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Travel

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Micronesia, macro fun

SHOPPING, RELAXING, SNORKELING -- IT'S JUST ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE

By Tom Bentley
Special to the Mercury News

KOSRAE, Federated States of Micronesia -- It took all of 15 minutes upon landing on Kosrae, a pint-size Micronesian island, to be treated to an incredible tropical deluge; a bracingly cold, machete-opened coconut served with a handy straw; and the purchase of succulent lobster at \$1.35 a pound.

And the rest of the week we spent on the island dispensed enough marvel and mystery to maintain that plentiful pace.

Kosrae is one of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), just a good Pacific warm-water paddle north of the Equator, and a 2,500-mile stone's throw (if you throw your stones with rocket ships) southwest of Hawaii. The island is a seven-mile-long triangle of volcanic rock, dense jungle and white-sand beaches with about 7,700 residents, half of whom come to the airport on flight days to see who's dropping by.

That might be an exaggeration, but entertainment on Kosrae can take angles unknown, as we would discover. Simply flying in over the series of atolls that preceded our landing was entrancing enough, with us gasping at the remarkable delicacy of the fringing reefs and the stunning aqua blues and greens of the reef waters. And then more forceful gasping at the remarkable humidity when we touched down, the thick wetness of the air, the scudding clouds, the sharp slanting light and the hallucinatory azure brilliance pushing out to the horizons. Having vacationed in Hawaii years before was barely a warm-up for the true tropics.

After waiting out the floodgate-down/floodgate-up of the brief airport storm, our hosts (the island's former attorney general and his wife) immediately demonstrated one of Kosrae's baffling charms: shopping. Shopping on Kosrae is nothing like Santana Row. Though there are a couple of commercial enterprises you



Sampling the island culture on Kosrae may include a rousing performance by church singers. (Tom Bentley / Special to the Mercury News) | [More photos...](#)

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might recognize (an Ace hardware, for instance), many of the stores we went to were minuscule roadside enterprises, some the size of large tool sheds, where they might sell eight products, all of which might be different on different days. So you might pick up toilet paper and batteries at one establishment, cabbage and motor oil at another. Gasoline sales were particularly interesting: A typical gas station consisted of a small shack filled with one-gallon plastic jugs, which the attendant poured through a large funnel into your tank. (A note that reveals just how small Kosrae is: The island's only surgeon also pumps gas on medically slow days.)

There isn't a real shopping center on Kosrae, though each of the island's small villages does have its own small business district, with many of these "cottage goods" stores operating there too. But big or small, all the stores trade in dollars, courtesy of our wresting most of Micronesia away from Japanese occupation toward the end of World War II.

Driving on the island's main road to anywhere was always interesting: Most drivers don't seem to want to tax the engines of their right-hand drive cars (mostly imported from Japan), and thus they cruise along at 15 to 20 mph, where 50 would do for an American driver. And pulling over in the middle of the road to talk to a pedestrian seems to be a part of many drives.

The island is stunningly lush, with heavily laden coconut and breadfruit palms, pineapple bushes and banana and papaya trees everywhere you looked. The islanders can bend and twist a big palm frond into a tight basket in seconds, and we saw many islanders walking off the main road with such baskets heavy with island fruits. We went to a Kosraen Girl Scout celebration one evening where each of the scouts, some as young as 4 or 5, struggled mightily to heft their huge baskets filled with feast food back to the tables.

My sweetheart, Alice, tried one of the local dessert delicacies there, *fafa*, which is obtained by pounding taro root, another island product. *Fafa* pounding is a matter of some pride on Kosrae: Pounders are always male descendants of pounders past and they adhere to certain cleanliness standards. For instance, *fafa* pounders must never clean a toilet, which probably doesn't endear them to their wives.

One Kosraen foodstuff we didn't try was roasted dog, though there was no shortage of these barbecues-to-be wandering around. The main road encircles the entire island, and it seems as though there's a dog meandering across it every 50 feet or so. They all look like they had the same parents, which decreased their appetite appeal for me. (I can heartily recommend hash browns made out of breadfruit, however.)

Thatched-roof cottages

We did have some lovely meals at the Kosrae Village Resort, where visitors can stay in thatch-roofed cottages made in the old Kosraen style, with locally woven reed siding and big corner posts tied with woven coconut-fiber twine. I had some particularly good grilled wahoo with ginger sauce at its high-walled, open-sided restaurant, where all eight of the wines (Australian) were \$19 a bottle, making choices -- "that one" -- very easy. The resort is one of the main dive centers on the island that arranges and supplies a variety of boat dives and eco-adventures for all calibers of divers. Two-hundred-foot visibility brings more than a few travelers to these parts.

A diver I'm not, but if snorkeling sends you, Kosrae can deliver. Alice and I snorkeled almost every day in various places on the island, and undersea wonderments were myriad. We saw electric blue starfish, yellow spotted eel, big pufferfish, red-green parrotfish, agitated angelfish and calm chromis. We'd take a turn around a corner, and small schools of incandescently colored darting miracles would streak by in collected lines and columns or float by in tranquil suspension. There are more than 170 types of Kosraen hard and soft corals, and we saw bunches: Corals like ottomans, purple and green and blue. Ten-foot coral towers

with knobs and knurls, and squat barrels of crenulated purples and greens. Brain corals with viscous mantles. All in waters so warm that you almost wonder if there's something wrong when you first step in.

Among the waves of conquerors, settlers and troublemakers (the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese) who colonized Kosrae -- or stopped by for a dog sandwich and stayed for a decade or two -- were American missionaries in the late 19th century. For better or worse, they persuaded the Kosraens to drop many of their old religious ideas in favor of theirs, and the influence lingers. There are many Christian churches on the island (Congregationalists are big), and Sunday is truly a day where activities outside the spiritual are discouraged. We attended a Sunday service at a big Congregationalist church where the men and women sat on opposite sides. Periodically, both groups would rise and move to the front of the church, where they sang Christian hymns in the Kosraen language in unusual high-pitched tones.

Just so you don't think we spent all our time praying, not long after we arrived, we did pick up the required drinking license (\$4) that allows us to drink at the local bars for 30 days. I was very disappointed that no bartender insisted on seeing it. I must say, however, that when you order a cocktail on Kosrae (and on nearby Pohnpei, and not-so-nearby Guam), you are unlikely to get the twin of its U.S. counterpart. Seemingly simple things like gin and tonic or rum and pineapple juice had us, after tasting, puzzling as to their true composition. Stick with that \$19 wine.

Walled compounds

We did a number of touristy things on the island, like visiting the Lelu ruin, which was a massive basalt-walled complex, the ruling center of Kosrae's feudal society 700 years ago. There were more than 100 walled compounds where high and low chiefs lived with their servants and other commoners. Time has worked its hard hand on many of the walls, tombs and the broken coral walkways, but it's still an impressive site. We spend a good part of another day hiking up the Tafunsak Gorge, where we were rewarded by a splendid double waterfall at the apex of our climb. The gorge is one of the island's water sources, where some of the 150-200 yearly inches of island rainfall are put to good use.

Tourist attractions have their modest place on Kosrae, but for us, the island truly shined at less defined moments: relaxing at sunset near the shoreline after an incredible crab-centered meal and seeing hundreds of crabs of all sizes racing about, perhaps considering turning the dining table on us. Or getting up in the early morning and stepping out of our air-conditioned home into the startling island air, where bright-white frigate birds wheeled above the coconut trees, and where we could see through the palms sharp blue waves crunching on a reef in the distance. And even for the "where am I again?" sight of eight-foot tall inflated Santas blaring out recordings of 1960s American pop tunes in front of Kosrae's version of a variety store. If you're not a dog, you might even think this place is paradise.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Continental's Air Micronesia (www.continental.com; 800-231-0856) is your best bet, since it's your only bet from the U.S. mainland. You'll have to transfer in Honolulu. Ask about Continental's Circle Micronesia Pass, which allows you to jump to a number of the Micronesian islands without additional charge. Since we wanted to stay on Pohnpei, Guam and Hawaii as well, we arranged a package through a local agent, Strong on Travel (831-662-2467), who subcontracted with World of Diving and Adventure Vacations (800-900-7657).

Documentation: The Federated States of Micronesia has a formal relationship with the United States called the Compact of Free Association. One of its benefits is that U.S. citizens aren't

required to have passports or visas. However, proof of citizenship is required, and passports were the first ID requested at all our airport stops.

What to bring: Pack lightly. If you bring a coat or sweater, you might get the chance to use them for a pillow. Year-round temperatures are between 80 and 90 degrees, with equal humidity. Even a long-sleeved shirt seemed a bit much, though it's appropriate at church services. Women are expected to dress modestly -- knee-length dresses and no bare shoulders -- on Kosrae, particularly on Sundays, when long pants are often seen on the men. Women on Pohnpei were more relaxed in their attire. And bathing suits were just dandy in the water for everybody.

Lodging: Accommodation, diving and dining information for Kosrae Village Resort can be found at www.kosraevillage.com or by e-mail at info@kosraevillage.com. Mangrove tours (and tours of other historical attractions) can be arranged through Tadao Wakuk once you're on the island, at 370-5080. As for the Lelu ruins, or the Tafunsak Gorge hike -- just ask. Kosrae is small, and people are quite friendly. Most Kosraeans speak English, though with varying skill levels. They'll happily point the way.

Resources: For general information about Kosrae (and FSM), try www.visit-fsm.org. We found Lonely Planet's Micronesia book and Moon Travel's Micronesia Handbook to be useful overviews of the whole of Micronesia, from history to hot spots.



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