

[From Summer 2003]

## Where America's Day Begins

Where can you find the world's top consumers per capita of Tabasco sauce, Soy sauce, and SPAM luncheon meat? Where is the first baby of each New Year born? Where can you find sandy beaches, beautiful tropical sunsets, friendly people, and food for your every craving? Guam, that's where! The United States Territory of Guam is a tiny island in the Pacific, about 9,000 miles from the Eastern Shore of Virginia; Mariana Trench has well over 160,000 inhabitants.

Why does any of this matter to me, you might ask? Well, Guam is also a part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the Guam NWR is comprised of 771 acres of coral reef and terrestrial habitat owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as well as over 22,000 acres of forest owned by the US Department of Defense.

In addition, both John and Leslie Morton, who spent a short time on Chincoteague NWR and are now at Kenai NWR in Alaska, spent about six years at Guam NWR. In addition, I, one of Eastern Shore NWR's newest interns, was born and raised on this tropical island, and would like to share with you an overview of Guam's unique background and culture.

The island of Guam, a mere 209 square miles in area, is located just 13 degrees north of the equator and midway between Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. Traveling from the United States mainland, one would have to cross the International Dateline to get to Guam, hence its popular motto: "Where America's Day Begins."



As far as climate is concerned, Guam is a land of eternal summer, with temperatures usually in the mid-80s with very high humidity, allowing many tropical trees and flowers to grow. Although plants usually do well, virtually all of Guam's native birds are extinct in the wild due to the accidental introduction of the brown tree snake (*Boiga irregularis*) during World War II. By the early 1980s, this snake had wiped out most of the native bird populations. Most of the other animals, such as wild pigs, deer, and fruit bats continue to thrive on the island with more success.

With regard to native human populations, it is believed that the first people to settle on Guam came from Southeast Asia about 5,000 years ago. These ancient people were called Chamorros, and spoke a language also called Chamorro. They ate seafood and fruit, and built their homes on top of large stones called latte. Since those ancient times, the people of Guam have been influenced by three major historical events.

The first was the Spanish conquest of Guam in 1695. The Spanish instituted a somewhat harsh rule for over 200 years, heavily influencing Guam's language, religion, and culture.

The second major event was the end of the Spanish-American war in 1898, which made Guam a United States possession. The American influences on Guam were more positive ones, mostly dealing with a structured naval government and much improved standards of living for the Chamorros.

The third major event was the Japanese occupation of Guam during World War II, where Chamorros lived as prisoners of war, many suffering severe brutalities, until the Americans liberated them in 1944.

Since then, Guam has happily (for the most part) remained a United States territory, heavily influenced by American government, capitalism, and pop culture. Ironically, its economy is now almost totally fueled by Asian tourism. On the whole, citizens of Guam are proud to call themselves Americans, and this pride is shown by Guam's high rate of military enlistment.

Where culture is concerned, Guam has been able to integrate its many influences into the Chamorro way of life, still maintaining its uniqueness by retaining several ancient customs and traditions. One of the most notable cultural events is the village fiesta, where each village will honor its patron saint by having a procession through the village, afterwards celebrating with a potluck meal of thirty or forty different, wonderfully mouthwatering dishes.

Another notable event is the annual Liberation Day parade on July 21st, commemorating the day when the Chamorros were liberated by the United States during WW II. The parade often consists of several cultural floats, as well as military floats and marching bands.

Over its long history, Guam has been called many names: "Hub of the Pacific," "Gateway to Micronesia," and "Where America's Day Begins," just to name a few. For many World War II veterans, it is a place of fond memories. For many Asian immigrants, it is a place to start a new life. But for the Chamorros and the many other peoples that now inhabit the island, it is and always will be home.

For more information about Guam's history and culture, please visit: <http://ns.gov.gu>

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