

TRAVEL

サイパン平和観音

日本救護正法会

Banzai Cliff, Saipan





# MAGNIFICENT MICRONESIA

*Where America's Day Begins*

Text & Photographs Lynette Hinings-Marshall

"There it is," said my husband pointing at the small island below. "That's Tinian, where the atomic bomb was launched in World War II." The details of the Enola Gay flight from Tinian to Hiroshima are well known and I remember some of this history, but from the air Tinian today is a tiny atoll resting peacefully in the sparkling waters of the Pacific.

With winter looming we craved a week in the sun so chose Micronesia because it guaranteed warm weather, snorkeling, diving, hiking, and even history with important sites from World War II. Oh yes, the rows of designer stores were attractive too. Our itinerary included Guam—with its slogan "Where America's day begins" because it's the westernmost territory of the United States—Saipan, and a day trip to Tinian.

With frequent flights and no need for visas Guam can be a mini-vacation destination or, as it was for us, a jumping off point for some island hopping. An added attraction was that just a few hours from Seoul we could step on American soil with all the familiarity that this brings. Although American history of Micronesia is recent, Guam's rich lineage stretches back to primitive times. We saw a little of this past when we stood at the spot where Ferdinand Magellan landed some five centuries ago. His crew named Guam Islas delas velas Latinas or the Island of Lateen Sails because of the triangular-shaped sails on the proa (canoes) manned by the local inhabitants, the Chamorro. Their society was Neolithic and the people were seafarers who sailed to Micronesia more than 3,500 years ago and established a strong matriarchal society that has survived centuries of foreign occupation.

After Magellan, the Spanish ruled for almost 250 years. Heavily laden with gold and silver mined in the New World, Spanish galleons from Mexico and the Philippines stopped at Guam for provisioning. The ships then sailed to China where they traded the precious metals for silks and spices. This lively trading period came to an end with the Mexican Revolution when the island was ceded to the United States in 1898. A year later, the United States formally purchased Guam, along with other territories, from the Spanish for \$20 million and used the island as a U.S. naval base.

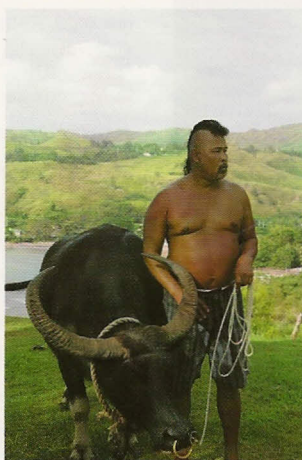




*Japanese bunker, Saipan*

Like most tourists we were keen to visit the war sites so on our second day we headed for Nimitz Hill. Some will remember Henry Fonda playing the role of Admiral Chester Nimitz who won back Micronesia for the United States at the end of the Second World War. We first stopped at the Pacific War Museum. Built by former U.S. Marine John Gerber and volunteers, it has an expansive collection of artifacts mostly collected by Gerber. He was not on hand during our visit but on most days he is happy to perform the role of docent. We drove on to the village of Asan where the two-storied houses are nestled into the hills. The huge Camel Rock at Asan is the centerpiece of one of Guam's many legends and the storyline is that the Chamorro people were so strong, even a small child had the strength of several men. When the Spanish were sailing to Hagatna (just a short drive north today), two boys were chosen to retrieve a large rock and block the harbor. It was heavier than expected and when dark came, because children were told not to be outside after dark, the children dropped the rock where they were, in Asan, then ran home.

The drive up to Nimitz Hill puts Asan Bay on magnificent display below. As we stood at the overlook we were able to imagine the entrenched Japanese soldiers watching waves of American soldiers swarming the beach below. The solitude on the hill was fitting respect for the memorial wall which features the names of Americans who died during the conflict along with names of all the Chamorro who died or suffered during the Japanese occupation. Visitors who are fit can hike through the jungle at Nimitz Hill to Sigua Falls where the popular pastime is to jump 100 feet to the pool below. In the same region are the aptly named Tarzan Falls where several falls empty into deep pools. An added attraction at Tarzan Falls is the fresh water shrimp in this branch of the Ylig River. We chose to drive south for lunch at Leoplace Resort and Country Club. This massive resort has never reached its potential but the owners keep trying. Lunch was pleasant and it was worth the trip to stand on the lake and enjoy the tranquility amid miles of beautiful landscaping. Heading farther south we watched the landscape change to lushier outlooks until our guide



*Chamorro farmer*





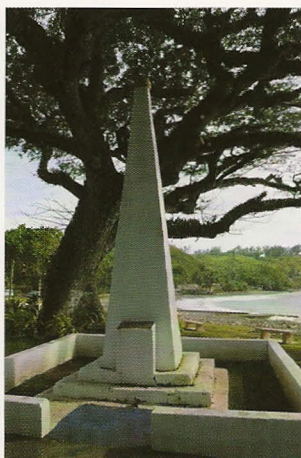
*Japanese submarine, Saipan*

exclaimed, "If you look to your left you will see Mount Lam Lam, the tallest mountain in the world." All I could see was a rather small hill and wondered what I was missing when the guide continued. "Of course most of the mountain is submerged in the Marianas Trench, which is the deepest location on Earth. Mount Lam Lam is deeper than Mount Everest is high." The hill was unspectacular but there was an excitement about being in such a unique place.

At our next stop we walked around the mottled stone walls of Fort Nuestra Senora de la Soledad which overlooks Umatac where the Chamorro people first met Magellan in 1521. Then it was on to Talofofo Bay on the eastern side of Guam which hosts a popular surfing beach, and we spent the rest of the afternoon swimming and watching Para gliders. Water activities in Guam are a definite draw because of its location at the edge of the Marianas Trench. For half the year visibility is as far down as 150 feet with warm waters year round. Riverboats, outrigger canoes, submarines or semi-submersible boats can take you out to view the rich and diverse coral reefs and sponges. Just off the

coast you can see sharks, pilot whales, sailfish, and manta rays but it is the shipwrecks that make diving in Guam unique. There is the WWI SMS Cormoran and three WWII ships to explore—all still intact enough to be photogenic.

We were settling into the rhythm of island life when it was time to head for Saipan, so we celebrated our last night in Guam at the Chamorro Village night market. We took our time cruising row upon row of food stalls where families offered freshly cooked Chamorro dishes. My favorite was the Kelaquin Benadu which is venison with peppers and I quickly acquired the local habit of adding Eneksa Agaga (red rice) to each dish I ordered. I did pass, however, on the pagua (betel nut) that is a popular after dinner tradition. It was a balmy evening and around 7 pm the sound of Kantan Chamorro singing brought us to the central dance area. Music is integrated into daily life in Guam and it was impossible to stand still on the sidelines as the locals line danced to the sound of traditional instruments. Just after we joined in the music changed to the soulful belembaotuyan, which is a



*Magellan monument, Umatac*





*Leopalace Resort, Guam*

one-string instrument made from a hollow gourd and strung with taut wire. We found ourselves swaying to what sounded like a musical legend and I chose to believe that it was the story of the doomed lovers leaping to their deaths off Puntan Dos Amantes (Two Lovers Point), or perhaps it was about Sirena, the beautiful young girl from legend who became a mermaid. Sirena loved to swim and exasperated her mother because she would neglect her chores in order to spend time swimming. One day her mother was so upset with Sirena when she found her swimming instead of working that she shouted "Sirena! That's it! I've had it with you! I wish you'd become a fish! Do you hear me? You're better off a fish!" At that moment, Sirena's godmother was on her way to the river and heard the curse. "No! Sirena is half mine! Her upper half will remain human! She will not completely turn into a fish!" With that, Sirena felt her legs turn to fins as she swiftly swam deeper and deeper into the ocean.

Next morning, before we headed to the airport for our half-hour flight to Saipan we couldn't resist a typical Chamorro breakfast of deboned milkfish and red rice. We added Finadeni, the peppery sauce of crushed red peppers, soy, lemon juice and green onions and felt we had now assimilated. There are several flights a day to Saipan for about U.S.\$60 and we stayed at the Mariana Resort and Spa. It was a little

tired looking but our comfortable room was about three times the size of an average hotel room with a huge bathroom and a large balcony that faced the dramatic sunsets. With a golf course, water sports, a large spa and horse riding available, it offered everything we needed to relax for a couple of days. We saw only two other guests at the resort who were not Asian and most signs were in Japanese. We arranged to take a light plane for the 3-mile trip across to Tinian which was a very reasonable U.S.\$25 per person round trip and then my husband went to the large ocean front pool while I headed for the spa.

With a list of memorial sites to visit we started at the site of the Battle of Saipan, dramatized by John Woo in his film *Windtalkers*. It told how on July 7, 1944 the Japanese had nowhere to retreat so their commander, Saito, made plans for a final suicidal banzai charge. Saito famously said: "There is no longer any distinction between civilians and troops. It would be better to join in the attack with bamboo spears than be captured." At dawn, about 3,000 men charged forward in the final attack. Behind them came the wounded, with bandaged heads, crutches, and barely armed. Finally, on July 9 the Americans announced that Saipan was officially secured and Saito along with commanders Hirakushi and Igeta, committed suicide in a cave. Many hundreds of Japanese civilians committed suicide in the last days of





*Guam night market*





*Ypao beach park, Guam*







*Umatac Bridge*

the battle, some jumping from "Suicide Cliff" and "Banzai Cliff." They believed that if they lived the U.S. soldiers would eat their children. Sadly, a U.S. Marine retrieved just one living baby from a cave full of corpses. On the day we stood at the top of Suicide Cliff surrounded by Japanese tourists we contemplated the frightening despair and fear and ultimately the courage it took to first push their children, then follow to their own deaths.

Saipan is possibly best suited to golfers and those who want simply to relax. There are some good local restaurants; our favorite being the home-style cooking of Shirley's. It was an easy decision to drive downtown to eat locally when the one-choice-only breakfast at the resort cost U.S.\$28 a head even if you only wanted toast and coffee. Another hint: If you decide to stay at the Mariana Resort, room cleaning is "on request"; a quaint concept we had never previously encountered. If you don't want to fly to Tinian, there is a daily ferry service but the short distance will take a few hours and the seas can be rough. The tiny island interested us only as the site where the Enola Gay took off so when the next day started out cloudy with rain threatening,

we opted for the comforts of the spa and a drive downtown for a leisurely lunch at the revolving restaurant. Of course, if you enjoy

casinos Tinian also hosts the popular Tinian Dynasty Hotel and Casino.

Our lasting impression of Micronesia is the genuine friendliness and happy disposition of the Chamorro people. So often we were greeted with Hafa Adai (hello) and several times when we became lost when searching out a restaurant or site, with unfailing kindness, we were shown the way. When we were heading home we realized how thoroughly relaxed and rejuvenated we felt. Micronesia is definitely the destination for you if you just want to get away from the hustle and bustle of Seoul for a short while and return refreshed. Adios.

*Lynette Hinings-Marshall has travelled abroad every year since her 19th birthday and has lived for long periods in Australia, Cyprus, Puerto Rico, Korea, the United States, Mexico and Malaysia. She has a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing and is currently writing a textbook for the tour guiding profession.*