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Living in Palau

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Introduction

Palau is a name that often sparks curiosity—an enchanting cluster of islands in the western Pacific, celebrated for its turquoise waters, lush jungles, and vibrant coral reefs. For many expats, the idea of living in Palau conjures up images of an idyllic, slow-paced existence in a tropical paradise. Yet life here is a complex blend of natural beauty, remote island living, and a distinctive social fabric that may surprise even the most seasoned global traveler.

This book, *Living in Palau: A Guide for Expats*, aims to provide a comprehensive roadmap for anyone considering making Palau their new home. Drawing from local insights, expat experiences, and practical resources, it covers everything from visa requirements and accommodation options to the subtleties of social life and the essential logistics of day-to-day living. Palau is not just a destination; it is a close-knit community with unique rhythms, customs, and challenges that demand a thoughtful and well-prepared approach from newcomers.

While many are attracted to Palau's unparalleled diving and natural wonders, the realities of daily life require adaptability and foresight. Costs can be high due to the need to import most goods, and services such as healthcare and education may be more limited than in larger, urbanized countries. Nonetheless, the high degree of English proficiency, coupled with a tradition of hospitality, ensures that integration into local society is both possible and rewarding.

Expats in Palau soon discover that success here depends on respect for local customs, a willingness to embrace the country's environmental commitment, and an openness to forming connections in a tight-knit society. Everyday activities—whether shopping at the market, navigating transport, or exploring breathtaking landscapes—are shaped by the interplay of modern convenience, island ingenuity, and age-old traditions.

Throughout the coming chapters, you will find not just factual information, but practical advice and cultural insights designed to help you navigate expat life in Palau with confidence. Whether your stay is temporary or long-term, this guide is your companion for building a fulfilling life amidst the unique beauty and spirit of the islands. Welcome to Palau—let your journey begin!

CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Palau — An Overview

Palau, officially known as the Republic of Palau, is an independent island nation nestled in the western Pacific Ocean. While many might mistake its name for a popular archipelagic province southwest of the Philippines, Palau carves out its own distinct identity, often dubbed the "Underwater Serengeti" for its breathtaking marine biodiversity. This remote archipelago sits about 800 miles from Guam and southwest of the Philippines, making it a truly far-flung destination.

The country is an intricate tapestry of 586 islands, both coralline and volcanic in origin, though only a dozen are continuously inhabited. Most of Palau's approximately 21,000 residents, roughly two-thirds of the population, make their home on Koror, which is also the largest city. The nation's capital, Ngerulmud, is found on the larger island of Babeldaob. For an expat, understanding this geographical spread is key, as the majority of services and social life tend to be concentrated in Koror.

Palau's economy hums along primarily thanks to tourism, fishing, and a dash of subsistence agriculture. Tourism, in particular, contributes significantly to its Gross Domestic Product. This reliance on visitors, especially from countries like South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, shapes many aspects of life, including the job market and the availability of amenities. The country also benefits from strong foreign relations with the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines.

One significant advantage for prospective expats is the high level of English proficiency; a remarkable 92.5% of the population speaks English, smoothing the path for communication and integration. While modern-day Palau has a noticeable American influence, there's a deep-seated commitment to preserving its unique cultural and historical roots, evident in ongoing cultural activities and traditional roles for men and women. The Palauan people are known for their friendliness and hospitality, often taking pride in their environment and cultural identity, and generally welcoming foreigners.

The climate is, as you might expect for an equatorial nation, consistently hot, humid, and rainy throughout the year. The annual mean temperature hovers around 28°C (82°F), with humidity typically ranging from 77% to 84%. Rainfall is abundant, averaging around 3,700 to 3,800 millimeters (146 to 150 inches) annually. While there isn't a true dry season, you might experience a slight decrease in rain between February and April. The wettest months generally fall between June and July.

Expats should be aware that Palau is situated in an area prone to tropical storms and typhoons, especially from April to December, with the highest frequency occurring

between August and November. These can bring strong winds and heavy rains, potentially disrupting daily life and services. There's also a risk of tsunamis, though earthquakes are rare despite Palau's proximity to the deep Palau Trench.

The allure of Palau, however, often transcends these practical considerations, drawing people in with its exceptional marine environment. The country boasts an astonishing array of corals, fish, and other sea creatures, making it a world-renowned destination for scuba diving. Beyond the underwater spectacle, the land itself supports a rich terrestrial flora, including tropical rainforests, mangrove forests, and diverse palm and fern species. Exploring these natural wonders is often at the heart of the expat experience in Palau.

For those considering a move, it's worth noting that citizens from the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the USA are exempt from visa requirements, with US citizens being able to stay for up to a year. Most other foreign nationals will require a visa, which is typically issued upon arrival for a 30-day tourist stay. This visa can usually be extended twice, allowing for a maximum stay of 90 days. Essential for all visitors is a passport valid for at least six months beyond the intended stay and proof of onward travel.

Before arrival, all passengers must complete a Palau Entry Form online within 72 hours, which generates a QR code to be presented during check-in and upon arrival. A unique and significant aspect of entering Palau is the requirement for all visitors to sign the Palau Pledge. This commitment, made in front of an immigration officer, is a promise to protect the country's natural environment and cultural heritage, reflecting Palau's deep dedication to conservation.

Customs regulations dictate that amounts equal to or greater than 10,000 US dollars must be declared upon both entry and departure. When it comes to bringing in personal items, there are specific limits: up to 20 cigarettes (one pack) per person aged 21 and over, and less than two liters of alcohol per adult (also 21 and over) are exempt from import duties. It's crucial to remember that vape products and sunscreens containing ingredients harmful to coral reefs are strictly prohibited. These regulations underscore Palau's strong environmental stance and its desire to protect its pristine marine ecosystems.

Palau is divided into several regions, with the largest island, Babeldaob, being home to the capital, Ngerulmud (Melekeok State). Koror, the former capital and most populous city, is a hub of activity. Other inhabited islands include Peleliu with approximately 700 residents and Angaur with around 200 permanent residents. Beyond these, the uninhabited Rock Islands, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, are a major draw for tourists, particularly for their famous Jellyfish Lake where visitors can snorkel without fear of stings.

The expat community in Palau is relatively small and close-knit, primarily engaged in sectors such as tourism, conservation, government, and education. While formal expat clubs may not be prevalent, online platforms can serve as avenues for communication and connection. Life in Palau for an expat often revolves around outdoor activities, with water sports like diving, snorkeling, and kayaking taking center stage.

The country's government operates as a functioning democracy with a strong judicial system. Palau actively collaborates with international law enforcement agencies and embraces modern technologies for efficiency, such as the ASYCUDA World system for customs transactions. This system streamlines processes for manifests, declarations, and e-payment of duties and taxes. Customs documents should be submitted in either Palauan or English, or with a translated copy.

Ultimately, Palau offers a unique expat experience. It's a place where the pace of life slows, allowing for a deeper connection with nature and a vibrant, welcoming community. While the practicalities of island living, such as the high cost of imported goods and limited specialized services, require careful consideration, the unparalleled natural beauty and the warmth of the Palauan people often make these challenges well worth the effort.

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