



The tiny island-nation of Palau recently made an historical decision. Palau is the first country in the world to ban commercial fishing in its territorial waters. The archipelago located between the Philippines and West Papoua is now the largest fish sanctuary in the world. For surf explorers Carine Camboulives and Manu Bouvet it is the most spectacular water-world they've seen so far.

It all started one day when I (Manu) was surfing the web in search of real surfing potential around the globe. A single aerial shot of Palau left me speechless in front of the screen. Taken from the air, what I was looking at looked like a giant broccoli salad in a blue cheese dressing (I don't know if such a recipe even exists) but it is the most beautiful salad I've ever seen (and I eat a lot of them!). No white water around though... I'm tripping out looking at a flat water picture which makes me worry a little. Later on, I find out that I'm looking at the 'Seventy Islands'. The first major decision made by the Palauan government in terms of environmental protection in 1956 Palau banned all access to a group of islands. From that date, they can only be enjoyed from the air! What put this decision into even more perspective is that in the 50's, very few nations were making environmental protection a priority on their agenda, especially nations where the deadly battle of the Pacific took place less than 10 years before...

PALAU

THE GREEN ISLAND



Great place... but no one can set foot on it... at the very best we can lay our eyes on it from the sky (that won't do for a SUP adventure). I tell myself that there could surely not only be that one 'salad on the menu', if the 'chef' is talented enough to make such a creation there must be other 'meals available'. I kept surfing the web and found 'the other pages of the menu'. What I found opened my appetite for travelling even more, to the point where I book a table for 6. I'm sure there will be a kids meal for our daughter Lou and a child seat for her 1 year old sister Shadé...

It is 9am in Koror, the capital city of Palau. The sun is so strong that it feels like a hallogen lamp too close to my face. It is almost mid March which does not change the temperatures too much around the equator. On the other hand it is a little late in the season to get a ground swell. I know that if the pass we have in mind for today's swell does not work, we might not get a second chance.

Obak is our boat captain for the day... *"I don't have a roof top on my boat, so bring lots of sunscreen and hats"*, he says with a big smile. We won't be picky, he is our only option to the reef, 3 miles off shore. The dive shops in town offered us a boat for a \$1000 a day! Obak is \$900 cheaper, sun-poisoning included. Obak's son lives in Tahiti, so does our photographer Ben who knows a friend of a friend of Obak's son... coconut wireless is still the most efficient way to connect people together in the islands.

Here we are, going full speed on the lagoon, our SUP boards baking in their bags under the morning sun. The pass is so far out that we can't see a wave yet but Japan got hit by a snowstorm a few days ago. Supposedly it is sending us non radio-active waves, Arigatou gozaimatu (thank you very much in Japanese)

The wait seems endless as our appetite for waves keeps growing. When our 'order' arrives we're not disappointed. It's not huge but big enough to fulfill our appetite. A perfect right-hander peels methodically in an outdoor aquarium, the peak is further up the reef. When the wave is big enough it connects all the way down and a further 200 meters down the line is where the reef bends to create a bowl that sucks up all the energy of the ocean. We're about to simmer in the equatorial sun from 10am until 6pm. The water feels like soup. Carine and I share the waves by ourselves during the morning session. The waves are such fun that we forget to go back to the boat to drink water. Carine keeps saying *"one more, one more"*. She will regret it 2 days later. We decide to stay for the late session as the wind appears to have dropped. The waves are getting better as the tide drops, getting hollower. We finally head back to port while the sun is diving into the ocean, setting the whole horizon on fire.

The next morning offers the same 'special of the day', on the 'menu'. Head high waves and glass off to start with on a high tide followed by light side off-shore winds under burning

hot sun. Our photographer, Ben can't take it anymore and jumps from the boat into the water for a 3 hour water shoot session to cool off.

We take a break from the wind, while we wait for the tide to drop. We then head back for more until there is no more energy left in any of us. Carine keeps a hat on for the late session but it is too late... She goes back to the boat with a growing headache. The orgy of waves comes to an end, as we were told earlier, the sun poisoning is included...

Because things happen for a reason, 2 weeks before leaving for Palau our kiteboarder friend (we do have one, he is our alibi! Just kidding) Bertrand Fleury, makes an offer for us to join him for a free-diving class. Davide Carrera who used to hold the world record in constant weight at 100m is on our home island of Maui to host a clinic adapted to surfers. Davide has a very spiritual approach to his sport (lots of Yoga and meditation). That does not give us the desire to go and look for oysters in a 25ft Jaws but it certainly gave us more self-confidence, mental and physical ability to deal with forced underwater experience. Davide's clinic could not come at a better moment, a few days before leaving for Palau, one of the World's best underwater people. I almost forgot to mention that Bertrand kicked our asses by holding his breath for 4m 22 seconds in static apnea! Even though Davide taught us that the state of mind matters more than the seconds I have to confess it pissed me off a little... This being said I believe our kiteboarder friend will need that extra time more than me when he gets tangled up in his lines under water (who said I am a sore loser?)

Here we are in Palau, well prepared with extra stretched lungs. We can fully enjoy the underwater world and understand better why the small island nation puts so much effort into preserving its marine heritage. The famous Rock islands that I took for a 'broccoli salad' from behind my computer screen are a very unique geological formation. Once in front of them for real, the vegetation is so dense that one can't even see the rock or the soil it is made of. Setting foot on one is simply impossible. The underwater part of each rock island is actually an upside down rock island where the corals replace the jungle and the fish replace the birds. The water is clearer than the air though! Once the swell is gone, we spend countless hours free diving. Our daughter Lou did not take the free diving class but she is so comfortable in the water for her age!

One day while we are cruising on the flats I have our youngest daughter Shadé on my back in the baby carrier. I'm following Lou who is paddling on her tiny SUP board right next to a rock island, slightly underneath the vegetation. She hits a branch with her paddle. A crocodile that must have been disturbed falls into the water just behind her, in front of me! I can't even imagine such an encounter underwater!

For the next 4 days we cross the archipelago on our SUP, followed by a safety boat that carries our camping gear and food. At night we set camp on the few islands that were designated by the government to host campers. All others are out of reach. No boats are allowed to set anchors anywhere in Palau outside the moorings. We feel really privileged to be able to enjoy this place the way we are. Kayak tours are organized in the area but standing up on the water is a whole other story. The view we get to the surroundings is breath taking. We hardly see anyone the whole day as most people here spend their time under water. The SUP allows us into the shallowest passages between islands and sand bars. Cruising as a family in such environment is a blessing. For part of the cruise Shadé falls asleep in my back while Lou gets more and more comfortable on her board as we progress. I'm glad to spend time in the water with my daughters. I am not worried about them getting hooked or not to surfing, windsurfing or any other hobby I might have.

There are many different ways to enjoy the ocean and seeing them comfortable in it is what matters the most. My concern is more about the marine heritage we'll leave behind us. I know that some spots we saw around the world are threatened, some already gone forever. In Bali, several waves close to Kuta are too polluted to be surfed during rainy season; Punta Preta in Cabo Verde might soon be out of reach to windsurfers and kiteboarders, the off-shore winds being blocked by a real estate development. Early summer this year, Basque Country's water got so polluted after heavy rain that a surfer died from staph infection. On the other hand there is hope for a better future thanks to some people's efforts, a few months ago, Hawaii's best right hander, Honolulu Bay, was saved from a real estate development that would have ruined its surroundings and access.

Today Palau's government takes risks to protect its marine fauna. By banning commercial fishing in its waters the small nation will suffer the lack of income generated by fishing permits. On the other hand the government hopes to attract more tourists seduced by a unique environment. The people who get involved in the environment protection are giving us a chance to protect our waves so our children can enjoy them as much as we do.

If our sessions get so memorable; if some riders, actors of the industry or media make a living out of the board riding world, it is because of one reason in the first place, it is all possible because the seas, the skies, the reefs and the surrounding elements being so beautiful and generous. All of this is free for us to use and enjoy anytime, any day, it is free but priceless, powerful but fragile!

We should always remember it by protecting our environment.

Text | Manu Bouvet - Photos | Ben Thouard

One good contact in Palau for SUP adventures: www.fishnfnns.com
Ask Navot

