
Manta Rendezvous

Off Baja, rays in your face

For most of us divers, an encounter with a giant manta ray is a rare experience, at the top of the list of underwater thrills. But when a manta comes so close you can scratch his belly — and he seems to like it — wow!

For some odd reason, the mantas of Socorro — actually the Revillagigedo Islands, a full day's steam from Cabo San Lucas on the southern tip of Mexico's Baja peninsula — are on call for human encounters with no apparent fear, hesitation, or shyness.

During my week here I was often treated to eight or ten animals at a time. Three or four might be in formation, while

others might approach alone or in pairs, suddenly materializing out of the gloom.

I met two mantas on my first dive, and six more greeted me on the second. I'm not talking about some distant observation through squinting eyes; this was in your face. For example, an enormous critter moved into my space, nose to nose, then lifted up and hovered over my head. I reached up and gently scratched its white underside. To my amazement, it stayed motionless for several moments, apparently enjoying the tickling bubbles from my regulator.

In my many previous experiences with mantas, they simply

maintained a comfortable distance and moved away if approached. In Yap (Micronesia), where visibility is usually poor and the current strong, fleets of mantas are just about guaranteed. They're majestic in formation, wonderful to observe, but of no mind to interact. There I saw a "gotta touch" diver kick off the bottom, make his doomed attempt, and ruin the photo of a patient photographer who had traveled thousands of miles to capture it.

On several trips to Costa Rica's Cocos Island, I've sighted large numbers of mantas, often quite close. But any attempt to move in was inevitably rejected.

The mantas at Revillagigedo Islands, however, seem to stay in one area for long periods. Perhaps due to repeated diver visits over the years, they have decided that we can be not only trusted but even counted among their playmates.

Perhaps it's also a tribute to the divemasters visiting the islands who have learned proper manta-ray protocol and give careful and accurate instruction to their guests. It seems that a manta wants a diver in his line of vision until just before contact. An approach from behind or a sudden movement will stop the intimacy. Any hands-on contact must be totally controlled by the ray.

The rays here have distinct personalities. Darth Vader (completely black except for a few patches of white on the underside) was selective about who could come close. Others were not at all interested in being ridden but stayed nearby. Once, when no other divers were in the water, I was approached by Stubby, a monstrous ray with a 20-foot wingspan and a missing tail. I lowered myself onto his upper back, gently placing my

How to See Manta Rays

Our correspondent diving with the mantas at Socorro was aboard the 72-foot *Ambar III*, a boat that does more fishing than diving. The vessel was booked up for the next two years, but a last-minute cancellation opened up

a spot for her. (*Ambar III*: 503-234-7952, fax 503-620-6787.)

The *Solmar V*, departing from Cabo San Lucas, is a 112-foot live-aboard carrying 22 divers that also covers the area. *Undercurrent* readers Fred and Jean Drury (Wheaton, Illinois) just returned from a May trip on the *Solmar V* and reported beautiful weather, plenty of mantas, sharks and more sharks, a whale shark, and humpbacks in the distance.

Jeff Milman (New York), who was on the *Solmar V* last December, noticed that, for touching, mantas preferred the women divers. He offered some advice: "Men should consider dressing in drag for the dive." Both readers rated the boat, the crew, and the diving high, but panned the food. (*Solmar V*: travel agent or direct at 800-344-3349 or 310-459-9861, fax 310-454-1686.)

The *Don Jose*, an 80-foot live-aboard departing from La Paz, has been in the area for 17 years. Carrying up to 22 divers, the boat makes some trips out to Socorro. (*Don Jose*: travel agent or direct at 800-843-6967 or 619-581-3311, fax 619-581-6542.)

The *Copper Sky*, a boat that was being booked by See & Sea, is an 88-foot schooner carrying only 12 divers. It departs from La Paz for Socorro trips. (*Copper Sky*: 604-433-8374, fax 604-433-8808.)

bare hands on his rough skin. This allowed me to adjust my position without losing contact.

What followed was the trip of a lifetime. From a distance, it would appear that we were moving slowly through the water column. But from my vantage point, it was an exhilarating, ecstatic flight, accompanied by a mixed bag of emotions, not the least of which was guilt.

You see, over many years of diving I've become a strong proponent of *not* "touching the sea." Marine animals from corals to whales should be visited, observed, and photographed, I believe, not manhandled, manipulated, or interfered with. So I

couldn't dispel the thought that I was participating in a practice that may be ultimately detrimental to these friendly fish. I had succumbed to behavior that I would have considered reprehensible before. But it was irresistible; and it was a dilemma. Now, guilt or not, I'm glad I did it.

Alone on another dive, I was approached by a single manta ray. It hung overhead for the usual bubble-and-scratch routine, in which I now gladly participated. After a time I swam away, but the ray followed and hovered again. This happened repeatedly, until I began feel a little uncomfortable with it. I wondered how long the manta intended to keep me

captive. I swam to a rock and waited several minutes. The manta remained nearby, and when I pushed off, it was again over my head. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic, so I swam toward the boat. Other divers entered the water; the ray seemed happy enough to share its attentions. I felt relieved.

While I still feel guilty about violating my rules of being only an observer of the seas, I guess the rule is to treat the mantas with respect and let them be the creatures in charge. I hope that the unique experience I had was, and will be for other divers, mutually enjoyable.

G. S.

Ranting about Rants

Readers respond to issues in previous issues

Fred Calhoun's rant in the April issue, in which he objects vehemently to the practice of dive instructors advocating dropping your mask around your neck as opposed to putting it atop one's head, prompted a volley of replies from readers. Stephanie Varix (Naples, Florida) writes that the mask on the forehead indicates a distressed diver. "The reasoning behind it is that if a diver is on the surface and is in distress, the proper technique to get help is to inflate your BC, place your mask on your forehead, and wave an arm over your head for someone on the boat to come and help you. This is not some technique made up by 'cocktail scubas,' but a safety measure."

Karen Uyeda (San Jose, California) writes, "It is obvious that Fred hasn't been diving on the West Coast in surf conditions or thinks that people only dive off boats or in bath water. Get hit with a rogue wave with your mask on your forehead, and your mask is history. I do have a question for Fred, though. How can your regulator get 'ensnared' with the mask strap? If your mask is around your neck, I would hope that you don't have need for the regulator! In our classes, it is emphasized that the only time you should have your mask off while getting in or out of the water is when the water is calm and there is no wave action. If there is a remote possibility that you might need

your reg in a hurry, you'd best have your mask on your face and reg in your hand."

Trish Boyer (Lincoln, Delaware) has an answer to the question of whether anyone has lost a mask by wearing it on the forehead. "Yes, my husband and I operate a dive charter business out of Indian River Inlet, Delaware. We see several masks a year go to the bottom when waves knock them off divers' heads. The most common telltale panic signs on the surface are no air in the BC, regulator out of the mouth, and mask on the forehead."

And Larry Taylor (Ypsilanti, Michigan) writes, "Perhaps the best-documented case occurred in the 'little Jimmy' incident. In this case, a child and his father fell through the ice near a Lake Michigan shore. A television crew, by chance, was nearby and videotaped the entire incident. Portions of this tape are often shown in