

The Hanifaru Experience

by Michel Braunstein

Meeting big animals in the sea, such as manta rays or whale sharks, is an unforgettable experience.

Meeting loads of them together in a food fest, is even much more moving. It's such a thrill, so exciting, a bit like being on a first date.

That's the incredible experience you can have in Hanifaru Bay, Baa Atoll, Northwest of Male, Maldives, a mere 20-minute flight from the capital's island. Each year, during the season (from June to November), the Southwest monsoon brings to the region gigantesque plankton gatherings. These are drawing hundreds of manta rays and often whale sharks into the bay.

Manta rays are feeding on planktons in a "fly" formation, like huge birds, all together circularly; this is called "cyclone feeding". This movement is quite incredible and unique. I had the chance to dive in many places around the world, including in Yap (Micronesia), Socorro (Mexico), and even other cleaning stations in the Maldives (such as Paradise). I could enjoy many manta gatherings in all those places, but nowhere could I admire such a formation between the mantas. That

was so exciting.

Before Hanifaru Bay was declared a marine protected area (in 2009), many boats visited the site without any control; this was quite bad for the sustainability.

In 2011, the bay was added to the UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.

Mantas do not enter the bay daily, even during the season. Their visits depend on the currents and whether they found enough food outside of the bay. To optimize your chances to see these amazing creatures, it's recommended that you go during the period around the full moon or the new moon. If you spend enough time on site (at least one week), you will optimize your chances to see many mantas (50-100-200) and whale sharks.

I arrived a bit early in the region, about a week before the new moon, and could only stay there four days. One could only see manta rays during the daily scuba dives and every afternoon, I was waiting

Nikon D850, Nikon 10-15mm fisheye at 15mm, Nauticam housing - no strobes. 1/100th @ F8. ISO 200. Centre weighted average -1stop.



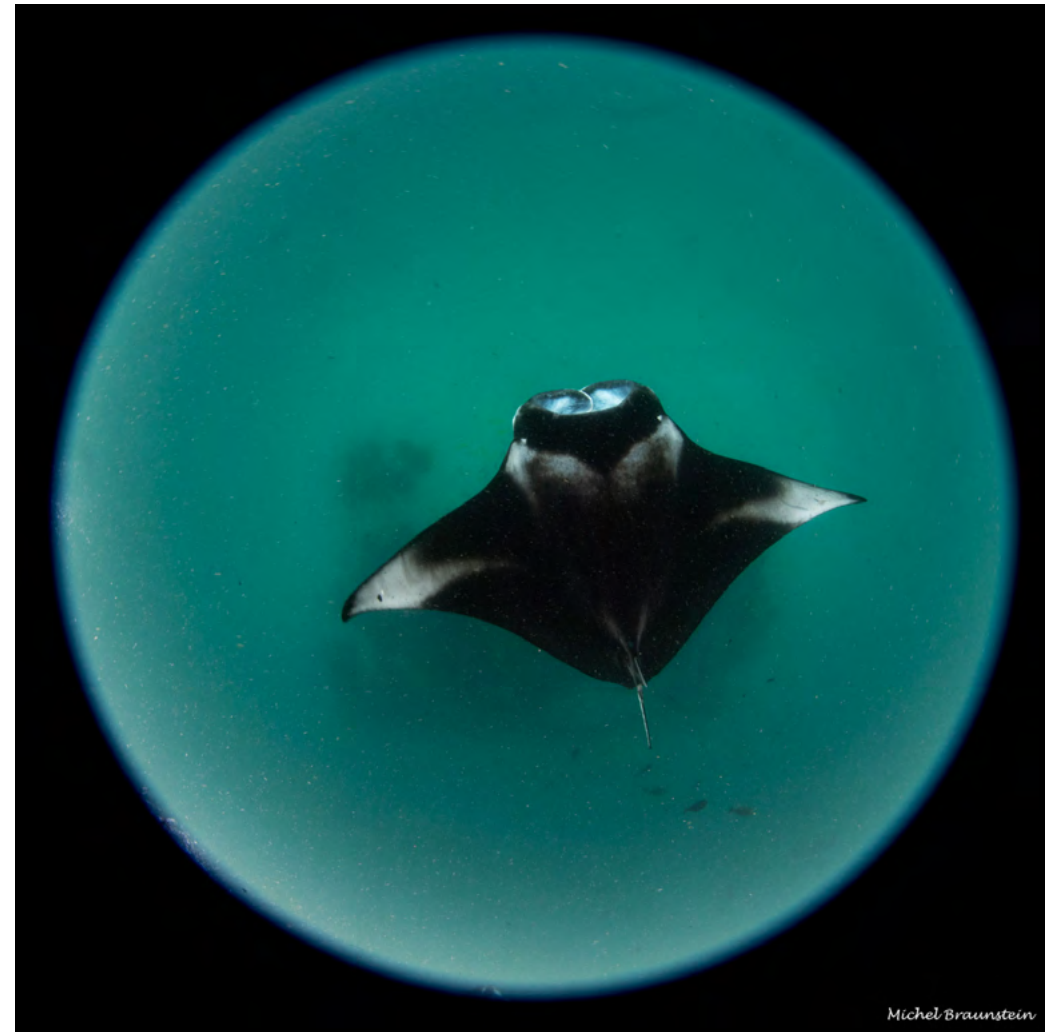


Nikon D500. 15-80mm lens at 24mm

impatiently for the dive center to call so I could go to see the mantas, but none entered the bay. Finally, on my last day, about three hours before flying to Male, the dive center who got alerted by the local rangers guarding the site notified us that approximately 15 mantas were in the bay.

We got out to the sea within 15-20 minutes and, lucky me, I had the chance to spend time with these beauties just before my flight. My friends stayed three more days on the island, but they didn't have the opportunity to go back to the bay during their stay.

On my flight to Fuvahmulah, I met two very cool twin brothers, and we ended up diving together. After a couple of days, I went back home and the brothers went to Baa Atoll, in a resort in the Dharavandhoo Island, close to the Hanifaru Bay. They arrived exactly when the full moon started. Surprisingly, they didn't see many mantas in the bay during the first few days but, after a while, the manta fest started with more and more mantas every day, reaching up to 200 at once!! Whale sharks also joined the party. Wow! Such an emotional moment!



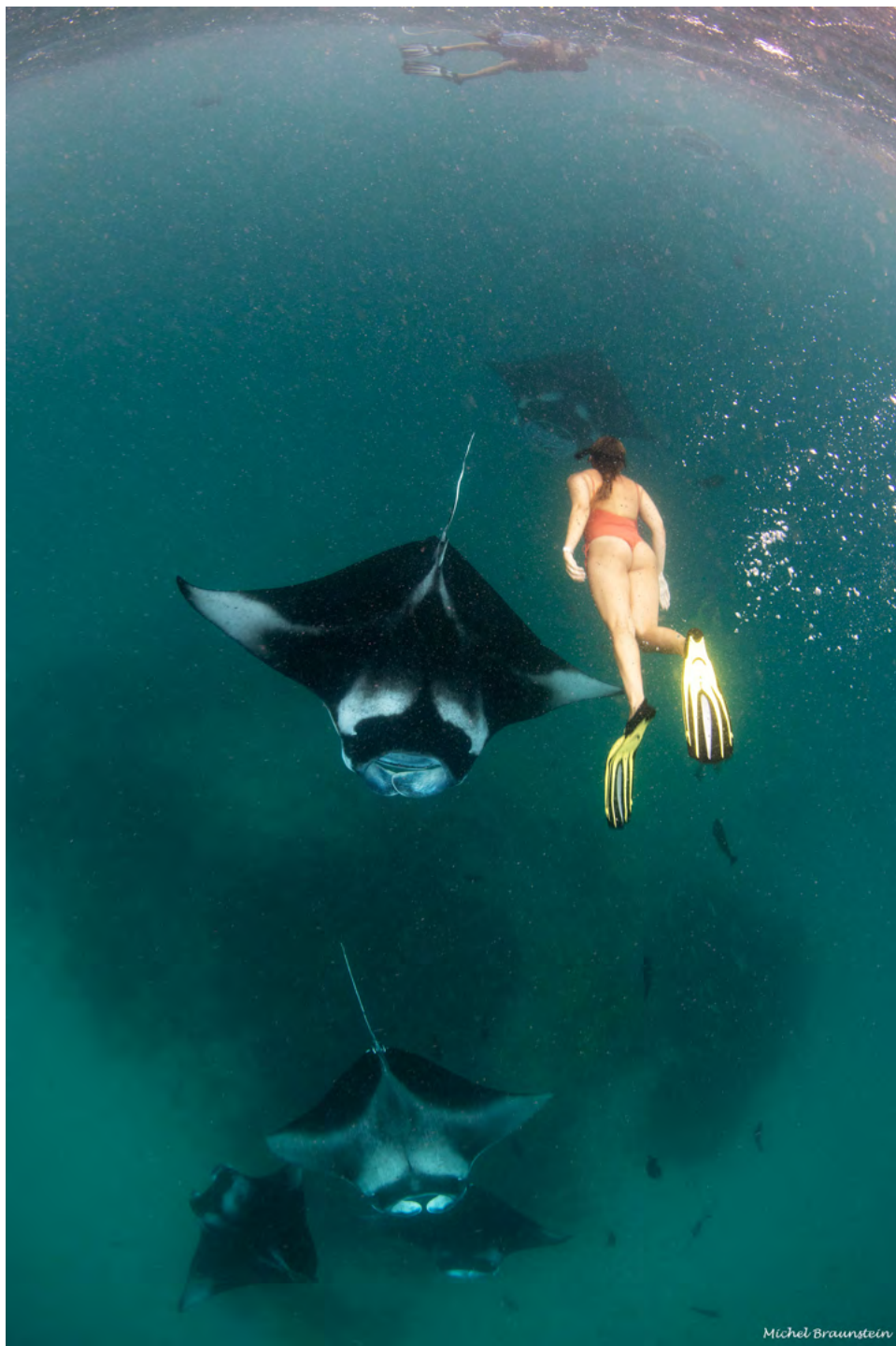
Nikon D850, Nikon 10-15mm fisheye at 15mm, Nauticam housing - no strobes. 1/100th @ F8. ISO 200. Centre weighted average -1stop.

Good to know:

- Scuba diving is forbidden in the bay. You may only go snorkeling with approved local dive center boats and a licensed snorkel guide.
- Boats are stopping at the entrance of the bay and snorkelers must enter the

bay by swimming.

- You will have to pay a \$20 entrance token, usually included in the excursion boat fee, allows you to stay 45 minutes in the water.
- It's forbidden to get too close to the manta rays and whale sharks or touch



Nikon D850, Nikon 10-15mm fisheye at 15mm, Nauticam housing - no strobes. 1/100th @ F8. ISO 200. Centre weighted average -1stop.

them and not should you cut their paths.

- You are allowed to take pictures, but the use of flash is forbidden.
- If you have a small "GoPro" camera or similar, make sure you don't use a long stick. It must remain close to your hand, with no extensions.
- Because there are so many in the region, dive centers must timeshare the site and must enter the water when scheduled.
- Note that some dive centers send boats every other day. Make sure you find a center that allows you to go to the bay every day when mantas are there.
- You must go back to the boat after 45 minutes. Sometimes whale sharks arrive just when your time is up. It's a pity, but you must still go.
- The twin brothers mentioned earlier decided to extend their stay to enjoy

more of the place. Because resorts are quite pricey for long stays, they switched to a more affordable hotel on the island. Keep that in mind if you wish to extend your stay or plan for a long stay.

- While you will spend most of your time in the region and not always in the bay itself, you can also spend your mornings scuba diving in some of the very nice manta cleaning stations. Make sure to choose a dive club that won't be overcrowded because quite a few of them are.
- Remember that the weather can cause internal flight disruptions. Make sure you plan for enough time in case your connections are cancelled or delayed.

And remember...it's a unique and must do once in a lifetime experience!!
Just go for it!!

We've got you covered!



Magic filters are now available in 3 options. Original Magic for use in blue water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance, Auto-Magic for compact cameras in automatic point and shoot mode. GreenWater Magic for use in green water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance. Prices start at just £25.

The Auto-Magic formula is now available in a Plexiglass filter that can be added or removed underwater.

www.magic-filters.com