



Yap

A MICRONESIAN TREASURE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DAVID FLEETHAM



Left: Grey reef sharks circle above soft coral on a reef. This page: An aerial view of the southern end of the reef surrounding the island of Yap



The water is a balmy 84°F (29°C). This is good. I have been lying on the rubble bottom for over ten minutes, waiting for the shrimp to emerge from its den. Beside me a goby has been watching warily. My elbows are on the bottom to hold the camera steady and my eye is trained on the viewfinder. I attempt the most relaxed breathing I can muster so not to disturb my vigilant subject. The dive site, called Slow and Easy, is ten minutes away from the Manta Ray Bay Resort in Yap, where I am spending three weeks with groups of divers who each had one thing in mind: to take pictures underwater. The goby finally moves to one side

and reluctantly allows the shrimp, claws and arms carrying tiny bits of rubble, to emerge from the den it has constructed for the two of them. The shrimp keeps one antennae in physical contact with the goby in order to communicate. Once they are at the maximum distance this physical link will allow, the shrimp dumps its load and disappears back into the hole for further excavation. I manage eleven shots in the few seconds it takes the shrimp to complete this operation. My twin Ikelite strobes fire on each shutter release but the bright flashes of light have no

Macro to micro
- a close look at
a whip coral goby

apparent effect on my subjects. I back away slowly and wave to share the opportunity with a nearby photographer in search of a subject.

Yap is part of the Federated States of Micronesia and the Yapese people's indigenous cultures and traditions are admirably the most authentic still in existence in the Pacific Region. The main island of Yap is actually four islands, three of which are connected. There are fourteen outer islands (mostly atolls) scattered to the east and south of the main islands, some nearly 500 miles (800km) away. The entire state has come to be known as Yap in recent years. The capital, Colonia, is surrounded for the most part by rolling hills that lead down to mangrove forests interspersed with narrow beaches along the coast. Temperatures range from 75-86°F

Dive guides know the area and will put you in just the right place to have these winged giants swoop over your head

MANTAFEST 2019

David Fleetham will be one of six photo pros participating in the 12th annual Manifest photo festival from August 24 through September 8th at the Manta Ray Bay Resort. Besides seminars, workshops and evening media presentations, all participants will be eligible for a photo contest involving images shot during the festival. There are separate categories for digital SLR, compact camera, and video, so both the seasoned shooter and the beginner have a chance at some impressive prizes. The pros will be diving every day with the participants and offering tips above and below to improve your photo skills. For more information visit: www.mantafest.com



(23-30°C) through out the year, with heavy rains possible at any time. The water temperature is a balmy 82-84°F (27-28°C), with a 3mm wetsuit being more than enough to be comfortable on some of the longer dives.

The Manta Trust

Yap was recognized early on as one of the best places in the world to observe manta rays up close at cleaning stations. At certain times of year, it's also possible witness mating "trains" of mantas gliding one after the other through two of the channels in the outer reef that surrounds the islands. The manta diving here is so significant that Yap State is now a field research site for the Manta Trust (www.mantatrust.org), a UK-based charity that co-ordinates global research and conservation efforts

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for manta rays, their close relatives, and their habitat. The rays are being identified, measured, and indexed in a custom database for the conservation of all Micronesian manta rays. Over 50 manta rays have been identified and named through photographs of their unique underside patterns. It's a great opportunity for citizen scientists and underwater photographers, and if you are fortunate enough to capture an image of a new individual, you get the honour of naming it!

Obviously, diving with mantas is a bucket list item for nearly every visiting diver. What I like about Manta Ray Bay Resort is that they

A majestic manta ray gliding over a cleaning station in M'il Channel, Yap, Micronesia

offer guests a great chance of diving with a manta any day of the year, not just certain seasons. The secret to the consistency of their encounters is that you make the dive to a cleaning station and remain stationary on the bottom, and the mantas come to you. The dives in the channels of the outer reef to observe mating behaviour are timed with the tides for the best visibility, which comes with incoming clear open ocean water. Their dive guides know the area extremely well and will put you in just the right place to have these winged giants swoop over your head. At the cleaning stations small wrasse and butterflyfish search the mantas for parasites on their extensive surface and even in the gills and mouth.

Diving from the resort is done from a variety of fast boats, 21 to 38 feet (6.5 to 11.5m) long, all with



twin engines and hard covers to protect passengers and crew from the tropical sunrays. These flat roofs proved to be a perfect take-off and landing point for my drone. Which vessel you end up on depends on how many divers are going and where. Some of the routes are tide-dependent and require the smaller boats to weave their way through narrow passages in the mangroves. A truly memorable experience.

More than mantas

There are over thirty named dive sites on the outer reef drop off. One of my favourites is Vertigo, Manta Ray Bay's shark dive. They have been feeding sharks here for over 25 years and the residents know the operation quite well. The moment the guide ties up to the mooring, blacktip reef sharks appear, casually swimming around the boat. They are soon joined by whitetip reef sharks and, a bit deeper, gray reef sharks.

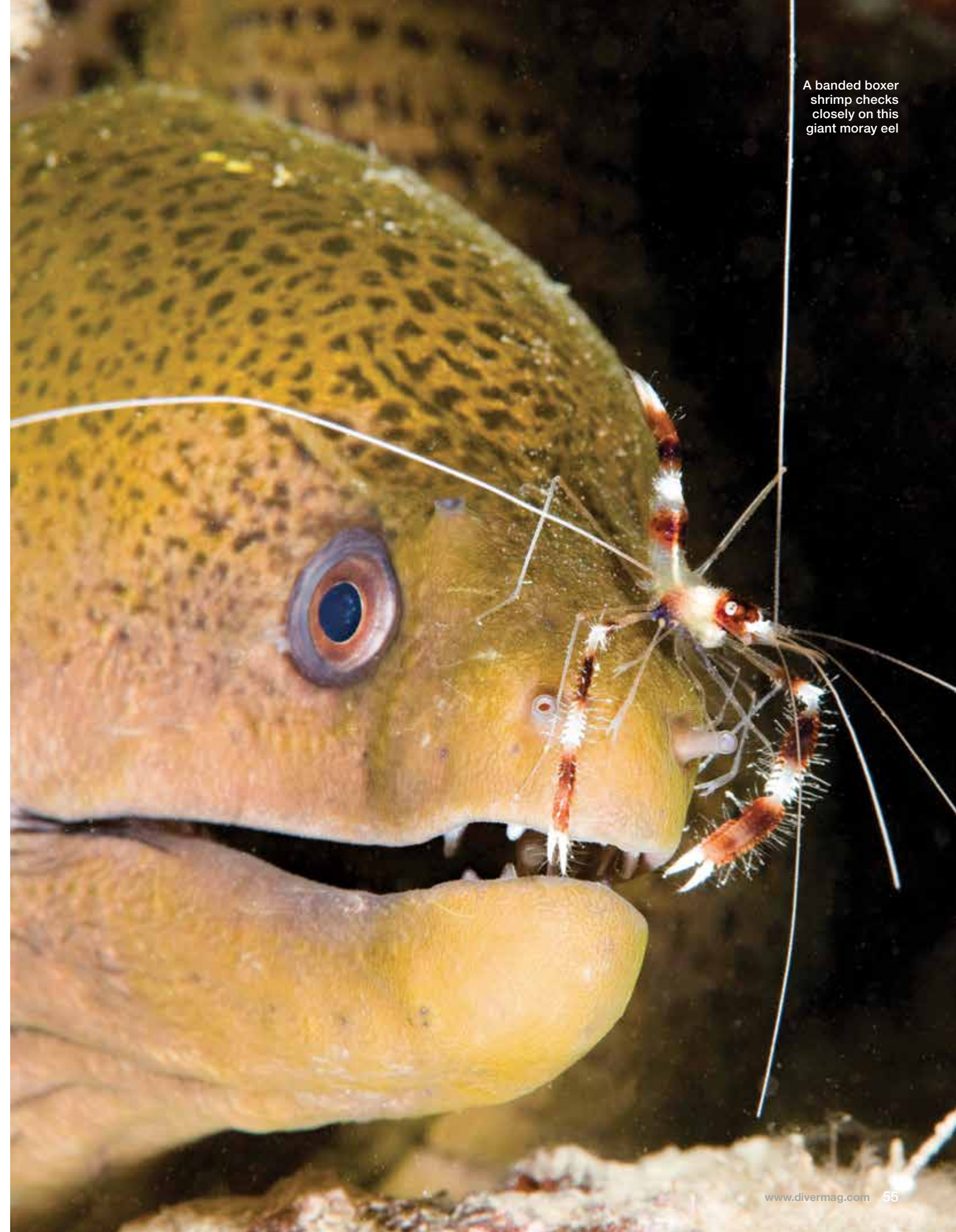
The bait is kept in a tube and placed in the reef where the sharks have to work to get to it. It is the perfect set-up for photographers. The sharks know that eventually they will get a bite to eat and, while patiently waiting, they swim calmly amongst the divers. If you want to get a close look at a shark, just move closer to the bait container. If you prefer to view from a distance, just move back. The visibility on the outer walls is well over 100 feet (30m) and the show can last for the entire dive. It is a perfect illustration of how misunderstood sharks are. They aren't the senseless killing machines that so much of our world still believes. They fulfill a much-needed

The common anemonefish, guaranteed to add a splash of colour and cuteness to any dive

place in the big picture of our oceans and have no interest in bubble-blowing scuba divers. In most places when sharks hear divers' bubbles they swim in the opposite direction, making encounters like this genuinely special.

On the outer reef, which stretches out to the south of the island, is Yap Caverns, definitely one of the country's top five dive sites. Spinner dolphins are regularly encountered on the commute and if they are in the mood will come to the bow and stay with the boat for much of the trip. Strong currents regularly sweep down the wall in varying directions and meet not too far from the site in a swirling soup of deep water nutrients where you regularly can see a complete food chain competing for a meal. Tuna chase small baitfish to the surface, where they are attacked from above by sea birds. The caverns themselves are a section of the

Blacktip reef sharks appear, casually swimming around the boat, soon joined by whitetip and gray reef sharks



A banded boxer shrimp checks closely on this giant moray eel

wall that collapsed into the deep and provides a sanctuary from the moving water. The caves, canyons, and swim-throughs provide a maze that takes more than just one dive to explore. On the outer wall, closer to the current, colourful schools of anthias pulse above the reef, plucking passing morsels. Clownfish in various colours dart about their anemones attending to the nest of eggs they have placed just beside their tentacled host. Deeper down, gray reef sharks regularly visit a cleaning station. These sharks must swim continually and when being cleaned will hover vertically with their tails beating just enough to keep them in one position, while small wrasse enter their mouth to check between their teeth. This is always a two-tank trip with lunch; sometimes even three tanks, depending on the conditions and the enthusiasm of your fellow passengers.

No matter how good the diving on the excursions, it is always a pleasure to step off the boat back at a resort that understands the need of divers: plenty of water for rinsing, a place to hang dive gear to dry over night, and even individual



lockers in which to place everything. Beside this area are camera bays, set up for photographers so you don't have to drag your equipment back to your room each night. Every section has its own lockable storage compartment and charging station. Right off the dive shop, a short walkway over the water leads to the *Mnuw*, a 170-foot (52m) long Phinisi schooner originally from Indonesia that is now the resort's restaurant and bar. The ship was constructed

A massive school of convict surgeonfish, also known as convict tangs

from massive beams, with teak walls that are now well over 100 years old. It has three levels with two bars and a huge movie screen mounted in the forward rigging where marine life presentations take place, as well as with first run movies.

Understanding the needs of divers runs to more than just thoughtful equipment storage areas: the resort has its own microbrewery, the Stone Money Brewing Company. Freddy, their Swiss brewmeister, produces

two varieties in 130-gallon (600-litre) batches just off the hotel's lobby and has the science of brewing down to a fine art.

The Rai

The name 'Stone Money' comes from one of the island's most intriguing cultural customs. The ancient currency is still in use today and involves round carved stones known as 'Rai', which are up to 13 feet (4m) in diameter with a hole in the centre. The source of the stone for the Rai is not located on Yap. The massive, solid stone wheels were quarried from as far away as Papua New Guinea, although the majority of them were cut by hand in the nearby islands of Palau. Still, Palau is over 300 miles (480km) away – a long trip by outrigger canoe! There are over 6000 stones of varying sizes around the islands and the value of each is tied not only to the size, but also to the fable of the pilgrimage to get the Rai back home. Over the years canoes and lives were lost. The "coins" are unquestionably the largest currency that exists. There is not even a close second. Interestingly, when a stone is used in a land transaction or wedding, often it is not moved. The identity of the new owner simply becomes common knowledge.

Six minutes from the resort's dock is a site favoured for night dives called Rainbow Reef. Visibility inside the lagoon is not the 100 foot+ (30m+) that you find outside the reef during the day, but this site offers a unique encounter. Impossibly-coloured mandarin fish inhabit the maze of antler coral found here and shortly after dusk males search for a mate. After a complicated dance that can include competing males, a pair will rise out of the coral and in an explosion of eggs and sperm renew their species. This happens in several locations around the world, but this site is unique in the density of the population. Once you find a couple and

follow them for a while you will inevitably pass by several others and inevitably lose your original pair in the bedlam.

The flight out of Yap is in the evening and often on this last day you will have the option of touring one of the local villages. On occasion some of the young people will present dances in their traditional colourful dress. They are enthusiastic performers and always curious about visitors. There is time for one last sunset and meal aboard the *Mnuw* before the final packing of bags.

Off the beaten path, Yap is one of those destinations that will lure you back. I have lost count of the number of times I have visited over the last thirty years and my most recent trip won't be my last. []



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FAMILY DIVE ADVENTURES



GOOD TO KNOW:

- Getting there: flights into Yap are limited. Most itineraries include a stop in Guam and then a flight on United Airlines to Yap. Yap is part of the Federated States of Micronesia.
- When to go: Temperatures range from 75-86°F (23-30°C) through out the year, with heavy rains possible at any time.
- Stay and dive with: Manta Ray Bay Resort www.mantaray.com
- Water temps: water temperature is a balmy 82-84°F (27-28°C) with a 3mm wetsuit more than adequate to be comfortable on longer dives.
- Topside Top Tip: Try the fresh fish tacos and the Hammerhead Amber Ale at the Stone Money Brewing Company.

