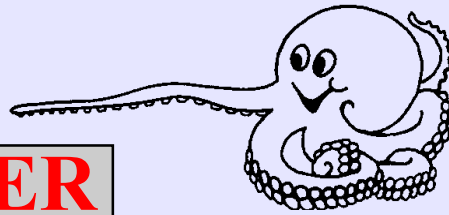


# THE REEF SEEKER



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## YAP 2023 TRIP REPORT

We are now on our way back from spending three weeks in one of my favorite places in the world, the magical island of Yap, with one of my favorite dive operations, Manta Ray Bay Resort & Yap Divers (henceforth referred to as MRB). I'm literally writing this as we're on the plane at 35,000 feet over the Pacific heading towards Hawaii at 634mph. It was an interesting and enjoyable trip for a number of reasons but also a trip that had some issues that affected what we could and couldn't do. To paraphrase Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of weather."

Also bear in mind that, because of COVID, this is our first Yap trip in

four years. Yap, as well as other parts of Micronesia, really clamped down on visitations by foreigners and didn't allow anyone back in until earlier this year. On top of that, United Airlines, which used to fly to Yap twice a week, cut that down to once a MONTH for a couple of years, and only recently – in March I think – reinstated the twice-weekly schedule. And so whether we wanted to go to Yap or not, for quite some time it was impossible to fly there.

### WHY WE CHOOSE TO GO WHERE WE GO

Over the years, I've developed some very close relationships with a number of operators at various destinations. I stayed in touch with them during the lockdown and, as the world has opened back up, my feelings were that I wanted to first take care of those who I have the closest relationships with. In other words, as we're going to start pumping money back into the diving economy, I wanted to do it first with the people and places that mean the most to me. And Manta Ray Bay is certainly at the top of that list. So once we knew they were open, we planned this trip. However . . .

### THE PLAYERS

This was probably the most logistically-complicated trip I've ever done. Originally, this was to be two 10-day back-to-back trips with

me staying in Yap the entire time. But then United Airlines did a schedule change and cancelled the weekend flights from Guam to Yap which meant your only option was to stay in multiples of a week. We had 11 people overall (including me, Ken Kurtis), but on four different schedules.

Lou Weisberg did only Week 1. Rachel Capoccia & Les Harriel, Tamar Toister, and Harry Kreigh all did weeks 1 & 2. Gayle Chin, Tom & Katy Burns, and Glenn Suhd all chose to do all three weeks. Tony Hanna was only able to do week 3. So we had ten divers week 1, nine divers week 2, and six divers week 3.

### AT THE MRB RESORT

The players here include owner Bill Acker, dive shop operations manager Francis, with DMs Nico, Ferr, Brian, Andy, and Irwin, aided by a number of others filling tanks, schlepping gear and stuff like that.

According to Bill, the resort's motto is, "The answer is YES. Now what's the question." They will bend over backwards to accommodate you every need. For us for the first two weeks, that meant giving us two boats with Rachel/Les/Tamar/Harry/Glenn on Eagle Ray, and Lou/Katy/Tom/Gayle on Seagull. Bill and I would trade off which of the groups we would dive with each day.

The advantage here was that the boats never felt crowded and everyone had plenty of space. The MRB boats are nothing fancy but are really well-suited for these dives. They have eight boats, around 25-30' long. And they're fast, zipping along at 20-25mph. That works really well because Yap is 19 miles long. But unless the seas slowed us down, none of the dive sites are more than a 30-minute ride away.

The other thing I really liked – and which I wasn't sure of initially – is that their standard dive package is now three dives/day with a cold lunch served on the boat between dives 2 & 3. You order lunch the night before from a menu and then it's prepped in the morning and packed in nifty little plastic container where the lid has an ice pack to get everything cool. My only "complaint" about this setup is that the food's really good and they give you a lot of it so I'm afraid to step on a scale when I get home.

The other advantage of this new dive plan is that it actually makes more sites accessible. In pre-COVID days, the package was 2 dives/day. I'd always add a third dive for our trips but what it meant was that we came back to MRB after dive 2, had lunch on shore, and then went out for dive 3. But that meant that most of the time dive 3 was a relatively nearby spot. Under the new scheme, if you're down south doing some of the spectacular wall sites there, you can now do a third dive there as well.

Another nice touch, and they've been doing this for a while, is that when you arrive, you're assigned a space for your gear inside the dive shop area. Throw your stuff in your space and that's the last

time you'll have to touch it. The dive staff will load your gear onto the correct boat each day and at the end of the day, will wash your gear and put in back into your assigned area. My gear has probably never before been so well-taken care of.

### **THE WEATHER**

Anytime we schedule a Reef Seekers trip, we try to take weather conditions into account, knowing full well that, over time, weather patterns can change and also that it's one part of the journey over which we have absolutely no control or influence. And that was demonstrated to us in spades on this trip.

Normally at this time of the year, the weather in Yap is idyllic. It's generally hot and humid – sweating could be their national sport – there's very little wind, you get occasional brief (10-15 minutes) rain showers every now and then, and all the dive sites around the entire island are accessible.

Not this year.

When we arrived on July 12, it was indeed as described above. It was the same July 13 as well. And that was the last day that we saw the sun until July 30. July 13 was also

the last day there wasn't any wind. Yikes!!!

It seems there was a highly unusual and large tropical depression that was southeast of Yap and moving to the northwest. It eventually became Typhoon Doksuri which did a lot of damage to the Philippines and mainland China. As far as Yap went, the storm produced wind and rain as it drew air to it from all areas of the Pacific (it was actually fascinating to watch the wind patterns on Windy.com) as it meandered to the north of Yap. But what it meant for us was that we got a LOT of rain and a decent amount of wind.

And if that wasn't bad enough, as the first storm passed out of range, a SECOND tropical depression formed and produced similar weather on Yap as it travelled through the Pacific. It was like we couldn't catch a break.

This doesn't mean it rained every second every day. But there were torrential outbursts lasting 15-30 minutes (seemingly any times just as we were loading up the boat to leave the dock), followed by clearing, then maybe some gentle rain for a little while, then it stopped and it was overcast, then it might

## **2023-24 DIVING VACATIONS**

**August 19-26 • Isla Mujeres**

**November 15-29 • Maldives**

**March 18-22 • San Ignacio**

**OTHER REQUESTS???**

rain again for a bit an hour or two later. The pattern wasn't really predictable but it was constantly there in one form or another.

**WEATHER DISCLAIMER**

Don't let what follows leave you with the impression that we didn't have a good time and get in wonderful dives. That wasn't the case at all. The short version is that the weather issues limited some of our options and sometimes made for unpleasant or even miserable surface intervals or rides back to MRB, but the diving itself was still good-to-great. Over the three weeks we were there, we got in 52 dives at 37 different dives sites – a few sites we chose to visit multiple times – so we got in both variety and quality. And we got mantas, Barracuda schools, Eagle Ray fly-bys, Leaf Scorpionfish, magnificent wall dives, cool macro critters, and even a few fish that we'd never seen before. So the weather certainly didn't impact the quality of the diving experience.

**DEALING WITH THE RAIN**

The rain in and of itself isn't any big deal. The joke is, "We're going to get wet anyhow." But bear in mind that the MRB dive boats can zip around at 20-25mph (my estimate) and while they have a canopy for shade, they're open on the sides. So this means the "gentle" rain is now hitting you at 20-25mph and it's like little wet needles pummeling you.

But you learn to cope. Here are two possibilities. At the top of the next column is Tony Hanna, who is truly wearing a garbage bag as a raincoat. The goal here is to avoid the little stinging sensation of the raindrops pummeling you when the boat's at speed, not to be fashionable.

**UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES**

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Thu.	Aug. 3	Redondo/Vets	••• Night Dive •••	<b>35</b>
Wed.	9	Catalina Express	Avalon Underwater Park	<b>175</b>
Sat.	12	Redondo/Vets	Navigation Made Easy	<b>35</b>
Wed.	16	--- CLASS ---	--- Tables & Computers ---	<b>35</b>
Thu.	Sept. 7	Redondo/Vets	••• Night Dive •••	<b>35</b>
Sat.	16	Redondo/Vets	Taming Surf Entries	<b>35</b>
Wed.	20	Catalina Express	Avalon Underwater Park	<b>175</b>
Wed.	27	--- CLASS ---	--- Secrets of Fish ID ---	<b>35</b>



The second option is what I'm doing on one ride back. The orange towels are provided by MRB on every trip and they have a pretty tight weave which makes them somewhat wind-proof. So you turn your back to the direction from which the rain comes, wrap the towel around your head and hold on tight (protects the back of your neck as well) and it actually provides pretty good protection, even though I feel I look like the stereotypical picture of a Russian peasant woman wrapped tightly in a headscarf.



You could also take Glenn Suhd's approach:



**HOW RAIN AFFECTED THE DIVING**

On some shallow sites, like Stammtisch (one of the manta cleaning stations), the runoff from the rain made the diving either very low visibility or impossible. On some of the channel sites with cleaning stations, like Goofnu, the rain gave the water a green tint from the runoff. The most noticeable effect at many sites was that the first 3-5 feet of water was a mixture of seawater and fresh water, so the water looked oily. But as soon as you dropped through that layer, the visibility cleared up – often to 100 feet or thereabouts – and the water warmed up too.

**WATER TEMPS AND VIZ**

On my gauge, and we think I might be reading 2 degrees high, I was showing a consistent 86° and on one dive even read 90°. But even if the true reading was 84-88°, that's still warm. It also might be indicative of the El Nino that meteorolo-

gists say is setting up this summer. And while that's comfortable, the warmer water brings up other concerns like coral bleaching, where the coral ejects the resident zooxanthellae that provide nourishment and color, and turns a ghostly white. Sometimes reefs recover from bleaching events, sometimes the reefs die. (While we were gone, this was driven home with stories of Florida reefs recording temps of 100 degrees and bleaching/dying almost overnight.) With the exception of one reef, the bleaching we saw was very sporadic and didn't seem to be out of the ordinary.

### HOW WIND AFFECTED THE DIVING

Wind is a very different story from rain in terms of how it affects div-

ing. This is as true in Yap as it is in Southern California. In Yap, you normally have winds prevailing from certain directions at known times of the year. And there's always a lee side (protected from wind) of the island so you've always got places you can find calm, clear water.

But these storms moving around changed that because as the storm travels, it changes the direction of the winds it's producing. So one day the winds are out of the northeast but the next day they're out of the northwest. Depending on the strength of the wind, the ocean can get whipped up quickly but it can also calm down somewhat quickly once the wind abates. And the winds these storms produced generally were 10-15mph but we had

two days where the wind speeds were being clocked at 20-30 mph. That latter speed is problematic and during those days we were limited diving around Goofnu Channel and the extreme wind even caused us, on our final dive day, to cancel the planned shark feed at Vertigo (NW side of Yap) because of dangerous ocean conditions.

A lot of times during these conditions, the secret was simply to get in the water as quickly as possible. Because when we were underwater, we had anywhere from 50-100 foot visibility, and fairly calm waters, sometimes with a mild current sometimes not.

**THE REST OF THE STORY . . .**  
Will be told in the full trip report, out by the weekend. Pick up where this leaves off.

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## PICTURE PAGE - Five favs from the Yap trip

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2023)



**A pair of Pink Anemonefish  
nestled in their home**



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**Gray Reef Shark  
at Vertigo**



**Flame Angelfish  
in all its glory**



**Lovely  
'flowering' soft coral**



**Juvy Yellow Boxfish  
checking us out**