

# **UNDERWATER** *Journal*

A Diving Adventure Magazine



Featuring  
**Turks & Caicos Aggressor II**  
**Florida's Castor Wreck**  
**TDI's Wreck Tech Training**  
**Inon 45-Degree View Finder**  
**Manta Rays of Manihi**  
**Grand Cayman's Dive Tek & Cobalt**  
**UNEXSO's Dolphin Dive**

This publication is  
underwritten in part by:



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### Editorial Disclaimer:

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**Cover** - Karen Stearns enjoys a close encounter with a large reef shark in the waters off West Caicos, in the Turks & Caicos Islands.

**Image:** Copyright ©Walt Stearns 2009. Camera system - Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens in a Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes.

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Many visitors to the islands of Tahiti and French Polynesia are drawn to the indescribable beauty of Bora Bora's fantastic lagoon, or to the more under-stated but equally stunning scenery of Tahiti's neighboring island of Moorea.

More adventurous explorers often find themselves on the funky island of Rangiroa, where an expansive 25-kilometer-wide lagoon provides opportunities for amazing natural experiences. However, since French Polynesia consists of so many islands and atolls, the most interesting opportunities for exploration and adventures are often found in the most out of the way places.

Manihi is just such a place.

story & photography  
by Michael Salvarezza  
& Christopher P. Weaver

# The Manta Rays of Manihi



"Patience is the word of the day here at The Circus."



A birds-eye view of Manihi Atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago

Tucked away nearly 480 kilometers northeast of the main island of Tahiti, Manihi is part of the Tuamotu Archipelago, a collection of 69 atolls and islands sprinkled across an 1100-kilometer wide swath of the South Pacific Ocean. Although Manihi is serviced regularly with flights from Tahiti and other islands, visitors arriving here immediately notice the rustic nature of the island: a tiny, open air shack serves as the airport terminal and is only manned at certain times of the day when an inbound or outbound flight is expected. Manihi is a large elongated coral atoll, consisting of a narrow strip of land circling a wide lagoon with two cuts or "passes" into the surround-

ing ocean. The only village here is Turipaoa, which is located on the Tairapa Pass. You will not find any banks on the island nor restrooms at the airport. Manihi is truly an out-of-the-way place.

Known primarily for its thriving black-pearl farm business, Manihi is home to some world-class diving opportunities. Our diving on Manihi initially consisted of intriguing dives along the sloping reef outside the lagoon. Here, the hard coral reefs boast rainbows of pastel colors brightly decorating a wall that tumbles gently into the deep. Along this reef, divers can find schools of snapper and grunt, along with emperor snapper and dozens of raccoon butterfly



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fish. Looking closely into the reef crevices, divers can often find lionfish hiding alongside squirrelfish and soldierfish.

Green sea turtles are often seen cruising along the reefs, as are a variety of sharks: Manihi is home to both grey and blacktip reef sharks. Divers can generally count on these creatures to be patrolling the mixing grounds of the pass where the waters from the lagoon and sea converge. Here, where the visibility decreases dramatically as the murkier lagoon waters escape to the ocean, schools of jack and barracuda can often be found waiting for a quick meal.

The reefs of Manihi are blessed with crystalline waters from the surrounding Pacific and diving outside the lagoon is certainly a fabulous experience for any diver.

But Manihi held one other surprise for us...a magical dive site called **The Circus**.

Leaving the dock as we did every morning, we once again motored across the lagoon. But instead of pushing forward into the open ocean, our boat tender cut the engine and stopped short of the pass. Looking around all we could see is puzzled faces and low murmurs from confused divers. Without question, we heaved over the side and descended nearly 18 meters into the hazy lagoon water. Soon, we found ourselves



among a random tumble of large boulders and rocks. The colorful corals from the reefs outside the lagoon were noticeably absent. First impressions: not good! But patience is the word of the day here at The Circus and the dive guides had prepared us accordingly. So, we settled in among the rocks and waited.

After only 5 minutes, they appeared from out of the gloom. First, a fleeting shadow could be seen moving cautiously among the murk. Then another shadowy glimpse, and finally there it was... the delta wing of a large manta ray sweeping past us like a jetfighter. Amazed, we stared with open eyes, while sucking down a few extra pounds of air in excitement. Soon we were surrounded! Manta Rays were everywhere, circling, dancing, sweeping, and flying all



Life of the reef in Manihi range from raccoon butterfly fish (upper left), which often travel in schools to larger denizens like grey reef sharks (top) and blacktip reef sharks (bottom).



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around us. Incredibly, they hardly took notice of the noisy bubble-blowing divers sprawled across the dive site. I guess you can say the mantas were busy with their own agenda.

You see, **The Circus** is a manta cleaning station, and each morning, a dozen or more of these gentle giants converge at this rock-strewn location seeking relief from irritating parasites and dead itchy skin with the help of resident butterfly fish and cleaner wrasse. Manta Rays by nature are watchful and wary creatures. If divers make an effort to minimize their movements and refrain from harassing them with luck may get a rare and wonderful opportunity to interact with these magnificent animals up close and personal.

This dive site also features black-tip reef sharks in abundance, as well as several resident moray eels. In today's era of short attention spans, divers who tire of mantas cavorting only a few feet from their masks can turn their attention to these other inhabitants living in this unique location.

Our dive at The Circus concluded with an amazing encounter. A sizeable ray, perhaps with a wingspan exceeding 3.5 meters, approached guardedly from a small gully in the rocky substrate. With a small remora in tow, the ray glided slowly towards us and at the very last moment gracefully lifted its wings



Manta Rays by nature are watchful and wary creatures.

to perform a slow backward-rolling summersault, exposing its brilliant white underbelly before disappearing into the brume of the lagoon waters. While we try not to attribute human behaviors to wild animals, it was hard not to envision that this ray, which had been playing in these waters for the better part of an hour, was not trying to find a way to say "good bye" to its newfound friends. As it disappeared, we simply waved farewell and began our slow ascent to the surface.

Manihi is a treasure in the vast open waters of the South Pacific. Much like the prized black pearls that are cultivated in these waters, Manihi is to be savored and experi-

enced by those willing to appreciate its natural beauty and appeal. Linger here and you will forget there is a frantic, bustling world "out there." If you come, make sure you get to The Circus...the mantas will be waiting.

- MS & CP

**Getting There:** The only international airport is located on the main island of Tahiti. It is serviced with direct flights from Los Angeles, Hawaii, Paris, Auckland, Sydney, Tokyo, Osaka and Easter Island (Chile). Air Tahiti Nui, Quantas, Air France, Hawaiian AirLines, Lan Chile and Air New Zealand all service French Polynesia.

For flights to Manihi, connect with Air Tahiti, the domestic carrier within French Polynesia, which offers frequent service to all of the islands of French Polynesia.

**Baggage:** Baggage allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave. For the domestic flights to Manihi, Air Tahiti imposes strict limitations on baggage: carry-on baggage may not exceed 3kg and standard class passengers are permitted 3 checked items not to exceed 10kg/. For passengers booked in the "Y" boarding class, 20kg is permitted and passengers in the "Z" boarding class can check 50kg. Divers are permitted an extra 5kg by showing their c-card at the time of check-in.

**Travel Documents:** A valid passport is required for entry. For visitors from Australia, no Visa is required for stays up to three months. Visitors from the USA and New Zealand require a Visa for stays over one month in duration.

**Currency:** The currency used throughout French Polynesia is the Franc of the "Compagnie Francaise du Pacifique" usually called the French Pacific Franc. It is abbreviated as XPF or CFP. Its exchange rate with the Euro is fixed at 119.33 Pacific Francs per 1 Euro.

**Electricity:** Power voltage used in French Polynesia is 220 Volts (60 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk.

**Weather:** Manihi and the rest of the islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago enjoy two distinct seasons: a Dry Season and a Humid Season. The Dry season runs from April through October, with July and August being the coolest. This is the Austral winter and temperatures range from 24-28 degrees Celsius. In the Humid Season, between November and March, more rain can be expected, along with higher humidity. Temperatures can range from 26-28 degrees Celsius. French Polynesia's climate is defined as marine tropical (hot temperatures tempered by the ocean).

### Where to Stay



#### Manihi Pearl Beach Resort

Web: <http://www.pearlresorts.com/manihipearlbeachresort/main.php>

#### Dive Operation

**Blue Nui Dive Center** is located on the grounds of the Manihi Pearl Beach resort.  
Tel: (689) 96.42.17, Cell 79.22.72

Web: [http://bluenui.com/Ang/manihi\\_ang.htm](http://bluenui.com/Ang/manihi_ang.htm)



Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver head **Eco-PhotoExplorers.com (EPE)**, a New York based organization promoting interest in protecting our ocean environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography.



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