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- [Lifestyles](#)

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- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Bay Area](#)
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[Back to Home](#) > [Lifestyles](#) >

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Fragrant mangrove swamp teems with bats, exotic fruit, island lore

By Tom Bentley
Special to the Mercury News

KOSRAE, Federated States of Micronesia -- We had the good fortune of touring Kosrae's mangroves with the entertaining Tadao Wakuk, known on the island as its ``last storyteller."

We met Wakuk at the Utwe harbor, gateway to the Utwe-Walung Conservation Area. Wakuk proudly displayed his traditional (though with motor added) outrigger canoe that he'd built from three types of local wood, mangrove among them. Wakuk was quite talkative, which contrasted with the smiling shyness of many of the Kosraens we spoke to.

Mangrove swamps almost surround sections of Kosrae, though there are some breaks between the channels and the ocean. From the shore, the mangroves look like other islands, but they are more like island offshoots, peninsulas with dense passageways, with some soil buildup contained within a massive, intricate root system topped by towering trees.

The ancient Kosraens believed that gigantic tortoises and hammerhead sharks populated the deep lagoon Tadao piloted us across, weaving us through a number of smaller outlying islands and into the mangrove channels. This was how the children on the other islands got to school on Kosrae when Wakuk was a boy, he said.

Once in the channels, our senses were fully engaged. In just moments, we were deep in the humid swamps, moving through the dark, narrow waterways flanked on both sides by towering trees with incredibly long, spindly, pendulous roots. Wakuk told us that tradition had it that the sinuous mangrove channels had been formed by a giant snake's frenzied twisting through the trees as she searched for her kidnapped human daughter. He didn't seem to think any other giant snakes were on the way, as he hopped in and out of the boat, using a machete to clear fallen palms and pushing the boat through the shallows.

The mangrove swamps trap sediments between their cable-like roots, and more sediments mean more mangroves growing, with all their richness extending further into the lagoon. The swamps are also natural water-filtration systems, purifying water flowing from the land to the sea.

The interior of the channels is overwhelmingly lush: There are massive, gnarled *ka* trees, which are used for carving. They have high, serpentine roots that look like flattened, upright walls of molded chocolate.

There are tunnels of big ferns and tall, sword-like palms. One of the most unusual palms is the *nepa*, which has huge, dangling "nut-cluster" fruit, like knobby, woody basketballs. Each basketball is composed of 30 or more baseball-size nuts, whose juice can be distilled for liquor or medicine. Wakuk let us know little distinction was made between the two uses.

The mangroves give off a mixture of dank, earthy smells mixed with vegetal aromas and salts, with some lighter flowery odors. The winds also brought briny, ocean smells that were enhanced by the constant equatorial heat.

Big and small crabs (some tiny and bright red) scuttled through the tree roots, and we heard the occasional flop of the flying pollock fish, the cries and chirps of many birds and the eerie sizzling, exhaling sounds from the swamp itself. I kept my eyes peeled for one of the six-foot monitor lizards we'd heard about, but they kept a low profile during our tour.

We stopped at the island of Utwe-ma south of the harbor, where fruit bats with 35-inch wingspans were "kite-flying" in formation at treetop height above the shallow mangrove waters. Wakuk said these bats can predict the weather: When they fly to the other side of the islands, a heavy storm is coming.

They are considered a delicacy -- I saw a recipe for fruit bat soup on the Internet. However, they are now listed as a threatened species, and it's illegal to hunt them. I enjoyed them from a distance; I was very happy they weren't interested in the *nepa* fruit I was carrying.

We toured some of the smaller islands, where Wakuk told us that for good luck the residents used to leave bananas out for enchanted dwarfs that lived there. There were lots of Kosrae starlings (and those bats) in the air, and we also spotted black herons resting on the edges of the swamp.

About three hours later, because the tides in the channels were too low for the outrigger, we returned to Utwe Harbor. The harbor is a nesting site for the government-funded restoration of the island's giant clams. Because of massive overfishing, the National Aquaculture Center on Kosrae has been growing a variety of giant clams in tanks and "seeding" them in this harbor, which is also the site of the wreck of the *Lenora*, ship of 19th-century scoundrel (and pirate) Bully Hayes. Hayes is believed to have left buried treasure in the harbor district, and if it's been found, the claimant kept quiet. Maybe the clams ate it.

Wakuk left us with an invitation to join the Utwe villagers in a celebration of the opening of a new church the coming week. Just a minor Kosraen feast he said: 600 pigs were going to be slaughtered. We would have to miss that one, but I was able to bring a *nepa* palm nut home, and I intend to make some mangrove medicine soon.

