

Magical Manatees

by John Bobel

“We’re on reduced circumstances.” These pitiful words, lifted from Sense and Sensibility were our mantra last winter as we planned our vacation. We normally spend a few weeks in the Caribbean. Me swimming with the fishes and she reading on the beach. But in this year of the U.S. recession it was not to be. It was I that cooked up the scheme of a 2,000 mile round trip driving vacation to Florida, ostensibly so we could visit relatives and friends. I waxed poetic about those wonderful warm Floridian nights, reunions with long lost relatives and as an added bonus there would be no paring down the luggage the night before departure. “Just think, you can take all the shoes you want, darling”. Of course the rosy picture I painted had ulterior motives dripping from every word. I was finally going to swim with the manatees.

A search on the Internet revealed several commercial manatee tour companies. While they all sounded sufficient in finding manatees and providing transportation to them, I was leery about casting my lot in with a bunch of wide-eyed tourists. So I placed a phone call to my local dive shop who had run trips in the area and was told about an excellent hotel/marina/dive shop operation that could provide shelter, food, small motor launches, and even maps. This meant I could be captain of my own fate (and boat) and at a price that fit nicely with our reduced circumstances. This haven of independence, so



important for those of us whose raison d’être in the water is photography, is the Port Hotel and Marina in Crystal River, Florida.

The West Indian Manatee who has cousins in other equatorial coastal waters around the globe is normally a solitary critter and according to the World Conservation Union is “vulnerable to extinction” throughout its distribution. The geology of northern Florida provides hundreds of warm water springs that feed into the coastal waters and has given rise to a unique manatee behavior. While all manatees will spend some time in fresh or brackish waters, Florida visitors will swim miles up fresh water rivers to reach these warm springs to winter in relatively large colonies. This activity is the reason many of these gentle giants have scars on their backs as the area is also loaded with other mammals that drive boats for recreation. It is also the reason their persona appears on countless coffee mugs, road

Camera: N-90S in Aquatica Housing
Lens: Nikon 17-35 F/2.8 @ 28 mm
Settings Shutter Priority @ f/5.6, 200th sec
Film: ProviaF
Lighting: ambient light 8:27am EST plus Nikon SB 104 strobe set at 1/2 power
Atmospheric conditions: Killer, patchy clouds, 8 degrees C

signs, logos and advertisements. Floridians, to their credit, have done a reasonable job of trying to protect these delightful creatures, setting aside large areas as no and low-wake zones with stiff fines for violators and no-go areas that allow total protection from humans. Few of the animals that I encountered had scars from boat propellers but the jury is still out as to whether or not the West Indian Manatee protection efforts can overcome the general decline of the population witnessed by manatee observation teams all over the State. They are



Camera: Nikonos V
Lens: Nikonos 20 mm
Settings Auto @ f/5.6
Film: ProviaF
Lighting: ambient light 10:04am
EST plus Nikon SB 104 strobe
set at 1/2 power
Atmospheric conditions: Mostly
cloudy, 12 degrees C

you if you are calm” was missed during the service of jelly doughnuts and hot chocolate. It is surprising how much particulate two dozen humans can suspend in a water column by frantically thrashing about then by standing upright and shuffling fins along the bottom when you are too tired to swim after a hard morning of chasing mammals. In-water photography is dodgy in near zero visibility. Within an hour I left, a beaten man. I was prevented from my goal by two dozen tourists whose only crime that morning was a short memory.

I arrived back at the marina and complained to the dock hand about the stupid tourists. He told me of a side spring called The Three Sisters located down a very narrow canal near the site of the morning’s debacle that few tourists try. I had noticed this little stream but the three vertical pilings sunk in the mouth of the stream looked to prohibit any self-respecting 500kg beast from passing. Reluctantly, I decided to give the same area a try on the following day. But this time I would arise even earlier knowing full well that I may arrive too early for ambient light photography. The next morning I found the outboard’s starter cable covered with ice. Not a good sign. But I countered by wearing

vulnerable to very cold water and poison created by “red tides” organisms as well as those boat driving mammals.

Whether you rent a boat or sign on with a commercial tour company, you must first watch a 10 minute video that has many interesting things to say but has one operative concept. **DON’T CHASE THE MANATEES, THEY ARE BETTER SWIMMERS THAN YOU ARE.** Most of us learned long ago the same concept for other sea creatures. There is, however, an interesting twist to this advice: manatees are actually curious and when you make eye contact with one it may very well swim over to investigate.

My rosy image of our Florida vacation fell apart the first day in Crystal River as temperatures plummeted to near 0C at night. In fact the entire four days we spent there the air temperature struggled to get into the double digit’s. Sunrise the first morning was accompanied by temperatures in the 2-3C range and a delightfully stiff breeze. After braving conditions that would make Sir Edmund Hillary turn back, my heart sank as I found the first commercial barge beat me to the site. His load of tourists had a hell-bent-for-leather attitude focused like a laser on one concept: **GET THE MANATEES.** Somehow the message of “they will come to



Camera: N-90S in Aquatica Housing
Lens: Nikon 17-35 F/2.8 @ 24 mm
Settings Shutter Priority @ f/5.6, 200th sec
Film: ProviaF
Lighting 100% ambient light 9:14am EST
Atmospheric conditions: Killer, patchy clouds, 9 degrees C



Camera: N-90S in Aquatica Housing
Lens: Nikon 17-35 F/2.8 @ 24 mm
Settings Shutter Priority @ f/5.6, 200th sec
Film: ProviaF
Lighting: ambient light 10:15am EST plus Nikon SB 104 strobe set at 1/2 power
Atmospheric conditions: Killer, patchy clouds, 13 degrees C

my winter gloves and fashioning protective head gear out of a towel from the hotel. After my 15 minute boat ride found I was beaten again by the tourists (did they spend the night??). Undaunted, I slipped over the side and my vacation began to change. I discovered that 22 C water on skin recently subjected to wind chills near absolute zero feels like a hot tub. And these tourists actually watched the

video. Collectively, we had a spiritual event with these wild creatures.

After several rolls of film I remembered the advice about the side channel leading to the Three Sisters Spring. This meant swimming against a strong current as there were three springs, each pumping out plenty of water every minute. Loaded with camera gear, the only way to fight this current was crawling

along the side using my free hand for grabbing anything immobile. I asked my self how/ why these seemingly lethargic creatures would make it upstream. Certain I was told a cruel joke, I thought of the dock hand, laughing in his beer that evening as he would tell the story of this, yet another, stupid tourist that fell for the "swim up the Sisters Spring" story. After 20 meters the stream widened, the force of water abated, I feasted on a sight so rich in visual intensity I can almost taste it today.

Gone was the greenish water with 8 meter visibility and

*Camera: N-90S in Aquatica
Housing. Lens: Nikon 17-35 F/
2.8 @ 24 mm
Settings Shutter Priority @ f/2.8,
200th sec. Film: ProviaF
Lighting: ambient light 9:00EST
plus Nikon SB 104 strobe set at
1/2 power
Atmospheric conditions: Killer,
patchy clouds, 8 degrees
Fahrenheit*



dozens of mammals, human and otherwise. Here was a body of water recently filtered by the Florida limestone resulting in beautiful blue water with visibility closer to 30 meters. And there was just three of us mammals. One mother, one calf and me. Always the gentle creature, mom and calf swam over to me to investigate and after a few moments went about their way swimming from one end of this large area to the other. Each time passing by me and allowing five or more photographs. No need to chase them, they'd be back. This divine opportunity lasted for one roll of film in each of the housed camera and Nikonos. Back to the main channel and my yacht for a reload and it was not hard to find a solitary manatee or a mother and calf that would want to interact with a diver understanding the protocol of manatee interaction.

I used ProviaF on auto-exposure with my strobe set at 1/2 power. I hardly know how to use my camera in auto-exposure mode but it seemed to be the right choice as no depth was

greater than one meter. This is an ambient light situation with the flash just adding a pop of light to ease the shadows. My housed Nikon was fitted with a 17-35mm zoom lens, a lens I had never tried in-water before. This will be a standard rig for me in lieu of my fixed focal length 20mm. The only issue I have with the Aquatica is that you lose the focus control for the zoom feature. In theory you can lock focus by partially holding down the shutter release but I found this dicey since there is a clear loss of control through the housing shutter release mechanism. You just don't have the same tactile and acoustic response when you've got the camera body in a metal box in-water. Add to that the fact that it is hard to detect a slight change of focus in a lens that has inherently a great depth of field and I found it easy to take a photograph focused on the background and not realize it until the slides are on the light table. The close focusing of the 17-35mm was a blessing, as

these critters would swim right up to the dome port. I had several encounters where an animal would swim toward me, then actually past the camera to nuzzle my arm or chest. One even slipped his forelimb under my arm and pulled me around for a short ride.

The manatees of Crystal River, Florida offer an experience unique for the in-water photographer. Be advised there is no night life short of the bar at the hotel, almost no town short of U.S. Route 19 (that and 40 minutes will get you to Tampa), and certainly no local E-6 processing. But what you will find is an incredible experience with aquatic mammals that outweigh you by a factor of ten. Animals that if left to their own devices, will leave you thinking you are an interesting species worthy of some regard. What a fine feeling that is indeed.

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