

YAP

Island of mantas and stone money

AL HORNSBY extols the virtues of Yap, a Pacific island where the lifestyle and culture is little-changed from their ancient origins, and which is a hotspot for manta encounters

Photographs by **AL HORNSBY**



We've drifted inward on the current from the outer reef wall where Goofnuw Channel opens into the sea. Along the way, we've passed green turtles, grey reef sharks, schools of black snapper, leopard sharks and reef fish of every description milling about the scattered coral heads. It's a fascinating dive, but even more exciting is the anticipation of reaching our destination – the Valley of the Rays, with its three manta-cleaning stations. As the largest of these, Merry-Go-Round, a huge lettuce coral structure arising from the 20m bottom, comes into view in the clear – nearly 30 metre vis – water, we can see there are 10-15 big mantas moving around the mound.

As calmly as possible, we settle in on the sand bottom around the edges of the knoll, staying low to avoid interfering with the mantas' patterns of movement as they come in to hang motionless just above the coral. While we watch, a swarm of wrasse and butterflyfish rises up to clean them of parasites. The mantas gaze at us serenely, obviously unfazed by our presence just metres away. As in my previous visits to Yap, it strikes me how unusually calm Yap's mantas are around divers.

As a manta moves away, it pauses just over our heads, seemingly curious, providing the opportunity for very close observation. It's an underwater photographer's dream and any diver's transcending moment, being so near these immense, gentle creatures...

The islands of Yap are the tops of submerged mountains, their green, rugged hillsides jutting up from the western Pacific's otherwise unbroken horizon, an hour and 15 minute flight southwest of Guam. Though easily accessible to tourists, Yap has managed to steadfastly hold to its traditional ways, including its tribal chiefs' style of government, the use of huge pieces of carved, stone money, its songs and dances – and its affinity for the constant chewing of calming betel nut by young and old. Still relatively little-affected by the outside world, Yap is a place where visitors may easily experience the realities of Micronesian culture.

Especially interesting (and unique) is the use of the ancient stone money. Around the various

villages stand large, circular disks of stone, a hole carved in their centres, on display. These stones, carved in olden times in Palau and transported the arduous 300 miles by canoe, once served as the currency for Yap's economy. Value was determined by the size of the stone and the difficulty of the voyage return to Yap. Today, they are still used as collateral for major transactions like sales of land, in marriages and as settlement of grievances.

Visitors are treated with a shy, friendly curiosity, and those who express polite interest in the local people will often be surprised by the welcoming response. There are opportunities to visit villages and men's (meeting) houses, eat local foods and witness traditional dances and sings. It's something that should not be missed – for the lifestyle that defines Micronesia is one of enjoyment of the simple things, reverence for the natural environment, and unconditional sharing, of possessions, resources, and the smiles of happiness.



For World War Two history buffs, Yap, was occupied by the Japanese and fortified with bunkers, artillery and an airport. While it was not invaded by US forces like nearby Palau and Guam, it was the scene of heavy bombing and aerial skirmishes. Today, tours reveal anti-aircraft guns and wrecked airplanes.

For divers, however, Yap is even more special. Beneath the clear, clear waters that surround its shorelines, nature has prepared another of her wonderful surprises, one that only divers may experience. Each morning, on the incoming high tide, schools of huge manta rays enter two of Yap's tidal channels, Goofnuw and Mi'l, and spend several hours hovering over certain coral heads, waiting their turns to be cleaned.

The setting provides a manta-interaction opportunity that is special among diving locations – the chance, just offshore, to observe as many as 10 to 20 huge mantas

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from only a few metres away, as they participate in a daily ritual that has been occurring uninterrupted over the ages. There’s something else very special about this dive experience, as well, beyond the obvious. Since the goal of the dive operation is to allow divers to continue to witness the mantas in their natural behaviour, these dives are accomplished in a manner that does not alter the event or interfere with the mantas’ comfort. A great deal of attention is given to helping guests learn to dive in a way that allows coexistence, without disturbance. The skills learned are, perhaps, the essence of environmentally sensitive diving - becoming an observer, without being a damaging intruder into nature’s process. The skill-sets and awareness developed when diving with Yap’s mantas are valuable lessons that can be carried on, improving any diver’s interactions with big marine life, wherever found.

Besides the Valley of the Rays, there are many other remarkable dive sites around the 24km-long main island. In Mi’l Channel, on the island’s east side, is Manta Ridge, a coral ridgeline that runs across the channel from the 13m-deep bottom. On the morning incoming tides, especially in the winter and spring months (Goofnuw Channel is the main summer-fall

location), as many as 10-12 mantas at a time ride the current in to the site. Taking turns, they move in to hover over the ridge, while a horde of small fish begin to roam over their bodies and in and out of their gaping gills, searching for isopods and other parasites. After a few minutes, the mantas move away, to be replaced by others.

On the island’s north end, in very clear water, Yap Caverns is a jumbled terrain of grottos, caves and swim-throughs located at the edge of a steep drop-off. A white, sand bottom creates a lovely photographic setting and fish life is profuse. Green turtles, often completely unafraid of divers, are common as well.

On the outer reef on the southeast side of the island is an exciting dive called Yap Corner. With many different corals along the reef top, the slope tumbles down into deep water, with a mild current and very clear water, generally with 25-30 metre visibility or more. There are many white-tip reef sharks moving about the slope and big grey reef sharks patrol back and forth in blue water.

Near Yap Caverns, Lionfish Wall is located on a steep section of the drop-off. Huge, leathery- brown zoanths cover the wall and colourful reef fish congregate in clouds. Off the wall, in blue water, grey reef sharks will be seen. In one section of the wall, a series of overhangs provides shelter for an amazing collection of lionfish, as many as five species congregated together.

A visit to Yap is a trip back to a slower, tradition-hued time, where Micronesian culture and life-style endure, in many ways little-changed from their ancient origins. It also provides a fascinating glimpse into one of nature’s most-fascinating rituals, as immense, graceful mantas calmly go about their daily habits, little-concerned over divers’ close, wide-eyed presence. ■

Al was supported on his Yap assignments by Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers (www.mantaray.com)