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Maldives

## Into the wild

by Jasmine Corbett

In November 2021, Manta Expeditions and Blue O Two, the UK's number 1 diving tour operator, joined forces to create an extra special liveboard trip in the Maldives. The route took guests on board the Blue Voyager, to the remote and unexplored northern atolls of the Maldives, with the aims of identifying new manta rays, discovering new manta aggregation areas, and exploring reefs that have rarely been dived before.

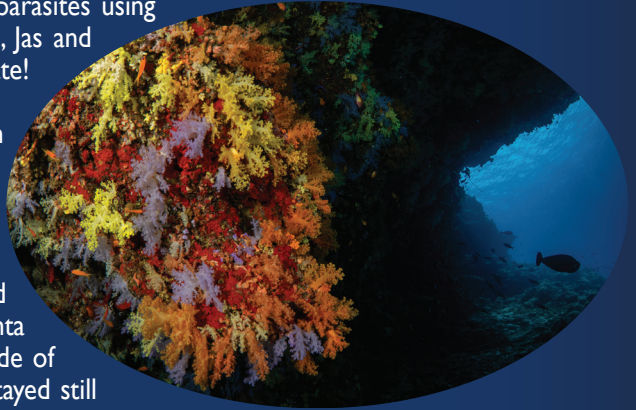
Jas Corbett, project manager of the Manta Trust in Laamu atoll, was hosting the trip as the Manta Expeditions guide, to teach guests about not only manta ray biology and ecology but all aspects of Maldives marine life, teach them how to take identification photographs of manta rays, and help them to identify the manta rays they have seen using the unique pattern of spots on their bellies.



Flying over the northern atolls, she could already tell this trip was going to be very different from most. Untouched inhabited islands, with vast expanses of water in-between, each island looked more remote the further north she went. The northern atolls in the Maldives are the oldest geographically, so many of the thilas (pinnacles) underwater are much deeper than those in those in the more southern atolls.

These large, deep thilas happened to play host to a few understudied manta ray cleaning stations, where manta rays go to have dead skin and parasites using hand drawn dive site maps from locals, Jas and the Blue Voyager team went to investigate!

A particular favourite site was Baarah thila, where the group were graced with the presence of 8 mantas, all of which were new to the Maldives database! As these mantas had rarely encountered divers before, at first, they were shy and kept their distance. Following the Manta Trust's "how to swim with mantas" code of conduct on every dive, all the divers stayed still and calm underwater and stayed at least 3 metres away



from the mantas, which made the mantas realise they were of no threat. Slowly the mantas became more inquisitive and starting circling and swooping overhead the divers, taking advantage of the scuba divers bubbles to massage their bellies. Towards the end of the dive, the divers got to witness an intensive courtship display in which the males mimic the movements of the female mantas to compete for the chances to mate with her.



Moving further south, the group gradually arrived at manta aggregation sites that were more frequently visited by divers, and the behavioural difference was quite clear; the mantas were not bothered by human presence and even though the divers tried to keep their distance, the confident mantas were having none of it and came extremely close to the divers, swooping and playing around them!

As the trip was coming to an end, the group visited the world famous Hanifaru Bay, a marine protected area where mantas arrive in the hundreds to feast on plankton that gets trapped in the bay. As the divers had seen mostly manta cleaning behaviour, they were excited to witness feeding behaviour, where mantas open their mouths wide and gorge on the plankton soup around them.

Overall, it was a once in a lifetime trip for all the divers on board – over a period of 10 days the group dived in 6 atolls across the Maldives, encountered 70 mantas, took 45 manta identification photographs, added 10 new manta rays to the Maldives database, witnessed rarely seen courtship behaviour and even spotted a pregnant manta ray!

The manta sightings were incredible and the guests were extremely happy...they are all counting days until the next manta expedition starts!

