

Guam and the Northern Marianas,II

Guam's official name is the Territory of Guam, which is a self-governing, organized, unincorporated territory of the U.S. with a legislature consisting of 15 members. The capital is Agana, which isn't much more than a village of some 1,100 people on the west-central coast. The native Chamorros only account for less than 40% of the population, with the remainder consisting primarily of Asians and Philippinos. For several years following the Second World War, the U. S. Navy had jurisdiction on much of the recently conquered Japanese holdings in the western pacific, and it was found that the natives did not make very good workers, so Philippino workers and their families were imported. This was the period of time that I was stationed on Guam, and what I remember best about Agana was a destroyed U.S. duck (an amphibious type of landing craft) that had been pushed to the edge of the one road passing through the village and left there to rust away, while any traffic that might have wandered through town had to walk around it. In all the time that I spent on the island, my friends and I only visited Agana one time. There were many beautiful and interesting sights to be seen on Guam, but for the most part, naval personnel remained in the southern half and the U.S. Air Force, stationed at Anderson field, stayed on the northern half.

My favorite place was the tip end of a small projection named the Orote Peninsula. This is a 213-foot high plateau ending as a perpendicular cliff. The Japanese had a Zero (fighter planes) base there during the war. At one end of this cliff ancient people had chiseled steps reaching from top to bottom. The natives claim that these steps pre-dated the Spanish. The top is nearly impossible to find, even when you are standing within two or three steps of it. The trick is to line up the end of a breakwater that defines the perimeter of Apra Harbor with a large boulder on the near shore. At this point, carefully look over the edge of the precipice, and you will see the top step. From that point on, it is not dangerous to descend (just stay close to the wall)!

At the base, you find yourself in a shallow arm of the ocean formed by the base of the cliff and a small island. It was anywhere from three feet to eight feet deep, depending on the tide. It was a snorkeler's dream; growths of coral and a resident octopus that stretched about 12 feet from tip to tip, and having a head the size of a basketball. This fellow posed no threat, but he was curious, and when we first went there, used to occasionally reach out to feel our arms with the tip of a tentacle. The natives told us that if they grasp you using their suckers, there is no realistic way you can escape until he is satisfied and releases you. If you were below snorkeling depth, this might cause a serious problem, but we were assured that all you had to do was grasp the tentacle in a firm grip; the octopus, thinking he is being attacked, will "play possum", and relax. The split second he is released, he will eject a huge cloud of black ink and make off at high speed. I never had to find out if this was good advice, although in later years I have heard that it is indeed the approved method of escaping from an octopus. Additionally, there were many species of fish, including transparent pipefish and seahorses.

Guam was the base from which most of the heavy bombers attacked North Vietnam during that conflict. The airfield is situated at the northeast end of the island atop a 200-foot cliff that faces right into the constantly-blowing northeast trade winds, giving it the effect of an aircraft carrier launching into the wind.

Guam and the Northern Marianas to the north were discovered by Magellan on his circumnavigation of the world in 1521. The Spanish named the island chain for Queen Maria Ana, but the officers and crews referred to them as “Las Ladrones”, meaning “The Thieves”, because of the natives’ penchant for taking anything that wasn’t nailed down, and quite a bit of what was nailed down. The name persists even today, with an occasional reference to them as “The Ladrones”. Guam remained a Spanish territory until 1898, when it was ceded to the U. S. after the Spanish-American War. The Japanese occupied it from 1941-1944. In 1950 it was made a U.S. territory.

The north-south trending Marianas are a group of high volcanoes that have formed along the west side of a subduction zone. The resulting trench has produced the world’s deepest depth about 75 miles to the southeast of Guam; the Mariana Trench, 36,201 feet. This is formed by the Pacific geological plate sliding beneath the Philippine plate. Additionally, these volcanic islands are in actuality much higher mountains than they appear from the surface of the ocean, as their bases sit some four to six thousand feet below the surface. For example, Agrihan Island, 3,166 feet above the surface of the Pacific is in reality an 8,000 – 9,000 foot high conically shaped volcano.

The northern half of the Marianas tend to be active volcanoes, while the southernmost, which includes Guam, volcanic activity ceased long ago. Saipan and Tinian also have much less rugged landscape, and consequently contain the majority of the 78,000 population.

The official name is the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a self-governing commonwealth in association with the U.S., created in 1986. It has a governor, a Senate, consisting of 9 members and a House of Representatives, having a membership of 18. If you ever read clothing labels, occasionally you will come across “Made in the Northern Marianas”. Whatever industry they have is essentially on these two islands, as the high volcanic islands to the north, having little or no level ground, are restricted to producing copra. Copra is the white meat from coconuts, which is extracted from the hard shell and spread on wooden racks about 18 inches above ground level to dry. When ready, it is collected and brought to a location on the shore, where it will be loaded on small coastal steamships a few times a year. Among its uses are for plastics and soap. I don’t know about the present, but it used to be a big deal whenever a ship made a stop near one of the villages; three or four outriggers would come out, loaded to the gunnels with men and boys, all hoping to be allowed on board so that they would have an experience to relate to those back on shore. It undoubtedly would have provided an experience that would probably be talked about for the rest of their lives (and likewise for those on the visiting ship).