

# Giant Manta Diving

## In The Revillagigedo Islands



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**K**EEP breathing was what I kept telling myself as I stared at the giant manta with a huge wingspan heading straight for me. I was awestruck at the sight of this magnificent creature and the excitement simply took my breath away. Coming within reach, the enormous creature stared straight at me with intelligent, communicative eyes that conveyed a very clear 'hello, who are you?' A scratch on the underside sent a tremble through its body and slowly off on a loop towards another lucky diver in our group. Not bad for the first dive of the trip in the Revillagigedo Islands.

The Revillagigedo Islands (pronounced reh vee ah hey hey do) consist of four volcanic islands (Socorro, San Benedicto, Roca Partida, and Clarion) approximately 220 miles (350 km) south of Baja, Mexico. Known for their unique ecosystem, these islands are often called the 'Galapagos of Mexico'. Due to their isolation from the mainland, this archipelago is home to a large variety of endemic plant and animal species not seen anywhere elsewhere in the world.

While these islands are world famous for these giant mantas, there is also an abundance of other large pelagic animals: humpback whales, whale sharks, dolphins, and multiple varieties of sharks (hammerhead, silky, Galapagos and white tip). Since this archipelago rises up deep from the ocean floor (11,000 ft /3,500 m at some points) there is a large upwelling of cold water that also brings with it an abundance of nutrients. It is these nutrients that attract all the marine life. If you enjoy diving with large pelagic creatures, the Revillagigedo Islands certainly deliver.

Since the Revillagigedo Islands are only accessible by sea, we left La Paz on Nautilus Explorer, a 35.35-m/116-ft dive expedition vessel, for our 36-hour journey to these islands. As is usual this time of year, a 40-knot 'Norte' with 10–12-ft seas followed us as we headed south out of the Sea of Cortez. This type of seasonal storm is one reason why the best diving in the Sea of Cortez approximately ends while the best diving for Revillagigedo begins.

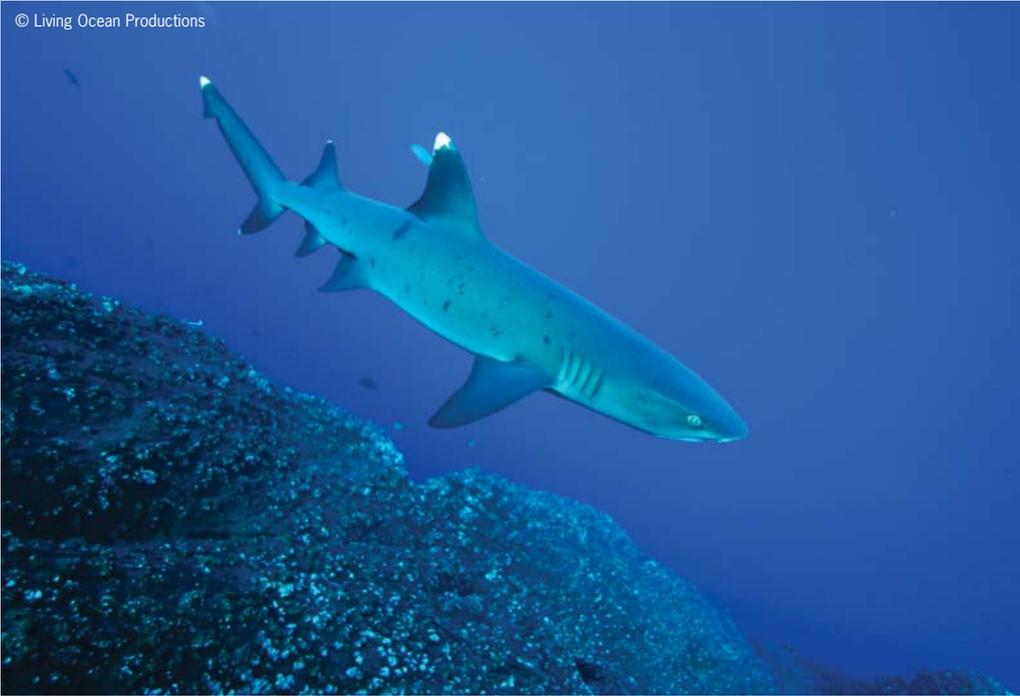
The islands' volcanic origins are seen everywhere, above and below the water. On land the terrain is sparsely vegetated and very rocky. On San Benedicto, there is still a very dramatic 'ash flow' where the landscape is ridged with lava grooves up to 50 feet high. The same can be seen underwater where, rather than sand, igneous rocks are piled high. In the last few decades, commercial fishing had dramatically impacted the numbers of all sea life here, but after an international outcry the Revillagigedo Islands were declared a protected marine biosphere in 2002.

Since we were diving in a protected marine biosphere, a few ground rules were laid in regard to interacting with all of the marine life, especially the mantas. We should not approach them, but if they approached us we could 'interact', which generally meant a nice scratch on the belly. Riding them is strictly prohibited, but since we were filming underwater high-definition video we preferred to view them gliding by in their full majesty. Mexican requirements in the Revillagigedo Islands do not allow divers to have knives, lights or gloves. This protects mantas,



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and gives divers a unique souvenir called 'manta fingers', resulting from rubbing the rough underside of the mantas.

Within 10 miles of our first anchorage at the island of San Benedicto, a dozen dolphins greeted us as they rode our bow wave and leaped into the air. Always a good premonition to divers, it seemed they were as excited as we were to be there. Our first dive site was called the 'canyon' and this is where we enjoyed our first encounter with several friendly giant mantas. At a later dive at this

same site, I ended up leaving the water only after I had ran out of videotape. I was swimming 10 feet from silver tip sharks and hammerheads, which were swimming above me while two giant mantas were circling me. To say there was a lot to see is an understatement. I was on my rebreather, which fascinated the mantas, as they are used to seeing bubbles coming from divers. After 60 minutes at 80 ft (24 m), I made my way back to the anchor line and slowly made my ascent. The entire time a giant manta shadowed me from



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20 ft (6 m) away, and hung with me for my entire safety stop. This was my 'magic dive' of the trip that made all the logistics, expense and effort worth it.

Textbooks list mantas as 6–9 ft (2–3 m) across, yet Revillagigedo giant manta rays sometimes measured up to 20 ft (6 m) across! Despite their massive size, giant mantas are harmless to people. They are gigantic filter feeders, straining the water for plankton and small fishes through their very wide, rectangular mouths. Cephalic lobes, or fins, on the sides of their head are unfurled when the animals are feeding, funnelling water and food into their 'super-sized' mouths.

Giant mantas generally inhabit tropical seawaters around the globe, usually near shore in the vicinity of coral reefs and rocky outcrops. They are most often encountered near the surface of the water, although recent research indicates that they may dive to very deep water at night. They are solitary animals that do not form schools, but they may aggregate in waters with rich feeding opportunities.

After San Benedicto, we made a mandatory check in with the Mexican official at Socorro, and they were very friendly and quick with their check on our boat to make sure we carried no fishing apparatus.

Our next dive site was at Roca Partida, the smallest and most isolated area of the Revillagigedo Islands, 80 miles from the nearest island. Roca Partida is a guano-covered white rock so small that a diver can easily swim around it during a single dive. Rising from the deep blue, Roca Partida is a magnet for marine life, including giant mantas. We spent two days at Roca Partida diving with the giant mantas in beautiful blue water with over 100-ft visibility. Here, we watched as many as three giant mantas at once. They would swim toward us, flare in mid-flight and hover with us as we rub them on their bellies.

The diving here isn't always easy. The currents can be very strong, and on most dives a strong surge is felt, often to as deep as 80 feet or more, so it's not easy to hide from it. Generally there is no night diving due to the heavy shark activity. The water temperatures are pleasant; with normal January temperatures in the mid-70°F range, and it being a little warmer in November/ December as temperatures are routinely between 76°F and 78°F.

The Revillagigedo Islands are certainly a world-class diving spot that should be on any diving yacht's itinerary. There are fewer and fewer 'pristine' diving spots in the world, so make the effort and take the time to dive them while we can still enjoy them.

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***The third installment in this series will be a diving report on the world-class diving areas at Cocos Islands, Costa Rica and Malpelo Island, Colombia. Both are renowned for their abundant marine life, including schooling hammerheads, whale sharks, mantas and many more species of pelagic creatures.***