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Maldives

Photo chasing the mantas through the Maldives

by Aline Hess

Everyone will remember their first-time swimming with the iconic manta rays. These fascinating and completely harmless giants have been cruising the oceans for millions of years but many aspects of their biology, movements, reproduction pattern etc remain a mystery.

The Maldivian Manta Ray Project from Manta Trust has been studying the manta rays from the Maldives for 15 years. It turns out that the country is home to over 5000 individuals spread across the 1190 islands. These findings were collected by the regional project managers based around the country and citizen science. Liveaboard expeditions are a fantastic way to travel to known manta ray sites, discover new areas and raise awareness among the scuba diving community about the facts and whereabouts of these captivating animals.

For ten days, Aline Hess, the Manta Trust project manager of Lhaviyani Atoll joined aboard the Seafari excursion alongside 17 guests. Departing the capital on the 147-foot-long cruise ship "Seafari Explorer", we headed to Lankan Beyru, our first manta cleaning station. Manta rays have unique spots pattern on their belly and thanks to this method, five manta rays could be identified at this location using photo ID. After enjoying a couple of dives in South Malé Atoll, the boat cruised to Ari Atoll where we met "Thomas" (MV-MA-3346) a mature male that checked us out before vanishing in the deep blue.

Manta rays feed on plankton that gets trapped in their gill racks while swimming around with their huge mouth wide open to filter the water. It wasn't long after the tiny organisms that makes up plankton, were attracted by the light of our boat at night. Then appeared 4 manta rays. Within a few minutes, all divers jumped in the water with their torches facing up, sitting in the sand watching the feeding dance right above their head.

At the same time, the Manta Trust team from Baa Atoll informed us that over a 100 manta have been sighted the same day in the famous UNESCO protected area: Hanifaru Bay. It was also getting closer to the full moon, so we decided to head north to Baa Atoll the next day. The unique structure of the bay, under the right circumstances, (wind direction, tide, moon phase), creates one of the largest aggregations of manta ray of the world. Hanifaru Bay kept its promise as the whole team swam with over 150 manta rays frantically feeding on the abundant plankton. The experience was absolutely mind blowing and lots of ID pictures were taken. These will take a while to be processed.

With heads in the clouds and stars in the eyes, we returned to North Malé Atoll for a last dive where "Super Hands" (MV-MA-1511) and Myah (MV-MA-3681) came to say goodbye.

Click [HERE](#) to see a short video of this fantastic expedition!

