

The Manta Rays of Tofo

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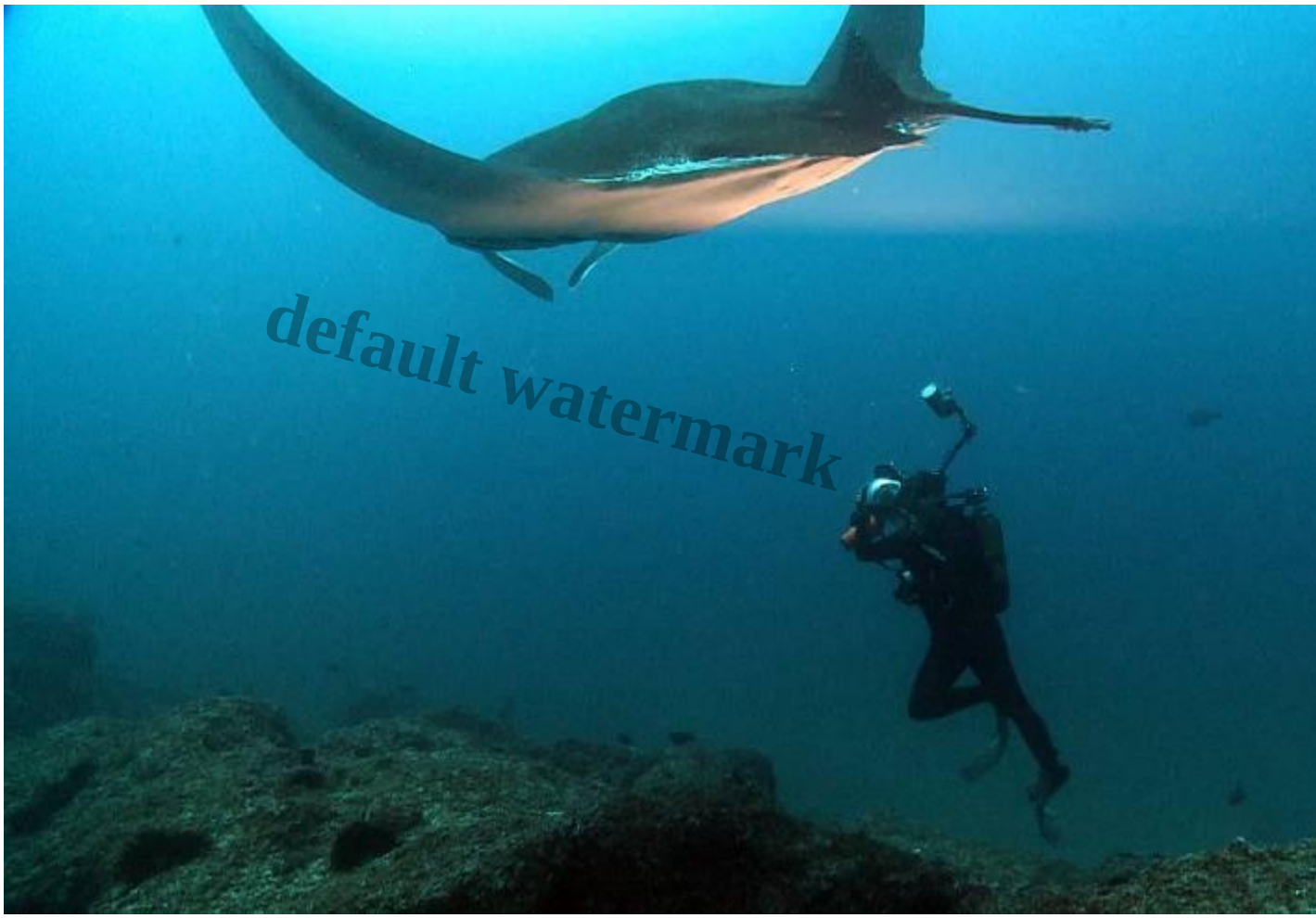
Charles Filming a Manta Ray on Giants Reef
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When my plane touched down in the small Mozambiquean village of Inhambane, I was unsure what to expect. I had been sent to Mozambique by French Televisionâ??s â??Ushuaia Natureâ?• on the TF1 channel to film manta rays off Praia do Tofo, a small village about 20 kms from the airport. On arrival in Tofo, I met Andrea Marshall who heads the Foundation for the Protection of Marine Megafauna, a marine research and conservation organisation. Andreaâ??s work on mantas was to be the focus of this documentary. Previously, a French team was in Tofo working on the same production but they were unlucky with both sea conditions and manta sightings. I was now given only four days to get the critical underwater sequences.

Andrea briefed me on what to expect. There were a number of manta cleaning stations where the mantas would cruise up into the current and hover over the reef for a few minutes, allowing â??cleaner fishâ?• to remove parasites from their bodies. Another good example of a symbiotic relationship in the

marine environment. This activity would afford me the ideal opportunity to get close up to these graceful monsters.

Sharks, skates and rays are all part of the same zoological subclass. Manta rays can reach seven metres in wing span, weigh two tons, live for up to 20 years and have the largest brain to body mass ratio of all sharks and rays. The Tofo population comprise of two species, reef mantas and giant mantas, the latter being migratory. While mantas have a formidable looking tail, they cannot sting.



Andrea Obtaining a Photo ID of a Manta Ray

The first day was slow as there was hardly any current, a critical factor in enabling the mantas to hover in one spot while being cleaned. Fortunately, on the second day, the current picked up and we could start to get the critical shots. I have filmed mantas before in the Comoros Islands in the open ocean but this was very different.



A Manta Being Cleaned by Small Reef Fish Note shark Bites on Mantaâ??s Wing

The mantas approach the cleaning station, into the current and only a few metres above the reef. Then they rise in front and stall, waiting to be cleaned. It never ceases to amaze me how graceful these huge animals are as they swoop in and perform backwards loops. Andrea explained to me that, due to the mantaâ??s large brain size, by making eye contact it is possible to interact with mantas and get them to loop around you, a sight that is quite spectacular to witness.

The tag application method was critical. If the tag was inserted incorrectly it could fall out or injure the animal and, from a filming point of view, the manta would react instantly and speed off, that was not what I wanted. On this occasion the tag was perfectly attached and the manta remained in position long enough for me to film the tag in situ before the manta swam away.

The cleaning station I preferred was named â??Giantsâ?•. At 30 metres, it was relatively deep. While this cut down on our bottom time, it meant that the boatloads of recreational divers could only have one dive there, leaving the reef to us for most of the day. Fortunately nitrox was readily available in Tofo, being the ideal gas mixture for this depth and allowing us two dives a day with minimal decompression time. As there was no decompression facilities available in Tofo, safety was of paramount importance.



Making Eye Contact with a Manta Ray

A very noticeable and common feature of the mantas that I saw off Tofo was the semi-circular shark bites at the rear of the wings: not a good area to place a tag. According to Andrea, 75% of mantas in Mozambique have shark bites compared to the international average of 10%. Tiger and Zambezi (bull) sharks are thought to be the main culprits (see photo above).



Reef Fish Seek Refuge in Green Coral

Besides mantas, the area is good for another sea monster, the whale shark. The reef structure off Tofo is interesting and varied with â??bushesâ?• of green coral, harbouring a variety of colourful reef fish. During one dive I caught a fleeting glimpse of a leopard shark. Whitetip reef sharks, grey reef sharks, scalloped hammerhead sharks and weasel sharks have been seen in this area.

was very taken by the village of Tofo. From where I presently sit, having breakfast at the Cassa Barry restaurant while typing this blog, a long and beautiful beach stretches all the way to Ponta da Barra some 8 kms away. In the early morning the beach is all but deserted. In fact, out of South African school holidays, the tourist pressure is small. With simple but good restaurants, comfortable accommodation and friendly locals, this is a great place for a laid back holiday. Casa de Comer is one of the many good restaurants in Tofo, specialising in Portuguese style seafood. If you like prawns, Mozambique is the place to be.

Besides the mantas and whale sharks, Tofo is renown for humpback whales that arrive in the sheltered bays to calve and mate during the winter months. On their northward migration, the humpbacks pass the Transkei coast at the same time as the famous Natal Sardine Run is taking place. As I am planning to film whales off Tofo this winter, I wondered whether, by some coincidence, I would chance upon an individual whose mournful songs I had previously heard while filming baitballs (see my Sardine Run blog) or the few that I had managed to quietly approach and film at first light while they rested near the picturesque Umkombati estuary, before continuing with their long northerly swim.



The View of a Deserted Beach from the Cassa Barry Restaurant

Finally my time was up. As I made my way to the surface Nick, my safety diver from Peri-Peri Divers, pointed down and I caught my last glimpse of a manta cruising the reef far below me. Hopefully I will be returning to Tofo soon.



Large but Graceful: A Manta Swoops Over the Reef

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Author
kerryn