

*The megalithic structures of Nan Madol have puzzled scientists for centuries*

# Secrets of the Stone City

By JOHN OLIPHANT

**A**fternoon sun catches the gleaming fuselage of Continental Micronesia Flight 956 as it begins its descent to Pohnpei, a volcanic island lying in the turquoise waters of the Pacific, 400 miles north of the equator and halfway

**Royal Mortuary**  
– The stone ruins of Nan Douwas housed the remains of Nan Madol's chieftans.

between Hawaii and the Philippines. Excitedly, I crane my neck, hoping to catch my first glimpse of one of the world's greatest archeological wonders: the enigmatic stone city of Nan Madol.

Moments later the plane jolts down onto the runway. Few tourists visit here, and I quickly disembark, stepping out into the steamy tropical air, dazzled by the lush sun-splashed landscape. Above me looms Pohnpei's landmark Sokehs Rock, one of the possible sources of the basalt from which the 92 artificial islets of Nan Madol were constructed. Its

instead of horses. It's the island's only town, since most of Pohnpei's 33,700 inhabitants live in villages along the coast. Taxis here are only a dollar, no matter where you go in town. My driver, Celestin Isaac, a cheerful local with a smile that should be patented, asks what brings me to the island. As we cruise past ragged lines of naked children and golden-skinned island beauties who could have stepped out of a Gauguin canvas, I tell him about my interest in Nan Madol. He rolls his eyes, saying each time he has visited Nan Madol he has felt the "presence" of the ancient spirits that inhabit the ruins. It scares him.

From my reading I already know that Nan Madol's builders somehow managed to move massive basalt boulders from the interior of the island, then take them across the water to the coastal reef. Celestin has his own theory how they did it. "Magic," he replies, lowering his voice. "They said special words and the stones flew through the air and piled themselves up at Nan Madol."

My destination is a rugged boat journey to the other end of the island, about thirty miles from here. Soon, I'll see these ancient ruins for myself.

THE STEADY puttering of a Yamaha outboard motor breaks the steamy silence of the shallow, sediment-choked canals that surround the islets

craggy, sphinx-like face makes me wonder if it knows the secrets of Nan Madol.

Anticipation mounting, I'm dropped off in Kolonia, a dusty frontier settlement that looks like a set for a John Wayne movie, with pickup trucks

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**Labyrinth** – A network of canals links the 92 islets of this “Venice of the Pacific.”

of Nan Madol. I'm riding a shallow flat-bottomed fiberglass boat with Emensio Eperiam, Pohnpei's historic preservation officer. It's these canals that prompted the city's name, says Eperiam. In Pohnpeian, it means "places in between."

As the boat slides through the warm canal water, I stare uneasily into the dark recesses beneath the mangrove canopy that lines the banks. I'm beginning to see how this city of unanswered questions could spook locals like Celestin. An islet looms ahead of us. This, Eperiam says, is Nan Douwas, an imposing fortress and site of the royal mortuary compound, with a crypt that housed the remains of Nan Madol's chieftains.

The reassuring pulse of the Yamaha dies, and the boat's hull scrapes against

the islet's low walls, leaving us to disembark in eerie silence. A huge, double-walled enclosure towers above us, its 25-foot-high ramparts glittering with sunlight refracted by crystals in the five-million-year-old basalt. Lichens crawl amoeba-like over the dark stones, and a monstrous breadfruit tree threatens to tear apart one wall. I gaze up at the corners of this fortress, which protrude in a graceful, almost pagoda-like overhang – the reason some think its architects were from Asia, rather than Pohnpei.

The crypt itself turns out to be an 10-foot-square chamber covered with basalt slabs. Mosquitoes buzz in the splintered shafts of light and the once-smooth coral floor is a jumble of stones. The jewelry and other artifacts that were interred here

with the bodies of chieftains have long since been plundered, says Eperiam. Archeologists meet with mostly slim pickings on Nan Madol, and even then they face the perils of a Tutankhamen-like curse said to afflict those who violate its precincts: in 1874, a shipwreck near the Marshall Islands took Polish anthropologist Jan Kubary's hundred crates of artifacts to the bottom of the ocean and with them a significant portion of the history of the city.

More chilling, in 1907, German Governor Victor Berg was excavating a royal tomb on the islet of Peinkitel. That night, say locals, Nan Madol was alive with spirit activity – observers saw lights moving and heard the sounds of canoes being paddled while the governor lay in delirium, hearing the ghastly trumpeting of a conch shell, the harbinger of his doom. Berg expired the following day. Sunstroke was the official cause of death; locals beg to differ.

As we continue our explorations, dwarfed by the intricately assembled 200-foot-long outer wall, Eperiam stops at a mammoth, fifty-ton boulder that forms one of the cornerstones and smiles. "They put this here knowing we'd come along eight hundred years later and wonder how they did it." He grins. Theories of bamboo rafts, hibiscus fiber ropes and inclined planes, combined with the fantastic exertions of a zealous workforce, seem mocked by this colossus.

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Despite considerable archeological research, the identity of the builders of Nan Madol remains a matter of conjecture. The best evidence holds that it was begun by two brothers but then expanded by the Saudeleurs, a feudalistic dynasty that flourished around the time of Europe's Middle Ages.

**Etched in Stone –**  
In its heyday, each islet of Nan Madol had its own purpose, from ceremonial clam fishing to canoe making.



Felicia Beardsley, an archeologist at the University of California at Riverside who has studied a similar megalithic site on Kosrae Island, 340 miles to the east, thinks the centers were the administrative capitals of two allied island states. For five centuries, she says, they supported a vibrant and



capable civilization comparable to that of the Incas in South America.

Mindful of the fate of Governor Berg, I opt for a comfortable bed nearby at the Village hotel. There I meet Bob and Patti Arthur, an American couple who came to Pohnpei 30 years ago and slept on a platform in the jungle with their four children while building the hotel.

"Nan Madol is a spooky place, no doubt about that," Patti says as we gaze out over a lagoon from beneath the largest thatched roof structure in Micronesia. She shows me a bulging folder of clippings about Nan Madol that she's collected over the

years. I find that the stone city has even been immortalized in the fiction of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft as the site of the submerged city of R'lyeh, while his contemporary Abraham Merritt used Nan Madol as the centerpiece for his fantasy novel *The Moon Pool*, describing its ruins as being so ancient "they wither the eyes of those who look upon them."

NEXT MORNING, risking withered eyes, I'm slogging through the ruins at low tide and clambering up onto islets from which the topsoil has long since vanished. I've learned that each of these islets had a specific purpose –

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from burial places like Nan Douwas to canoe building and coconut processing. There is even a medical center where people bathed in special pools to cure themselves of sickness, especially afflictions caused by evil spells.

On the islet of Pahn Kadir, an area equal in size to three football fields, was the royal residence to which Pohnpeians regularly brought the tribute exacted from them by their Saudeleur masters. And in a sacred pool on nearby Idehd, priests sacrificed turtles to the moray eel they called Nan Samwohl. Here I stop for a while, imagining the eel they worshipped bursting from the water to snatch the offering from outstretched hands. The priests are said to have divined the future from how enthusiastically the deity snatched their offerings. The pool is still there, but there's no sign of Nan Samwohl in the few inches of muddy water at the bottom.

**I** SPEND my last hours at Nan Madol with archeologist Rufino Mauricio, who headed field excavations for the University of Oregon archeological team that conducted most of the research at the site. As we wander the ruins, Mauricio, a native Pohnpeian who received his archeological training in the US, brings the civilization vividly to life. "They would probably have had large trees for shade and bamboo aqueducts bringing in fresh water from the mainland," he says. He conjures up a vast panorama of thatched roofs and soaring palm trees, water-

ways teeming with canoes and tattooed residents, their muscular bodies glistening with coconut oil and adorned with feathers and shells.

"Most Pohnpeians believe you can do almost anything by magic," says Mauricio. Oral historians describe a Merlin-like figure who rode basalt slabs to the site. Many Pohnpeians still believe in *ahmara*, the magical power to make heavy objects lighter, and point to basalt slabs in the Awak Valley that they believe fell from the sky while being flown to Nan Madol.

Mauricio's view is more practical, but he is still awed by these extraordinary feats of engineering. "There are three boulders on the islet of Pahnwi that are stacked up on top of each other about eighteen meters high," he says. "Every time I look at them, I think: Were these people really giants? What kind of technology did they have that enabled them to do that?"

There is currently no active research at Nan Madol, and time continues its to take its slow toll on the site. But it does have local legal protection, and it's on the American National Register of Historic Places. It has also been nominated for the World Heritage List of UNESCO, which Mauricio hopes will foster more archeological work at the site. "There's still an incredible number of things we don't know about the city," he says.

As I bid Mauricio a grateful farewell, I find myself hoping that the city will always guard its mysteries. That way there will always be magic encircling the stones of Nan Madol.