

Trips to Other Islands

I mentioned in an earlier article that we didn't spend a single night off Satawan the entire 1st school year. We did, however, make a couple of day trips to neighboring islands.



Before I begin, a few comments on the state of my photos. We were in Micronesia from 1970-72. That is quite a while ago. The photos I took were all with slide film. Kodachrome does not work well in low light situations but the slides are more durable than Ektachrome or Agfachrome. Most of the pictures in this article were shot with Kodachrome. Many of the slides are very dark, both because there was not enough light when I took the picture and because they have faded over the years. I have scanned them a couple of times. The second time was with a much better scanner, an Epson. I also have used Paint Shop Pro to restore the photos as best I can. Here is an example. The first photo is as it came off the scanner. The second has been tweaked. Big improvement but not as good as the digital photos I have been taking for the last couple of decades.

But these photos are a big part of my memories and being able to add light and enhance the color is a big deal for me. So all of the pictures that accompany this article and others have been restored as much as I can do.



The food variety on remote islands is very limited. Most of the animal protein comes from fish. Almost all of the non-fish meat is from pigs. Most families will raise a pig to be butchered for special occasions. The school did not raise pigs. But occasionally, a team from the school would arrange to purchase a pig from a neighboring island. The school had a boat and two 18-horse Evinrude outboards. I went along on a couple of trips to get a pig for the school.



One trip was to Ta, a neighboring inhabited island. It is about 7 miles long but only about a couple hundred yards wide. Long and narrow.

The school boat had been built by the students in a practical boat building class. It looks a bit worn, but it was well used and functional. A couple of the students, Bruno and Tetor, hauled the motors down to the dock, attached them to the transom and fired them up. After a few minutes, we could look back and see the entire length of Satawan spread on display.



Ta did not have a dock for boats to land and tie up. When we got there, we brought the boat close in to shore and got out to wade in. We were greeted by a group of kids that gathered on the shore to watch the new arrivals.



When we got ashore, Pissar, one of the students, prepared coconuts for us. A lime squeezed into a coconut is a wonderful refreshment. Another student, Nover, helped get the pig and coax it back to shore and up onto the boat.



With the pig safely aboard, we could begin the trip back to Satawan.

We made another excursion that year. This time a long day trip to Etal, a neighboring atoll. Etal is the name of both an atoll and the only inhabited island in that atoll. Again, we were off to get a pig for the school. We were given a sendoff by some of the staff, students and village children.

For part of the trip, we motored alongside another boat, the “Fordham Ram” heading in the same direction. Not quite sure where that boat is based. Probably on Moch or Kutu which are also part of Satawan atoll.



We passed many tiny uninhabited reef islands on the way. Satawan Atoll is about 21 miles on the long axis and about 10 miles across. There are only two passes through the reef deep enough for boats – and ships – to enter the lagoon. From the dock on Satawan, it is about 17 miles to the northern pass. The island of Moch lies right at that pass. We passed by the settlement when we went through the pass. Moch is another one of the four inhabited islands on Satawan Atoll.



Looking at the settlement on Moch

Although the reef islands are uninhabited, it does not mean they are not owned and used. There are coconut trees, breadfruit trees, pandanus trees, papaya trees and other trees that can provide food. They can grow taro and bananas there, and they can keep pigs on the small islands.



Some of the “islands” are not yet islands. An example is the mangrove (pictured) with its intricate web of tangled roots. As tidal currents flow back and forth, the roots trap anything floating through the web. Over many years, the captured flotsam and the mangrove reproduction will build a high spot on the reef which will eventually become an island. In the picture, the vertical stem hanging down into the water will become another web of mangrove roots and capture more flotsam.

There is an interesting rule of land ownership. Is possible for a person to own a piece of land but someone else owns specific trees on that land. So someone may have a huge, productive breadfruit tree on his land but he does not own the tree or have rights to the breadfruit. I don't know the specific legalities of this.

From the pass, it is about 6 miles to Etal. This is open ocean. There is no pass into the lagoon at Etal and larger ships are not able to enter. We were able to get out and walk the boat across the reef. In the photo, you can see a fish trap made of stones placed on the reef. It takes advantage of the current generated by the tides. Once we were across the reef, we headed to the village and the crew went looking for the pig we were purchasing.



Crossing the reef by the fish trap



This was a much bigger pig and we had to weigh it. So the boys rigged a makeshift scale and suspended it on their shoulders.

After the weighing and other business was taken care of, the pig was carried out to the boat and loaded aboard.

And we had some time to explore the village.





We spent some time looking around the village. The thatched fal at the top of this article was on Etal as were these houses. One is a typical fal (house) for the region and the other a more modern structure with a corrugated iron roof. Also, a photo of the island church.



Canoe being built from breadfruit wood

I was having a canoe built by a craftsman on Etal. We stopped by to see the progress. Canoes are carved out of wood from breadfruit trees. Breadfruit trees are the largest trees in the islands and have the most substantial trunks which are suitable for canoes.

With the pig loaded into the boat and our tour of the village done, we waded back out to the boat, boarded and headed back to Satawan.



A canoe in the islands would have a hull of breadfruit wood. There would be multiple pieces spliced together. Then there would be the outrigger, two cross pieces and an elaborate system to hold the float in place. Larger canoes intended for passages to other atolls would most likely be rigged with a sail.



As we were heading back to Satawan, we saw a boat in the distance going our way. It was much faster and soon caught up with us. They had some gifts that didn't get presented when we were on Etal so they came close and tossed some nice baked goods to us. Then they sped away with a rain squall on the horizon.



We got back to Satawan, unloaded the pig and other gear. The students removed the outboard motors, fuel tank and associated gear. Then the boat was hauled out by a large team of students and carried back to its storage site on the high school grounds, to be made ready for another excursion in the near future. The pig was taken to the school compound and would add to the protein served by the school cook.