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Myanmar

## Chasing Giants: A Manta Ray Expedition into Myanmar's Hidden Paradise

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There are few places left in the world where you can truly feel like an explorer. The Mergui Archipelago in Myanmar is one of them. A remote chain of 800+ islands, it remained closed to foreigners for decades, hidden away in the Andaman Sea. Today, it's a diver's dream with pristine reefs, pelagic encounters, and a sense of the unknown.

In early 2020, I joined a dive expedition to document the manta ray population in Mergui, a trip which was enhanced by the presence of Manta Trust researcher, Jamie, who joined this trip as well. With its strong currents, deep pinnacles, and rich plankton blooms, this untouched frontier had all the makings of a manta haven. But would we actually find mantas, I wondered?

### Setting Sail into the Unknown

We departed from Kawthaung, Myanmar's southern gateway, aboard a liveaboard vessel stocked with tanks, cameras, and an eager crew. As we pushed into open waters, I couldn't help but feel a thrill - many of Mergui's dive sites are still uncharted. This wasn't just another dive trip; it was an expedition into the unknown. Our journey would take us across rugged limestone islands, hidden lagoons, and deep oceanic trenches, all while keeping an eye out for the ocean's gentle giants.

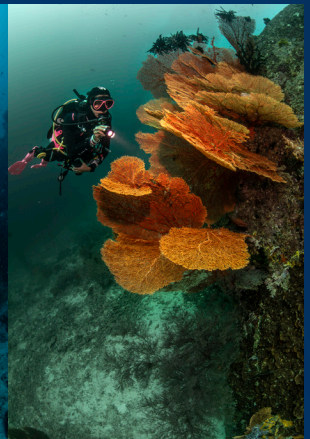
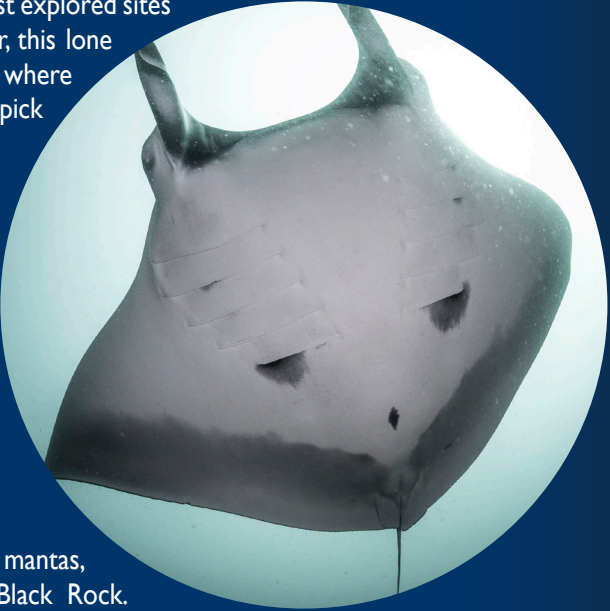
## Black Rock: The Manta Magnet

After two days of diving, we finally arrived at Black Rock, one of the most famous yet least explored sites in Mergui. Rising steeply from the seafloor, this lone pinnacle is a cleaning station for mantas where they hover above the reef while tiny fish pick off parasites.

The first descent was pure adrenaline. Schools of barracuda spiralled around us, trevallies darted through the blue, and below us lay a vast expanse of coral-encrusted rock. Then, out of the deep, a shadow emerged - a manta ray, effortlessly gliding towards us.

It was the first of many.

For over an hour, we watched as giant mantas, some over three metres wide, circled Black Rock. They twisted, looped and danced in the currents, completely unbothered by our presence. My camera clicked furiously, trying to capture the grace and power of these incredible creatures.



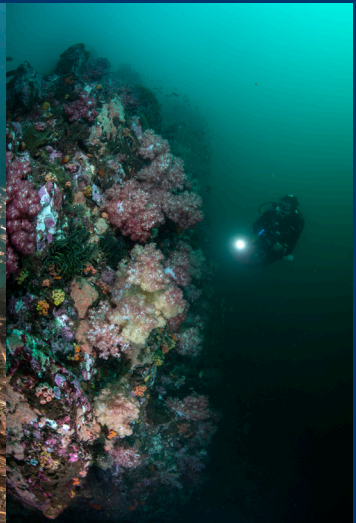


## Beyond the Mantas: A Diver's Wonderland

While mantas were the stars, the Mergui Archipelago offered so much more.

At Western Rocky, we explored an underwater tunnel teeming with nurse sharks and stingrays. At Shark Cave, we swam alongside whitetip reef sharks and we spotted the occasional whale shark. And at Fan Forest Pinnacle, we drifted through massive gorgonian sea fans, it was a surreal, almost alien landscape.

But not everything was pristine. In some areas, ghost nets littered the reef, and signs of past dynamite fishing were evident. It was a stark reminder that conservation efforts are crucial to protect this delicate ecosystem.



## The Future of Mergui's Giants

Our expedition confirmed what we had hoped - Mergui is a critical habitat for manta rays. But with increasing tourism and overfishing, their future is uncertain. Efforts to create marine protected areas could ensure that both mantas and the Moken people, who depend on these waters, thrive for generations to come.

As we sailed back to the mainland, I knew this wouldn't be my last trip here. Mergui is a place where the wild still rules, where giants still roam, and where the spirit of exploration is very much alive.

Would I go back? In a heartbeat.



**Read more about Todd's trip to the Mergui Archipelago with Manta Expeditions in his newly released book:**

**Ultimate Dive Sites**

<https://thimios.com/books/>