

Mantas of the Maldives

by Julian Cohen

Sharks, Whale Sharks, Mantas. These animals are right at the top of many divers' list of "things to see underwater before I die". For me it has always been Manta Rays. There is something fascinating about an animal that compared to humans is so massive, that moves in such a fluid, balletic style and that you know is not going to harm you in any way.

Before I went to the Maldives I had been to some of the prime Manta spots in Asia with very limited success. Nothing at Hin Daeng and Hin Muang; a fleeting glimpse of a black outline in the distance at Koh Bon; forty five minutes in the cold cold water at Manta Point in Bali trying to peer into the blue for the distinctive profile that would never appear. I had one magical experience last year with my good friend and dive instructor Alex Mahoney at a secret spot he knows off Phuket. Three Mantas came and swam with us for ten minutes. We were the only ones at the site and I watched captivated as a giant female swam right up to Alex's face and then performed a graceful barrel roll right in front of him. It was lucky I didn't have my camera with me or the Mantas would never have

turned up!

So when I decided to go to The Maldives it was with the express intention of photographing Mantas. I packed my 12-24mm and my 10.5mm lenses and didn't bother with the macro at all. If it wasn't big, I wasn't going to photograph it.

The Manta Ray (*Manta birostris*), is the largest of the rays, and has been measured as large as 7.6 m across, with a weight of about 2,300 kg. It ranges throughout all the tropical waters of the world, typically around coral reefs. Mantas are most commonly black on the top and white underneath, but some are black all over. A Manta's eyes are located at the base of the cephalic lobes or "horns", on each side of the head. These horns have given rise to the common name Devil Ray and are used to direct food to the Manta's mouth and the Manta can curl them while swimming. Like other rays, the Manta has five pairs of gills on the underside of its body. Mantas are filter feeders: they feed on plankton and fish larvae, which are passively filtered from the water passing through their gills as they swim.

The first dive was at a site



This shot at Kani Corner was one of the first I took that week and was taken with ambient light only in about fifteen meters of water. 1/80 sec at f8 with the 12-24mm at 24mm, the Manta was swimming about 10 meters below me as I hovered on a safety stop. I adjusted the white balance by using the preset white balance feature on my D200 and took the test shot of my hand to set it, pointing the camera down towards the Manta so that the light would be the same as the actual shot I was intending to take.

1/80th sec at f 8, 12-24 mm F4 @ 24mm ISO 200 NIKON D200 Subal housing Spot-Meter Mode

in North Male Atoll called The Aquarium, for what became obvious reasons. As we approached the drop point the boat boys pointed out a Manta feeding at the surface. My heart took a leap as I realised this was going to be a special trip for me. That

first day I saw ten or fifteen Mantas on three different dive sites. Every day after that was the same, and it never got boring for me. At Langkan Reef, also named Manta Point which is usually a promising sign, there was a cleaning station and if you stay low



*1/50 sec at f5.6, 10.5 mm f2.8@10.5 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D200
Subal housing, Spot-Meter Mode*

the Mantas will come in and swoop around your head as they line up to be cleaned. Because of its proximity to a lot of the major five star hotels, Langkan was always quite a busy site.

The water at North Male Atoll was clear with about twenty meters visibility and so I shot primarily with the Magic Filter. The Maldives has an abundance of sunshine and the water can be clear with good visibility. I was planning to do most of my diving around ten to fifteen meters and so conditions seemed perfect for the Magic Filter. (www.magic-filters.com)

I kept my strobes attached to

my rig so that I could use them if I saw the need, but the Magic Filter is designed to be used without strobes and I used it that way most of the time. If I did shoot with the strobes, often to get some fill flash on the underside of a Manta as I was shooting upwards, then I corrected for the red shift in Lightroom. I found that with the Filters on the colours were brought back beautifully.

When using the Magic Filter it is important to remember to take the test shot to set the white balance in the same light as the subject. Because you have to reset the white balance every



*1/125 sec at f7.1, 10.5 mm f2.8@10.5 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D200
Subal housing, Spot-Meter Mode*

two meters or so of depth, it is easy to forget that when shooting upwards or downwards, the white balance setting will be different than shooting horizontally for the same depth.

I primarily meter for the surrounding blue water when shooting wide angle. I always set the meter system to spot metering and find a patch of blue in the same direction and light as the subject and then meter off that. When I am shooting close focus wide angle, I use the exposure compensation to underexpose by anywhere from 2/3rds of a stop to sometimes 2 stops, depending

upon the lighting conditions. When shooting like this in full manual mode, the exposure compensation will control the flash output when the flash is set to TTL. You may ask why I don't shoot in manual flash mode in the first place? I learnt that way initially, but when I switched to TTL I found that it became one less thing that I had to think about and I could concentrate more on composing the scene in front of me. Each to his own is my motto.

When shooting general wide angle scenes, as I was doing in the Maldives, I meter for the blue water



1/160th sec at f5.6, 10.5 mm f2.8@10.5 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D200 Subal housing, Spot-Meter Mode

in the same way, but underexpose manually, generally by a stop, in order to achieve the deep blue colour of the water. I leave the flash on TTL and forget about it. The Ikelite TTL works so brilliantly with the Nikon system that I rarely think about the flash output for wide angle, unless I am shooting close focus.

It was when we got to Hani Faru in Baa Atoll that my dreams became a reality. Hundreds of Mantas feeding at the surface, swooping and performing synchronised barrel rolls like fighter planes, and no one else for miles around. They call this Manta soup.

Normally there are Whale Sharks here to add to the excitement but that is where my luck ran out. I wasn't complaining.

At Hani Faru in about six to eight meters of water the Mantas were feeding in large numbers. I went down on scuba and mainly shot them as they swooped around above my head. At the time I thought that by being lower than them and shooting upwards I would get the shots that I wanted, that thick of the action being surrounded by Mantas kind of shot. Later I tried snorkelling with them at Helengeli Thila. We had just come up from a



1/100th sec at f5.6, 10.5 mm f-2.8@10.5 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D200 Subal housing, Spot-Meter Mode

dive and there were twenty or thirty Mantas feeding in the murky water so I dropped the scuba tanks and jumped back in. The feeling of being at the surface with them was totally different, as it was here that they had their mouths wide open to feed, and my photos now had the look I was after.

Of course Mantas that are feeding means water with suspended particles and less visibility. I shot with strobes and pointed them out at an angle away from the lens to catch the Mantas at the edges of the light. This helped to cut down on the backscatter.

I also converted many of the photos to black and white. There were two reasons for this. Aesthetically I think the Manta is perfect for black and white shots, as these are their predominant colours anyway, and I wanted to get more of a reportage feel to my photos. Secondly, I feel that when converted to black and white a lot of the suspended particles are not as apparent in the photo. They are still there, but to my eyes don't jump out at you and interfere with the subject as much as when the shot is in colour.

My favourite site in the Maldives is a cluster of three rocks at eighteen



1/50th sec at f5.6, 10.5 mm f2.8@10.5 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D200, Subal housing, Spot-Meter Mode

meters surrounded by sand, called Sunlight. This forms a natural cleaning station for the Mantas and every time I went we were the only boat on the site. When the sun is shining the ambient light in the shallow water is spectacular. Here I took black and white again and shot from above looking down with my favourite lens, the Nikon 10.5mm. I love the barrel effect and the way it bends perspective, especially when you are close to the subject and shoot straight down. A three meter Manta Ray and its surroundings are all in view from less than two meters away.

As I am writing this article I keep gazing out of the window and wishing I were back in the Maldives again. Time to stop dreaming about it and get on the phone to the travel agent!

Julian Cohen



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