

Satawan, Our New Home

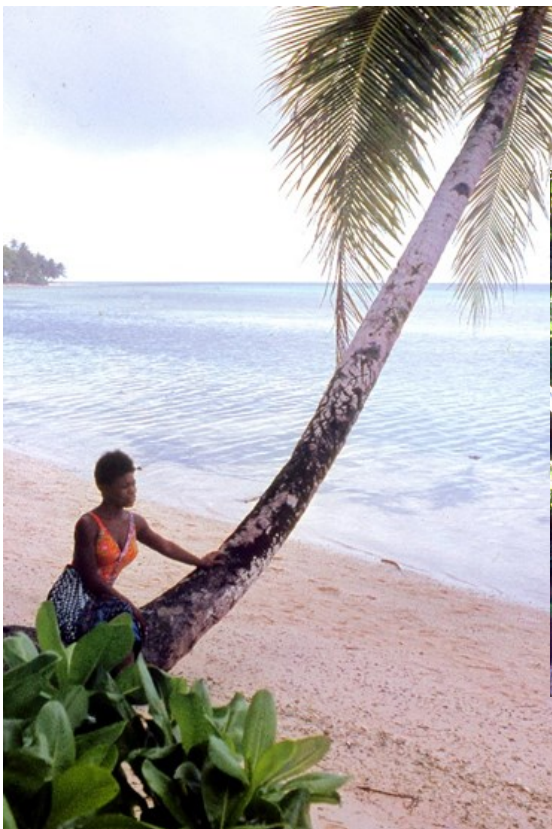
We arrived at Satawan, went ashore and had our first look around. We got all our belongings off the Palau Islander and more or less installed into the house we would be living in for the next couple of years. Now, about Satawan.

It is a tiny island. Someone once told me it was about $\frac{3}{8}$ of a square mile. Probably not a bad estimate. As I described in a previous article, it is a high spot on a reef. It is comma shaped. The big end is northerly and it tapers off to nearly nothing to the south and west, merging into the reef. This is a shallow reef on the SW end that separates Satawan from its neighboring island, Ta. At low tide, you can walk to Ta on the reef. Ta is about 7 miles long but VERY narrow. It is another one of the four inhabited islands on Satawan Atoll. The others, on the other end of the atoll, are named Moch and Kutu.

Satawan has a high school, which is where I would be teaching, and a primary school where Gracie would teach. The high school was a boarding school, hosting students from the Upper and Lower Mortlock islands. The boys were housed in an open-air dormitory with a thatched roof. The girls boarded with families on the island.

There were also two churches on the island, a Protestant church and a Catholic church. Our house was a short distance from the Protestant church, and we could hear singing whenever there was a service or event there.

I was told that most of the small atoll islands are either Protestant or Catholic depending upon which missionaries arrived there first.



On Satawan, as on most atoll islands, there is an ocean side and a lagoon side. The lagoon side is more protected and placid. On the ocean side, the reef usually extends out a few hundred yards and acts as a barrier protecting the island from the open ocean waves. The waves break along the outer edge of the reef and the island doesn't get eroded.

As we explored more and more of the island it soon became apparent that Satawan was deeply involved in WWII. There were bits and pieces of war materials scattered all over. There were four tanks parked next to the Catholic Church. There was a Japanese Zero still on its parking apron.



There were mostly intact planes in the jungle with trees growing through the wings. A detached wing leaning against a fal (thatched house). Pill boxes on the ocean side. A big gun still aiming out over the ocean.



An aircraft engine with prop still attached poking out from the lagoon. There were bunkers, water tanks, truck chassis and more. And sadly, there were men living on the island with slave ID numbers tattooed on their arms.

After living there for a few months, local residents told stories of the war and talked about some of the remnants.

Satawan had been an unsinkable aircraft carrier in support of Truk during the war. Truk was the headquarters for the Japanese fleet in the Pacific and a major target of the Allies as they fought their way through the Pacific toward the Japanese homeland. Truk was eventually blockaded and bombed, destroying much of the Japanese fleet. Truk lagoon is the graveyard of many ships.





Pillbox on the ocean side



Big gun aiming our over the ocean

It seemed there were reminders of the war wherever we looked. But as we continued to explore the island, we found much more. There were scenes of beauty and of everyday life on the island. There were taro patches, small banana plantings, breadfruit trees, coconut palms and pandanus trees. There was one main street, a wide footpath really, that ran the length of the settlement.



Engine and prop in the lagoon



Here are a couple of photos from the far end of the island where the island merges into the reef.

Taro is a starchy root vegetable and a staple in the local diet.



As we settled into our new home and community, our lives soon revolved around our schools and the activities there.



Taro patch on Satawan

We did not have electricity. Nights were dark. Also, being in the tropics, day-light was relatively short. Sunup was about 6 am and sundown about 6pm. School started at 8 and got out at 4. This gave us two daylight hours before school and two after school to get routine household tasks done. Evening reading and school prep was lit with kerosene lamps.

Our life during the week settled into morning chores before school, then the day at school, evening chores that needed daylight and finally reading and school prep in the evening. We were not able to enjoy the lagoon or swimming during the week. But weekends gave us time to roam the island. We couldn't go very far. It was a tiny island. And we did not have use of a boat to explore and visit other island. In fact, we didn't spend a single night off the island the entire first school year.



Typical fal with a thatched roof

On weekends, we could take hikes around the island, snorkel along the reef and generally get the feel of the atoll. We didn't have SCUBA gear, but snorkeling was great.

In the interior, the vegetation was thick, almost like a jungle. But because of its isolation, the variety of plant life was quite limited. And there was almost no wildlife on the island.



The Japanese did introduce the monitor lizard to some of the islands, and there were a few on Satawan. They were a threat to chickens that were raised by many locals.

Exploring the reef



Sunsets were often spectacular as in this photo looking out over the lagoon.

For pictures, I used slide film. I stocked up in Truk and had to send the exposed film to the US for processing. From Satawan, this would take weeks round trip. Fifty years later, they were badly faded. I have scanned them and was able to restore some of the color digitally.



We lived in Micronesia for two years. As I mentioned earlier, we never spent a night off the island the first school year. We did make some day trips with school groups. One of the things taught at the school was boat building. They built the school boat and we took it for day trips to neighboring islands. But I will talk about that in a future article.

Between our two years, we took a trip to New Zealand, spending a few weeks there. We rented a car and saw much of both islands. We also visited schools along the way and met teachers. We gathered contact information at the schools for future use. When we finished our time in Micronesia, we started applying for teaching jobs in New Zealand and eventually I was offered a job teaching math at Gisborne Boys High School. But that is, also, for a future article. I'll close with a few more photos.

