Marshall Islands, Republic of the Marshall Islands

Location

The Marshall Islands are located in the North Pacific Ocean approximately half way from Hawaii to Australia. The coordinates are between 4° and 14° N latitude and 160° and 175° E longitude. They are a group of atolls, reefs, and islands in the Oceania region. In a worldwide rank order of area, they are number 229 (this number varies a little between different listings) with only 181.3 sq km. It covers an area of nearly 1 million square miles in the ocean, making it one of the largest spread countries in the Pacific Ocean.

Geography

The islands are made up of 29 coral atolls and five single islands, with the total number of islands adding up to about 1,225 islands. All of these islands form two parallel chain-like formations, the east group is known as Ratak (Sunrise) group and the west group is Ralik (Sunset) group. Low coral limestone and sand islands make up of most of the islands and islets. Islands encircle central lagoons and also have plenty of palm trees and white sand. The highest point on the islands is a mere 10 meter high point on Likiep, the mean height of the land is about 2 meters above sea level.

Climate

The islands are very tropical, generally hot and humid. Their average temperature is 81°F; mild winds and tropical showers tend to temper the heat. Nighttime temperatures are actually only a few degrees cooler than the daily lows. Typical of the Pacific the skies are often cloudy, but the rainfall varies; the northern atolls average about 20 inches of rain and the southern average about 160 inches a year. They experience their wet season from May to November and the dry season begins in January and runs for about three months. The islands do
border the typhoon belt, but typhoons are not regular problems for them. Typhoons, although irregular, occur around March to April and October to November.

History

Approximately 500 BC to 2000 BC Micronesian navigators arrive on the Marshall Islands and they called the atolls Aelon Kain meaning “Our Islands”. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas grants ownership of all of Micronesia to Spain. Spaniard Alvaro Saavedra was the first European to “discover” the islands in 1529. From that discovery the Marshall Islands were virtually left alone by Europeans for years. Then in 1788 they were named by British Naval Captain William Marshall, who was transporting convicts for New South Wales. Starting in the 1860’s German trading builds and expanded on the Islands. Spain then annexed the Marshall Islands to Germany in 1885 for a compensation of $4.5 million and in 1886 Germany took over ownership, governance, and protection of the area. This remained generally the same until 1914 when Japan captured the islands, and in 1920 the League of Nations granted a mandate for Japan to control them. In 1934 when Japan left the league, they retained possession and began military fortification of some of the islands, including; the atolls of Kwajalein, Wotje, Maloelap, Jaluit, and later Mili and Enewetak. During World War II there was intense fighting on the Marshall Islands and surrounding areas. At the end of the war the United States was granted control of Marshall Islands. Soon after 1946 the United States began their nuclear testing program in the islands, more specifically on the Bikini atoll and was later expanded to the Enewetak atoll. Over the years of 1946 and 1958 the U.S. tested 67 nuclear weapons. In 1954 the most powerful hydrogen bomb tested by the U.S. was tested on Bikini atoll, the radiation forced a large area evacuation of Marshallese and U.S. Military personnel alike. Three years later one of the islands, Rongelap, was allowed to be returned to by the Rongelapese. They left the island
several years later because of feared contamination. In 1978 the Marshall Islands Constitutional Convention adopts the nation’s first constitution. Officially in 1979 the government of the Marshall Islands was established, and becomes self governing. Showing the change in 1982 Marshall Islands officially becomes the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Also in 1983 voters approve the Compact of Free Association with the United States; this was approved by the United States in 1986. This grants RMI its sovereignty, provides for aid, and U.S. defense: in exchange the U.S. has continued military use of the missile testing range on the Kwajalein atoll. After being recognized by the United Nations as no longer under a trusteeship the RMI joined the United Nations in 1991. Then in 2003 RMI and U.S. governments altered and renegotiated some terms of the Compact of Free Association.

**Important Dates**

**Holidays and Events**

- **New Year’s Day**: January 1
- **Majuro Day (MALGOV)**: February 15
- **Memorial and Nuclear Victim’s Day**: March 1
- **Coconut Cup Sailing Regatta**: First Saturday in April
- **Good Friday**: April 9
- **Constitution Day**: May 1
- **Constitution Day Sporting Events and Parade**: May 1
- **Outrigger Marshall Islands Cup Traditional Canoe Race**: First weekend in May
- **Fisherman’s Day**: First Friday in July
- **Marshalls Billfish Club Annual Tournament**: First weekend in July
- **Rijerbal (Worker’s) Day**: First Friday in September
Mobil All Micronesia Fishing Tournament: First weekend in September

Manit (Custom) Day: Last Friday in September

Lutok Koppan Alele Custom Day Activities: Last Friday in September

President’s Day: November 17

Gospel Day: First Friday in December

Chamber of Commerce Christmas Parade: 1st or 2nd Saturday in December

Christmas Day: December 25

New Year’s Eve Block Party: December 31

Population

The population of the Republic of Marshall Islands is approximately 60,000. They have a population growth rate of 2.27% with an average life expectancy of about 70 years. Most of the population is indigenous, the Marshallese, although there is a fair mix of other Micronesian, German, Japanese, and American Marshallese. Most of the population is on the main islands and atolls; some are not inhabited at all nor are some big enough to be.

Currency

The currency used on RMI is the U.S. dollar.

Education

Compulsory education is for ages 6 through 14 or completion of eighth grade. There is a high school entrance exam that is given to all eighth graders and from that students are chosen as to who will be admitted to high school. There are public and non-public schools available; with about 100 primary schools, one middle school, and 12 high schools total. About half of the students are female and half are male. Many of the facilities are primitive and a lot of them need repaired or replaced.
Post-secondary education consists of the College of the Marshall Islands. The college offers programs for high-school graduates and non-high school completers alike. There are associate degrees, vocational education courses, certificate programs, adult education programs, high school drop out intervention programs, enrichment and continuing education programs available.

Literacy rates of the total population were 93.7%, male 93.6% and female 93.7% in 1999.

Language

RMI has two official languages, Marshallese and English. English is widely spoken as a second language. Marshallese has two dialects, one in the Ralik chain and one in the Ratak chain of atolls. Although there are two dialects there are only minor differences between the two.

Religion

Most of the population is Protestant. Other religions include Assembly of God, Roman Catholic, Bukot nan Jesus, Mormons, other Christian, and others. In general though the people are all religious and Sundays are set aside for rest and relaxing after church services.

Agriculture

The government has programs that are trying to expand and help agriculture grow on the islands. They see potential for niche markets in the United States and other areas. A lot of agricultural production on the islands is primarily subsistence. The crops produced are coconut, breadfruit, tomato, taro, pandanus, pumpkin, sweet potato, swamp tare, arrowroot, banana, papaya, lime, cabbage, and green pepper. Livestock consists of pigs, chickens, and some aquaculture production of clams and coral. Hydroponic farming is gaining popularity in the area as well. The labor force of the country is 21.4% agriculture, 20.9% industry, and 57.7% service.
Trade

Marshall Islands import far more than they export and are dependent on U.S. aid since they are a growing country and government. They export few agricultural products, crafts, tuna, seafood, and copra. While they export about $9 million f.o.b. they import about $54 million f.o.b. There are various government programs that help substantiate the country in the future. They will receive aid from the United States until the year 2023; at that time a Trust Fund, with contributions from both governments, will begin perpetual annual payouts.

Some of the programs of the government focus on tourism, agriculture, and canoes for example to help to accomplish stronger independence.

Food

Food on RMI is a melting pot of flavors. Most any type of cuisine is available from Chinese, Korean, Indian, Japanese, and many more. Local food is strong in seafood because of their very oceanic location. Many of the locally grown crops are used in dishes on the islands; crops such as coconut, pumpkin, and breadfruit. They also eat rice, turtle, and canned meat, such as Spam.

Landmarks

There are many exciting things to do in the Marshall Islands. A few landmarks to speak of are the Peace Park Memorial, 1918 Typhoon Memorial, Alele Museum, and the Marshallese Cultural Center. The Peace Park Memorial honors Japanese soldiers who fought and died in the Pacific during World War II. The structure was built by Japan to honor their soldiers. Also the 1918 Typhoon Memorial which commemorates victims of the terrible 1918 typhoon that devastated Majuro. It recognizes the generous contribution of the Japanese emperor to help
rebuild Majuro. The Alele Museum holds many items of Marshallese tradition and culture and exhibits of their history.

In addition to these, there is a lot more to do on Marshall Islands. The nature of the islands allows for some amazing activities. In Laura Lagoon, you can snorkel down to a sunken World War II bomber. Snorkeling is a great activity because of the great ocean life; corals, fish, turtles, and other sea life abound nearby. As well as snorkeling, there is scuba diving and swimming. The beaches on the islands, atolls, and islets are gorgeous to spend a day on. Fishing and sport fishing are mainstays of the Marshallese but can be enjoyed by anyone. Marshallese have a deep history in boating and have a unique traditional style of canoes. Transportation from atoll to atoll can be accomplished by airplane and watercraft. On some of the major urban centers you can rent a car, ride a taxi or bus, and bikes are widely used as well. In the urban centers there are plenty of restaurants, hotels, nightlife, bowling, and other activities. Gardens are tropical and show off local flora.

Laura Harpster