

# Tides of time

This installment of the "Tides of Time" series takes our readers to the Rock Islands Southern Lagoon in Palau, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2012



JAEGER-LECOULTRE



Rich in both cultural artifacts and biodiversity, Rock Islands Southern Lagoon features mountainous limestone islands, marine lakes and coral reefs.

JEREMY FANELANDER

THE SITE | Rock Islands Southern Lagoon

## 'We're protecting this pristine area while sharing it with the world'

Many of them mushroom-shaped and crowned with thick vegetation, scattered through seawater that runs all the way from jade green and turquoise to peacock blue, the Rock Islands of Palau's Southern Lagoon have an unearthly feel. If not Pandora or Alderaan, then some other alien world conjured in the mind of George Lucas or James Cameron. Because on first glance, one thinks: This can't be real.

That's only part of the reason that Unesco listed the 445 islands that comprise this astonishing archipelago as one of the globe's newest World Heritage sites in 2012. The islands' extraordinary beauty is complemented by a huge diversity of plants, birds

and marine life — many of the species found nowhere else on our planet — and by a long-lost human civilization that arrived in the Rock Islands more than 3,000 years ago.

"Not only is the place physically beautiful," says Karen L. Nero, who has done research in Palau for more than 30 years, "it also has art works of great beauty, traditional meeting houses, a spectacular habitat and a history that is accessible."

The Republic of Palau lies about 500 miles (800 kilometers) east of the Philippines and 500 miles north of New Guinea in the southwestern corner of the Pacific. The Rock Islands are in the southern part of Koror state, inside the coral ramparts of the

massive Southern Lagoon. It was that reef that scuttled the British packet ship *Antelope* in 1783, stranding the crew and giving the outside world its first glimpse of the Rock Islands. The account of that shipwreck, published five years later, painted a vivid picture of tropical paradise: "The islands of Pelew, when viewed from the sea, exhibited high rugged land, well covered with wood. The interior part was in many places mountainous, but the valleys were extensive and beautiful, spreading before the eye many delicious prospects."

Those "delicious prospects" are still there and have gone virtually untouched in the intervening years, an island and ocean habitat that has passed into the 21st century as one of the most pristine in the entire Pacific basin.

One of the site's most outstanding characteristics is diversity, a vast array of habitats in which all sorts of wildlife thrives (including 385 coral species). Besides the fringing reefs, one also finds underwater caves and channels, tunnels and arches, sea grass and algal beds, shallow bays and coves. The terrestrial areas are also varied,

ranging from beaches and limestone cliffs to wetlands, mangroves and wooded hills.

"The Rock Islands are unique in that they contain all the biodiversity that can be found in Palau," says Ilebrang U. Olkeril, coastal management officer of the Koror State Department of Conservation and Law Enforcement. "You can find dugongs, you can find manta rays, and bats on the limestone islands. You can go scuba diving with sharks and turtles, as well as go snorkeling with unique jellyfish. Or you can go on a trip and see crocodiles, fruit bats and birds."

One of the most unusual features is an abundance of marine lakes — 52 bodies of brackish and salt water detached from the open ocean — more of these lakes than any other place on Earth. In recent years, five new subspecies of jellyfish have been discovered in these lakes, and scientists are certain that more new species will be recorded as these unique water bodies are more thoroughly examined.

Orgeim'l Tketau (Jellyfish Lake) is the only one that visitors can currently access. Its English name derives from a population of as many as 25 million golden jellyfish (*Mastigias cf. papua etpisoni*). This endemic species migrates horizontally across the lake each day, following the movement of the sun. Another particularity of the species is that the toxin delivered by their nematocysts — the jellyfish's sting — is generally harmless for humans.

The islands also harbor rock art, burial places and the remains of stone villages constructed by human occupants between the 11th century B.C. and the 17th or 18th century A.D., when they moved to larger islands presumably because of population growth or climate change.

Modern Palauans consider the Rock Islands their ancestral homeland and continue their association with the area via oral traditions and everyday economic, cultural or recreational purposes. These activities

are regulated through traditional governance and modern laws that seek to preserve both the cultural and environmental integrity of the islands.

"Awareness of conservation long predates World Heritage," Nero explains. "There was traditional management for millennia. But World Heritage is important and Palau hopes it will be of great benefit."

"That doesn't mean there aren't perils. We do have threats to conservation and challenges that we're faced with," says Olkeril. One of those threats is tourism. Although small numbers of people visit Palau at present, the Rock Islands are gaining a reputation as a world scuba-diving mecca. Yachts make stops in Palau and a few cruise ships, fewer than five a year over the last five years, according to Olkeril.

"We're at a crossroads," says Olkeril, "where we're balancing, protecting this pristine area while sharing it with the world, and having their input and getting their help to protect the Rock Islands for our children, as well as for their children's children to come and visit."

J.R.Y.

### Jaeger-LeCoultre auction to benefit Brazil's World Heritage

To benefit one of the iconic diving sites of the world, what could be more appropriate than one of the world's iconic diving watches? The fifth edition of the Jaeger-LeCoultre online watch auction to benefit the marine program of Unesco's World Heritage Centre links a Brazilian beauty with a Swiss reference in watchmaking, and the winning bidder is not the only beneficiary.

This year the recipient of the auction's proceeds is the archipelago of Fernando de Noronha, off the northern coast of Brazil, an underwater paradise for divers and snorkelers. They treasure it all the more for its exclusivity: you need to apply for a permit to visit the site and only 420 tourists are allowed on the island at any one time.

The Jaeger-LeCoultre Deep Sea Chronograph Cermet, a diving watch newly created by the Swiss manufacture, is equally exclusive. The 2013 timepiece was inspired by the famous 1959 Memovox Deep Sea, the first automatic diving watch equipped with an alarm. More than half a century later, the Swiss manufacture has demonstrated equal ingenuity. The icon now

boasts a housing strengthened with a composite of ceramic and metal, or cermet, in this case aluminum reinforced with ceramic particles coated with a protective layer of ceramic 40 microns thick, thinner than most human hair. The resultant casing is more resistant to shocks and pressure than pure ceramic, but it is also lightweight — an appreciable feature for divers.

The chronograph has a power reserve of 65 hours, and an indicator to show whether this stopwatch feature is running, stopped or at zero, also crucial for divers, who need to time the length of time they're underwater.

Online watch auctions conducted since 2009 have enabled Jaeger-LeCoultre to contribute to the protection of Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park in the Philippines, India's Sundarbans National Park, Malpelo Fauna and Flora Sanctuary in Colombia, and Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park in the Philippines. The current online auction began April 23 and runs until April 26. To participate, go to [auction.jaeger-lecoultre.com](http://auction.jaeger-lecoultre.com).

C.F.

PEOPLE | Culture and tradition

## Honoring ancestors through conservation of natural heritage

Rocks tell us about our past. The illuminating quality of rocks can be seen in microcosm in 445 uninhabited islands in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. The appropriately named Rock Islands, located in the Southern Lagoon of the tiny country of Palau in Western Micronesia, became a World Heritage marine site in 2012, in part because of the history engraved on its stones.

Karen Nero, senior research fellow at the Te Tumu School of Maori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies of the University of Otago, New Zealand, notes that the majority of Palauans visit the Rock Islands frequently and has a strong connection to the site. The Rock Islands became a protected area under the Koror Rock Islands Management and Conservation Act in 1997.

Honor for one's past through conservation is a cultural tradition in Palau, and the

links between the people and their environment are strong. "Palauans learn the landscape as children," says Nero, who has spent the last 30 years studying the oral traditions and art of Palau.

"To a large extent," she says, "the Palauan histories are literally written on the land and seascapes, not only through naming, but through the stone house and meeting-house platforms, wells, pot shards and garden areas that remain."

Although this World Heritage site is unpopulated, and the total population of Palau is less than 22,000, archeologists believe that about a thousand years ago, the Rock Islands sustained 4,000 to 6,000 people. Why they left is the subject of study and discussion, but it is believed to be related to climate change and overfishing, problems that are familiar to contemporary researchers. Research published by Julian Sachs of

the University of Washington suggests that around 500 years ago the amount of rainfall in the area decreased markedly. The implication is that climate change reduced food and water sources and increased conflict in a place where resources necessary to life were already limited. Thus the local population was compelled to migrate from the Rock Islands to more hospitable environments.

Geoffrey Clark, a professor at the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific, was the lead author of the cultural component of the site's nomination

for World Heritage status. He and other researchers base their studies on archeology, anthropology and oral tradition, which records events such as protracted warfare between various island communities, the importance of marine resources for human survival and the political organization and hierarchy of the islands' villages.

"The stakes are high in this World Heritage site," he says, "and the ebb and flow of human occupation in the Rock Islands is a concrete example of how climate change affects human societies, especially in the heavily populated tropics."

C.F.

**Rock Islands Southern Lagoon** is the 41st in the "Tides of Time" series about Unesco's World Heritage marine sites. It produced by the IHT Creative Solutions department and does not involve the newspaper's reporting or editorial departments. "Tides of Time" is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Unesco World Heritage Centre Marine Program and the International Herald Tribune. Text by CLAUDIA FLISI and JOSEPH R. YOGERST.

JAEGER-LECOULTRE

## BID FOR A PRECIOUS CAUSE

Jaeger-LeCoultre is offering for Auction a new water-resistant watch inspired by the Memovox Deep Sea:

the Prototype N° 1 of the Jaeger-LeCoultre Deep Sea Chronograph Cermet

Join the cause by visiting [auction.jaeger-lecoultre.com](http://auction.jaeger-lecoultre.com)