

Francis Toribiong with shipwreck find in Palau (right) and in his element (below)

Text by Simon Pridmore  
Photos courtesy of Simon Pridmore, Tim Rock and Francis and Susan Toribiong

**For many divers, Palau is a bucket list destination, thanks to the pioneering efforts of maverick Palauan Francis Toribiong. Simon Pridmore has the story.**



TIM ROCK

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# Francis Toribiong

*The Diver Who Fell From the Sky*

The Republic of Palau is a country consisting of a collection of islands spread over a large area of the western Pacific Ocean. It lies east of the Philippines and north of the huge island of New Guinea. Geographically, it is part of the Caroline Islands, which in turn form

part of a region known as Micronesia. It is a 100-mile-long archipelago comprising a mixture of high peaks, coral atolls and a maze of tree-covered limestone outcrops. The northern islands are where most people live. The southern islands are tiny, sparsely populated and very remote. Palau

is blessed with a rich diversity of rare plant and animal life, and its tropical forest includes ironwood, banyan, coconut, pandanus and broadleaf hardwood trees. The islands have over 50 species of resident birds, a variety of reptiles, flying foxes and, most significantly, a rich marine envi-

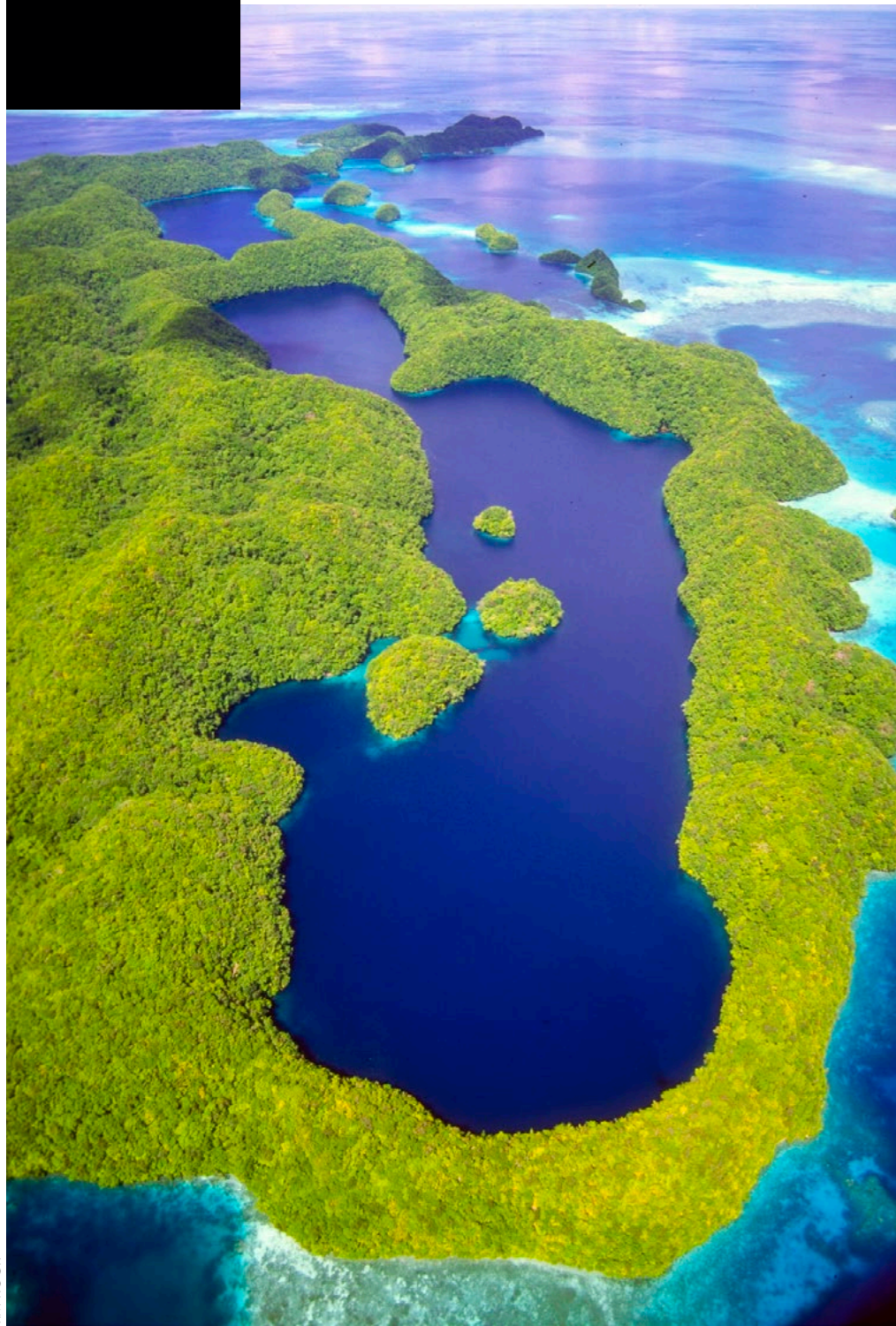
ronment to rival any in the world. This is why, if you are a scuba diver, you probably know exactly where Palau is. You are very familiar with what it looks like above and below the water, and if you have not already been there, you really want to go there.



Palau's outer reef, Toribiong's playground (right); Palau's Rock Islands (below); Location of Palau on map of Micronesia and Southeast Asia (centre); The author's book about Toribiong (bottom right)

SIMON PRIDMORE

## Toribiong



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elled to Palau, and it was fascinating to tour the islands with Francis, speak to his friends and former colleagues and find out more about him and the recent history of his country.

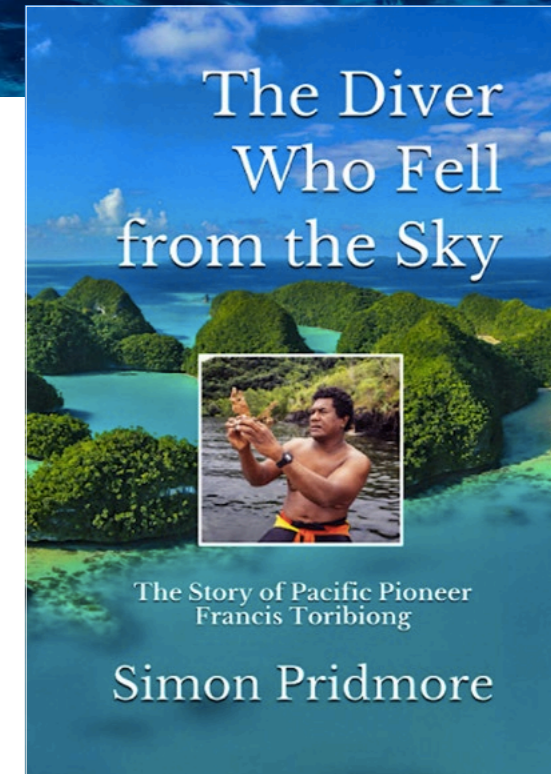
I had met Francis while I was working in Guam in the 1990s. He came to me to learn about nitrox diving and took a short course, and I was well aware of his reputation. But, before

embarking on the book project, I did not appreciate what an astonishing guy he was, what challenges he had overcome and how significant his achievements were. In a nutshell, he had created an entire national economy on the back of sport diving.

### A Palauan pioneer

Maverick, innovator, entrepreneur, environmentalist and sheer force of nature, Francis Toribiong would have been a unique and significant individual in any period and anywhere in the world. As it turned out, he was born at just the right time, in just the right place, with just the right set of skills and attributes to help a fledgling nation find its place in the world.

For around 20 years at



COURTESY OF SIMON PRIDMORE

the end of the last century, he arguably did more than anyone else to build Palau's economy and help it develop into an independent, forward-looking republic. And, as I

You may not have seen his name before, but the person mainly responsible for putting Palau so high on your travel bucket list is Francis Toribiong.

### A book commission

A few years ago, Francis and his family commissioned me, my wife Sofie and photographer Tim Rock to write a book on the story of his life. We trav-

Francis Toribiong exploring the reefs of Palau with wreck finder Klaus Lindemann in 1987 (right). Francis Toribiong, the sky diver (below). He was the first sky diver in Palau.



TIM ROCK

COURTESY OF FRANCIS AND SUSAN TORIBIONG



said, improbably and uniquely, he achieved this via scuba diving. He was also Palau's first-ever skydiver

and jump master—known by people throughout the islands as the Palauan who fell from the sky. The reference is both literal and figurative. He was so completely different from his contemporaries in terms of his demeanour, ambition and vision that it was as if he had come from outer space.

There was no historical precedent for what Francis was doing, and he had no examples to follow. He wrote his own life story. He was the first Palauan ever to seek and seize the international narrative. No Palauan in history, in any context or field, had ever thought to go out into the world and say:

"This is Palau—what we have is wonderful. Come and see!"

But that is exactly what Francis did.

### Dive training

As a child, he was already an expert

swimmer, thanks to his father's guidance, and would negotiate the fast-flowing currents between Palau's major islands to commute to and from school instead of waiting for the ferry. Then, in 1964, at the age of 16, he watched in fascination as salvage divers raised a sunken sea-plane from the harbour floor and immediately knew what he wanted to do with his life.

He started working with the salvagers and taught himself to dive. Then, in 1971, he got a NAUI C-card while at college in California, where he also worked as a lifeguard. Two years later, when he was back in Palau, his NAUI instructor, Dean Westgaard, visited him as part of a round-the-world trip to explore the world's best dive sites. They went diving together, and Westgaard was filled with wonder at

## NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling *Scuba* series:

- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

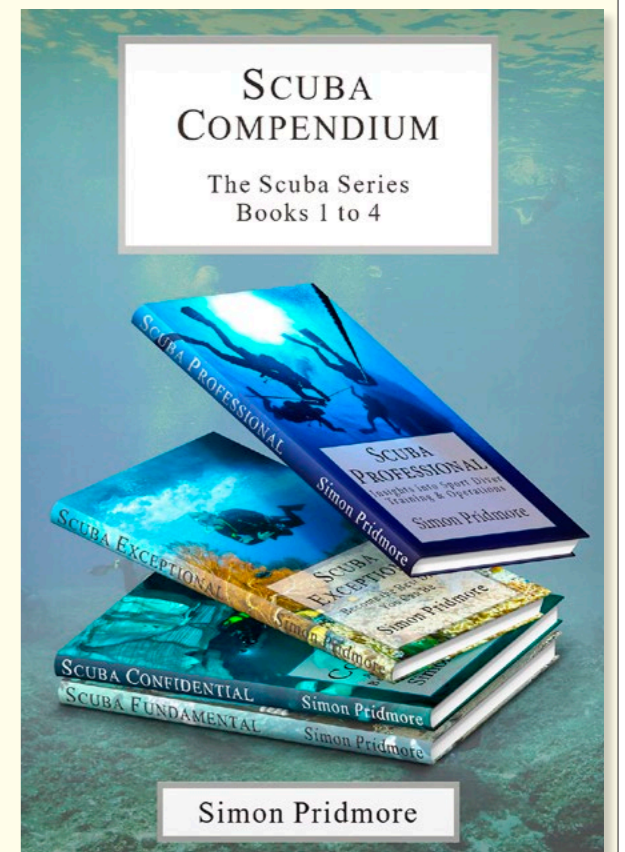
As Simon puts it, this is "a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits." Nothing is missing. *Scuba Compendium* gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much

what he saw. For Francis, it was nothing special, but then, he had never dived anywhere else.

A few months later, Westgaard sent Francis a postcard. On it, he wrote: "I've dived everywhere else. Palau is the best. You need to become an instructor and open a dive shop, DW."

In 1975, Francis became Palau's first dive instructor and started hanging around hotels, selling dive tours to visitors. In 1977, he met Susan, his future wife and business partner, and together they opened the Fish 'n Fins



of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

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dive shop. He trained other Palauans to dive, established an expert team and began exploring Palau's lagoon and outer reefs to find the best sites.

One day, eager to impress a group of Italian divers, Francis took them to a point that looked like a promising place for some shark action. An hour or so later, the group ascended, screaming with excitement. They had become the first divers ever to experience the adrenaline rush offered by Blue Corner, now established as one of the world's best dive sites.

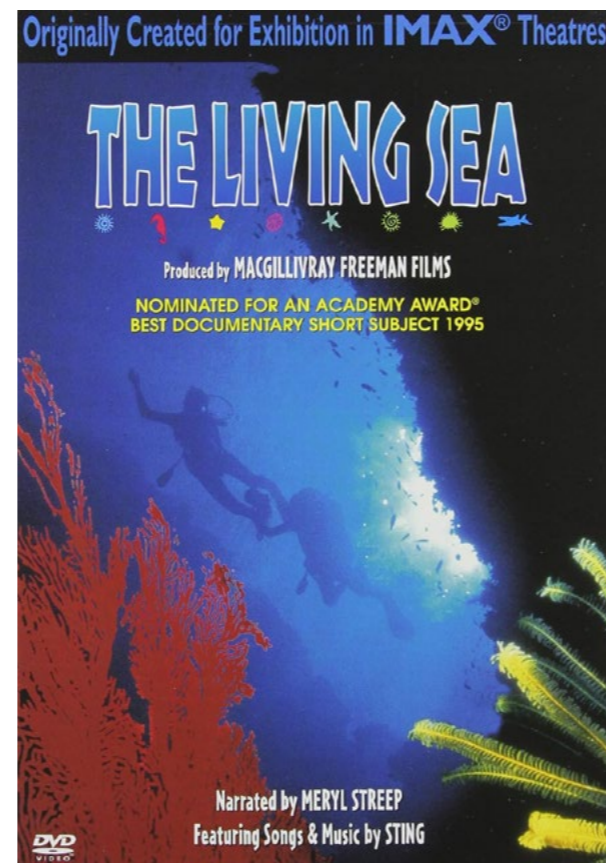
Francis receiving his Scuba Diving Hall of Fame award in 2010 (right); Francis with his wife, Susan (below); DVD cover for *The Living Sea*, the 1994 Academy Award-nominated IMAX documentary film about oceans that featured Francis in Palau (centre)



COURTESY OF FRANCIS AND SUSAN TORIBONG



COURTESY OF FRANCIS AND SUSAN TORIBONG



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## Spreading the word

Francis brought the first dive liveaboard to Palau. He opened Palau's first dive resort and travelled all over the United States, telling everyone about Palau's underwater delights via dive shows, dive shop visits and magazine articles written by his close friend and collaborator, photojournalist Tim Rock.

In 1987, Francis, Tim and wreck finder Klaus Lindemann—who had previously devoted years of diving to research and record the sunken fleet in Truk Lagoon—teamed up to discover, dive and photograph the many WWII shipwrecks in Palau's waters. Then, in 1994, Francis was

featured in the Academy Award-nominated IMAX documentary *The Living Sea*, which was seen by millions and cemented Palau's place as one of the world's top dive destinations. In 2010, he was inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame, joining the pantheon of the truly great figures in our sport.

Francis is rightly famed as the father of Palau tourism. For decades, he has been a tireless ambassador for his country and its abundant marine and land resources and a perfect host to legions of visiting divers. Today, in retirement, he continues to be a devoted advocate for marine conser-

vation and an implacable opponent of those who, through malevolence or negligence, threaten to harm Palau's considerable natural treasures.

As Francis bade us farewell at the end of our research trip, I asked him what it was that continued to drive him. After all, he had made his dreams come true long ago. He had

## A New Dive Book from Simon Pridmore

"Simon Pridmore's new book, *Technically Speaking*' is an outstanding tour de force from one of modern diving's most accomplished practitioners and best-selling authors."

— David Strike, Oztek & Tekdive Convenor

"Simon has completed a complex task with consummate skill and has accurately unravelled the when's, the who's and some of the why's, much of which would have been unjustifiably lost in the mists of time if not for this work."

— Kevin Gurr, Technical Diving Inventor & Innovator

"It will take some doing to better this account of tech's first steps... as no matter how much you know or think you know; you will still find many obscure historical gems..."

— Kevin Denlay, Early Adopter & Wreck Finder

*Technically Speaking* is the latest book from best-selling Scuba series author Simon Pridmore. It is a selection of themed talks telling the early history of technical diving—where it came from, how it developed, how it expanded across

the world, who the important movers were and how, in the decade from 1989 to 1999, the efforts of a few determined people changed scuba diving forever.

These ten years saw the greatest shake-up the sport has ever seen but technical diving's road to universal acceptance was anything but smooth, many obstacles had to be overcome and there were times when even viewed in retrospect, it seemed that its advocates might fail in their mission. Ultimately, success came down to per-

severance, people power, good timing and more than a little luck.

Available in hardback, paperback and ebook at **Amazon Worldwide, Apple, Kobo, and Tolino.** See **SimonPridmore.com**



built a successful business, turned Palau into a magnet for divers and a thriving tourist destination and inspired Palau to become a world leader in marine conservation. But it seemed to me that he felt he still had work to do.

His reply showed that he was now thinking of Palau's youth and how he wanted them to take over the baton he had carried for so long. "I want to make sure that Palau actively pursues its traditional conservation practices for the benefit of future generations." ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers *Scuba Fun-*

damental: Start Diving the Right Way, *Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*, *Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be* and *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations, now available as a compendium. He is also co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His latest books include The Diver Who Fell from the Sky, Dive into Taiwan, Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again! and the Dining with Divers series of cookbooks. Visit: **SimonPridmore.com.***