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TRAVEL TALES

OCEAN ADVENTURE



Splashing with sea devils

In a Maldivian lagoon during monsoon season, a congregation of the ocean's largest and most charismatic rays gathers to gorge.

By Carrie Hutchinson

Rough seas obscure my view. In the distance, I can see the Zodiac bobbing on the ocean, but the tell-tale signs of my fellow snorkellers – heads out of the water, jets of water being expelled into the air – have disappeared.

Not that I'm particularly concerned. We are in open ocean, but the water is only about six metres deep and I am pretty sure they wouldn't leave me out here like some sort of *Open Water* nightmare. The sea calms for just a second and I spot a few people swimming about 40 metres away. Readjusting my mask, I stick my head back

under water and kick off, only to be greeted by the most magnificent sight. A school of manta rays, about 16 in all, is cruising towards me.

Every year in Hanifaru Bay in the Maldives' Baa Atoll, when the southwest monsoon and the lunar tide coincide, huge numbers of rays gather to feed on plankton blooms. Each day, the feeding frenzy goes for between two and four hours. The luxurious resort where we are staying, Anantara Kihavah, runs regular expeditions between May and November and, this being August, we are in the midst of manta mania.



AS SOON AS WE ARE IN THE WATER, THE FIRST MANTA APPEARS OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

On board the yacht on the way to the bay, one of our party, underwater photographer and videographer Dean Cropp, offered a few pointers about swimming with these giant rays. “They don’t like a whole lot of legs and fins hanging down, so stay flat on the surface,” he advised. “Think graceful like Swan Lake rather than Michael Jackson’s Thriller.” He also mentioned mantas often

respond to sounds, so a yell or noise made through a snorkel may capture their attention.

In the water, I decide to put his advice to the test. I make a noise – a woo-hoo – beneath the waves and a manta glides just inches past me, giving me the side eye. I wave at another and it swoops back to pass again. As I swim along on my side, stretching arms and legs into a starfish formation, it mimics my movements, its belly just inches from my own. They are incredible beasts, and some have wing spans of three-and-a-half metres. I’m not sure how long I play with them, but eventually they tire of the attention and slide off into the gloom, just as I realise my camera has been clutched in the palm of my hand throughout the entire episode.



Water views from beside the pool; snorkelling the house reef (below).

As a group who'd been caught in a storm and struck by sea sickness a couple of days before, only to suffer the ultimate indignity of not spotting a single manta, we'd been hopeful but also anxious on the way out here. There are strict rules about how often the mantas can be visited and the length of time swimmers can stay in the water. If, on our return, we had failed to see them again, we'd be leaving without achieving our prime objective. Everyone on this expedition had their fingers crossed. At least the weather was better.

Not that we hadn't already made the most of the amazing island on which Kihavah is located. It might not be big, but it certainly packs a luxe punch. Such are the vagaries of the flight schedules from Australia to the Maldives, we'd arrived after midnight. Unfortunately I had just got my thirteenth wind, so opened a bottle of Taittinger (it flows quite freely in these parts) and slid into the private plunge pool beneath a full moon. It was the perfect start to an island adventure.

The next day, jetlag was easy to kick. A snorkel on the house reef looking for the resident moray eel (found) was followed by lunch at SEA, the resort's underwater restaurant (delicious). Just a week before, Leonardo DiCaprio had supped here with a dozen Victoria's Secrets models. Considering his interest in conservation, perhaps he should have instead invited Andy Bruckner and Georgia Coward,



who run an organisation on Kihavah called Coral Reef CPR. Over pan-fried scallops and crusted sea bream, they explain how they're growing knuckle-sized pieces of coral on rope that they then 'plant' to regenerate bleached and damaged reefs.

In the afternoon, we sail around the island as the sun sets then gather on the beach for the weekly lobster and champagne evening. If there's a more decadent buffet anywhere in the Maldives, I'd certainly like to hear about it.



Dine beneath the ocean's surface at SEA restaurant; SKY bar and the observatory (below).

There are 80 villas on this private island – some are perched over the sea, others strung along the beach – but it never feels as though there are many other people around. You can ride your bike along sandy paths and only pass staff members, who smile brightly. It could be that everyone is at the overwater spa or learning how to cook Maldivian curries in a class at Plates restaurant. We spy a young boy learning to scuba dive (when I say spy, I mean he waved as he and his instructor finned past the window of the underwater restaurant) and occasionally couples can be seen spotted splashing in the crystal clear, warm ocean. The only time of day when there seems to be more than a handful of people around is during meals, which are always world-class.

Even on our second trip to Hanifaru, there was only one additional guest who tagged along with our group. It turns out none of us needed to have worried about the objects of our attention not turning up again. On arrival at the lagoon, guide Javier points out where the currents are and the spots we are most likely to see the mantas. As soon as we are in the water, the first manta appears out of the depths. Then another. And another. It's a seemingly never-ending manta train. Later, Javier will tell us he counted 25, although he is sure he missed a few.

It never even occurs to me to count – I am spellbound by their grace and size.

For the next half-hour we float on the surface and watch them feed around us. Occasionally they barrel roll in pairs, scooping the plankton into their gaping maws helped along by their horn-like cephalic fins (the reason they've earned the nickname sea devils).

A couple of us yell, "It's behind you," in pantomime fashion as one snorkeller misses a manta splashing playfully on the surface just beyond him.

Before any of us are ready to return to the island, Javier starts yelling from the Zodiac that it's time to leave. Rangers patrol the bay – it's part of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and the mantas are listed as a vulnerable species – and he's keen not to earn their wrath by outstaying our welcome. Not that we've seen any other boats here since we arrived. "No, really, we need to go," he implores, as half the group is distracted by yet another display. Back on the yacht, heading towards Anantara Kihavah and the setting sun, everyone agrees our encounter with these charismatic creatures was an experience we'd never forget. Perhaps another few days here in this tropical paradise with our new-found floating friends isn't completely out of the question.



IT'S IN THE STARS

When guests arrive at Anantara Kihavah, they're introduced to 'sky guru' Ali Shameem. Growing up in the Maldives, Shameem became obsessed by the skies above him, particularly the constellations he could see at night. He went overseas to study with famed Italian astronomer Massimo Tarengi before returning to home shores.

Thanks to the minimal light pollution here, on a clear night, more than 15,000 stars are visible to the naked eye. Which was exactly what past guests utilised to pick out constellations. That was until the launch of Kihavah's observatory. A custom-built dome atop SKY Bar now houses a 16-inch Meade LX200 telescope sitting on a giant tripod. Start out on a daybed as Shameem identifies some of the more obvious points in the sky then have a go with the telescope. With its assistance you can see Messier 13, a cluster of about 300,000 stars in the constellation of Hercules. Even for those with little interest in astronomy, this is a unique and magical way to end the day.