond the originally-planned end. So even though we would arrive in Yap four days later than planned, because we could extend, we weren't going to miss any diving.

As always when I go to Yap, we stayed with our good friends – extended family really – at Manta Ray Bay Resort & Yap Divers (henceforth MRB). We've been coming here since 2001 and we can't say enough good things about the resort and those who staff it under the watchful eye of the Acker family. Bill Acker has "retired" but it still at the resort almost every day diving with guests. His daughter Numie now oversees everything as General Manager. And their general motto is "Yes." In

other words, if you'd like to do something, they'll find a way to make it happen.

Unfortunately, that power and attitude doesn't extend to controlling the weather. And the weather definitely affected us on this trip. (In fact, we ended the trip as it began: Walking on the tarmac at the Yap Airport in the rain.)

Our first dive day was Sunday, September 15. Because we arrive at the hotel around 3AM, we typically only schedule an afternoon close-in checkout dive for that day. We ended up at Sakura Terrace and while it was choppy (and rainy) on the surface, it was actually fairly nice underwater with 80-foot viz and water temps that were a consistent 86 (with an occasionally 87) the entire time we were there. And we even caught a bit of a weather break on Monday and made it to some outer reefs (Sunrise and Tradewinds) and then took a look at the Goofnu cleaning station in what's also known as Valley of the Rays.

Yikes!!! We encountered a screaming current, visibility that could charitably be called low, and no mantas. Although given the viz, I suppose mantas could have been 35 feet away and we might not have been able to see them.

Bill Acker has a home-grown theory about the absence of manta rays during inclement weather and that's that they don't like rough weather any better than we do and simply head out to sea to ride out the storm. Given that the cleaning stations are relatively shallow – 20 feet or so – that certainly makes sense because rough weather will chop up the shallows which will likely make it harder to get cleaned.

So it made sense, assuming Bill's take is correct, that we wouldn't see mantas at the cleaning stations for a day or two.

Tuesday the weather picked back up and pretty much eliminated any hope we had of getting outside of protected areas. We did a dive at Stammtisch, one of the manta cleaning stations on the western side of the island and not only got skunked, but it was the worst I've ever seen it in all the time I've been going to Yap. The viz was MAYBE 10 feet (and that's being generous), the water was green, and there wasn't much to see. I'm lucky the group didn't toss me out of the boat after that one.

But Wednesday the weather started to clear and we had pretty good weather throughout the rest of our stay. That becomes even more significant when you realize that the standard MRB dive day is three dives with lunch on the boat between dives #2 and #3 (at no extra charge). But it also means that on days when it rains, you're likely stuck on the boat for lunch. All of the five Yap Divers boats are covered, but it's only a flattop. So if the rain's coming straight down, it's not too bad, But if there's a little wind and it comes at an angle

. . . let's just say there are few things in diving less miserable than trying to eat your lunch while getting rained on. (But the lunches, which you order the night before at dinner, were amazingly good. Lots of things on the menu, a few "off-menu" items, everything served cold or room temperature but also served in these amazingly clever plastic containers with moveable dividers called "Packit" that I think they found on Amazon. Quite clever.)

As long as we're talking about food . . .

In 2001 MRB purchased a huge Indonesian phinisi that they use as their floating (literally) restaurant. It's called the Mnuw. The lower deck is used for buffet breakfast from 6:30-10:00AM (included in your package) and the second deck (which is enclosed) and the upper deck (which has the bar and a number of open-air tables) is used for dinner (which you pay for). They no longer serve lunch.

8They've got a new guy, Chef Kuda, who's been there only about ten weeks – he and his wife came from Zimbabwe – and it seems like he's working at shaking things up a little bit. The menu's not as extensive as it was pre-COVID

## 2024-2025 DIVING VACATIONS

**November 1-10 • Palau**

**March 1-9 • Easter Island #1**

**March 8-15 • Easter Island #2**

but every night there were five or six appetizers to choose from (I was a fan of the chicken fingers) and seven or eight main courses, three of which changed each night. Plus you could always order Stone Money Pizza. (The thin crust we thought was much better than the thick and be aware that if they put the little green diced peppers on, they're REALLY spicy hot.) You can bill everything to your room and you settle up at the end of the trip. We seemed to settle into a routine of dinner at 6:30PM each night and we wrapped up around 8:10PM, and then toddled off to bed.

And while we're talking about a post-COVID world . . .

MRB was effectively closed for quite some time during COVID, not only due to a lack of tourist trade, but also because United cut the flights back to once a month. Yap set a rule that if you left the island, you couldn't return until the pandemic was over. This not only resulted in a significant drop in business for MRB, but also meant a reduction in staff due to people needing to leave Yap and then not being allowed to return.

So there are some familiar faces no longer there and they're definitely working with a smaller staff than previously. But Bill was telling me they still employ 85 people, which is significant. And they kept those folks working one way or the other through the pandemic, either by teaching locals how to dive, or doing Friday night pizzas, or sprucing the place up, or routine maintenance, or whatever. And while it might be a thinner staff than before, people double-up on duties and you certainly won't notice a drop in the level of service you

## UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Wed.	Oct. 9	- CLASS -	Tables & Computers	<b>\$35</b>
Sat.	12	Redondo/Vets	Taming Surf Entries	<b>FREE!!!</b>
Wed.	16	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	<b>180</b>
Thu.	24	Redondo/Vets	••• Night Dive •••	<b>35</b>
Wed.	Nov. 13	- CLASS -	Photo Workshop	<b>35</b>
Sat.	16	Redondo/Vets	Beach Diving	<b>35</b>
Wed.	20	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	<b>180</b>
Wed.	Dec. 4	- CLASS -	NAUI Nitrox Diver	<b>95</b>
Sat.	7	Redondo/Vets	Navigation	<b>FREE!!!</b>
Thu.	12	Redondo/Vets	••• Night Dive •••	<b>35</b>
Wed.	18	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	<b>180</b>

## 2025 SCHEDULE CURRENTLY IN THE WORKS

receive. (As a quick example, not only do the dive guides load your gear and hook it up each morning, but they also wash it all and put it back in your locker at the end of the dive day.)

Back to diving . . .

So overall, we had six days of pretty good diving weather. And we were able to get around to most of the dive sites on both sides of the island. We also finally got some decent manta encounters. Certainly not the multiple mantas we've encountered before but on Thursday at Goofnu, we had a single manta for about 10 minutes and on Sunday, again at Goofnu, we had two mantas who repeatedly returned over the course of 30 minutes, including one time for each of them at the cleaning station (which means you get a longer look).

And while there were definitely fish to be seen, it seemed a little less fishy than usual. This could have been due to the weather. But we had a large school of Barracuda at Buena Vista (which ended up being a pretty good drift dive), and over the course of the week saw plenty of Parrotfish, Butterfiles, Angelfish (including a number of Flame Angels, one of my personal favs), Orangefin Anemonefish ga-

lore, Sweetlips, Eels, Damsel fish all over the place, lots of Squirrelfish and Bigeyes, and a number of turtles. With one exception (O'Keefe Passage) I thought the coral all looked pretty healthy too.

Although we had really great Goofnu channel and Mi'l Channel drift dives, likely the highlight dive of the week was our first dive on Friday at Vertigo because that was the shark feed.

Pre-COVID, MRB did this feed almost weekly. But COVID put the kibosh on that and it hasn't really resumed regularly since they re-opened. In fact, we were told, this was going to be the first full feed of 2024. So we didn't know if the sharks would be there because the feeds hadn't resumed, or that there would be so many of them that they would be ravenous and it could become dangerous. (FYI, this dive is done without a cage for the divers. You can sit as close or as far away from the bait as you like.) We especially hoped this would be good because Doc Anes is "Mr. Shark" down in San Diego.

We were not disappointed.

We had 25-30 sharks hitting the bait, mostly Blacktips and Gray

Reef. Plus there were numerous Snappers and other opportunistic fish trying to get a piece of the action. The general plan is that the bait boat hovers over the feed station, a line is run down from the boat through a pulley mounted on the reef, the bait is tossed into the water, and it's hauled down to diver level. The sharks devour frozen block #1 (usually takes 15-20 minutes), we pause for 10-15 minutes and let them settle down a bit, and then bring down frozen block #2.

Unfortunately, the first block was nowhere near frozen enough. I don't think it made it down 10 feet underwater before the sharks completed devoured it. Best laid plans. But we waited 5 minutes or so and brought down block #2, which was frozen solid. They immediately

started hitting it but it wasn't a walk in the park like #1. This is what we came for.

I find this interesting on lots of levels, the least of which is that there's a definite pecking order where the smaller sharks get out of the way as the bigger sharks come in. By the same token, the smaller sharks may occasionally try to take a piece out of the mouth of a bigger shark if they bite off too much. It's really like watching an intricately-choreographed shark ballet. And after about 40 minutes, it was over. The cool think is that the sharks stay in the area in hopes that there's a block #3 so there are more photo ops with the sharks and they're calmer.

So that pretty much sums up this Yap trip. It certainly didn't start

the way we wanted, but it ended with a bang. Ironically, as I said when I started writing this, on our last full day in Yap, a non-diving day when we do a half-day land tour, it started raining again. Not much we can do about it. As the hat I wear often says (and it's one of my favorite sayings): It Is What It Is.

We'll definitely be going back but probably not until 2026 and we'll likely move back to March on the calendar since we seem to have had consistently better weather that time of the year. So hopefully, despite our travails this year, Yap is on your list whether it'll be your first time or a return. It's a great place to go dive, the people at Manta Ray Bay are wonderful, and we'll look forward to going back.

## PICTURE PAGE - Yap, 2024

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2024)



**Bumphead Parrotfish  
in Mi'l Channel**



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**Lunchtime  
at Vertigo**



**Watching the action at the  
Goofnu cleaning station**



**The gang's all here  
at a Stone Money Bank**



**Colorful  
Parrotfish**