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RAYS OF LIGHT

Swimming with the Manta Rays off Hawaii's Kona Coast

By Erin Caslavka

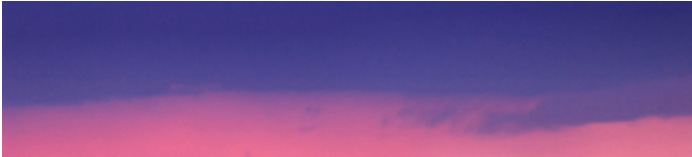


Before the arrival of the ‘white man,’ the Hawaiian Islands were truly a paradise on earth. With no indigenous plants or animals that were poisonous or deadly, and no large land animals to worry about outrunning, the ancient Hawaiians pretty much had it made.

Still, Hawaii *is* a series of islands - which by their very definition means that they’re surrounded by water. And in that water, namely the Pacific Ocean, there *are* things that are poisonous and deadly: jellyfish and sharks, to name but a few. So it was with some reluctance (and, let’s admit it, a modicum of fear) that I agreed to go swimming in the dark one balmy February night while visiting the Big Island of Hawaii, with the hope of seeing manta rays.

I’d heard about the rays that frequent the waters just off the Kona Coast. Gentle giants, the rays appear in photographs like some kind of alien space being. With wing spans that can reach over 20 feet across, it’s not all that inconceivable to imagine hitching a ride atop one of them like the animated sea creatures did in *Finding Nemo*.

My boyfriend Jon and I arrived at the headquarters of Big Island Divers just up the road from downtown Kona at 5 p.m., and proceeded to check in. After being fitted with a wetsuit, snorkel, mask and fins, we drove over to the meeting point for the boat. Most of the boats in the harbor were being put away for the day, but our lively group of divers and snorkelers got busy introducing ourselves to one another while climbing onboard with our gear. With everyone finally set, we headed out into the open water, paralleling the coast for a quick 15 minute ride, finally coming to a cove



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bustling with activity.

Our captain explained there were other companies operating in the area, but that they all worked together to keep the experience as unique and safe as possible. Gathered like covered wagons on the prairie, we slipped into the circle of boats and anchored ours in-between two other commercial crafts. As everyone set about getting ready to take the plunge overboard, our instructors broke us off into two groups - the snorkelers (us), and the scuba divers (them), who quickly took off into the black water bound for “the campfire”: a grouping of rocks placed on the ocean’s floor, and set into a circle.

Even though Jon is a diver, he choose to hang with me in the snorkeling group. Our instructions went something like this: “Here is a flash light. It is your friend. You will use it to attract the mantas to you, and to help us find you if for some reason you drift off.

“Once you’re in the water, point it downwards - it does you no good to send the light straight out ahead of you. Likewise, do not shine it in anyone’s eyes; they will not be happy about it.

“You should check to make sure that your mask and mouthpiece fit snugly and securely. Also, that your snorkel is clear and that you can breathe through it. Lastly, and most importantly, do not attempt to touch the mantas! As soon as you’ve got your bearings when you’re in the water, immediately get into a floating position and lie completely flat, with your flashlight pointing down.

“Any questions?”

We shook our heads in a collective “no,” and Jon helped me adjust my mask and snorkel. Signaling to the captain that I was ready to go, I got the thumbs-up and plunged solo into the cool, dark water beneath us. Bobbing to the surface, I adjusted my gear once again, turned on my flashlight and got into the flat position we’d been instructed to assume.

Five seconds later I was staring into the cavernous body cavity of a gigantic manta.

If the manta was even looking at me - instead of the billions of tiny, floating plankton in between it and my flashlight - it surely would have noticed the bug-eyed expression behind my mask. It was all I could do to keep my flashlight steady, I was so overcome with excitement. (Later that night, Jon would tell me that from the boat he could hear me screaming into my snorkel.) After a few minutes, Jon was shining his flashlight down into the crystalline water alongside mine and we watched, spellbound, as the manta did somersault after somersault beneath our floating bodies, looping end-over-end like a giant roll of deep-water taffy. As it passed within inches of our bodies, we peered into the barrel-sized mouth and watched its gills move back and forth as a remora did a mutually-beneficial cleaning of the inside of its body.

Popping up, I



breathlessly asked Jon, [REDACTED]
“Did you want to swim over to where the divers are?” He nodded yes, and we took off hand-in-hand for "the campfire."

Following a trail of bubbles that glowed like silver balls of suspended mercury, we swam towards a feeding frenzy of thousands of small, opportunistic fish who'd also shown up for the plankton buffet. In what was surely the most surreal of scenes, we floated above giant rays that swam in and out amongst the divers, seated on the bottom of the ocean floor while swirls of fish swam in circles around the glowing bubbles of air. Jon and I hovered above the scene like voyeurs in a sci-fi fantasy, squeezing one-another's hand whenever something entered our field of vision that we wanted the other to see.

Who knows how long we were floating there? At some point we realized we'd become cold and that the number of snorkelers around us had dwindled to a handful. So we signaled to one-another to head back to our boat, recognizable by the distinctive yellow light suspended from its bow.

Kicking our fins against the surface of the night-cooled ocean, Jon motioned towards a manta heading our way. Apparently, we were one of the remaining sources of light and the manta was hoping to capture a few last mouthfuls of plankton with our assistance. So we stopped and hovered again in the water, our flashlights dutifully pointing downwards. But as the manta rose towards us, we noticed it wasn't alone.

And there in the jet-black water, we watched as two mantas began to perform an underwater ballet - their graceful bodies twisting, turning and twirling; weaving in and out in an otherworldly pas-de-deux, illuminated in the flashlights' glow that shone on them like spotlights.

Later, on our boat ride back to the harbor, Jon would quote to me with a smile, “Fortune favors the brave.”

I don't know if I was necessarily “brave” to plunge into the dark waters of the Hawaiian coast that February night - but I do know I was fortunate. And that's more than enough reason to do it again.



FAST FACTS

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Posted January 2010

