

MantaFest 2025, Yap, Micronesia

By Jennifer Ross

For many of us, returning to Yap each year feels less like travel and more like coming home — home to mantas, coral gardens, and a community that shares our love for the sea. From late August to early September, Manta Ray Bay Resort & Spa, along with Yap Divers hosts an outstanding event called MantaFest. As the name implies, this tiny tropical island paradise in Micronesia comes alive with two weeks of diving, creative photo workshops, and camaraderie. Now in its 18th year, MantaFest 2025 welcomed both returning participants and enthusiastic newcomers from around the world.

On arrival, guests are greeted with hand woven baskets filled with dive goodies and handmade flower head leis presented by local children dressed in traditional attire. It is not unusual to feel as though you have stepped back in time as you get a real taste of Yap's people, heritage, and rhythm of life.

Dive. Learn. Create. Repeat.

At the heart of MantaFest lies its signature photography workshops

- a dynamic blend of daily dives, workshops, and creative sessions. This year's event was led by a trio of world-class professionals: David Fleetham, Tim Rock, and Logan Wood. Between them, these mentors bring decades of underwater photography expertise to the table, covering everything from wide angle storytelling to post-processing and cinematic video techniques.

Each day unfolds with two morning dives, followed by a delicious lunch aboard the S/V MNUW, the resorts repurposed sailing vessel turned floating restaurant. Afternoons bring hands-on seminars, one-on-one photo reviews, and professional photo processing techniques using the latest image rendering software. For those who still have a hankering for more - a variety of dusk, evening, and night dives are optional offerings.

The Manta Ray Capital of the Pacific

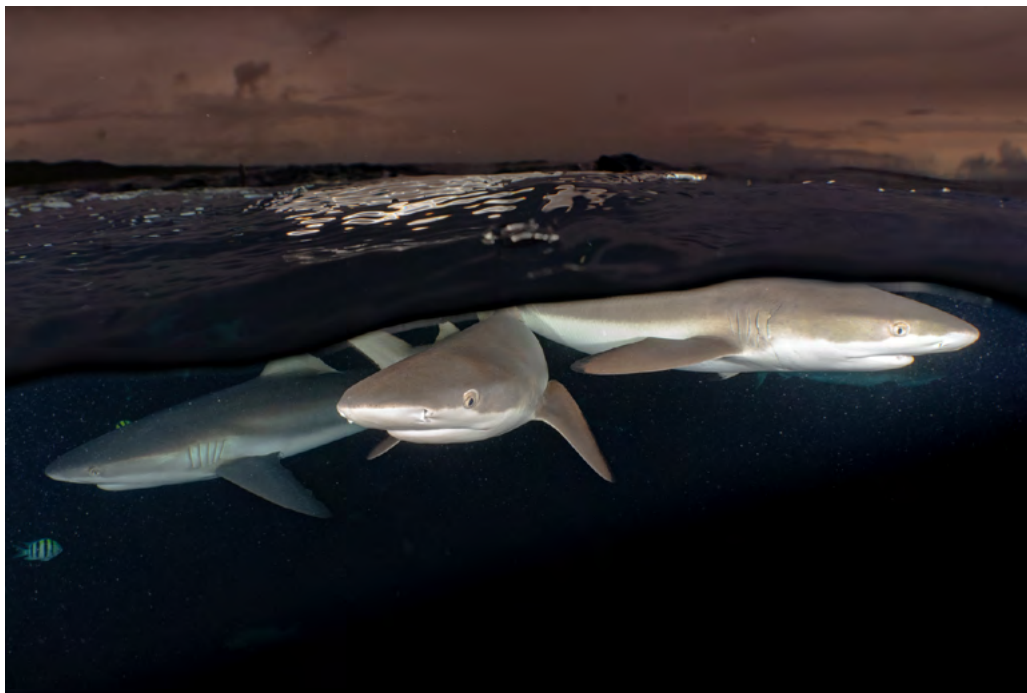
Yap's gentle giants - its resident manta rays - remain the crown jewels of any dive trip here. With wing spans reaching up to 20 feet, these graceful creatures glide effortlessly



(Best in Show) by Phil Seys.

Presenters. From left to right, Tim Rock, Nicholas "Nico" Erhieisap (Dive Master/boat captain), David Fleetham, Bill Acker, Logan Wood (Ikelite).





Big Animal - DSLR category- First - Bonnie Zalenski

through the cleaning stations and channels that surround the island. Each manta is individually identified by its unique belly markings, making every encounter a personal reunion for divers who return year after year. There's nothing quite like hovering silently while a manta loops overhead, framed by shafts of tropical sunlight.

Diving Beyond the Ordinary

While the mantas may steal the spotlight, Yap's variety of diving experiences offer something for every lens. One local favorite is the Mandarinfish Dive, held at dusk when

these shy, jewel-toned fish perform their mesmerizing courtship and mating dance - a burst of color and motion that challenges even seasoned macro photographers to capture the perfect shot.

Equally unforgettable is Yap's Vertigo Shark Dive, a thrilling and unconventional encounter that puts divers in the middle of the action. Often, as soon as the boat approaches the site, the sharks begin to gather in a Pavlovian response to the engines hum. Unlike the static setups common elsewhere, Yap's shark dives give photographers the freedom to position themselves as close, or as



Big Animal - Non DSLR category- First - Ella Marie Shew

cautiously distant, as they like. With bait secured in a reef-mounted PVC tube, gray reef sharks and blacktip reef sharks appear by the dozens, circling gracefully in the water column.

For an added creative twist, participants can also take part in Shark Split Sunset Sessions, capturing dramatic over-under images with glowing skies above and sleek predators below. It's the kind of high adrenaline artistry that defines Mantafest's blend of adventure and art.

Adventures in Blackwater

For the third year, Blackwater Diving is offered to those thrill seekers wanting an 'out of this world' experience. Conducted offshore in the inky darkness over depths of thousands of feet, these dives reveal strange and ethereal creatures that drift up from the deep - larval fish, tiny squid, and translucent organisms that look almost alien under a photographer's light. The growing enthusiasm for this otherworldly



Macro - Non DSLR category- First - Ann Donahue

experience has inspired Yap Divers to begin offering blackwater dives weekly during the calm season (June - mid-November).

Personal Touches

Yap and the MantaFest experience inspires participants to share their talents and gifts with others. Adding an artistic flourish to this year's event



Macro - DSLR category- First - Scott Shew



was visiting muralist Susan Watkins from Alaska who painted a stunning reef scene featuring "Melissa" a known manta ray, and a green sea turtle, alongside beloved dive guide Erwin and boat captain Nico. The mural will forever grace the wall of Manta Ray Bay Resort & Spa for all to enjoy for years to come.

Another delightful addition to MantaFest 2025 was daily sunrise yoga courtesy of visiting diver and yogi Marybeth Kochis from New Mexico. Every



Behaviour - DSLR category- First - Chris Forbes



Behaviour - Non DSLR category- First - Susan Watkins

morning at 5am participants were welcome to gather pool side to stretch and limber up for an hour while Mother Nature painted a breathtaking canvas of Her own in the sky.

Competition and Celebration

Of course, MantaFest isn't just about diving - participants have multiple opportunities to enjoy



Winners - from left to right, Ann Donahue (first place macro, first place topside and second place behavior), Ella Marie Shew (first place big animals and second place macro), Scott Shew (first place video), Chris Forbes (first place behavior and first place topside), Phillip Seys (Best in Show/Grand Prize)



prizes generously provided by event sponsors and partners. Collectively, all of the photo entries capture the unique experience of Yap from every perspective.

Looking ahead to Mantafest 2026

As the final evening drew to a close and the Mantafest “family” gathered for a last time under the stars onboard the MNUW, one sentiment echoed through every conversation: “we can’t wait to come back!” Plans are already underway for Mantafest 2026, promising new workshops, cultural experiences, and of course endless encounters with Yap’s magnificent marine life. For those who dream of warm blue water, world-class diving, and a global community of divers who feel like family - Mantafest 2026 is the place to be!



Jennifer Ross has been scuba diving since 1986 and discovered her passion for underwater photography with a point and shoot compact camera in 2021 during Covid. The Mantafest event on Yap holds a special place in her heart and this most recent gathering marks her third time attending. For Jennifer, Mantafest feels like a homecoming, where friends, fellow photographers and the resort owners have become family.

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