



Feature > Profile

Finding the Way

Master Navigator Guards Guam Hotel - And An Ancient Skill

By Sarah Garvey

Manny Sikau

Never underestimate the hidden talents of your hotel security guard. Manny Sikau, 43, works the graveyard shift as a security guard at the Hilton Guam Resort & Spa, but he's also a master of the ancient art of Micronesian navigation. While most people arrive in Guam by airplanes equipped with GPS and radar, Sikau made his last voyage to Guam in a handmade traditional outrigger sailing canoe. He sailed from his home on Puluwat, an island in the Chuuk state of the Federated States of Micronesia. To guide him he used only the sun, the stars, the feel of the waves and the sea creatures he met along the way during his six-day, 450-nautical-mile journey.

Traditional navigation is still practiced on Puluwat and the neighboring atolls that form the western islands of Chuuk and the eastern islands of Yap. Navigators learn the constellations and can locate an individual island by following the particular star under which that island is located. Each island is also associated with specific "sea creatures" so navigators like Sikau also position themselves by looking for these creatures, as well as by studying the sun and wave patterns. If you have the correct star in sight, and you see a flock of black and white sea birds fishing, for example, you may well be nearing the southeast shore of Saipan. Before each voyage, Sikau says he prays to the Spirit of Navigation (Anunwaii) to "forgive my bad deeds on land." He also chants to "open the sea" when he leaves the reef and can do another chant to "shorten the sea" if ever he feels he's losing his bearings. "I know that you can't really shorten the sea," Sikau explains, reconciling his belief in science with the art of traditional navigation, "but I do believe that the Spirit of Navigation will help me to sight land." To those observers who look on his fragile craft with skepticism, he says: "I know it works because I've seen it work. I've done it."

For Sikau, navigation is a family tradition. His grandfather, father and uncle are all navigators. His lessons began at age 5, when he accompanied his grandfather to the lagoon to learn the stars. Lessons continued as he got older and moved into a bachelor canoe house. When he left Puluwat to attend high school on the main island of Chuuk, he asked his sister to record the navigation lessons for him so he would not fall behind.

Today he feels safer in his outrigger canoe than in an outboard motorboat. "In a canoe you can't run out of gas and you can't break down," he explains. "The worst that happens is you run out of wind for awhile." In the hierarchy of navigators, the top tier consists of men like Sikau who have become "masters" or po by absorbing all the knowledge, completing voyages and undergoing an elaborate three-day po induction ceremony.

With the advent of outboard motors and the breakdown of traditional lifestyles on Micronesian atolls, the art of traditional navigation is being lost. In Sikau's part of Micronesia there used to be more than 30 different schools of navigation; today only two remain (Fanurh and Wariang). There are just 15 navigators left on Puluwat.

When he's not protecting the Hilton, Sikau is doing his part to ensure the survival of traditional navigation in Micronesia. He used to teach a class at the University of Guam, but after that program ended, he created his own Seafarers Society. Each Saturday, the members of this club meet at the traditional canoe house

Sikau built and go out sailing in the very canoe in which Sikau made his last voyage from Puluwat. Sikau receives no pay from these sessions, and his only requirement for his students is that they are serious and “really want to learn.” The club members are now looking for financing to enable them to build an eight-person canoe to sail to Palau in 2004.

“I love to navigate,” says Sikau. “I just love the water and sailing. I don’t want this thing to die out.”