

ELEVEN A.M. and I am drifting slowly along a sheer wall of coral at fifteen metres, above me are huge blue corals shaped like church bells, above them shoals of Red Sea anthias silhouetted against the clear blue of the sky. Healthy gorgonians are waving gently in the barely noticeable tide as a group of Jacks come up, circle us menacingly, and speed off into the distance looking for lunch.

I have to keep reminding myself this mind-blowing scene is real; this is Deadalus reef 75km off the Egyptian coast in the Red Sea. Past the bell corals, and the whole of the reef face is covered with what looks like one enormous anemone but is in fact dozens of individual animals each with attendant clownfish.

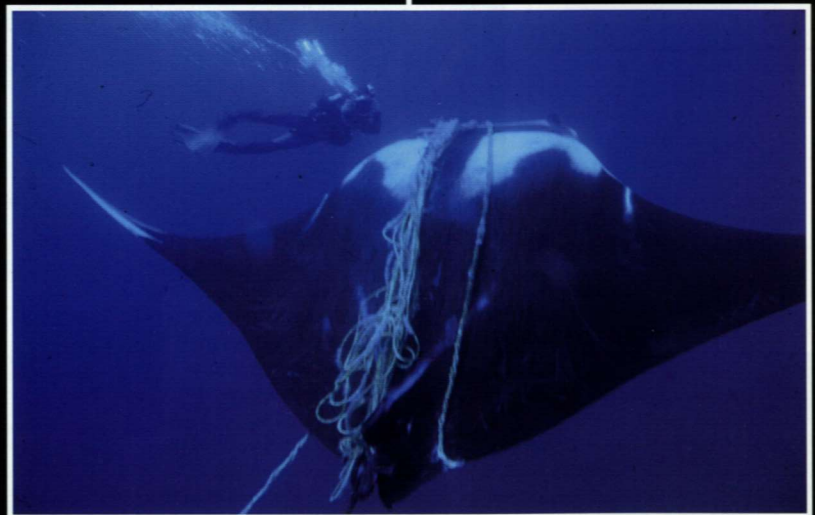
While trying to work out the best angle to photograph from I notice my buddy frantically signalling for me to look back along the reef. There slowly and gracefully coming towards us was a manta ray. Like some giant plane gliding through the sea with several smaller creatures trying hard to keep up with it.

The manta was at least five metres across and the small creatures were in fact divers dwarfed by this giant of the seas. As it neared us we noticed the ropes wrapped around the fish with at least thirty metres trailing behind and a couple of buoys attached to the end.

Once I gathered my composure and started taking pictures I realised there was someone pulling himself hand over hand toward the manta. When he reached the tail he cut off the trailing rope. You could almost hear the cheer from the other divers as the huge fish shuddered and shook our hero off. Unfortunately the loss of drag meant we could no longer keep up with it. We watched helplessly as it headed for the depths breaking off at thirty metres.

Back on board we all had mixed emotions as we discussed whether it would survive with rope still wrapped around its body. The mouth was still open and being a filter feeder we convinced ourselves it would survive, but over the next few days I think everyone kept looking around to see if it returned to have us remove the rest of the rope, it did not.

This exciting but remote dive site is only reachable on a good liveaboard; one with two engines a steel hull and a good crew. I dived from Tiger Lily a luxury liveaboard owned and operated by Flowers of Sinai who also own MV Orchid. They have a good reputation for running a safe and comfortable operation with probably the best food in the Red Sea. Try it yourself sometime.



Close Encounters OF THE NATURAL KIND

Jack Morrison