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Maldives

Ramón Domínguez
PHOTOGRAPHY

100 mantas in 10 days!

by Tam Sawers

photos from Ramon Dominguez (www.ramondominguezphotography.com)

Our Central Maldives Manta Expedition in October 2022, started off with a lovely chance meeting in Male' City between guests and myself while seated in the Sultans Park and enjoying the cool shade afforded by the ancient trees that enchantingly filled the area and isolated the noise from the busy city streets. Strangers at first but soon to be underwater friends – the group of passers-by asked for some directions and, after noticing my Manta Trust t-shirt, recognised an immediate connection - It seemed I had just met the liveaboard guests before we set sail around Baa, Raa and North Male Atoll's the very next day.



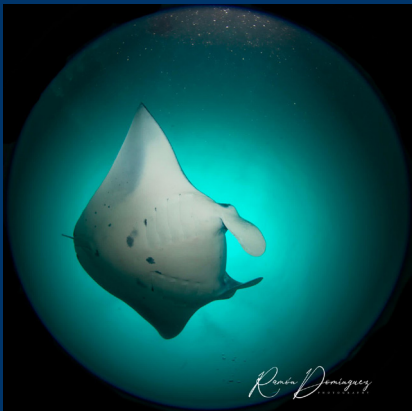
After being briefed on all the important features of our mother ship and settling into our cosy cabins, which we would call home for the next 10 days, our lunch was served and the tantalising smells from the kitchen were hard to resist. As we sat down to our meal, an urgent call came in from the Hanifaru Bay Ranger informing me of mass-manta feeding inside 'the bay'. Moored up just outside, this call was too good to ignore, so we asked the chef to 'hang fire', whilst we sped off to get a glimpse of the feeding frenzy.

We anticipated a spectacle not to be missed, but so did about twenty other groups, which meant we had to wait our turn to enter the marine protected reserve. Finally, we had our opportunity to get in the water - the water was green with dense plankton and poor visibility made for quite a search for the manta rays. Unfortunately, some of the mantas had already moved off but we were still lucky to catch the tail end of their feeding and some of the team even had a show from our famous manta ray, the one and only - **'Babaganoush'**.

Our first few hours of the trip had clearly started off with a bang, and we all came away feeling incredibly humbled by the show. A night dive on our return was an absolute bonus and we ended the first evening very happy and ready for bed.

The weather was not in our favour the next day as we woke up to gloom and choppy seas, a common phenomenon around full moon. As I explained to the guests, what many people don't know, is that this is also when the manta rays like to come out to play. It appeared however that the mantas had filled themselves up on too many 'plankton pies' the day before and were not showing off for us this time but the crazy storms above the water still made for some spectacular encounters with sharks, turtles and frenzied fish which seemed to know there was something going on up above.

Day three of wind, drizzle and lack of good manta encounters lead us to venture off to a new destination – we steamed full force ahead to Raa Atoll to check out if the big beauties had made a stop at some of the favoured cleaning blocks that side rather. As we donned our wetsuits and geared ourselves for another dive, none of us were the wiser to the spectacle we would all witness after breaking the water surface. We had no sooner reached the thila below, when all of a sudden we saw a large manta cruise nearby. Battling to see her silhouette against the murky waters beyond, we followed as she seemed to slow down near a large coral outcrop. Kneeling down near the coral bommie, we noticed another manta appear from the cloudy waters behind and together the two



individuals looped around what we had now identified as the primary cleaning station. These cleaning sites are often visited by manta rays who have participated in a good feeding session and need to be picked clean by smaller cleaner fish of any detritus or ecto-parasites that may have built up in their mouths, gills, or on their bodies. The symbiotic relationship established between the cleaner fish and the large bodied animal is mutually beneficial and is always interesting to watch, as the smaller fish move into the body cavity and around the body picking off the detritus and ecto-parasites (their food source), while giving the manta ray a nice clean, and slight 'tickle' in some cases. It always appears to be quite a soothing process for the manta rays.

It was not long before another male manta ray swooped over our heads to join the duo and for a good 30 minutes we were all graced by a wonderful show of the three mantas enjoying a thorough 'spa treatment' from the cleaner fish that dominated the block they hovered above.

We only just breached the surface from our spectacular manta dive and barely got a chance to chat through the exciting encounter, before another call alert flagged on my phone for another mass feeding event starting back over in Baa Atoll again. After only being stationed in Raa for just over 2 hours, we made the slightly reluctant, but quick decision to not miss out on this opportunity that happens so seldom and, before we knew it, we watched the boat turn around and we were on our way back to Baa. Wondering if we would be too late or met by a too many other tourists wanting to witness the same spectacle again, we were surprised to have the mantas almost all to ourselves - this time with numbers of manta rays reaching **60 + individuals!** We couldn't have wished for anything better. We had clearly made the right choice and everyone was completely elated by the magical manta experiences witness that day.



Nearing the last few days of our trip and realising the immense manta luck we had now been afforded we decided that after a morning dive we would motor the mother ship over to North Male' in search of some sunshine (the rain and stormy seas had been persistent) and some new sea life. After a peaceful 4-hour navigation, we motioned over to a dive site in the northern section of the North Male' for our first dive in the atoll but last dive of the day. Not expecting too much after all the luck we had experienced in Baa, we were all overwhelmingly surprised by the walls of sharks that met our gaze as we reached the reef below. Large reef sharks cruised by through the channel navigating back and forth along a course, while eagle rays soared above our heads and schools of batfish hovered nearby. A group of us were also greeted by a very angry lionfish which puffed his spines and pranced behind us for quite some time, almost as if he was 'miffed off' by the lack of attention he was receiving ;).

Another treat awaited us on our dives the next day, the pristine reefs provided some of the most colourful and rich soft coral to be found in Maldives. The contrast between those corals and the ones in Baa was profound and we took many photographs and memories from the hours spent around these vibrant life forms.

As the last two days approached, we wondered if we would be graced by one last encounter with the manta rays on this Manta Expedition.

The dive on the second last day at the Manta site, Lankan Beyru, started off a little slow. It was early and the sun had not quite presented enough light yet to illuminate the water below. It was all a bit hazy and the early morning coffee had not quite kicked in, but a rapid shake of a dive rattle and some loud banging on the dive tanks definitely caught everyone's attention, and quickly. Spinning our heads and swimming towards the bursts of sound, we set our eyes upon some gorgeous manta ray belly's cruising over our heads to a big coral outcrop nearby – And for the remainder of this dive we were presented with quite a show. It was almost as if the mantas had been practicing for our visit – they swooped above our heads, cruised past our shoulders, frolicked along the reef edge, and enjoyed a tickle from our dive bubbles. We counted a total of **11-12 different individuals** on that dive and there was no doubt that after that spectacle, everyone agreed to return to this spot for our final dive of the trip the next morning.

Our last dive of the expedition and yes, the manta rays decided to present another beautiful display, but this time with 11 completely different individuals to the ones we had met the day before. They motioned over us much slower this time, and gave us the opportunity to clearly observe past injuries, recent mating scars and some of the adult females even proudly supported some very heavy baby bumps. We certainly ended our Manta Expedition on an ultimate high and we were all grateful for the magnificent trip. We said our goodbyes the very next day with memories to last the team until our next chance encounters!



A big thank you goes out to Ramon Dominguez (www.ramondominguezphotography.com) for supplying all the beautiful photos