

On My Mind

1/4/02

A ten-day visit is hardly long enough to claim familiarity with or knowledge of another island and its people, but it is long enough to learn a few things, to form some impressions. Especially if it's a small island, as is Kosrae, where I spent Christmas and New Year's with several friends.

Actually, Kosrae is not much smaller than Saipan - Saipan has an area of 47.46 square miles, Kosrae an area of 42.31 square miles. But its population is much smaller - according to year 2000 census figures, it has only 8,000 people. Paving of its main road was only finished this year; it connects all but one of its five villages. The fifth village, Walung, asked that the road not extend to it - access is only by boat, and its villagers like it that way.

The road has only two speed bumps - about five feet wide - in front of the island's high school. There are no others. Though people drive on the right side of the road, many of the cars are right-hand-drive vehicles. Since Kosrae is not an American entity, it does not have to meet American standards, so many people purchase the cheaper "non-conforming" models.

Most Kosraean government offices operate on a four-day work-week, adopted several years ago as an economy measure and in hopes the shorter work week would encourage more investment in small businesses such as farming and fishing. The schools, though, have gone back to a five-day work-week.

Wiring for cable tv was just being strung as we were there. Kosraeans, strongly influenced by the Congregational Church, have contracted to receive only specified channels, rejecting all that carry x-rated or pornographic material. There is only one radio station, and no local newspaper. Continental flies in once a day, in alternating directions (ordinarily there is no flight on Sunday).

There are only 60 hotel rooms on island. But Kosrae is impressively tourist-oriented. Over 50 dive and fishing sites have been identified and marked with buoys - in cooperation with both fishermen and SCUBA shops - so boats can hook up to the buoys rather than drop anchors, a major source of coral destruction. Spear fishing on SCUBA is not allowed. Thus fish are plentiful on the reef - both for looking, and for eating. And on Sunday, no fishing - or any other work - is allowed. An exception is made for those working in the small hotels, but there is no exception to the ban on drinking on Sundays.

Fireworks are banned as well, making for a very welcome quiet and peaceful observation of both holidays.

The Kosraean language is soft and melodious - unlike the guttural sounds of German and Russian, or the harsh choppy sound of Chinese and Japanese; almost everyone we encountered knew English as well. The Kosraean guide to the Menke Jungle Ruins knew not only the scientific names for all the flora and fauna encountered on the trip, but used an outrigger he had built himself to take the group on a brief tour of the lagoon, up the Menke River.

Were it not for the mosquitos, which were fierce - due partly to the heavy rains resulting from typhoon Faxai - one could hardly have found a more idyllic retreat for the holidays. The lush green island, including its cloud-topped mountains and twisting road lined with everything from taro to mangrove, its clear waters - often with visibility of 100 feet - and its basalt ruins - older than those on Pohnpei - is truly lovely. Its people are warm, generous, knowledgeable. Its tempo is relaxed and restful. And the food we were served at the Kosrae Village Resort, where we stayed, was outstanding.

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The re-immersion into the madness of the rest of the world was tough to take. Headlines still screaming about the search for Bin Laden. As though his capture would end terrorism. As though he alone was responsible for all the rest of the terrorism, world wide. As though terrorism had not existed before September 11.

President Bush saying that though this is war, those captured would not be considered prisoners of war. India about to declare war on Pakistan. Continuing killings in Israel. Argentina out of control.....

That I expected a ten-day absence to change anything obviously says far more for the after-effect of visiting Kosrae than it does for my intelligence!

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It was disheartening, too, to read that the CNMI's newly-passed law against spear-fishing on SCUBA is already under attack, and looks like it will be diluted, before it's even gone into effect.

Instead of a knee-jerk reaction - to amend the law - it might make more sense to take a more long-range point of view and, for example, work out the trade-offs between the goal of more fish for tourists to view versus the goal of more fish for the fishermen.

Those goals are not mutually exclusive. Over-fishing - the result of fishing on SCUBA - reduces not only the size but also the number of fish on the reef. Unless a ban is imposed on such invasive fishing practices, the fish population will only continue to shrink - leaving both fishermen AND tourists on SCUBA with ever fewer fish. The question must also be asked as to where the money goes, and to whom, from the fish now being caught on SCUBA. Does it really stay in the local economy?

A gradual phasing in of the ban - with a fixed date for a total ban - might be a better way to go?

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The contrast between the still on-going intermittent shooting off of noisemakers and other fireworks on Saipan with the quiet on Kosrae over Christmas and New Years gives new emphasis to the question of whether the CNMI shouldn't also ban fireworks. After all, what purpose does the setting off - at random times throughout the day and early evening for weeks before, during

and after the holidays - of those explosives serve? What does it signify? What meaning does it have? What function - other than providing the vendors with income, the kids with dangerous toys, the neighborhood with annoying noise - does it serve?

While only two serious injuries related to fireworks were reported this year, is not justification enough to allow unrestricted use of such explosives to continue. A coordinated fireworks display, as a celebration of Christmas, New Years, the holiday season in general, is one thing. But the random shooting off of noise makers at all times of day and night makes no sense at all, and benefits no one. Isn't it time to stop unrestricted sale of fireworks on island? Wouldn't quiet be a more appropriate observance of the holidays?

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It is interesting to note that despite widespread criticism in regard to the composition of the transition team, and in regard to the accounts of transition team findings being carried in the <I>Variety</I> this week, the reports produced by the transition team committees appear to be surprisingly frank and thorough. The team's biggest shortcoming - provided it's true - would appear to be its refusal to make copies of its report available to the <I>Tribune</I>.

In fact, the findings are so informative that it makes one wish that a similar critique could be undertaken of the actions and expenditures of the legislature and all its staff. It would be interesting to know, for example, whether there is orientation and mentoring for legislators and their staff, whether the legislature has manuals for procurement and operation procedures, whether its computer system is adequate or needs upgrading, whether long-term planning exists or issue-driven legislation is ever introduced, or whether the work of its community workers is duplicative of that of other agencies (all of which were noted in the transition team report as short-comings of the various executive agencies covered).

It would be equally interesting to ask the same questions of the judiciary branch.