

2004 – A YEAR IN MICRONESIA: RECOLLECTIONS OF A PEACE CORPS COUNTRY DIRECTOR

On my birthday in mid-December, 2003, I received a phone call from Peace Corps (PC), Washington DC. I was in Morocco with one of my daughters and the call was an offer to serve as Country Director (CD) in Micronesia, which is actually two countries – Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Of course, I accepted, having no idea about the post but presuming it was somewhere in the Pacific. And, I was to report for Overseas Staff Training January 10 in Washington, DC. I had learned in mid-November that my CD application had been re-activated after having been a finalist during the June hiring.

The flag of Palau represents the full moon in the Pacific and that of FSM its four states in the blue water of the Pacific.



Naturally, some fast shuffling of plans had to take place since I was scheduled to travel to Seattle with my daughter, visit my other daughter in Michigan and then connect with an old friend and fly together to my home in Paris for a visit we had planned for over a year. I had moved into my studio in February, 2003, but returned to Morocco from late August to November to be the technical trainer for the incoming group of 23 PC small business trainees.

It was Christmas eve (still in Morocco in a rather noisy Marrakech medina) when Peace Corps human resources called and actually gave me a contract with the terms of my appointment. They were express shipping the document to my home in Paris (it didn't arrive before I departed to the U.S.).

Overseas staff training was intense with Americans headed out as CD's, administrative officers and program managers, plus some staff members from host countries. For a month we had simulations, role playing, and nightly homework, learning the intricacies of an agency (small yet large) and the policy manual – larger and larger! Wonderful new friends were made – four new CD's going to East Timor, Kiribati, Nicaragua and Uzbekistan. A special treat for me was that two of the Micronesian staff, our program managers in Palau and Kosrae, were in the training. Not only did we share their first ever snow, plus ice skating and professional hockey, but many new ideas for programming and volunteer support. It was an unusually cold/snowy winter in DC.

I would be living in a furnished house but needed to provide my linens and kitchen accoutrements. So, on the weekends I shopped at Ikea and Bed Bath and Beyond and had the items delivered to a warehouse from which they would be shipped to me by slow boat. The

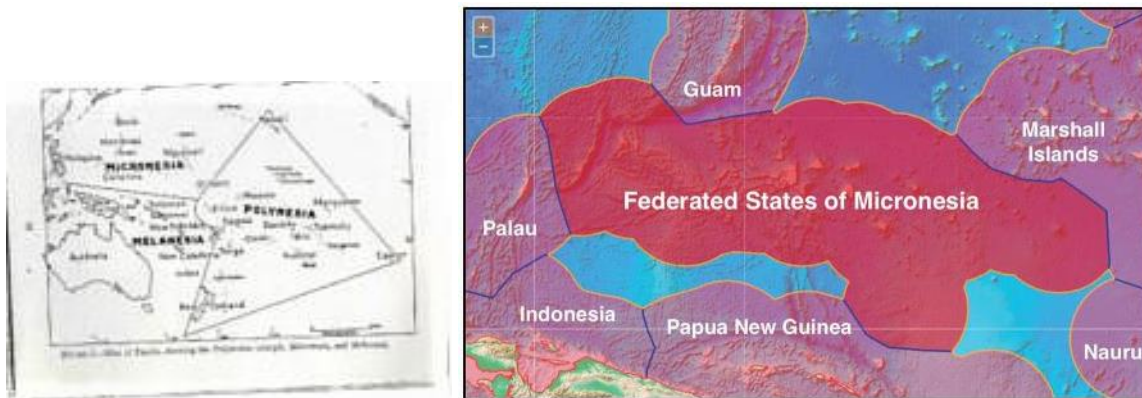
trick was to select the bare essentials that would arrive by air freight approximately the same time as me.

At PC headquarters there was a regional structure with support staff dedicated to each active host country, including safety and security specialists. They had prepared an extensive briefing document for me. We were also given a day at the Department of State Foreign Service Institute where we received country-specific briefings. In my case there were two countries with Palau reporting to the U.S. Ambassador in the Philippines and the FSM having a U.S. Ambassador in the country. I was fortunate while in DC to meet the Ambassadors to the U.S. of both countries and each of them praised the contributions of PC over the years to their countries.

First, a bit about the countries themselves. These island areas had been settled between 3-4000 years ago by migrations from other parts of the Pacific (picture outrigger canoes) and were organized by systems of chieftains. European explorers began to arrive in the 1500's.

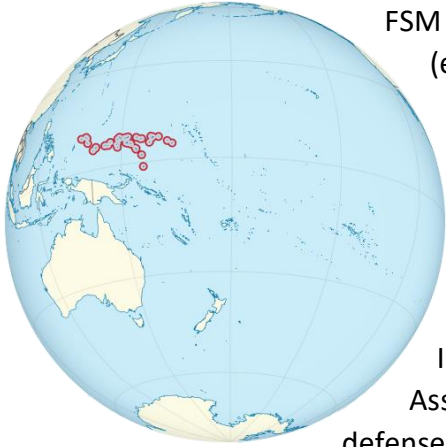
A friend who had spent much of his career in the Pacific, especially Palau and Hawaii, sent me an 80-page document "South Sea Lore" by Kenneth P. Emory which was published by the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu in 1943. Its purpose was to provide a comprehensive manual for survival for military who would find themselves living in the Pacific and potentially cut off from help and supplies. It is, thus, a comprehensive guide to traditional life in the Pacific. Among the most critical skills required was use of a machete and one of my earliest recollections was seeing children learning to use one as soon as they learned to walk!

These maps show the racial group designations of the inhabitants of the Pacific and the fisheries areas controlled by each nearby country.



FSM had/has a population of about 110,000 people on 607 islands spread across an ocean area the size of the continental U.S. It is about 2500 miles southwest of Hawaii and 1800 miles north of eastern Australia. It is about 6 degrees north of the equator with fairly constant 80-degree

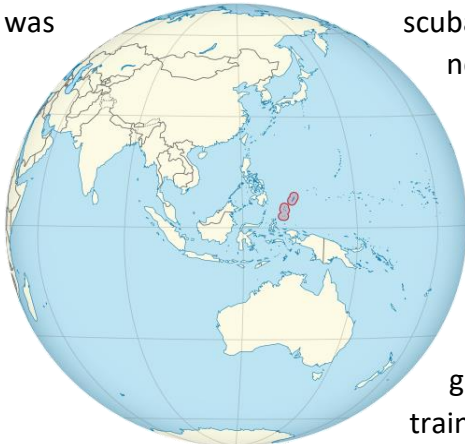
temperature. When PC started in Micronesia in the late 1960's – which then included a much larger area such as Saipan and the Marshall Islands – there were over 800 volunteers!



FSM is organized into four states, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Kosrae and Yap, (each with its own language) with powers loosely modeled on the U.S. It had been a U.S. protectorate after WWII and Japanese-administered between the two world wars. Originally colonized by Spain, it was sold to Germany in 1899 following Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American war. In 1979 a federation was established among the four principal islands and gained independence in 1986.

Independence brought with it a 20-year Compact of Free Association by which the U.S. maintains military rights and defense obligation in return for payments which essentially paid for all public services to the citizens – health care facilities, public education, costs of government. The FSM citizens also have the right to serve in the U.S. military and had automatic green card status if they went to work in the U.S. (The latter changed to a passport requirement when the compact was renewed in 2004). These situations caused there to be significant emigration, particularly of the more educated youth. There is no industry to speak of, merely subsistence agriculture and fishing. The FSM's capital is Palikir, near Kolonia on the island of Pohnpei.

The Republic of Palau had/has a population of 17,000 on 340 islands and its primary industry was



scuba-diving, particularly for Japanese visitors. Having chosen not to become part of the FSM it became a sovereign country in 1994 with a similar Compact of Free Association with the U.S. It is located north of the Indonesian archipelago and southeast of the Philippines with its own language. Both countries use English as the lingua-franca and the US\$ as their currency.

When we graduated from training and were sworn in, I flew home to Paris to pack clothes and other personal effects which would join my slow-boat freight shipment. Since I had two State Department structures, we decided to route my arrival via the Philippines. There I could present my credentials to the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines and Palau, and be



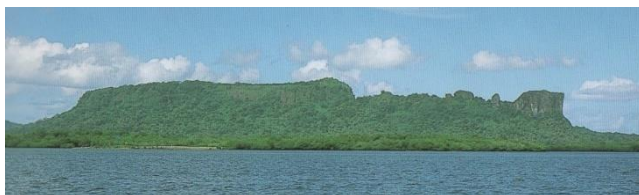
welcomed, entertained (with a traditional merenda – extensive potluck, stock photo) and briefed by the PC country staff. The CD, having previously served as CD in Kiribati, shared his experiences with island programs. Sitting in on a few “exit” interviews which CD’s have with each volunteer (PCV) at the end of their service was very helpful, broadening my exposure to the PCV experiences in Asia/Pacific as compared to those in Morocco.

Each U.S. Embassy (USE) conducts a periodic meeting (frequency depending on the activity level in the country) of all the department representatives of the Embassy as well as any other U.S. agencies that might be active in the country such as Agriculture, Defense, Intelligence, etc. Attending my first Country Team meeting was more than overwhelming as there were about 40 people in the room (the USE in Manila had 1600 employees) all using abbreviations/jargon of which I could understand very little. I would not face such a crowd again until I returned to the Philippines 3 years later as acting CD and then in 2007 in Bangkok, also a regional center. The PC CD was always excused from the meeting at the time intelligence matters were discussed and I really never figured out who the CIA person was at any of my PC posts.

After this marathon 24-hour visit I flew east again to my new home in Kolonia. En route I had my first glimpse of atoll islands amidst white caps in the middle of the Pacific. We stopped at Chuuk where there was a police squadron at the terminal practicing marching with wooden rifles. Then a group of locals – women with flower hair crowns called mwar mwar, and men with flower leis – got on the plane and the police formed an entry corridor for a man, obviously a dignitary with a larger flower necklace, perhaps the governor or a chief? I learned later when I landed that it was the President of FSM!



Pohnpei island is comprised of a 2500’ elevation mountain in the interior (whole island 10 x 20 miles in size) which is the cone of a former sub-oceanic volcano, surrounded by a reef about 1 1/2 miles offshore which would have been the rim of the volcano’s crater. This is the view to Kolonia on Pohnpei from Sokehs rock, a major visual landmark on Pohnpei and considered its symbol (see below).



My house (concrete) was up on stilts about 20’ from the only road with the water of the lagoon lapping under my balcony. The lagoon normally stays pretty calm and my view was to an island shaped like a stretched-out crocodile with the reef extending from its mouth against which the

Pacific pounded its white surf. Already visible in this photo are local handicrafts, a wall hanging made from pandanus and a model of an outrigger canoe.

Across the road began the steep ascent up to the mountain. Most of the shoreline was mangrove swamps and the interior, jungle. (Photo courtesy of M. Wiener, 2019)



The local version of red cardinals lived in the trees abutting the house and there were probably 25 species of flowering plants in the small garden, including tiny orchids. Next door was my landlord's outboard fishing boat under a shed roof and his piggery abutting the lagoon – one of about 5000 on this island according to USDA estimates! Pigs are ceremonially very important and a pig is killed and cooked for every important event. At a funeral the number of pigs relates to the rank (in traditional tribe) of the deceased. The soil on these volcanic islands is not very nutritious, it is basically coral and basalt and very acidic. The USDA was working with local land owners to improve yields. A project to encourage moving piggeries off the lagoon edge – thus keeping the mangroves and reefs cleaner- used a catchment system to collect the pigs' urine and feces to use as fertilizer. Excellent results were being obtained with bananas, breadfruit, sakau, yam and other native food crops. One farmer at a time the concept was taking hold.

Another agricultural project on Pohnpei was the promotion of the karat banana, so-named because of its bright orange flesh. Considered to be very high in beta-carotene which the body converts to Vitamin A it was used locally to wean infants onto solid food. We had a PCV working with Dr. Lois Englberger who was spearheading this project including creating recipes for the fruit. Since 2004, the Island Food Community of Pohnpei (IFCP) had been actively promoting local



food for their CHEEF benefits: culture, health, environment, economics and food security. After Dr. Englberger's untimely death in 2011 a former Peace Corps staff member, Rainer Jimmy, became head of the organization.

Pepper was also a specialty export of Pohnpei, and was known for its rich fragrance and full flavor. It conveniently blooms and bears fruit all year round.

Sakau, you might ask? What is that? The plant's roots are pounded, then filtered through hibiscus bark to create the traditional drink called kava in Fiji and drunk at all traditional ceremonies. Of the pepper family, it has sedating and euphoric qualities. It is produced and sold commercially and there are sakau bars all over the island – traditional outdoor thatched hut buildings where people socialize most evenings. Unfortunately, land owners had been deforesting the tropical rain forest at higher elevations (creating landslide and habitat loss consequences) in favor of planting sakau because with the added rainfall it grew faster. The new fertilizer program, by increasing output at lower elevations, would also help solve this problem. Photo courtesy of T. Omoto, 2001.



RAIN – rain and more rain is what produces the lush jungle in which I lived. Even if it isn't raining it sounds as if it is. That's because the leaves of most of the plants are as big as I am (no joke) therefore they are always covered with water which the breeze blows off and so it still sounds as if it is raining. It rained every day, usually in intermittent downpours. If the downpour lasted more than ½ hour continuously the run-off started to flood the road and the very limited flat area between the mountain and the lagoon. Supposedly the mountain is one of the wettest places on the planet receiving 400" of rain per year (New York City averages 40").

From vegetable-laden couscous/tajines in Morocco (pork disallowed in Islam) my diet transitioned to rice, sashimi, tuna and pork. Almost no fresh vegetables there – no land for agriculture and no bees for pollinating.

I became adapted to "water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink". Most local families used a catchment system for the rainwater from their tin roofs to use for cooking, bathing and drinking. The PCVs were taught to boil their drinking water. I had a small electric distiller unit in my house which easily processed enough water for my cooking and drinking. I also had a hot water heater (not normal there given the ambient temperatures) and a washer/dryer. It was really helpful to have the dryer as



it took a long time for things to dry given the humidity. I had an AC unit in each room and tended to keep just one running minimally to prevent clothes and books from molding.

Pohnpei consists of a number of small villages, each with an elementary school and a few churches. People from other parts of Micronesia on Pohnpei tended to live together so you heard many different languages spoken across the island. Often these communities migrated when their island became uninhabitable either due to contamination of the fresh water lens under an atoll, drought, or rising sea levels. The Kapingamarangi community migrated in the early 1900's due to a drought. They are particularly known for their handicrafts, especially wood carving and weaving from local plant material.



We had volunteers on two of Pohnpei's outer islands – Mwoakil and Pingelap, each of which speak a separate language. Pohnpei also has three other outer island groups – Sapwuahfik, Nokouro and Kapingamarangi (over which Spain still claims Sovereignty). These atolls (no central volcanic mountain) range from 90 to 455 miles away across open Pacific Ocean.

Where we could place volunteers was based on an ever-changing matrix of availability of access – missionary small planes, supply ships and/or state patrol boats – plus communication – SSB, CB radio or iridium satellite phones. All atoll islands are beyond helicopter reach. At my time there, the volunteers were situated on 22 islands spread across 2400 miles – 3 time zones. At least half were located on islands separate from the main island of their state where we maintained a one-person office. If we placed a PCV on an island without SSB or CB radio we provided them with an iridium satellite phone and solar charger. They were required to keep the phone charged at all times and once a week a fellow volunteer called them to socialize and provide important updates, such as baseball scores, etc.

Everything was expensive (travel, importing food, communications) and complicated. Each volunteer had a host family they lived with during their training, another they lived with at their work site for the whole two years and a third in-town family for when they went to their main island to use office facilities. In total over 150 families for 74 volunteers had to be found, trained, continually interfaced with and paid. Families are very extended with one small house (one or two bedrooms plus outdoor kitchen) accommodating 12 or more people. And they fluctuate a lot when outer islanders decide to come in for the school year or married children move back in. Everyone wasn't always adjusted to the American living there and it was especially problematic when young men moved in where a female volunteer was living.

The PCVs were doing an amazing variety of projects clustered around concepts of environmental education, marine and terrestrial resource management, youth sports, women's income generation, libraries, small business advising, historic/cultural preservation and tourism.

The list of agencies – NGO and governmental – who hosted the volunteers was long and diverse. Some agencies were still having difficulties with the notion that PC was no longer providing English teachers – PC’s historic role in the Pacific. Although the population was supposedly 97% literate, I felt that statistic was misleading as school quality was quite low and only those who went to high school gained any real English proficiency. Nine of the 17 local languages were taught during pre-service training based on the site to which the volunteer was assigned.

Things moved slowly. Where there are cars the speed limit is 25mph but mostly you drove at around 20. Car doors were frequently opened while moving so occupants could spit out the juice from the betelnut they chewed. Most people traveled in groups in the back of pick-up trucks despite the rain and the baseball field was always full of various age group softball teams. People were very friendly. There was a caste system and the traditional leaders were revered and carried a lot of power. The country had just celebrated 25 years of its constitution, 20 years of independence and yet the legislative, judicial and executive branches were still in their infancy.

People ate a lot of imported spam, canned turkey tail, white rice and junk food. Diabetes, coronary disease, alcoholism and vitamin A deficiency were rampant. The 50% of the population under 18 had few jobs to look forward to as traditional fishing, farming and the social fabric were disappearing. On the positive side, recognition of the fragile eco-system was growing and the kids were bright and enthusiastic.

The calendar of activities at a PC post is planned at least a year in advance since the life cycle of a PCV’s two years of service includes periodic required trainings and medical checkups. Usually one or sometimes two groups of trainees arrive per year so there are overlapping cycles to be organized.



I arrived in late February having traveled Washington, DC to Paris to Manila via Detroit and Nagoya, Japan to Pohnpei via Guam and Chuuk. Upon arrival I learned that the Close of Service conference for the current second year group of volunteers was scheduled just one week later in Palau, 1600 miles to the west, more than 7 hours of travel due to required stops along the way. Because there was no electronic security apparatus at the FSM island airports, each time we stopped at an intermediary point we all had to deplane with our carryon baggage and go through another hand security check process before re-boarding with the added passengers from that airport.

This trip would provide the opportunity to visit current and planned PCV work sites in Palau, attend the Close of Service conference, and attend a Volunteer Advisory Committee meeting which would give me the chance to meet at least one PCV from each of the five geographic

areas and hear first-hand the concerns of the serving volunteers, a valuable opportunity for a newly-arrived CD. It was held at Carp Island Resort.



The COS conference is a very helpful “training” as its purpose is to help PCV’s reflect upon and celebrate their two years of service, plus receive valuable advice towards job searching, graduate school, and what the challenges of re-entry to life in the U.S. will be.

All the trainings made extensive use of flipcharts!



There were 18 volunteers scheduled to complete their service in June, from all of our geographic areas including some from remote atolls. However, when I arrived, one of the attendees had not arrived as scheduled. This, of course, was a very scary situation. We called back to his home island of Chuuk and learned from his host mom that he had left for the conference three days earlier. This was a serious problem, until he finally arrived on the next day’s flight from Guam. PC has a very elaborate set of policies by which the exact whereabouts



of every PCV is to be known at all times, in case of need for contact due to family matters back in the U.S. or local conditions. This PCV had decided to spend the weekend in Guam in order to see the movie *The Passion of Christ*. And while it is very understandable that PCV’s need a break, he had used up all his allowable vacation and, most importantly, had not told his supervisor of his

whereabouts. In PC Micronesia, being out of site without permission meant the volunteer had to be immediately severed from service and sent home. I will always remember the date that I had to initiate the process to separate him as it was both his and one of my daughter's 35th birthdays! It was painful to have to do this, but one thing that had been heavily emphasized during our CD training was the importance of implementing all policies equally, even when the PCV in violation had had exemplary service, as had this young man. (Post-script, due to a clerical mix up at PC HQ he was able to finish his service for which I was happy.) I only had to separate a volunteer on one other occasion, 5 years later in Thailand.



Each main island has a distinctive culture and language. Church is very important everywhere, mostly Catholic, Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist and Mormon. The Missionaries had started arriving in the 1800's, translated the Bible into the local languages and created schools.



After the COS conference I visited Kosrae. It has no outer islands and has the smallest population of the four states of the FSM, about 7000. It is a rugged high island of about 42 miles square and the furthest east. The reef is just a few feet off shore – non-existent in some areas.





Some areas of the island are only accessible by water.

The coastline is virtually 100% mangrove. The mangrove forest is an intricate ecosystem which filters the silt runoff from the central mountain and is populated by a wide variety of plants, birds, and fish. The water is tea-colored and the channels

were the primary means of travel before the arrival of roads and cars.



Canoe travel through the canals is extremely peaceful and relaxing with sounds only of nature, not the modern world. As a result of the mangrove, Kosrae's fringing reef is one of the most pristine in Micronesia.

I spent two weeks there to visit PCV's in their sites. At the hotel, which



consisted of thatched bungalows on stilts, instead of the lagoon lapping under my balcony at home, the surf was pounding underneath my balcony. I found this both calming (the repetitive sound) and energizing (the forceful energy of the waves).

The Kosraean people were virtually extinguished by diseases brought by colonists in the 1800's. However, the almost total conversion of the surviving population to the Congregationalist religion has resulted in a unified society which revolves around the church. They are a single racial and linguistic group native to only one island which is the meaning of the state's symbol, the fa fa, or stone used for pounding taro root.



The women are known for their basket weaving, often from pandanus.



I went to church in Utwe and the adjacent village Maap's choir was visiting. Kosraeans are renowned for their singing, which they do with their choirs several nights per week. The choir is usually almost the whole Church membership and on that Sunday was about 100 people all dressed in white. At church the women sit on one side, the men on the other. During the two-hour service (in Kosraean language including the Bible and hymns) I enjoyed looking at 150 different floral dresses of the women of the Utwe congregation, and twice that many combs holding up their abundant thick hair. The deacons sat up front, their wives on the opposite side dressed in white. After church people go home to rest and eat soup (prepared the day before) then return to church at 4pm for another two hours, then eat more soup. No cooking, no driving (except as necessary to get to church) and no work, which includes recreation i.e. no swimming, fishing, soccer etc. on Sunday.



Another renowned activity was marching. Although I didn't see this in Kosrae, I was able to experience it on Pohnpei at Christmas when an amazing production takes place. From www.comfsm.fm comes the following: "The Pohnpei-Kosraeans live primarily in the small central town of Kolonia on Pohnpei. This allowed the community to meet regularly to practice and allowed for the execution of a complex march. Ensuring that the women will end up in the correct order to spell out a phrase is much harder than it might seem in the world of Kosraean formation marching. This also indirectly speaks to the skills of the Pohnpei-Kosrae community. Their ability to cope with a very complex marching pattern is indicative indirectly of the level of education found in the community. The permanent community has many members working in the national government or business communities as owners and operators."



Funerals and first birthday celebrations were the big cultural events. Funerals last several days, huge crowds attend and bring freshly-woven baskets of food and a huge number of pigs are slaughtered. A funeral can approach the cost of a U.S. wedding and almost bankrupt a family. Other local foods can include mangrove or coconut crab, all manner of fresh fish – tuna, flying fish – sashimi'd, fried, barbecued; fried chicken and of course rice. Dessert is various

preparations of taro root, breadfruit, yams and bananas coated with sugar and coconut. One of my most vivid recollections is the sugar intake – it seemed as if naturally sweet fruits were further doused with refined sugar and children were almost never seen without a soda can or lollipop in their hands.



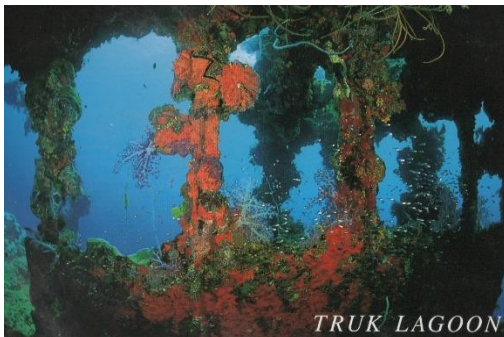
One of the other unusual things on Kosrae were the graveyards in almost everyone's front yard. There was no cemetery so each family had its own – you can't forget your ancestors when you walk by them every day. They ranged from simple headstones to elaborate mausoleum-type structures, usually decorated with lots of brightly colored plastic flowers.

We visited the Utwe-Walung Marine Park which, the following year, became a UNESCO-designated Biosphere Reserve encompassing significant areas of lagoon, reef, mangrove, swamp, river and stream habitats.

A team of scientists was visiting Kosrae to teach the importance of seagrass for the inter-tidal wildlife eco-system. I happened to encounter them during their work and met the head of the project, Dr Fred Short of the University of New Hampshire. It turns out he had worked with one of my daughters who is a restoration ecologist. Talk about a small world! (Photo courtesy of World Seagrass Association, Inc.)



The state of Chuuk (Truk of WWII sunken Japanese ships fame) is, in a very different way, also unique. It is the most populous of the FSM states with upwards of 50,000 people. It has a huge lagoon in which are located many islands. The name Chuuk means "high mountains" in the Chuukese language. The Chuuk Islands are encircled by a barrier bank composed of some 85 sand and coral islets. The bank (often referred to as a reef) encloses a lagoon 822 square miles in area and has a diameter of some 40 miles. Chief islands of the group are Weno, the capital, Tonoas, Fefan, Uman, Uatschaluk (Udot), and Tol.



Annexed by Japan (1914) and strongly fortified for World War II, the islands were heavily attacked, bypassed, and blockaded by the Allies during the war. The sunken hulls of Japanese ships remain there, along with ruined weapons and fortifications on land. Tonoas was actually the headquarters of the Japanese South Pacific command during WWII.

In addition to volunteers in the capital at Weno, I was able to visit volunteers on three of the lagoon islands. When arriving in a more traditional location one is immediately treated to fresh coconut. Someone climbs the tree with their machete, cuts it down, whacks off the top, and you drink the water from inside. Delicious, especially in the heat, although a little furry around the edges. What I think of as the “meat” – white part – is then used to make many products – not only to eat but also oil and soap. In fact, every single part of the coconut palm is useful. It isn’t a good idea to stand under one because if a coconut falls it can really hurt you!



The Chuuk Chieftain structure was still very strong in many places and sometimes one would have to approach him on hands and knees so as to not be above him when he was sitting. Whenever I visited a volunteer in their site, I needed to always first greet the highest ranking official, and the PCV's

helped me learn the proper greetings in the local language. Most communities were so small that the PCV's were a jack of all trades – helping in the school, getting a vegetable garden started, perhaps starting scouting if the Church youth group wasn't very active, plus informal coaching of basketball, soccer and volleyball.



Chuuk outer islanders make a wide variety of handicrafts including tapwanu masks of the Mortlocks, the only masks made in Micronesia. When I hang my pair, I deliberately place the female higher than the male to remind me of the overwhelming power of the male in Chuukese culture. Below the masks are Chuuk dance paddles.



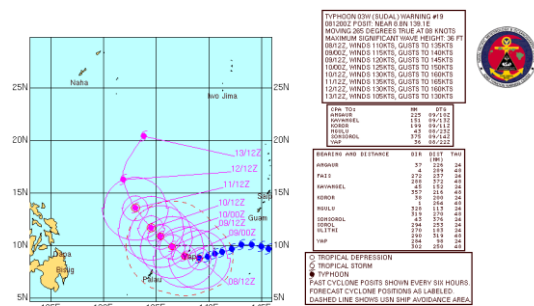
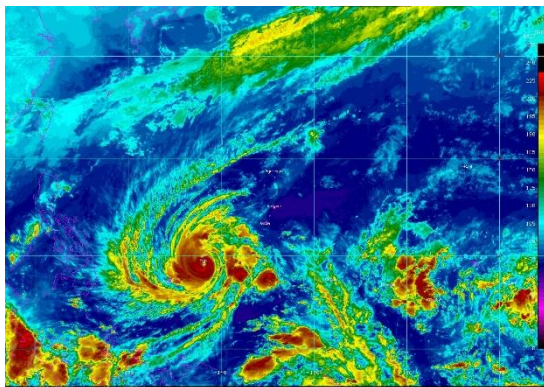
Cooking out and sharing time with PC staff as well as PCV’s was always a fun part of site visits.



The love stick was a local tradition. Every male had one and it was unique in its design. He would thrust it into the hut of a girl whose attention he was seeking and entangle it in her hair. She would know by feel whose it was. If she pulled it inside the hut he could enter, if she shook it, she would come out and if she pushed it away, he was rejected. Here are some sample love sticks from my collection plus a traditional comb.



In April I had another “exciting” experience when an out-of-season Super Typhoon named Sudal pounded the main island of Yap with 130 mph winds and gusts to 155 mph for 11 hours on April 9, Good Friday. Our Yap office and virtually every host family and PCV work site received heavy to total damage – 90% of all structures on the 11-mile-long island were damaged or destroyed. We were watching the progress of the storm on the NOAA web site (which I had to quickly learn to read), but the satellite that facilitated our communication to the National Hurricane Center in Hawaii was down so I had no information. Fortunately, the Australian Ambassador’s communication passed through a different satellite and it was through him we were able to learn that, thankfully, all our volunteers were safe and quickly accounted for.



The PCV’s were of major assistance in immediately supporting the Yap Governor’s Command Center and relief efforts as well as helping to rebuild. Then, as some had no schools to work in, they created a roving summer camp program for the island’s youth.

Fortunately, this time, the Yap outer islands, still recovering from a typhoon the prior November, and where we also had volunteers, were largely spared. Yap state's 130 outer islands extend for a distance of 600 miles east of Yap "proper" which is a cluster of four islands connected by roads, waterways and channels. At the peak of their kingdom in pre-colonial times there was an estimated population of 50,000. Three languages, Yapese, Ulithian and Woleian, are spoken in the state and it is considered the most culturally traditional part of the FSM. Most of the outer islands are coral atolls and are sparsely populated by a people different from the Yapese in culture and language. From the time of first contact, with the introduction of new diseases, the population of Yap, spiraled downwards reaching a low of 3,000 during the Japanese administration.

I later learned that Pacific countries contribute the names for tropical storms and Sudal, which in Korean means otter, was retired from the list due to its level of destruction.

We had sent our safety and security officer and medical officer to Yap as soon as transport was available to assess the situation of the volunteers and make arrangements for suitable ongoing accommodation.

In August, I finally got to visit. Yap is the island of stone money and it is everywhere! I still remember learning about it in my introductory economics classes. The largest two I saw were about 8' in diameter – I can't imagine how many men it would take to carry one. Interestingly, they were quarried on Palau, 250 miles southeast of Yap. It is not the size which determines the value but rather the story behind it, the hazards and deaths it took to bring the stone to Yap.



Another cultural treasure is the men's meeting houses with their huge mahogany beams supporting a soaring thatched roof and intricate carvings. (Alamy stock photo.)

Beautiful stone paths are everywhere and the island was CLEAN – no litter anywhere. Total population of Yap proper is about 8000 people, 11,000 in the whole



state. The island seemed large to me, although it isn't. I finally realized it was because there is no mountain in the middle as in Pohnpei, Kosrae and Chuuk. Also, because of typhoon Sudal, the vegetation was either blown over or shorn at about 20' elevation so it felt very open and airy. There were even areas of natural grassland. The tropical jungle was rapidly re-growing, but unfortunately the houses were not rehabbing so fast. 90% were still roofless and the bright blue tarps everywhere marred the exquisite beauty.



Yap's most highly developed art form, dance, or "Chura" is a form of story-telling. Traditionally the dances were segregated by sex. However, as a female, I was honored to be invited to see a men's traditional dance that was performed for the new Japanese Chargé d'Affaires for FSM who

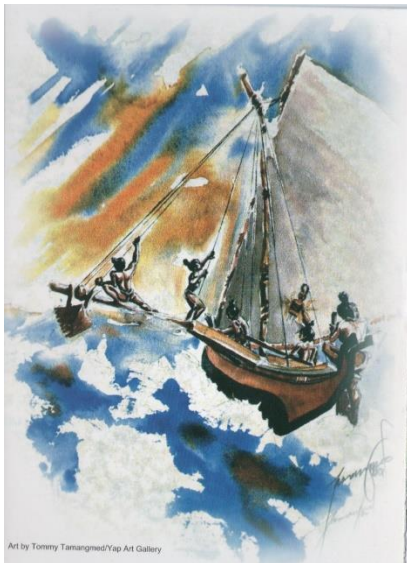
was visiting the same time as I. I realized that Yapese have virtually no body hair which when covered with coconut oil and yellow turmeric powder made their bodies glisten as they danced.





Even in Yap proper many women went topless (totally the case on outer islands). Dress was very casual with many people wearing jeans to the office – even women, which was very different from the rest of FSM where women wore local dresses and men shirts and slacks or local traditional attire.

At the time I visited there was a project to train local youth in creating beautiful watercolors of traditional scenes. Here is one by the artist Tommy Tamangmed. I bought several reproductions, which



include portraits of chiefs. This is a traditional Yap dance skirt.

Although betel nut chewing is common throughout the Pacific islands, it seemed to be universal on Yap. Men and women carry baskets made of coconut leaves in which are kept the nuts, lime, and leaves. A green nut is split open, sprinkled with dry lime made from coral and wrapped in a piece of pepper leaf. This is put into the mouth and chewed for about 20 minutes and the juice is spit out, not swallowed. All pavements in Yap have bright red stains from this practice. The resulting physical effect is a sense of well-being.

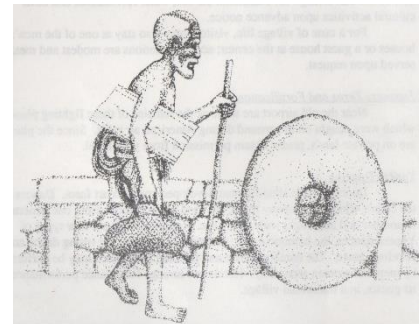


Here is a barman at Traders Ridge Hotel on Yap preparing betel to be added to a martini! And my collection of the necessary tools. However, I never actually tried it!



I, unfortunately, contracted Dengue fever on this visit, from daytime mosquitos. There is really nothing to do for it except take aspirin and hydrate. I returned to Pohnpei as quickly as possible, but as flights are always fully booked it took a couple of days. I was observed overnight at the clinic in Pohnpei when I arrived, but the labs didn't have the capability to determine if I had Dengue Type 1, 2, 3, or 4. Oh well....

In May I traveled east again, this time to a conference in Florida of all 25 CD's in my PC Region – Inter-America Pacific. By then I had visited every main island except Yap and all the PCV work sites on those islands except Pohnpei. I wished I could have spent a month ingesting the knowledge of this amazing group of CD's. One thing we studied quite a bit was the characteristics of the Millennium Generation – those born



1982 onwards. Donna Shalala, then President of the U of Miami (who had been a PCV in Iran in the 1960's) aided our understanding by explaining how universities had had to modify their staffing to accommodate this generation's needs. They were the bulk of our PCV population.



Chuuk airport is typical. Traveling on Micronesia Air Continental was really fun. The pilots must have loved it because they were really flying the planes - no instrument landings, no radar. The planes, all B737-800's, were landing on runways where the land on which they are located (manmade) is the only flat land around – water before, after and on

one side – mountainous jungle on the other. Each island is about 1-1 ½ hour flying time from

the next so lots of take-offs and landings. For my post east to west, Kosrae to Pohnpei (formerly Ponape and known historically as Ascencion Island) to Chuuk to Guam. Then a layover depending on the day of the week of a few hours to overnight, then Guam to Yap to Palau. On the return from my Florida trip I took the Honolulu, Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae route. Kwajalein and Majuro in the Marshall Islands have no volcanic island portion, just flat atolls. I became an "Elite" flyer (25,000 miles) on Continental en route eastbound between Guam and Honolulu and was upgraded for the Honolulu to Pohnpei leg on the return which was very nice. Especially since first class didn't have to deplane during the security check process, just remove all baggage from the overhead compartments. The food was actually pretty good as well!

On July 4th the U.S. Ambassador had arranged for the Marine Expeditionary Force Band based in Okinawa to perform on Pohnpei. This was a special accomplishment and was thoroughly enjoyed by all the invitees. The Pohnpei Island PCV's had their own local "tent".



A few days later the U.S. Ambassador's wife hosted a luncheon for women/wives of the international delegations and female local dignitaries at the Ambassador's residence. She was known as an outstanding chef and produced all the desserts herself. The views over Pohnpei were spectacular.



I had the privilege to spend a few days at the 9th quadrennial Pacific Arts Festival in Palau. It was a wonderful experience to see the people from 28 Pacific nations all around town. Palau would not be the same on my next visit without the diversity of their colorful varied garb, physical appearance, and languages. There were many cultural activities from wood carving and canoe building to traditional food preparation, weaving, music, poetry, celestial navigation, architectural models of traditional structures and DANCE!



I love dance and it fit my schedule because many of the performances were in the evening. I got to see dance from almost every country that Peace Corps served in the Pacific and learned about lots of countries I had never heard of – Rapa Nui (formerly Christmas Island off the coast of Chile), Niue, Tuvalu, etc. I liked the Rapa Nui and Kiribati dancers the best, although getting to see my first Fiji kava ceremony was special. Papua New Guinea was definitely the most exotic group.





It was amazing to see how many provisions could be stored in an outrigger canoe as groups prepared to head back to their respective islands in the traditional way.



Historically, on such voyages the navigator would manipulate a janus-faced “Hos” or weather charm in order to influence benevolent water spirits to divert storms from their canoes. See mine below.

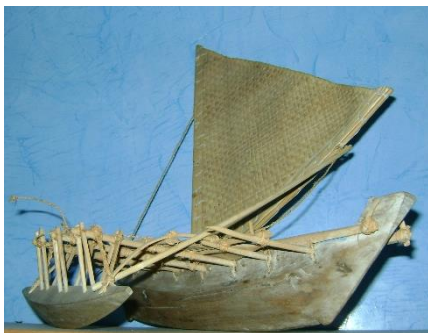


The next Pacific Arts festival was to be held in 2008 in American Samoa.

I bought some more woven mats for my house and many other traditional items, including a carved story board from Yap with stone money on it. Other than the mats, I still have all the artwork. Here are a few of the items.



The nine tiles which depict a traditional Palau meeting house, known as a bai, stayed packed away for five years until they are finally installed in my permanent residence in Paris.



We welcomed our new training group in September. One of the joys of the Country Director job is to witness the life changes that come with the volunteer experience. In this training group one young man realized during the flight overlooking the “tiny” islands in the vast Pacific, that he really could not spend two years in such a place, even on one of the main islands. We worked with PC HQ to try and find another post that would suit his skills. During the pre-service training we encourage the trainees to prepare a “traditional” American meal for their host family. Many of the trainees were not actually accustomed to cooking. So, an older retiree, who

had never left his home state before signing up for PC, volunteered to help them with this task.



I finally had the time to find ways to get some personal exercise. I had walked in a fund raiser for the College of Micronesia, which made me realize that I could walk on the causeway to the manmade island on which is located the airport runway, the fuel storage tanks, the dump, and boat docks for the

patrol boats, container ship berth, field trip ships that travel throughout this million square miles of Pacific moving people and cargo among the islands, and miscellaneous other boats such as tuna fish processors. It appealed to my logistics past to watch the comings and goings as well as to know that fresh produce may have arrived so it was time to hurry to the stores before they are sold out. (Photo courtesy of M. Wiener 2019.)

I wanted to walk to the office, about 5 km, for my exercise, but the packs of dogs on Pohnpei made that impossible. Fortunately, there was no rabies on the island, but dog bites were one of the biggest medical hazards our Pohnpei volunteers faced. The dogs chase and even jump up at the cars on the road!

It turned out we had a shower in the office so I could drive there before work, get in 5 km walking on the causeway, return, shower and start my day. Just as I was completing the circuit, about 6:45 am, the church bells in the 19thC German bell tower on the edge of the island rang, providing a pleasant, calming start to the work day.

Ever since arriving, I had been wanting to learn the local dancing. Dance has always been an important part of my life for both physical and mental health. After seeing the movie “Shall We Dance” over Thanksgiving, I made my resolution. I started solo lessons one night per week so that I could catch up to the beginner group that had started earlier in the fall. I



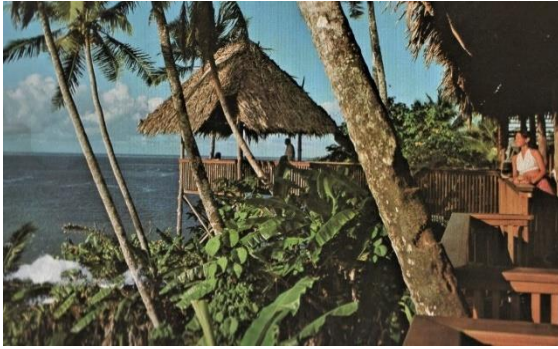


practiced every night after work, added practicing the arm movements to my morning causeway walks, and 2-3 hours each Saturday and Sunday. It was really hard to learn the steps and arm movements, but once you learn a dance it is easy to remember because the music and your arms are telling a story. The dances were Hawaiian, Maori and Polynesian. I finally was able to join the beginner group which included the new female Australian Ambassador and three other wives of their Embassy/Navy staff. It was fun to dance as a group – although as tall lanky women we would never be as graceful as the Micronesian women! We danced on the large veranda of the Ambassador’s residence with a lovely cool breeze blowing from the afternoon rain showers. The residence sits high on a bluff overlooking the harbor and Sokehs rock. I am still in touch with Melyann Mallarme who was our incredible teacher.

At last I had the opportunity to go snorkeling. On my third time out, I saw my first shark. I was snorkeling in a newly established marine protected area and the good news was that the species was returning. The reef sharks are about 4-7’ long and are not interested, except for sometimes being curious, in humans. We were snorkeling at the beginning and then the middle of the flood tide, and it was fascinating to see which species left the wall of the channel and moved into the inter-tidal area as the tide came in. There was even a sea grass zone. The current was rather strong coming through the cut in the reef as the tide came in. It was fun to just drift with it and then to move out of the channel to the calmer inter-tidal area and lay still watching everything around me. On outings such as this we took along bento box lunches.



Each PC country has a health handbook for the volunteers which is substantially reviewed during their training. In our case, since our medical officer was located on Pohnpei he often had to provide diagnoses of PCV conditions remotely. To assist with that we had full color photos of the various skin conditions to which one is susceptible in the tropics in the handbook. Additionally, we had color photos of



the ocean creatures which were poisonous and often lurking in the coral, wrecks or underwater caves, so that the PCV's knew to recognize and avoid them.

One weekend evening while finishing my dinner at the Village Hotel the Japanese Chargé arrived with a guest. He stopped at my table and reminded me that we had met in Yap (both at the dance performance and again at 2:30 a.m. at the airport waiting to catch our flight back to Pohnpei). I was able to tell him that I was scheduled to meet the local head of the Japanese overseas volunteer organization that week together with the U.S. Ambassador. Japan has a program modeled after Peace Corps, Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, JOCV, which was active in 80 countries, more than PC! PCV's occasionally did projects together with the Japanese volunteers. As I drove out of the parking lot, I saw his car – diplomatic plates – a BMW! Upon reflection I decided that decision honors a former ally and avoids alienating any Japanese automaker by selecting one over the other.

Virtually every car in FSM is Japanese-made except for some of the US Embassy and PC vehicles. Because the Japanese were required to trade in their vehicles every five years, there is a very active used-car market throughout the Pacific. So, although we drove on the right side of the road, we were driving vehicles with the steering wheel on the right.

Lest the U.S. never forget, Japan, China and Australia have full Embassies in FSM and have not given up their strong influence, despite the Compact. Both Japan and China are major funders of infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and athletic facilities, among others. Interestingly, the Republic of Palau has diplomatic relations with Taiwan, rather than mainland China.

For Thanksgiving I was invited to one of the historic families of Pohnpei. They are a mixture of Belgian and Australian settlers from the early 1900's intermarried with Pohnpeians and, in recent generations, with Americans. We were sixteen children, four sets of parents and myself for a traditional American Thanksgiving! Yvette, the Belgian grandmother, still spoke French and one of the Pohnpeian wives was honorary French consul. I also was invited to the reception when a French Navy cruiser came on a visit. In addition to a tour of the ship we were served Champagne and fancy hors d'oeuvres!

I realized when heading out in one of the small local boats to a nearby atoll island that the boatman was only using Sokehs rock as the landmark for his heading. We could not see the atoll and then a heavy fog rolled in. We basically had to wait it out! That was when I decided

that it would be a good idea if every PCV had a compass and was taught how to use it in our training. That way they could find their destination, even if their boatman couldn't!

Two hundred twenty-two-acre Nan Madol, a UNESCO World Heritage site, consisting of 92 small artificial islands linked by a network of canals, is often called the Venice of the Pacific. It is



located on the eastern periphery of the island of Pohnpei and used to be the ceremonial and political seat of the Saudeleur Dynasty that united Pohnpei's estimated 25,000 people from about AD 500 until 1500, when the centralized system collapsed. Construction is believed to have begun around 1100 and the ruins include a town, ceremonial center, and tombs of former kings. A similar ruin is located on Lelu Island in Kosrae, believed to have begun in approximately 1400 AD.



Photo courtesy of M. Wiener 2019.

The tsunami that devastated southeast Asia on Christmas Eve in 2004 fortunately did not reach us, nor were our volunteers who were vacationing in Thailand at that time caught up in it. It was daunting, though, to realize that the death toll was greater than the entire populations of FSM and Palau. I also came to realize that our part of the Pacific was very often the spawning ground for the typhoons that so frequently devastated parts of the Philippines.

My tenure as CD in Micronesia was interrupted after one year when I was asked to assume the same role in Benin, in French-speaking West Africa. My replacement was an experienced CD who had a great background in marine science and maritime business.

I would definitely miss Micronesia – the lushness of the landscape, the ever-present stunning water views, fresh sashimi and the widely varying cultures of this 2500-mile stretch of the western Pacific. The Micronesian people were wonderfully friendly and I would miss the

dedicated PCV's (with many of whom I still correspond after 15 years), the staff and my little house on the water's edge.