



Atoll Hospitality

Eating sea turtle in Yap

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **Justin Nobel**

ON A STEAMY NIGHT IN YAP, I was eating a dinner of boiled taro and reef fish when two sweaty men in loincloths arrived in a beat-up truck. "I hope you saved appetite," my host Jesse told me. "Tonight, you'll try sea turtle." The animal was in the back of the truck, with a rope lashed around a flipper. It had clear eyes and wrinkled skin, and took up half the bed.

Once it was on the ground, the men clubbed it with a wood post and dragged it to the edge of a banana grove. Women and children piled rotting leaves and sticks on the turtle's stomach; then a man crouched down to light the pile on fire. An orange blaze erupted and the turtle kicked violently.



Yap is part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), a nation of 607 islands scattered across a patch of Pacific the size of Western Europe. I had gone there to report on climate change. Sea levels in the tropical west Pacific rose about four inches between 1993 and 2008, and in December 2008, extreme high tides inundated homes and destroyed crops.

Damage from the tides was worst on Yap's outer islands, a belt of atolls mere meters high that are only reachable by a two-week journey on a cargo ship that runs a few times a year. Some atolls lost 90 percent of their taro crop, a staple food. It was there I needed to go for the climate story, but I'd have to spend several weeks on main Yap waiting for the perpetually delayed ship. At the airport in Guam, a beefy guard examined my ticket and smirked, "So you want to live with Adam and Eve?"

It would be easy to confuse Yap as an Eden. Across the island grow banana, coconut, breadfruit, and citrus trees. Women tend gardens of sweet potato, tapioca, and taro. Nearby reefs yield fish, lobster, and turtle; the seas beyond are loaded with tuna. Unlike most people on Earth, the

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But Spam, Budweiser, and SpaghettiOs have also become popular. In 1956, across the islands of the northwest Pacific there were just eight documented cases of diabetes; by 1976 there were 522. In the same time period, the number of cases related to heart and circulatory problems jumped from 200 to nearly 1,500. A 2007 World Health Organization

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report ranked FSM as the second fattest nation on Earth; 91 percent of adults are overweight. Death due to renal failure has increased, and limb amputations are on the rise — both complications are often results of severe diabetes.

Micronesia has long been a soft target for outsiders,



be they Budweiser distributors, military men, or god folk. Spanish missionaries introduced Christianity in the mid-1800s, and by the century's end churches had been established on most of the region's large islands. In the 1920s, the Japanese commandeered the country and put people to work harvesting copra. Allied forces bombed Yap regularly during World War II, and afterward the United Nations charged the U.S. with overseeing the region, an area designated as the Trust Territories. FSM gained independence in 1986 but formed a trade agreement that gave its citizens the right to live and work in the U.S. and serve in its military. FSM now has a rate of enlistment higher than any U.S. state's and its casualty rate is five times the national average. Nine FSM soldiers have been killed in the war on terror.

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After 40 hours of travel, I arrived in Yap at midnight. A tropical storm was approaching. Warm winds lashed the palms, and eerie clouds flitted across the moon. I crashed in a motel on a hill above the island's one town. On my third day, I found a local to stay with, Jesse Haglelfeg. Jesse is from Eauripik, a tiny atoll in the outer islands with about

100 residents. He left Yap to attend college in Texas and joined the U.S. military before the trade agreement legally allowed it, by lying about his nationality. Afterward he earned a master's in pharmacology from a university in Fiji and got a job directing the pharmacy at the Yap hospital. The post had afforded him something that few outer islanders (who are excluded from owning land on main Yap) had: a home of his own. It was a small concrete house at the end of a rutted road. He lived there with his brother, his wife, Mikaila, and their five children, ages two to thirteen. The entire family slept together, curled on the concrete floor, and for six weeks I slept with them. Mikaila cooked dinner over a wood fire in enormous scorched pots: taro, tapioca, breadfruit, and fish. The turtle roast was a special occasion.

After an hour, the men extinguished the flames with water and dragged the charcoaled corpse to the cook hut. With a machete the shell was removed, revealing a glistening tangle of tubes. They dug in with their fingers. I held back, uncertain what to grab. "Try the green fat," said Jesse, and handed me a strand of rare meat dripping with green gristle. It was succulent and gamey, delicious. For some time we tore haphazardly at the prize, but the dismantling soon became an operation. Organs were clipped, cleaned, and diced for

stew. Meat was cut into small steaks and barbecued. Blood was drained into a basin. Head and flippers were frozen for later. We ate turtle for a week. Shortly thereafter, I departed Yap on the cargo ship.

Jesse's whole family was at the dock to see me off. Mikaila gave me a large bag of mar — breadfruit baked with coconut and wrapped in a leaf — and Jesse and I vowed to stay in touch.

The journey was hellish. For two weeks I slept on the deck, cramped between a group of Chinese fishermen, two large Micronesian families, heaps of luggage, bins of rotting food, and a coffin. For several days, we were buffeted by a typhoon. I got the climate change story, though.

We live in a world based on convenient truths, where slaughtering a sea turtle or changing the climate contradicts how we think things should work. We have forged our reality, and the Yapese fall outside of it. They can confront oblivion or forsake their identity and join. But what we in the West often forget is that to burn an animal alive is to acknowledge that world and defy ours, just as we have defied theirs.

Jesse never asked anything in return for the six weeks I lived with his family, but he did occasionally preach to me about Jesus. He suggested that when I returned to New York City, I visit a holy site in Queens supposedly frequented by incarnations of the Virgin Mother. Rose petals available there could cure all man's diseases, said Jesse. The original site is gone, but a group of the faithful now meets at a traffic triangle beside a massive steel globe called the Unisphere, on the grounds of the 1964–1965 World's Fair. I called St. Michael's World Apostolate, a group that holds weekly vigils there, and a smooth-talking man named Peter Frank answered. He was intent on having me attend a vigil. "The apocalypse is going on right now before our very eyes," said Peter. "We have to be prepared to meet our maker." 



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