



# The Palau EXPEDITION

*Sustaining Life  
on a Blue Planet*

**EVST 281**

**May Term 2023, Dr. Stelle**



## *The Place*

Palau is in Micronesia (~550 miles east of the Philippines) and composed of more than 340 islands. Only 8 of the islands are permanently inhabited but a few show signs of human habitation for over 3,000 years. The country has a resident population of about 20,000 people. Prior to contact with European missionaries and traders in the late 18th century, Palau was an isolated paradise with an elaborate system of self-sufficient villages and regional alliances. The dazzling coral reefs and idyllic island settings of the archipelago have made it one of the most exotic and photogenic places on the planet. Palau's lagoon and outer coral walls are properly regarded by divers and snorkelers as one of the underwater wonders of the world.

## *Environmental and Cultural Concerns*

Palau faces potentially large threats to its environment and way of life. Many of these threats are also opportunities, in the form of expanded tourism and development. The concern is how to promote economic development without natural resources. Fortunately, many of Palau's residents are trying to protect their resources and eco-friendly way of life. They know that the ecological and cultural wealth of their islands are imperiled by reckless forms of growth. Unfortunately, some threats, such as climate disruption and ocean acidification, are global and cannot be managed locally.

## *Course Description*

This expedition combines the study of Palau's marine ecology and natural history, its clan-based system of social organization, and its efforts to achieve sustainable forms of development. Students will participate in interviews with members of the community (e.g. chiefs, government officials, elder women (the real source of power in Palau) and conservation experts). During our trip, students will reside on two very different islands and explore more than a dozen others. In addition to hiking, kayaking, and swimming, students will participate in a variety of underwater activities, either by snorkel or SCUBA diving, and learn scientific sampling methods and species ID.

The course will start with a few days of orientation and background material on campus in Redlands. In Palau, we will spend time in the main town of Koror and Babeldaob, learning about Palauan society and the country's economy and conservation challenges, explore jungles, ancient ruins and waterfalls. We will embark on a kayak expedition through the famed Rock Islands, exploring unique marine lakes, dry caves, jungle, and coral reefs -- all within the calm waters of the lagoon. Students may visit Jellyfish Lake to snorkel amidst millions of stingless jellyfish. One week will be spent on the island of Peleliu for the purpose of experiencing traditional island life and exploring the incredible coral reefs offshore. Boat trips will take us to nearly a dozen nearby reefs and islands for snorkeling and SCUBA diving (divers must be certified and receive approval to dive from the instructors). During this period, students will be housed in 2- or 3-person bungalows overlooking the lagoon and Philippine Sea.

Grading will be based on both field activities and assignments, and written essays.

## *Student Selection Criteria*

Only 12-13 students will be permitted to enroll in this travel course. Students from all majors are encouraged to apply. Preference will be given to students who have strong interest and experience in the ocean environment and passion to learn more about its creatures, island culture, and sustainable development. Relevant coursework, wilderness experience, and knowledge about ocean systems and marine life is a plus. Students must like outdoor activity and think and act like adventure travelers, NOT tourists. All participants must be physically fit and comfortable in a wide range of jungle and ocean conditions. Everyone must be strong swimmers, and be comfortable using a snorkel around marine life (you will see plenty of sharks!). Those who wish to scuba dive must be certified, safety conscious, and experienced in open water conditions. Each participant will have to cope at times with social and cultural differences, last-minute changes in schedule, and high heat and humidity. Flexibility, adaptability, and a cheerful attitude are a must! Living conditions and food will sometimes be basic. Each participant will spend lots of time in saltwater and in teamwork situations. Come prepared to learn and immerse in cultural encounters and diverse ecosystems. Everyone is expected to treat Palauans and their environment with deep respect.

If your interest is in sun tanning, shopping, and drinking beer on the beach, don't even think about applying! If you seek cultural enrichment and encounters with ocean wilderness, apply now.

Brief interviews of applicants will be scheduled in October.

## *Cost*

Cost per student (without airfare) is **\$3,350**, which includes transfers, lodging, meals, boats and kayaks, captains and guides, ground transportation, tours, and snorkeling trips. Roundtrip airfare adds about \$1,200-\$1,700+. An additional fee only for SCUBA divers is collected in Palau, based on dive activity (\$75/day, which includes 2 boat dives, rental tanks, weights, regulator & backup, buoyancy compensator, gauges, and airfills).

Note: a group flight will be organized and students are encouraged to travel with the class but can make alternative arrangements if necessary – be sure to discuss with Dr. Stelle beforehand to make sure dates and times work.

*There are limited scholarship funds for those with financial need through the Study Abroad Office <https://www.redlands.edu/study/study-away/cas-study-away/programs/may-term-travel-courses/#maytermtravelgrant> (use this link to obtain grant application as they are awarded separately from this application process); the grants provide a maximum of \$1000.*

## **NOTES:**

- This course/trip may extend past the normal May term (exact dates TBD but latest return is June 1); the program won't be longer but instead would just start a bit later.
- The trip will be ~16 days; we will likely spend the first 3-4 days on campus to cover background course material before our expedition.
- Academics: this is a course for credit so you will have assignments before, during and after the trip part of the course. It is graded, not pass/fail.

**IMPORTANT:** Please read the above details carefully and confirm that you are seriously interested in this course and can cover the costs before you submit an application. Please contact Dr. Stelle at [Leilani\\_stelle@redlands.edu](mailto:Leilani_stelle@redlands.edu) with any questions.