

# Manta Mania

by Tobias Bernhard

“Put your head under water, put your head under water” the exasperated Fijian guide calls out to his flock of pudgy punters. They are too busy snapping selfies with their smart phones to notice the manta rays swooshing past underneath them. Fresh off the Australian or NZ adrenalin circuit, having bungy jumped, jet boat ridden and survived several massive party hangovers, “like awesome dude”, or whatever kids do for entertainment these days?

They have come to Fiji, a convenient stopover on some round the world airfares, to tick off either swimming with manta rays or getting laid and hungover again at Beachcomber Island (known as Beachbonker among the locals). Few can afford both options, they are poverty conscious backpackers after all.

The well oiled tourism machine makes it easy to find adventure on a tight schedule (even though the wifi here sucks). Port Denarau, a stone throw from Nadi international airport is the one stop shop for the young travelers who haven’t booked online from overseas yet. I mean who books over the counter these days,



like old people? No need to leave any aspect of your awesome adventure to chance when you can buy a package including - well everything.

The most awesome adventure of this package is the risk to miss breakfast, lunch or valuable Fiji Bitter drinking time because the time and direction of the tidal stream, which seems to be more important to mantas than swimming with backpackers, has moved to one of those inconvenient time slots above.

Once the constellation of gravitational pull of the moon and a full gut is right, the young adventurers are packed into longboats until the freeboard can hardly be called free anymore and the geriatric outboard

*Busy manta pass. Nikon D800, Nikon 16-35 @ 35mm, 1/500s, f14, ISO 400*

*Ray gliding by. Nikon D800 in Subal housing, 16-35 @ 16mm, 1/125s, f13, ISO 400*





*Eco tourist longboat racing past manta ray. Nikon D88 in Subal housing, Nikon 16-35 @ 35mm, 1/40s, f13*

engines start making bubbling noises. Longboats from at least six resorts in the vicinity, home in on the pass where the mantas feed in the outgoing current on the South side of Naviti Island in the Yasawas.

These mantas or their ancestors have been frequenting this location long before the first backpacker resort was conceived and probably long before the first backpacker has been conceived. There must be a severe shortage of similarly good swim through restaurants for manta rays, because why else would you

repeatedly come to dine at the risk of getting a couple of GoPros on a stick stuck into your gill slits.

The pass is of course a marine reserve these days, with strict rules, like no anchoring in the sand because it damages the coral, no scuba diving, because the bubbles frighten the manta rays much more than 150 screaming, splashing, fun seekers and the most important rule: you have to pay to swim there. This last rule benefits the mantas greatly since they have moved from subsistence filter feeding to the cash economy. “A



*Eco tour guide leading the way. Nikon D800 in Subal housing, Nikon 16-35 @ 16mm, 1/80s, f14, ISO 400, SB910 @ 1/4 power*

manta walks into a plankton store and says: I’ll have a bag of instant photo-plankton please and an aspirin for the gill-ache - those GoPros again ... “

Once on location the jostling for position between the boats starts. One boat driver spots a ray and places his boat up current before another can get in the way and the punters are encouraged to enter the water a.s.a.p. using any technique so long as it makes the greatest possible splash and looks cool on FB.

Some swimmers are given bright yellow rubber duck fins and those of

the Asiatic persuasion a matching life jacket (Nothing against those fins or people of Asiatic persuasion, some of my best friends who shall of course remain nameless swear by them).

The organizers of this wonderful pastime have omitted to mention the minor detail that mantas swim underwater. Since you cannot communicate urgent news updates to your fellow traveler underwater, the punters just bob in the current seeing mostly each other. Someone eventually remembers what they paid for or the guide says: you guys see



the shark, meaning a juvenile white-tip sleeping on the bottom, which is answered by a frantic head turning - still above water.

Eventually most people get the hang of it and fortunately the pass is so small and highly frequented by mantas that you would have to be blind not to see one. There is always one buck who is sore about missing out on a score at Beachcomber and needs to impress the fair sex by racing after the mantas and trying to duck dive down on them. Lucky for the animals the current is raging and no-one has enough puff to grab hold of a ray. Once through the pass it's a matter of finding the skiff from your resort among the six or seven others who wait there and get carted back up current. And on it goes like a conveyor belt until it's Fiji Bitter time. It's all tremendous fun.

In case you haven't noticed, this is a 'serious photographer' ranting, shaking his head in disgust at yet another blatant commercial exploitation of wildlife. It is happening wherever there is wildlife left to exploit, be it whale swimming in Tonga or Panda watching in China.

But am I really any better? Or just indignant at the loss of exclusivity.

Underwater photographers do nothing else than commercially exploiting nature, that's if they're

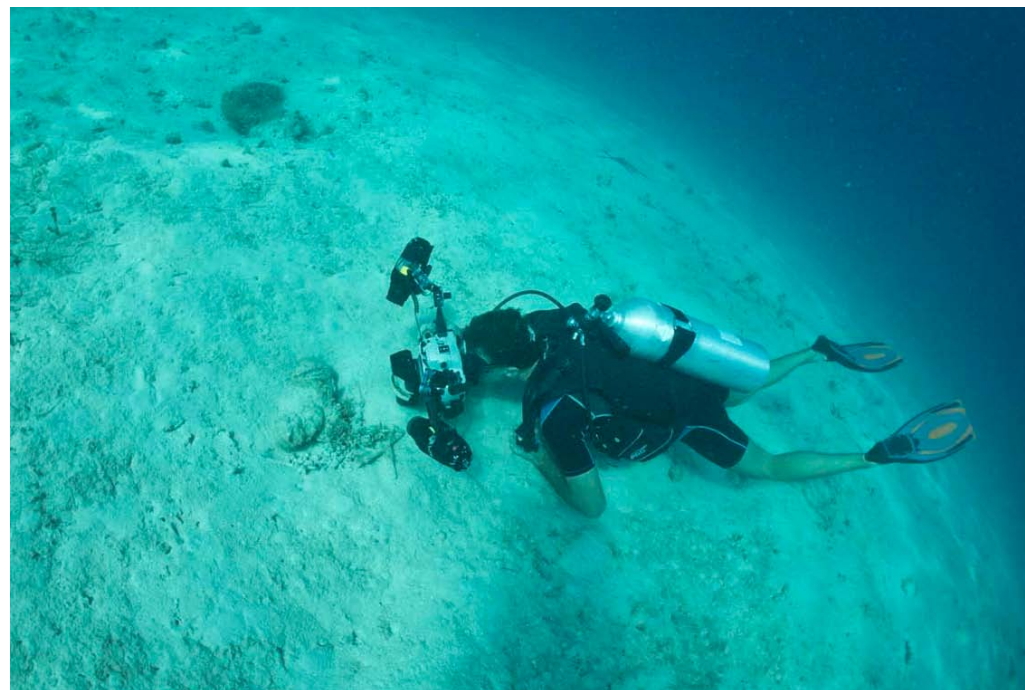


*Less popular images. Panorama of a dead reef. Nikon D800 in Subal housing, Sigma 15mm, 1/80s, f13. ISO 800, available light, stitch pano*

fortunate enough that someone pays for their pictures, or famous enough so aspiring underwater photographers pay for learning their tricks.

Underwater photographers love to rationalize that by producing beautiful images of nature they create "awareness" and "appreciation" for the natural world which in turn makes the viewer want to conserve and protect our beautiful planet. Excuse me if I puke. It's a ton of hogwash! Beautiful images instill a warm fuzzy sense of complacency in the general public, that things are not as bad as those yogurt knitting tree huggers keep telling us and I can drive my 4X4 into town as usual thank you very much. I mean if nature was so down the toilet how would images of

*Bracing that camera (of course on sand only). Sony NEX5 in Nauticam housing, 16mm, 1/125s, f 11, ISO 200, available light. Photo courtesy of Neelam Ratan*





*Yasawa Island scenic. Nikon D800, Nikon 16-35 @20mm, 1/400s, f10 ISO 100*

abundance, vast shoals of fish and the like seen on the BBC be possible? The truth is, images of dead reefs with no fish even though really easy to shoot with very little negative impact on the environment, don't sell advertising space. Environmental doomsday prophecies have gone a bit out of fashion nowadays.

The conservationist underwater photographer hovering neutrally buoyant a safe distance over a filigree reef is the lamest fib since "but I did not inhale". If you want to be successful as a photographer you will have to be the first one to probe ever further into the last undisturbed realms of nature and discover new hotspots and animal behavior. You will have to hold that super macro lens rock steady by bracing your elbows and knees firmly on the - whatever.

Intruding, interfering, disturbing, displacing, as you go in the quest for the original image. The very nature of underwater photography requires you to eliminate as much water as possible between you and your subject. In real terms, this means you want the subject touching your dome, even in gin clear tropical waters. All this at considerable expense in marine life, equipment and travel. And where do you think last night's gourmet buffet on your ecotourism award winning live-aboard ends up the next morning. 20 punters at an average of 2kg of pathogen and coliform laden matter over ten days would fill your average bath tub nicely. And then you complain about the viz ... . To be fair, fish shit in the water too.

Four to six expeditions a year involving long haul flights and live-aboard charter is not uncommon for a

dedicated underwater photographer. A mammoth carbon footprint compared to the prawn goby footprint of the average backpacker.

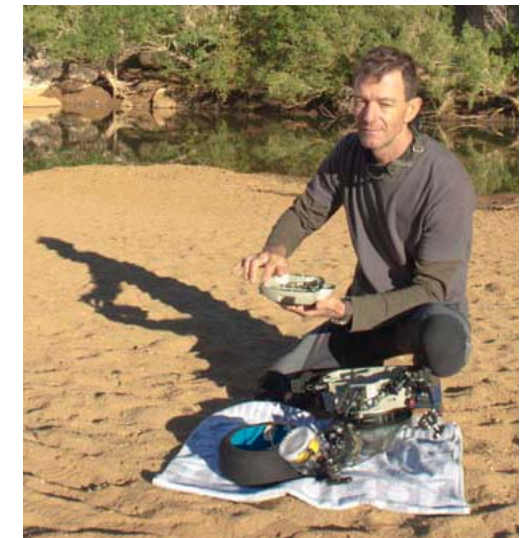
By making public the latest discovery in a cry for attention whether on FB or in those pretentiously artsy self published coffee table books we make sure the hungry but slow (or poor) finish off what we started. 'Ecotourism' even beats 'military intelligence' as an oxymoron. The only form of tourism that deserves that label is the one where you stay at home wearing your knitted yogurt and hug the tree in your back yard. To be fair I have seen places and wildlife put under protection and flourishing because there are more tourist dollars to be made there, than by eating the wildlife. It still boils down to the same basic attitude: nature is a resource to

be used up. Not a freestanding entity that has a right to exist unviolated or god forbid an all encompassing force of which we are a minor part.

So why do I do it? Why be part of the destruction? Because it wasn't always like that and underwater photography is still tremendous fun and I love it, probably to death - I mean just look at the beautiful gadgets available these days and who wants to be the first to convert his or her 4x4 into an herb garden. Anyways, no one likes a cantankerous old sod ranting on about: "when I was a lad ... "

**Tobias Bernhard**

*The cantankerous old sod at the latest undisclosed shooting location ;) . Nikon D800, Sigma 15mm with 1.4 teleconverter, 1/60s, f9, ISO 100. Photo courtesy of Neelam Ratan*





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