

Expectations and preparations

Thursday, June 23, 2011
7:20 AM

I heard about the planned Pan-Micronesia cruise in 2009 already, and decided in early 2010 to participate with my friends Susanne (from Dive&Travel), Manuel and Maryrose. The safari was described as a dream cruise where we would travel from one island to another at night and spend our days diving and occasionally meeting the islanders and learning about their traditions and way of life. The Thorfinn Web site confirmed this with its enthusiastic description of the "dive trip of a lifetime". While the \$8000 + price tag seemed high, I was willing to spend that kind of money for a truly exceptional diving experience.

The first sign of trouble came in March 2011, when Susanne forwarded us a message from Cap. Lance Higgs explaining that passengers for the westbound voyage from Chuuk to Palau had cancelled, and that therefore the cruise would be shortened by two days, departing from Yap on Monday 20 June instead of Palau on Saturday 18 June as initially planned. As partial compensation for this change in plans a free day of wreck diving in Chuuk would be added at the end of the cruise and additional days of wreck diving offered at a suitable discount. After some discussion this alternative was accepted, on the premise that the cost of the air ticket from Palau to Yap would be covered by Seaward and that we could start diving in Yap as soon as we boarded the ship. I managed to change my existing airline tickets to return from Chuuk on 5 July instead of 2 July, and took two extra days vacation to accommodate the change.

Here is the text of the message received from Lance on 12 March:

We have worked diligently to replace a previous fully booked and deposited party on our westbound 2011 voyage that suddenly canceled late, due problems within their family. Although receiving enthusiastic and positive responses, it was too late for many to alter a year's planned vacation itinerary.

The nearly filled eastbound tour will operate as expected with even more features after a slight change at western end. Our vessel will run light from Chuuk to a western terminus at Yap, closely adjacent to Palau instead of entering Palau, after a promised donation of stored oil wastes was sold off to Philippine interests.

To adjust for this change, Seaward will fly at its expense all passengers arriving at Palau for a planned diving vacation prior to boarding our ship Saturday June 18, over to Yap Sunday evening (a 20 minute flight) for transfer to ship at pierside, departing Yap on original schedule Monday. This program avoids a nonstop at-sea day trip to Yap while providing equal or more island visits during our main cruise. We'll extend the cruise by an extra day at Chuuk for those willing and able to do so. Requests for extensions into diving Truk's sunken treasures after the cruise will be offered at a suitably attractive discount.

We trust you will be pleased with this arrangement to visit the many outlying islands and reefs of Micronesia's Yap and Chuuk States en route. Arrangements are now being finalized with the outer island chief's Council and everyone is excited and pleased to learn of our coming visits.

There was also an issue regarding the diving in Yap, which according to the original schedule would be done from the Thorfinn and included in the cost of the cruise. The revised schedule indicated that this would now be at the customers' own expense, and organized independently. I strongly objected, and Susanne promised to look into it.

Here is the relevant message from Lance:

It is difficult planning every fine detail for a trip as broad as these tours are, taking into consideration the many obstacles or changes that appear almost every day along the way.

It is often difficult for people in a fast moving modern world to understand the different pace of matters in largely untamed locations such as these across a huge ocean. These are tours of adventure, requiring flexibility as the rule. At almost every stage of planning we receive some need for a change or diversion due to various circumstances that develop involving many differing islands and their people. It is exact opposite to spectrum of modern world schedules and rigid clock watching.

When finally learning of the Swiss French agent's failings for the fully booked westbound tour we were close to canceling the whole venture and refund deposits and payments in hand, but after considering the high enthusiasms from booked and committed people on the second eastbound cruise we determined it was best to run the tour and eat the giant losses we'd incur doing so.

The very best we can offer everyone is covering costs of the flights as we have committed to, that will run us well over \$3,000 negative. This is added to costs to run our empty ship 1,200 miles across open ocean without revenue to pick up 14 payees at western terminus and cruise them on a wonderful eastbound journey back to Chuuk. We are at our financial limits to do any more on this venture. Other extraneous expenses will need to be borne by guests.

Guests joining the ship early Sunday morning will barely be asleep by 5:00 AM, and likely sleep until late morning. After lunch we'll brief everyone about our ship, its safety features, the island routes, our tentative itinerary etc. This will consume at least 1.5-2 hrs. Any diving desires before or after the briefing at Yap, can be arranged with a local dive facility for guest's own considerations. We can only provide services performed by our ship's staff, and as already promised at the outer islands we'll be visiting.

Please realize this is similar itinerary/schedule as we would have been on if coming from Palau as well, as we cannot enter FSM waters without a formal entry at nearest port of entry ...in this case at Yap. Formalities out here are time consuming and there is no way to rush them faster than regular islander's paces. Everyone must have loads of patience in this regard or risk being very unpopular while aboard.

It usually takes 2 or 3 days of island cruising to slow their speeding minds, letting outer world anxieties slip away, and to begin enjoying the easy relaxing pace of being at sea leaving yesterday's concerns far behind.

I would suggest delaying anyone reserved out of Chuuk on the 2nd to leave on July 5 or they may forever regret not experiencing the great dive sites within this big lagoon as a 'capper' to a fine cruise. As given before we'll extend the trip by one extra day with up to 5 daily dives at Chuuk, to offset the non-diving day's cruise from Palau to Yap.

Please furnish us names and all pertinent details of your guests that we'll be flying over to Yap, as we need to get an early reserve on space for that flight.

Many thanks for your hopeful understandings of the massive job it is to make most of these great tours jell and run close to a foreseen plan.

In retrospect this should have alerted me that the services offered by Seaward would be a constantly moving target, understandably bound by the constraints of the Micronesian administration and island realities but also driven by the Captain's assessment of financial and organizational risks. Disowning responsibility for diving on Monday (which would have been covered under the initial plan) was not

acceptable, and the thinly veiled threat that guests who were short on patience would be "very unpopular while aboard" opened the door to ostracizing those who would not blindly accept all of the Captain's decisions, even if they amounted to a breach of contract. The reality turned out to be quite different, with most of the guests losing patience without any loss of popularity. In fact, it is the management of the Thorfinn that ended up losing credibility with many of the guests.

Sunday 19 June

Thursday, June 23, 2011
9:22 AM

We arrived in Palau on Friday evening as scheduled, and spent the day on Saturday exploring various snorkeling sites around the Palau islands. After the brutal red-eye flight from Palau to Yap, we arrived on the Thorfinn at about 4 am on Sunday. There was a short and relatively uninformative briefing after which most of us retired to our cabins for some sleep. After we emerged around 11 am we were told that there would have been a possibility to do some diving at 10 am, presumably at our own expense. As things turned out we settled for a tour of the island in the afternoon, again out of our own pockets.

I found it particularly unsettling that no provisions seemed to have been made on the ship for storing our dive gear. The cabins do not provide such storage, and the only possibility seemed to be the individual boxes on the dive tenders, to which we would not have access until Tuesday. No place at all was provided for wet suits and booties, which need some time to dry out between dives. The crew were unable to provide directives, as was the dive master (Karl). I finally left my partially unpacked dive bag on the aft deck, pending the availability of a place to store its contents, which in fact never materialized. I found out the hard way that the way the crew deals with dive gear found drying is to dump it randomly in metal boxes located on the outside of the D deck, leaving it to the guests to locate before they dive. No storage or drying area is provided anywhere except on the tenders, to which guests do not have access outside of actual dive times.

After dinner we were given a briefing by the Captain. This covered many fascinating aspects of the history of the Thorfinn and its technical specs, but again not very much in the way of practical information about dive procedures or the scheduled itinerary. We were told that the latter was still being negotiated with the Council of Chiefs. As to the former, we figured that more detailed information would be forthcoming during the first dive briefing (little did we know...)

Monday 20 June

Thursday, June 23, 2011
10:19 AM

On Monday at 8:00 we were picked up by a boat from Yap Divers for a two-tank dive. As mentioned before this was after Seaward had taken us on board, and thus in my view part of our cruise program. In any case, we did our two dives under excellent conditions and were returned to the Thorfinn by noon as planned. After our return I asked again where I could put my gear, and ended up leaving everything except my wet booties in a dive bag on the floor of the D deck, hoping that it would not get lost.

We waited for the immigration procedures to be completed and were able to sail by about 15:00, in line with what we had been told to expect. Given an expected transit time of about 18 h, we should have arrived at our next destination, Sorol Atoll, by mid-morning on Tuesday.

We travelled through the night at a speed of about 9 knots, and I noticed that the ship stopped for about an hour in the evening. After inquiring, I was told that there had been a minor engine problem that was rapidly fixed.

Tuesday 21 June

Thursday, June 23, 2011
10:33 AM

We arrived at Sorol Atoll around 10:30 on Tuesday. Preparations were started immediately to launch the tenders, which were tied alongside the ship within about 30 min. Guests decided that they wanted to dive as soon as possible, and postpone lunch until after the first dive. But unsurprisingly the process of getting tanks, dive gear and divers onto the correct tender was chaotic, given the fact that no one really knew where their gear had landed (see above) and thus had to frantically look for various missing pieces, that requests for Nitrox or DIN valve fittings had not been taken in advance, and that essentially no advance preparation of the boats had been performed. No rinse tanks were available on the dive boats. No SMBs had been distributed to the dive guides. There was no possibility to check the composition of the Nitrox tanks, no analyzers, no logs for the tanks (these may in fact not exist on the ship at all).

When the tenders finally headed out to the dive sites around 12:30, there was apparently no record of who was on which boat, and which divers had decided not to participate. Upon arrival on the dive site, the briefing was limited to "stay with the dive guide, do not surface close to the reef, swim out to the boat when it comes to pick you up". Our dive was uneventful, following a conservative profile and the group (7 divers and one guide) staying in visual contact during the whole dive. We surfaced after 61', in line with the general instructions to limit dives to one hour.

When we surfaced about 50 m from the reef the dive boat was nowhere to be seen. We were not overly worried, figuring that it would look for us on the assumption that we had respected the standard dive time limit of 60'. After about 10 min, five members of the group deployed SMBs to make us more visible to the boat that we assumed was looking for us (the dive guide did not carry one). The dive guide told us to swim towards the reef, presumably to avoid being swept away by the weak current which was driving us towards deeper water.

As time advanced the group got increasingly worried. We could see the Thorfinn but there was no indication that it was seeing us. The second dive boat, which had started about 20 min after ours, was seen getting back to the ship. There was no sign whatsoever of the boat that had dropped us off. About one hour after we had surfaced, one of the group managed to climb on the reef, to stand up and to signal the Thorfinn by waving his fins. The dive guide joined him on the reef a little later. We learned later that this is what triggered a response from the ship, as one of the guests saw the signals and alerted the crew. The Thorfinn then steamed towards us and sent out the second tender to pick us up. By the time we climbed on board we had been on the surface for 1h30. Our boat was still nowhere to be seen. There had obviously been a very serious breach of security procedures, inasmuch as these existed at all.

After our return to the Thorfinn we discussed the situation with several of the crew; details are not worth relating here. It transpired that the dive master aboard our boat had little or no experience dealing with drift diving from a tender or with handling a VHF radio. Such security procedures as existed had been ignored. False information had circulated on the ship, stating that we had left for a two tank dive. In the evening the Captain organized a debriefing where our concerns were aired. We were given assurances that the ship did in fact have security procedures (there had been no evidence of their existence so far) and that they would be scrupulously adhered to from now on. In particular, dive guides would deploy an SMB about 10 min into each dive, allowing the boat to locate the group at all times, and radio communication between the tenders and the ship maintained throughout the dive. Logs would be kept of outgoing and incoming divers and boats.

Towards the end of the meeting the Captain had to excuse himself to tend to some concerns from the machine room. Little did we know what that would portend. There was a long stretch of ocean to be traversed, bringing us to Ifalik Atoll in about 28 hours. No diving on Wednesday.

Wednesday 22 June

Thursday, June 23, 2011
12:15 PM

During the night of Tuesday to Wednesday we noticed that the ship had navigated in fits and starts, coming to a full stop around 4:00. Coming out of my cabin on E deck I noticed a charred piece of ceiling and evidence of fire extinguisher powder on the D deck. Evidently a small fire had erupted there.

The day was excruciating. We knew that there were machine room problems but little reliable information filtered. We were told several times that we would be steaming within an hour, but this never materialized. Most of the time the ship was just dead in the water. The Captain was obviously busy trying to get the ship operational again. Around 22:00 we were told that we would be steaming on a single boiler at a speed of about 4 knots, putting the next destination (Ifalik) about 36 hours away. No diving on Thursday either... In five days on the Thorfinn we had been offered exactly two dives, one of which many chose not to take after having spent 2h30 in the water on the first one. This was getting further and further from the five dives a day promised in the catalog, with no relief in sight

Thursday 23 June

Thursday, June 23, 2011

1:15 PM

Thursday started with the ship barely moving, at a speed of about 3 knots. A quick calculation showed that at this speed we would make it to Ifalik on Friday evening at the earliest. A full week spent doing exactly nothing except for a single botched up dive.

Around 10:00 the Captain came to the lounge to give an update on the situation. Starting Tuesday night a series of different problems had affected the machine room, not all of which could be resolved. The ship was running on a single boiler, and much of the water reserves for generating steam had been lost through human error. The crew were working on locating a leak in the second boiler, hoping to repair, reconnect and operate it by evening. While he gave an enthusiastic description of Ifalik and its people, he declined to predict when we may get there. A stay of two days had been scheduled, some of it devoted to diving and some to shore visits. A total of five island stops had been planned, but how these would fit into the remaining cruise time was unclear.

The mood of the guests ranged between disappointment and anger. Most still hoped that the situation would reverse itself and that the second cruise week would be better than the first (it could hardly be worse). Bets were taken as to what the reality would be...

In the afternoon and evening, things started looking up. A leak in one of the boilers was detected fairly rapidly and fixed. By early evening, the ship was cruising again at a reasonable speed, about seven knots.

Friday 24 June

Sunday, June 26, 2011

5:25 PM

The ship finally arrived at Ifalik around 9:00. The Captain went to confer with the village chief, who told him that they had expected us already on Thursday, and that they were ready for a welcome party. It was finally decided that we would have a couple of dives first (everyone was starved for diving) and then go ashore around 15:00. This is more or less the plan that was followed, and we went out to the island a little after 15:00.

The islanders put up a really nice show, with two women's dancing groups and one men's. Dancers were in full costume and had their upper bodies covered in turmeric. Dancing and chanting seemed totally authentic, and the rest of the islanders also looked on, cheered and laughed with the dancers.

In the late afternoon the captain gave us a briefing on the problems of the last two days. Started off by calling me "Mr Criticism", without me having opened my mouth. Ended in a heated argument with Hanspeter Zellweger, with rather vicious ad hominem attacks.

There was a night dive around 8 pm in the evening, under the ship. Fortunately someone thought to also put out one of the tenders, as there were fairly strong currents and getting back to the ship was not easy. Several divers could not make it and were picked up by the tender. Security was again minimal.

Saturday 25 June

Sunday, June 26, 2011

5:33 PM

Diving day. Three dives organized around Ifalik, although the original planning called for four. I sat out the third dive, thinking that I would make the late afternoon one. This was not to be, although not a big deal.

The tenders were brought in before dark and we sailed from Ifalik around 18:00.

Sunday 26 June

Sunday, June 26, 2011
5:36 PM

Arrived in Lemotrek around 10:30, although the planned arrival would have been 8:00. Preparation for diving was reasonably expeditious. Diving was good, but the promises that dive guides would deploy and tow SMBs from about 10 min into the dive were already forgotten. Tenders were closely following the bubbles though, and pickup was not a problem.

Dive guide was strangely concerned when I deployed my own SMB to indicate that I was starting my safety stop and to give my location. Otherwise uneventful day, and the ship's engines seem to be holding up for now.

Strange night dive to conclude the day: one of the locals offered to show us a "shark feeding" location inside the lagoon, ended up doing 40 min of finning on a sandy bottom at about 30 m...

Monday 27 June

Tuesday, June 28, 2011

11:13 AM

Second day at Lamotrek. Diving in the morning, quite OK. Returning to a spectacular wall with lots of fan coral.

In the afternoon, excursion to the island. Not nearly as nice as Ifalik: litter everywhere, men drinking a lot of "tuba" (palm wine).

Evening dive on coral head between boat and shore, OK but not spectacular.

Summary and lessons learned

Friday, July 01, 2011
8:37 AM

Events during the rest of the trip are not worth relating in detail. Diving on Satawal Atoll turned out to be very disappointing, because the reef has been damaged beyond repair, presumably from overfishing. The coral is pretty much all dead or dying, there are only small fish, and everything is covered in algae. Dive master Karl refuses to acknowledge that there is anything wrong with the diving though, rates it as among best in the world. Sigh...

We ended up visiting only four atolls between Yap and Chuuk, and spent a lot of time sailing from one place to the other.

From my perspective, there are three fundamental problems that made this trip less of a success than could be expected. Specifically:

1. Management of the ship. Captain Lance is fundamentally a good person, but is interested primarily in keeping the ship running. He truly believes that the guests should be thrilled to be on the ship and to be able to visit out of the way islands, regardless of other considerations. He is also somewhat of a micromanager, not delegating any real authority to his immediate subordinates. The result is a rather chaotically run ship, with procedures that are unclear and not followed anyway, inconsistent policies, poor communications etc. Decisions as to where and when to dive, timing of departures and arrivals, deploying and putting away the dive tenders, scheduling of meals etc. are not optimized. Consultation of the guests is haphazard, relying on whoever is in the lounge at a given time and not relaying to the rest. There is no "system" regarding handling and storage of dive equipment. An on and on.
2. Technical characteristics of the ship. The Thorfinn is a whaler designed to make long runs in very rough conditions. Its steam plant has the advantage of not requiring specialized spare parts and thus being repairable under almost any circumstances. The down side is that it is getting old (>50 years) and rather fragile, and that it requires specialized knowledge that only the Captain has to run and fix. It generates a lot of heat that makes most of the ship uncomfortable while the steam plant is running. The top speed of 10 knots (actual cruising speed of 7 knots) is very slow for sailing between islands that are often hundreds of miles apart. Finally the ship is a relatively poor platform for diving and requires the deployment of tenders even for dives close to the ship.
3. Government regulations. The FSM has produced some totally ridiculous rules that interfere with the operations of the Thorfinn or any other ship that would attempt to ferry visitors between individual States or bring them to some of the outer islands. Two rules stand out: (1) having to clear immigration into each State in its main island before being allowed to visit its outer islands and (2) requiring a representative of the governing Municipality to be on board when diving an uninhabited island. This prevented us from visiting any of the Chuuk state outer islands or from stopping off at uninhabited atolls (because we would have to back-track to return the observers to their home islands).

These cumulated problems created a situation where pretty much all of the guests were unhappy with their experience on the Thorfinn. The fact that the reefs on the islands we visited were far from pristine (in fact all suffered from overfishing to some extent) did not help, nor did the only 20 dives offered during the 2 week cruise. Arrival in Chuuk on Friday 1 July at noon severely limited possibilities for wreck diving of guests departing on 2 July. My prediction is that there will be requests for refunds that will not be honored, and that the sequels of this cruise will be lingering on for some time to come.