

Suggested Itinerary: Northern Mariana Islands

A U.S. commonwealth, the Northern Mariana Islands are a string of 15 volcanic and limestone islands in the Pacific Ocean just north of Guam. They're known for their rich culture, natural beauty, crystal-clear water, shopping and dining. Kick off your tour in Saipan, the chain's largest and most adventure-packed island. From there, venture out to explore World War II historic sites and underwater gems in this island paradise.

Saipan

Suggested: 3 days

You'll slip into relaxation mode as soon as you arrive in Saipan. Don't fight it – just head to the beach. Good news: all of Saipan's beaches, even those connected to a resort, are considered public land and are open to all. Before swimming, take note of daily tides. Mañagaha Beach, a quick ferry ride from Saipan, is a lush oasis of white sand, swaying palms and clear blue water. Another popular area for swimming and lounging is Micro Beach in Garapan village. To get a true sense of island life, plan to browse the Garapan Street Market, filled with food stalls, small vendors and live music. Serious shoppers will want to indulge in duty-free shopping at the high-end DFS Galleria Saipan. The island hosts many vibrant festivals throughout the year, including the Marianas Cup Beach Volleyball Festival in February; April's San Vicente Fiesta Saipan – a carnival celebrating the island's patron saint; and the Liberation Day Festival, a week-long event in July with music, games and local food vendors commemorating the U.S. liberation of the islands.

World War II Historic Sites

Suggested: 2 days

History buffs will find much to hold their interest in the Northern Mariana Islands. Saipan alone is home to 20 World War II historic sites. Saipan International Airport was once a World War II airfield (the Japanese built Aslito Airfield in 1934) and what is now the local visitor bureau was once an air operations building. Made of burnt coral and seashells, the Japanese Lighthouse atop Navy Hill is one of the few surviving structures from before the war. Visit memorials at Suicide Cliff and Banzai Cliff, where a large number of Japanese military personnel and civilians jumped rather than surrender.

The Grotto

Suggested: 1 day

Save a day to explore the otherworldly Grotto (also known as the Blue Grotto of Saipan), perfect for swimmers, snorkellers and divers. This collapsed limestone cave is one of the world's most popular diving spots. Visitors are treated to views of sea turtles, rays, tuna and reef sharks, as well as the stunning effect of the light on the water as it travels through the cave. The cavern is filled with seawater from three underwater passageways. Intrepid travellers enter the Grotto by descending steep concrete stairs into the water (previously, the area was accessible only by sliding down a rope), so visitors should be relatively fit and comfortable with the climb down and back. Be sure to look up to see the tiny stalactites hanging down from above.

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