

Reading through any given issue of UWPmag, it's easy to forget that behind every fantastic shot there's a multitude of hard lessons learned. No matter how long you've been using a camera, there's always room for a schoolboy error - as I was humbled to discover recently while diving with Thailand Aggressor at Myanmar's remote Black Rock. Three hours full steam from any other island in the Mergui Archipelago, Black Rock is one of South East Asia's premier dive sites because it's one of the few known places where giant oceanic manta rays gather in the region. We'd scheduled four dives here, and the first was uneventful, apart from finding a giant frogfish perched imperiously in full view on the coral debris at the base of the rock's sheer limestone drop to 20 metres. My camera was working fine and so at the beginning of our second dive, when I heard the frantic tank banging of our guide and looked up to see a truly huge manta heading straight towards me, I knew this was going to be The Shot. I raised the viewfinder to my eye, watched the manta fill the entire frame on my super wide-angle fisheye lens, hit the camera trigger... and nothing happened. I tried several times more until I realised the camera battery was as dead as my chance of getting the picture. Moral of the story - never leave the camera accidentally

Mergui Archipelago Mysteries

by Chris Mitchell

*Three Islets in the early morning.
iPhone 6, 1/2300 at F2.2, ISO 32*

switched on between dives.

That particular disappointment aside, it was still a thrill to spend the day at Black Rock. Oceanic manta rays were only proven to be a separate species from reef manta rays in 2008 by marine scientist Andrea Marshall. Members of the Marine Megafauna Foundation, which Dr Marshall co-founded, visit Black Rock annually on their Ray Of Hope chartered liveaboard expedition to observe and identify the oceanic manta rays to add to their global database. (The BBC documentary Andrea: Queen Of Mantas gives a concise overview of the MMF's work). During the four

A riot of soft corals at Frog Rock. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F13, ISO 200





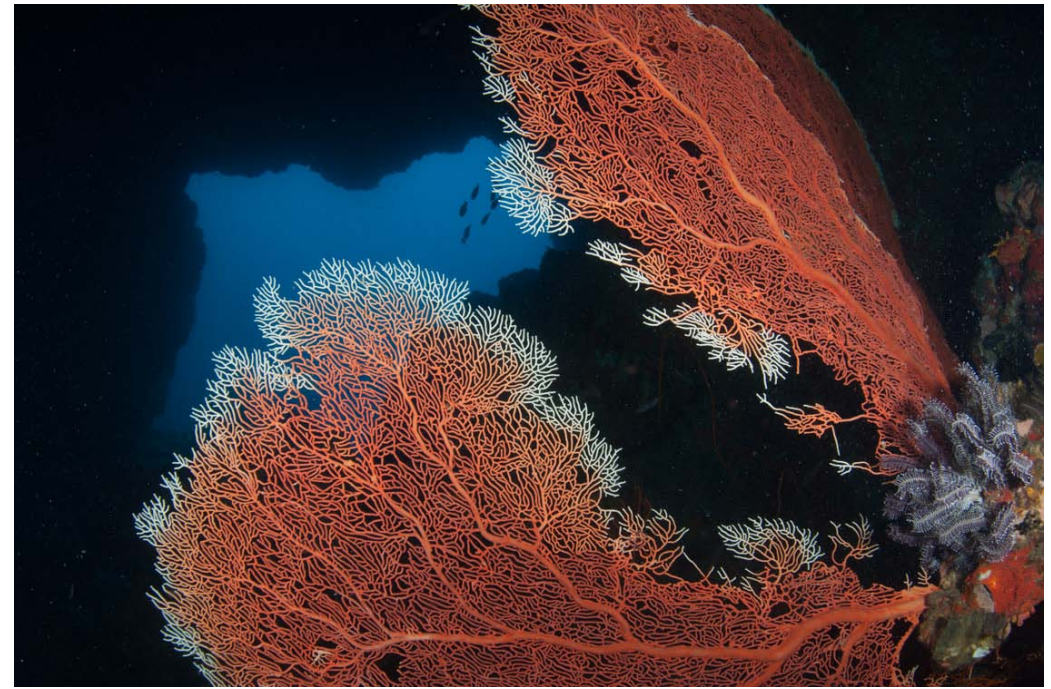
A school of glass fish over a coral bommie, Koh Bon. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F9, ISO 200

dives, we saw several more mantas, all sadly too far away for me to get any memorable shots, but it was heartening to know they were still around in numbers. We even had a blink and you'd miss it encounter with a speeding juvenile whale shark, cleaving through the water below while we were just nearing the end of our dive, a retinue of cleaner fish struggling to keep up.

Black Rock is the furthest north most Myanmar liveaboards explore - its isolation and distance from Mergui's other, more southerly, dive sites mean you need to be on a

solid, stable boat like the Thailand Aggressor in case weather conditions turn bad. During our 10 day trip, conditions in Myanmar seemed oddly better than neighbouring Thailand, where the trip began and ended - we had seas so flat calm you could see the clouds in the sky from under the water.

While Myanmar has opened up politically in the last couple of years and there has already been a huge influx of tourists and foreign investment, the Mergui archipelago - some 800 islands - remains one of South East Asia's last great wilderness



Coral fans at The Archway, Crayfish Cave. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F10, ISO 200

areas. There are still only a few liveaboard boats operating here, all crossing over from Thailand, and it's rare not to have a dive site all to yourself. Much of the archipelago is still unexplored due to its sheer size, although sadly Burmese fishermen seem to have most areas well mapped out and some sites occasionally show evidence of dynamite bombing, using Mergui's remoteness to easily evade detection.

Even so, it's precisely this sense of mystery that gives Mergui much of its appeal, and the recent realisation of just how scientifically important sites

like Black Rock are only increase speculation about What Else Is Out There.

Mergui also has a slightly forbidding reputation - its water are generally greener and slightly colder than neighbouring Thailand, despite their proximity, although we had generally excellent viz during our time in Myanmar. Topographically, most of Mergui's well-known dive sites are limestone islands, which have been shaped by the sea over centuries and provides a plethora of nooks and crannies for critters to find shelter. There is a huge array of macro



Octopus on the run, Richelieu Rock. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F13, ISO 200

subjects waiting to be discovered here - almost immediately after entering the water at Rocky One we discovered an white and yellow ornate ghostpipe fish, right next door to a juvenile frogfish so well merged into the surrounding wall that it went unnoticed for several minutes until there was a yelp of recognition through someone's regulator.

Three Islets is another happy hunting ground for small things, and after you've passed through the spectacular canyon swimthrough known as In Through The Out Door, you emerge with the surge onto a busy

sloping reef where cuttlefish and devil scorpionfish await.

Much as I love small stuff, taking wide-angle photos is more my thing, and despite the manta debacle, Mergui provided several other great opportunities. Fan Forest Pinnacle is exactly that, with dozens of huge fan corals almost growing on top of each other, arranged in serried rows on the site's slopes. Frog Rock was a real surprise, a collection of rocky outcrops thickly carpeted in a riot of soft corals - it was heartening to see the reef look so healthy and see the colours come alive in the



Diver surfacing inside Cock Coombe island lagoon. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F14, ISO 200

Sea snake in the glass fish, Koh Bon. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F14, ISO 200





Manta Ray, Koh Bon. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F11, ISO 200

morning light. My favourite was The Archway at Crayfish Cave, a massive cathedral-like window carved out of the limestone with perfectly-placed fan corals at its base. The eponymous cave itself is also interesting - it's actually a tunnel that runs from one side of the island to the other, around 3 metres wide and sloping up to the same above.

Perhaps Mergui's best secret is at Cock Coombe island - you submerge about three metres or so near to a particular spot by the sheer cliff wall - and once down, realise that there's a huge hole in the rock you can swim through. Once on the other side, you re-surface into a spectacular

lagoon carved out inside the island, surrounded on all sides by its towering cliffs and so invisible from the outside world.

The liveaboard had already explored Thailand's Similan Islands on the cruise up to the Myanmar border, and the difference between the islands and archipelago is quite dramatic given how near they are to each other. The Similans' dive sites are characterised by big, smooth-sided boulders and sandy slopes - at sites like Christmas Point and North Point, the boulders provide epic canyons and swimthroughs amongst stones the size of houses, perfect for wide-angle, while on the slopes are numerous

coral bommies that are teeming with glassfish and other life. Glassfish seemed to become a recurring motif for me on this trip, and I started getting a little bit obsessed with trying to capture their synchronised movement and how they caught the light.

Crossing back over the border into Thailand on the way home, the nearest dive site in Thai waters to Myanmar is Richelieu Rock, itself a horseshoe-shaped limestone pinnacle far away from other islands and widely regarded as the country's best dive site. The hundreds of resident schooling yellow snapper here make for great photos, and there is an abundance of other life both big and small that rewards multiple dives - the large octopus making its elastic way around the interior of the horseshoe was a real joy, while seahorses and harlequin shrimp were also found by eagle-eyed macro hunters.

Our final dive was at Koh Bon, Thailand's most famous manta ray hotspot. This was where I'd seen my first ever manta ray, back in 2004, but in recent years their presence had become very hit and miss. However,

during the 2013 - 14 dive season, there had been a huge resurgence of manta ray and whale shark sightings in the Similans, probably the best season in over a decade. We'd had no luck when we'd stopped off here on our way to Myanmar, and I felt a bit glum about our prospects now. Submerged on the huge limestone ridge that pointed out from Koh Bon's sheer wall, there was no sign of any manta. I contented myself with bothering yet more glassfish, suddenly enlivened by a sea snake bursting through the middle of the shoal as it hunted across the reef.

We were already doing our safety stop when there was a frenzy of tank banging and there, sweeping in with impossible grace across the ridge, glided a giant oceanic manta ray, at least four metres wide. Wishing I'd conserved my air better, I still managed to get a couple of shots as it stayed with us for a good ten minutes, wheeling around over the reef. There couldn't really be a better end to the trip.

As a 10 day trip, the Myanmar - Similan Islands combination offers a great mix of contrasting environments, and there's an excellent range of big and small stuff too. Mergui is likely to remain a niche destination for the foreseeable future simply because it requires a long cruise to get there - and also because there's a hefty \$200



Swimthrough at North Point with fan and glass fish. Nikon D90, Tokina 10-17, 13 mm, Aquatica AD90 housing, Ikelite DS125 strobes 1/2 power, 1/125 at F9, ISO 200

USD Myanmar marine park fee on top of all the standard liveaboard costs. That won't put me off though - I know I want to go back to Black Rock, and next time, I might even manage to avoid self-sabotaging my camera.

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*Chris was a guest on
 the Thailand Aggressor
www.aggressor.com.*



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