

MICRONESIA

The Forgotten Islands

Tour Duration: 19 days

Group Size Limit: 9

Tour Category: *Easy for the most part, but sometimes Moderate (and two optional fairly Demanding hikes)*



Caroline Islands Ground-Dove (Nik Borrow)

Scan the vastness of the Pacific in an atlas, or on a globe, and what do you see – nothing but the endless ocean! But wait, there is something else. In the southwest a scattering of islands stretching from the Solomons to French Polynesia and beyond, and in the north-centre the islands of Hawaii, and nothing else. But, not quite nothing... There, in the northwest, is a peppering of tiny specks, barely visible, straddling that immensity of blue between the Philippines, Japan and Hawaii.

This then is the region known as Micronesia – a collection of little known island nations and territories that rarely if ever cause the needle of world events to give the merest flicker, let alone register in the minds of the billions inhabiting the continental landmasses. Yet for one brief period in world history these unknown islands suddenly leapt into prominence, their names becoming familiar to

millions as mighty armies wrestled for their control and over 100,000 died in the bloodbath that resulted. From February to September 1944 American forces swept through the area, capturing first the Marshall Islands and then the Marianas and strategic parts of Palau (the Carolines and Yap were bombed but not invaded).

After the Second World War these formerly Japanese territories came under the administration of the United States, but more recently most have become independent, leaving only Guam and the Northern Marianas as territories of the USA. Once the war had passed them by, the islands of Micronesia slipped back into obscurity, although the most important of them have developed tourist infrastructures to cater for scuba divers, WWII sightseeing and the like. Standards of accommodation and travelling conditions in general in the islands are surprisingly good.

In spite of their many endemic species, these idyllic tropical islands have attracted few birdwatchers to date, although this may start to change now that genetic studies are revealing that many morphologically fairly similar island forms are genetically quite distinct and should not have been regarded as conspecific. With recent splits the number of definitely surviving endemics in Micronesia has risen to 51 (although Guam Kingfisher only survives in captivity and attempts to introduce Guam Rail onto snake-free Rota are not proving successful so far), and this number may rise still higher. During this fascinating journey through these little-visited islands we will have a good chance of seeing all of those endemics that survive in the wild.

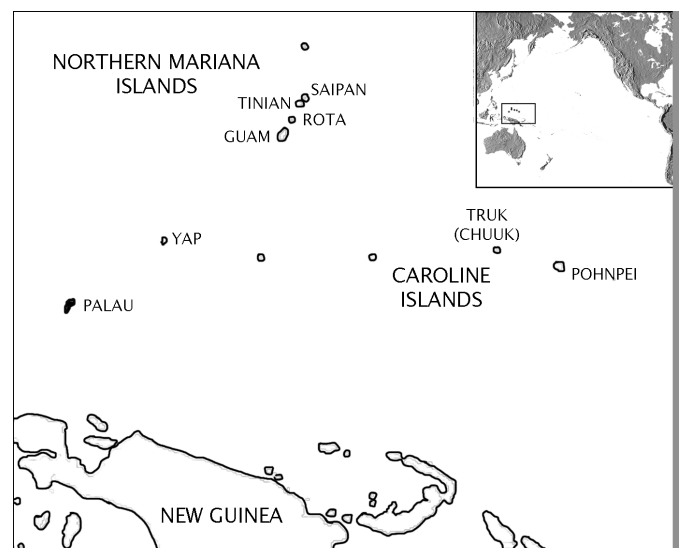
Our travels through Micronesia start in Guam, but we will pause only briefly here because the island now offers thin pickings after the devastation wrought by the introduced Brown Tree Snake.

Instead we will head north into the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, visiting first Saipan, where we will be concentrating on finding the majority of the Marianas endemics including Mariana Megapode, White-

throated Ground-Dove Mariana Fruit-Dove, Guam Swiftlet, White-headed Kingfisher, Nightingale Reed Warbler, Saipan Bridled White-eye and the beautiful Golden White-eye, and then Tinian (for Tinian Monarch) and Rota (for Rota Kingfisher, Mariana Crow and Rota Bridled White-eye, and Guam Rail if the introduction programme is doing well).

From the Northern Marianas we head southeast to distant Pohnpei, our first port of call in the Federated States of Micronesia, where we will be wanting to see the seven single island endemics, Pohnpei Lory (or Pohnpei Lorikeet), the superb Pohnpei Kingfisher, the handsome Pohnpei Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), Pohnpei Flycatcher, Pohnpei Fantail, Grey (or Grey-brown) White-eye and the curious Long-billed White-eye, as well as more widespread Micronesian endemics such as Caroline Islands Ground-Dove, Caroline Islands Swiftlet, Caroline Islands Reed Warbler and Caroline Islands White-eye.

Next we will explore the islands of Truk (or Chuuk) Lagoon, famous amongst scuba divers for the extraordinary number of wrecks that resulted from Operation Hailstone





Common White or Fairy Terns (Nik Borrow)

in World War II, where the specialities include Truk Monarch, Oceanic Flycatcher and Truk Great White-eye.

From here we head westwards to the interesting island of Yap with its strange tradition of 'stone money' and special birds including the impressive Micronesian Imperial Pigeon and five single island endemics; White-headed Ground-Dove, the uncommon Yap Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), the smart Yap Monarch, Plain White-eye and Olive White-eye (or Yap Olive White-eye).

Finally we will explore the archipelago of Palau (or Belau), geographically the closest part of Micronesia to a major landmass (the Philippines) and faunistically and floristically the richest part of the region. Highlights here should include such endemics as Palau Megapode, Palau Fruit-Dove, Palau Ground-Dove, the unusual Palau Owl, Palau Nightjar, Palau Swiftlet, Rufous-capped (or Palau) Kingfisher, the strange Morningbird, Palau Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), Palau Bush Warbler, Mangrove (or Palau) Flycatcher, the handsome Palau Fantail, Dusky White-eye and the intriguingly-named Giant White-eye, as well as the strange Nicobar Pigeon, not to mention the extraordinary scenery of

Palau's 'Rock Islands'.

Birdquest has operated tours to Micronesia since 2005.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening at Guam, a far-flung territory of the United States of America, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 From Guam, we take a morning flight to the island of Saipan for a two nights stay. Later we will begin our exploration of the island.

Day 3 Saipan is the largest island in the Northern Marianas, now a self-governing commonwealth territory of the USA, and has some 90% of the islands' population. Saipan and adjacent Tinian saw fierce fighting towards the end of World War II, and nowadays many visitors are Japanese wanting to see something of this period in their history, or to enjoy the casinos! On Saipan, the Americans landed on 15 June 1944 at the southwest end of the island, and during the subsequent conquest some 30,000 Japanese were killed as against 3,500 American troops (and some 400 Saipanese civilians). To this day the island is littered with pillboxes and bunkers constructed by the Japanese and there are some poignant memorials at the steep cliffs at the northern end of the island where hundreds of

Japanese troops and civilians committed suicide rather than be captured.

From an ornithological viewpoint, Saipan is the richest island in the Marianas and here we shall be looking for such Marianas endemics as the smart White-throated Ground-Dove (ludicrously easy to see for a ground-dove, often flying high over the forest canopy and the roads!), Mariana Fruit-Dove, Guam Swiftlet (split from Island or Uniform), White-headed Kingfisher (split from Collared), the impressive Nightingale Reed Warbler, Saipan Bridled White-eye (split from Guam Bridled) and the beautiful Golden White-eye, as well as the widespread endemic Micronesian Honeyeater (or Micronesian Myzomela) and Micronesian Starling. In addition, the endemic Marianas Megapode (or Marianas Scrubfowl) still survives here, and with persistence we may well see one creeping about in the forest, apparently unconcerned by our presence. (This form was formerly lumped with Palau Megapode as Micronesian Megapode or Micronesian Scrubfowl.)

Other species we are likely to encounter include White-tailed Tropicbird, Brown Booby, Yellow Bittern, Pacific Golden Plover, Brown Noddy, Common White (or Fairy) Tern, Rufous Fantail and the introduced Philippine Turtle Dove (or Island Collared Dove), Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Orange-cheeked Waxbill.

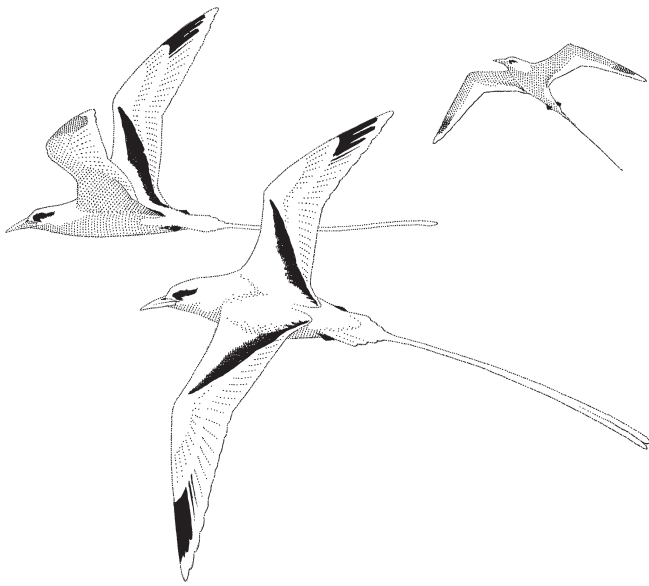
During our stay on Saipan we will also make a short side-trip by air to the adjacent island of Tinian, the scene of another great battle in World War II and later used for bombing raids on Japan, including the world's first and mercifully only nuclear strikes. As we approach the small airport

on Tinian we will be able to see the deserted runways at North Field, from where the Enola Gay and its sister aircraft took off on those fateful missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On Tinian we will be looking for the endemic Tinian Monarch, which is still quite a common bird in the scrubby forest that covers much of the island.

Day 4 After some final birding on Saipan we will take a flight southwards to the island of Rota for a two nights stay. This afternoon we will begin to explore the island.

Day 5 Rota, which is about half way between Guam and Saipan, largely escaped the bloody battles of World War II and this attractive island still has inhabitants who are full-blooded Chamorros, the earliest colonizers of the Marianas. Few visitors reach the island, which has a friendly, laid-back atmosphere. Our main targets here are the endangered endemic Mariana Crow, which still breeds successfully on Rota in spite of competition from the introduced Black Drongo (unlike Guam, the only other island on which it exists, where it is on the verge of extinction) and the uncommon endemic Rota Bridled White-eye (split from Guam Bridled), for which we will have to visit the highland forest. Guam Rail (which is nowadays nigh on impossible to see on Guam itself, where it is the only surviving endemic bird) has been introduced here and we have a good chance of seeing this critically endangered species. Thankfully the endemic Rota Kingfisher, which may represent a species distinct from White-headed Kingfisher of Saipan and Tinian, is still a common bird.

We will also visit a spectacular seabird colony where large numbers of



White-tailed Tropicbirds (Nik Borrow)

Red-footed Boobies nest in the forest canopy while Brown Boobies and lovely Red-tailed Tropicbirds nest on the steep cliffs. Great Frigatebirds regularly visit the colony to steal some fish from its occupants. Along the rocky coastline, Pacific Reed Egrets are regularly to be found.

Day 6 We will spend much of the day birding on Rota and then catch a flight to Guam for an overnight stay. Guam's avifauna has suffered complete disaster in recent decades at the hands of introduced creatures; in particular the Brown Tree Snake. The endemic Guam Flycatcher and Guam Bridled White-eye are now extinct, having both been common in the 1970s, and the endemic Guam Rail is extinct in the wild (hence the Rota introduction scheme). The endemic Guam Kingfisher (formerly the nominate form of the now-split-up Micronesian Kingfisher) now only survives in captivity.

Day 7 This morning we will fly far to the southeast of Guam, to the island of Pohnpei for a two nights stay.

In the late afternoon we will begin our exploration of this beautiful island.

Day 8 Pohnpei is one of the Caroline Islands and part of the widely scattered Federated States of Micronesia, a territory with a tiny population that consists of over 600 islands stretching for about 2,900 kilometres (1,800 miles) across the Western Pacific. The land surface occupies just 705 square kilometres (271 square miles) compared to more than 2.6 million square kilometres (1 million square miles) of ocean, so the islands are truly just specks on the map.

This extreme isolation has encouraged the evolution of endemic forms and Pohnpei has at least seven surviving single-island endemics; the noisy and conspicuous Pohnpei Lory (or Pohnpei Lorikeet), the superb Pohnpei Kingfisher (split from Micronesian, now renamed Guam), the handsome Pohnpei Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), Pohnpei Flycatcher, Pohnpei Fantail, Grey (or Grey-brown) White-eye and the curious

Long-billed White-eye. We have a good chance of finding all seven, although it can be quite a hike up to the altitudes where Long-billed White-eyes occur on the sometimes steep and muddy forest trails, while the cicadabird is both uncommon and rather unpredictable. (An additional Pohnpei endemic, the Pohnpei Mountain Starling, was last reliably recorded in 1956. Although there have been some claimed sightings from the highest montane forests since, none has been well documented and the species may well be extinct.)

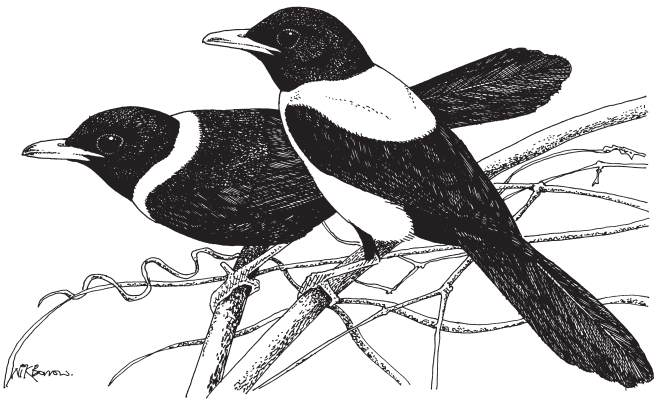
We can also expect to see the more widespread, regionally-endemic Caroline Islands Swiftlet (split from Island or Uniform), Caroline Islands Reed Warbler and Caroline Islands White-eye for the first time, and perhaps our first Caroline Islands Ground-Dove, while other new birds are likely to include Grey-tailed Tattler, Eurasian Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Black Noddy, Purple-capped (or Crimson-crowned) Fruit-Dove (a widespread species of Pacific Islands from the Carolines south to Fiji) and the introduced Hunstein's Mannikin.

Provided we have the time, we will also visit the famous and enigmatic ruins of Nan Madol, a religious and administrative centre that was built of huge stone blocks on 92 artificial islets on the coral flats. This huge and fascinating complex, extending for nearly two square kilometres, was started by the Saudeleur dynasty of Pohnpei in the 12th century and continued to be occupied until the end of the 18th century.

Day 9 After some final birding on Pohnpei we will take a flight westwards to Truk (or Chuuk) for a four nights stay.

Days 10-12 Truk, or Chuuk as it is nowadays officially called, is part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Infrequent air schedules mean that we will probably have more than enough time here, but there are worst places to be than a lagoon full of tropical islands! The airport and most of the infrastructure are on the island of Weno (or Moen), where we will be looking for the beautiful Caroline Islands Ground-Dove (shared only with Pohnpei) and the endemic Oceanic Flycatcher, as well as the more widespread Blue-faced Parrotfinch. We will also take a look at one of the few significant wetlands in Micronesia, and the grassy margins of the airport, where we may well encounter Eastern Cattle and Intermediate Egrets, Rufous Night Heron, Pacific Black (or Grey) Duck, Northern Pintail and Common Moorhen.

However, in order to see the endemic Great Truk White-eye we will need to visit Mount Winipot on the island of Tol South, one of the higher islands of Truk Lagoon. The island is rarely visited by outsiders, so our arrival is likely to cause a stir. Once ashore we have a steep climb in prospect, but our local guides, armed with machetes, will be able to help us reach the summit. First the lagoon must be crossed by speedboat (we should see Black-naped and Greater Crested Terns en route), and then it will take us some time to climb up to the remaining good forest above 300m, but once there the white-eyes are generally quite easy to locate. We should also encounter the endemic Truk Monarch during our visit to Tol South and we have a good chance of seeing the rare Truk form of the endemic Micronesian Imperial Pigeon. Chuuk Flying Foxes are still quite common and we will enjoy



Yap Monarchs (Nik Borrow)

watching them sailing around the steep hillsides, from where we will enjoy the spectacular views across Truk Lagoon.

Truk Lagoon was the scene of a famous naval-air battle in 1944 and the lagoon is littered with the remains of over 60 Japanese ships that were sent to the bottom, as well as numerous aeroplanes. Nowadays the whole area is a paradise for divers, with a worldwide reputation. It also offers some fascinating snorkeling possibilities.

Day 13 After a final morning in Truk we will take an afternoon flight to Guam where we connect with an evening flight to Yap for a two nights stay.

Day 14 Yap is the westernmost of the main islands of the Federated States of Micronesia and tradition still holds sway in many parts of the island. Traditional architecture survives in the villages and many men and women in country areas still dress in customary style. Yap is famous for its *rai*, or 'stone money', a tradition whereby

huge stone disks of up to 3.6 metres (12 feet) in diameter were carved from the Rock Islands of Palau and then transported on rafts towed by canoes more than 400 kilometres (240 miles) to Yap. Many Yapese were lost at sea in the attempt to transport these immense 'coins', which served to make the surviving 'money' even more valuable! To this day, *rai* is still used for some traditional transactions.

The rolling green hills of interior Yap hold some good areas of forest and it is here that we will be searching for the island's five single-island endemics, which comprise the lovely White-headed Ground-Dove (probably a good split from White-throated), the uncommon Yap Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), the smart Yap Monarch, Plain White-eye and the localized Olive White-eye (or Yap Olive White-eye). Micronesian Imperial Pigeon is positively easy to see here, unlike in Truk, while Scaly-breasted Munia (or Nutmeg Mannikin) is a widespread introduction and small wetlands attract migrant Tufted Ducks.

Day 15 After spending a

second day on Yap we will catch a late evening flight to Koror in Palau for a four nights stay.

Days 16-18 The Republic of Palau (or Belau as it is known to its inhabitants) is the most western island group of Micronesia and is faunistically its richest part. The main town, on the island of Koror, is connected to the largest island, Babeldaob (or Babelthuap), by a bridge, while to the southwest is an archipelago of small islands, including the extraordinarily beautiful, strangely-shaped Rock Islands that emerge from the turquoise blue coral sea. The islands are thought to have been settled as long ago as 1000 BC, probably by people from what is now eastern Indonesia, but as with most places in Micronesia, Palau only really came to the attention of the outside world during World War II, when there were fierce battles for control of the heavily fortified southern islands of Angaur and Peleliu.

Our birding explorations in Palau will be divided between the Koror region and some of the outer islands only accessible by boat or air. On Koror and Babeldaob we will be looking for the endemic Palau Fruit-Dove, the unusual Palau Owl, Palau Nightjar (split from Grey), Palau Swiftlet (split from Island or Uniform), Rufous-capped (or Palau) Kingfisher (split from Micronesian, now renamed Guam), Palau Cicadabird (split from Slender-billed), Morningbird, Palau Bush Warbler (easily heard but harder to see), Mangrove (or Palau) Flycatcher, the smart Palau Fantail and Dusky White-eye. Further afield, we will explore the scenic

outer islands in search of the endemic Palau Megapode (split from Micronesian, now renamed Mariana), Palau Ground-Dove and the drab but impressive Giant White-eye. We also have a good chance of seeing the localized Nicobar Pigeon, a small-island specialist, and Tropical Shearwater (split from Audubon's).

Other species that we may well encounter during our stay in the islands include Little Pied Cormorant, Little Egret, Buff-banded Rail, White-browed Crane, Greater Sand and Mongolian Plovers, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Black-headed Gull, Whiskered and Bridled Terns, Collared Kingfisher, Barn Swallow and the introduced Red Junglefowl, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Eclectus Parrot and Chestnut Munia.

Day 19 The tour ends with an early morning flight to Guam.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels are of good or medium standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus or car. Roads are mostly good, with the exception of Truk (but distances there are short).

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but sometimes moderate, and there will be one optional fairly strenuous hike on Pohnpei and one optional fairly strenuous hike on Mount Winipot on Tol South in Truk Lagoon.

Climate: It is typically warm or hot and humid. Some rain is likely and it can be heavy (although in theory this is the drier time of year in Micronesia).

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are worthwhile.