



The womenfolk of the village gather around the new mother for Ngasech, a very Palauan celebration of the arrival of the firstborn child.

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Labour of LOVE

Celebrating the firstborns of Palau

LYING 800 kilometres southeast of the Philippines and spanning some 600 kilometres, the Palauan archipelago is not nearly as culturally isolated as you might think. Having gained political independence only in 1994, after a century of foreign rule, it's one of the world's youngest nations, and colonialism and Christian missions have, over decades, fundamentally changed the worldview and lifestyles of its people.

Yet despite its modern currency (the US dollar), functioning government and five-star resorts, Palau and its 20,000 inhabitants take traditional culture and customs very seriously. There is perhaps no greater example of this than Palau's most unique festival: a ceremony to celebrate the arrival of the firstborn child.



The celebration's origins are steeped in legend, a story of a spider named Mangidabrudkoel who falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Turang. So smitten is the spider, according to local legend, that he transforms himself into a man and successfully wins Turang's heart. After they marry, the woman soon falls pregnant, and her family and the villagers are distraught. In that ancient time, pregnancy was less a blessing than a curse: midwives delivered a baby using sharpened bamboo to cut into the mother's stomach – and most would bleed to death as a result.

Fortunately, being possessed of special powers, the man-spider uses magic to deliver a healthy baby boy, and the village is soon wakened to the sounds of the baby's cries. Thinking Mangidabrudkoel has allowed his wife to die, without calling the midwife and her family, the villagers are incensed and come to find and punish her despicable husband. Of course, the villagers find mother and baby alive and well, and a celebration spontaneously erupts.

Modern Palauans delight in this ancient folklore, and although the majority of babies are delivered in hospitals these days, a complex series of rituals and festivities surround the birth of a family's first child. For travellers to this remote Pacific island, witnessing such a ceremony is equally challenging, an experience enjoyed by a very lucky few who just happen to be in the right place at the right time.

Ngasech (literally "coming up"), the day-long festivities that mark a married woman's first successful delivery, are actually the culmination of many days of rituals: medicinal baths and massages for the new mother and assorted festivities for the extended families of both husband and wife.

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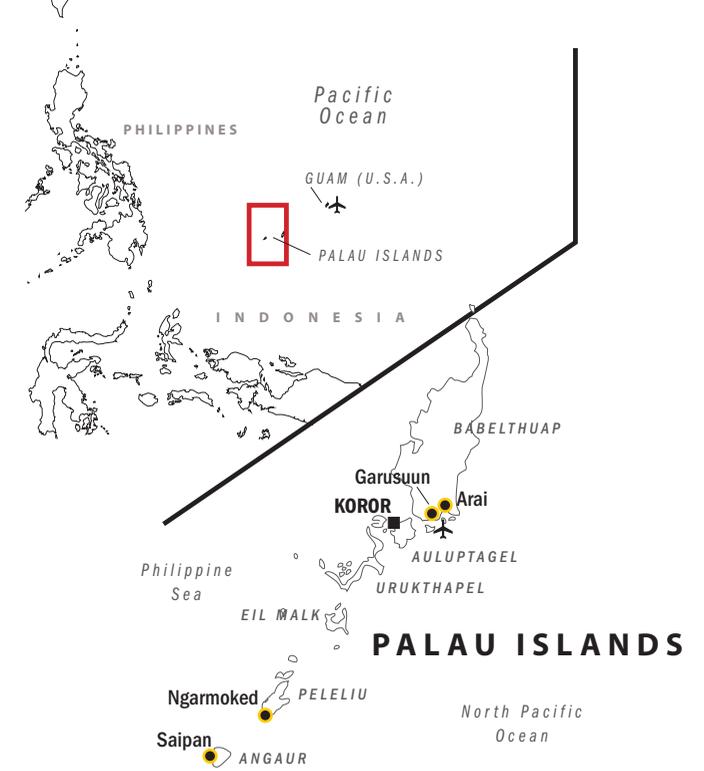
Already by the fifth month of the pregnancy, the young mother-to-be moves back with her own mother to begin a regimen of restrictions on diet and activity, and the daily application of a special ointment of coconut oil, turmeric and fragrant leaves. A ceremonial visit from the husband and his family takes place in the seventh month, where the two families enjoy a special meal together and exchange pieces of traditional Palauan money, small stone beads of great significance and value.

With the birth of the child comes Omesurech, the period of daily hot herbal drinks and baths leading up to Ngasech, and relatives come to see mother and baby, leaving with baskets laden with food. For the new mum, it's an intense time, as the twice-daily steam baths are "therapeutic" almost to the point of scalding.



Sitting naked on a woven coconut mat, she first covers her body in a protective oil made of coconut and ginger. A skilled older woman then uses specially prepared water, mixed with herbs and brought to the boil, to cleanse and heal the young mother. With oil applications in between, three rounds of hot water are splashed on the skin using special leaves, working around the whole body, and then the fourth and final time using a coconut shell filled with even hotter, near-boiling water, which makes the woman wince with pain.

With this ordeal being repeated day after day for between five and ten days – depending on the status of the clan to which the family belongs – Ngasech is nothing if not a very well-earned "coming out" party. It is the day she can finally make her first public appearance as a new mother, dressed in an ornate grass skirt, upper body glistening turmeric yellow, and hair adorned with flowers and symbols of her clan. Accompanied by singing, dancing and feasting, the celebration is an expression of both the collective appreciation of the miracle of birth and the strength and importance of Palauan women. If you don't believe us, there's a wise old spider you could ask. **AGP**



GETTING THERE AND AROUND
Continental Micronesia operates regular flights from Guam and several times a week from Manila, Philippines, to Palau. There are also services to Palau from Incheon, South Korea, on Asiana Airlines; from Taipei, Taiwan, on China Airlines; and from Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, Japan, on Japan Airlines. Continental Airlines flies between Guam and Cairns, Australia.

WHEN TO GO
Palau's tropical climate ensures a steady 30 degrees year round and while the island does have wet and dry seasons, it can rain, often heavily, on virtually any given day.

ACCOMMODATION
Palau Pacific Resort
www.palauappr.com
Cliffside Hotel
www.cliffsidehotelpalau.com
Palasia Hotel Palau
www.palasia-hotel.com
Rose Garden Resort
www.palau-hotel.com

MONEY
The currency is the US dollar (US\$). As at November 2011, €1 = US\$1.38. The major credit cards are widely accepted and larger hotels offer foreign currency exchange.

VISA
Palau issues 30-day visas on arrival to all nationals, with two additional 30-day extensions for a fee of US\$50 per extension. US citizens are given a one-year visa upon arrival.

INFORMATION
Palau Visitors Authority
www.visit-palau.com