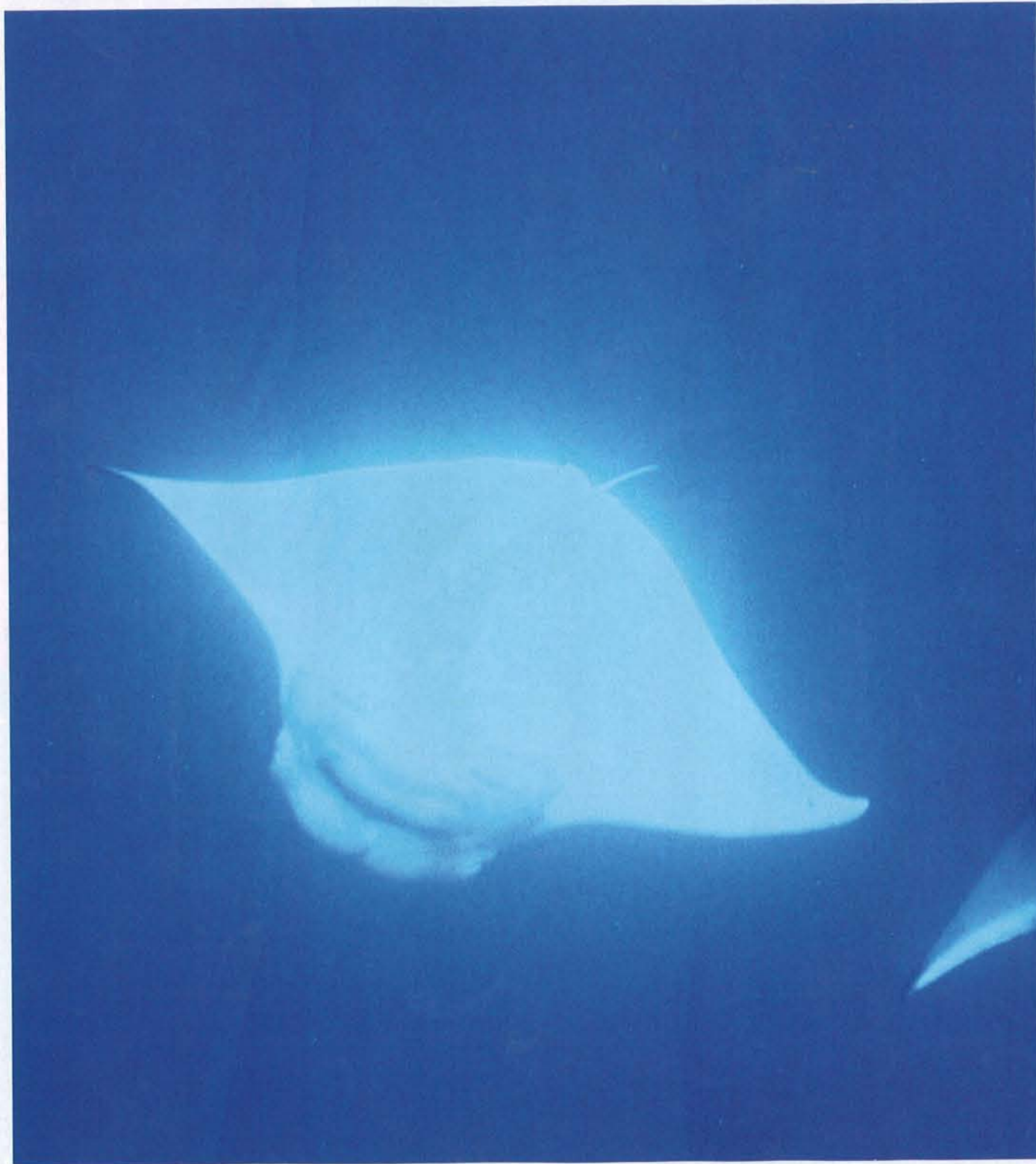


SHORE LINE

Edited by Elaine Lembo



NEVILLE HOCKLEY

Close Encounters

IT WAS A LITTLE OVER 10 years ago when my wife, Catherine, and I spotted our first manta ray, and although it was housed in a giant aquarium at Paradise Island, in the Bahamas, my first encounter with the largest of the ray family was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Since we entered the South Pacific Ocean aboard *Dream Time*, our 1981 Cabo Rico, we've searched for the opportunity to swim with them, to have a close encounter with what is also known as the elusive devil ray, a name derived from their distinct horn-shaped cephalic lobes. Unfortunately, however, from the Tuamotus to Tonga, the manta rays have continued to elude us—until we sailed to Fiji.

Anchored off Drawaqa island in the Yasawas, a chain of volcanic islands that form Fiji's western perimeter, we'd timed our arrival to coincide with the short, 12-week window when manta rays come to the area to feed in the plankton-rich waters that funnel between the islands. So at high tide, and aided by the beating drums resonating from the nearby Manta Ray Resort, a sign that rays had been spotted in the area, we

Swimming with manta rays in the Fiji Islands is a priceless time-out during a South Pacific Ocean crossing.

SHORELINE

raced over in the dinghy to investigate. We dropped the anchor in shallow water and swam out to join the two boats and dozen snorkelers already on the scene.

The water was 60 feet deep and so blue and clear that it seemed to radiate light from its depths. That's when we saw them, three shadows suspended below us, gliding effortlessly on the invisible tidal current. It seemed more like a dream than reality. Their presence was so compelling, so persuasive, that almost unconsciously, as if in a trance, we just had to follow, joining the small group of already faithful and transfixed tourists.

It was as if we'd entered another world, a quiet sphere of weightlessness and magical creatures. One of the manta rays veered away from the others and began a slow ascent, climbing to the surface toward us with open mouth, the distinct slits of 10 gills visible inside its enormous cavity, like a ribcage void of vital organs. It glided closer—30 feet, 20 feet, 15 feet from the



surface—and then, slowly, near the pinnacle of its loop, it arched upside down, its soft, smooth belly reflecting the sunlight and flashing bright white against the deep-blue water of its habitat.

I moaned into my snorkel, amazed at the performance as I watched the manta slowly descend to complete its aquatic loop-the-loop. The other mantas were feeding now, too, filtering hundreds of gallons of seawater through open mouths while performing the same endless graceful somersaults, the contrasts of dark shadows and flashing white shapes meeting as the fish crossed.

I dove down, timing my descent to meet the manta as it swept up toward the peak of its climb. Suspended 20 feet below the surface, the ray glided quietly below me, just six feet away, observing me as it completed its turn, then slowly sinking to begin another. I watched the rays swim up toward me again, aware of me but seemingly unconcerned by my presence.

I stayed with them until my lungs burned for oxygen. I surfaced for air in the middle

of what reminded me of the scene from *Titanic* just after the ship went down: a mass of thrashing bodies turning the water white, all kicking, splashing, and paddling at the surface.

A boatload of tourists had just been delivered by the resort; now, 40 more snorkelers formed a tight formation, like a school of fish all drawn together and driven by the same force, to get a glimpse and perhaps a photo of the giant rays. Everyone was so excited that snorkeling etiquette was momentarily abandoned as the eager group scrambled to keep up with the mantas.

The rays fed for 30 minutes, completing endless sweeping loops underwater to the thrill of us all, and I spent as much time with them as my lungs would allow. But even at the surface, among the noisy, flogging, gasping masses, nothing—a slap in the face from the occasional rogue flipper, a ramming by a snorkeler rushing to the surface—could break the spell of an experience that seemed so completely out of this world.

Neville Hockley

BEACH MAGIC: MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

ONE FEBRUARY, MY HUSBAND, BILLY, AND I walked along an isolated beach in the Berry Islands area of the Bahamas, not far from where we'd anchored *Bonnie Christine*, our Catalina 380. Scavenging the beach for treasures, we came across a message in a bottle. Inside was a note, carefully sealed inside an orange balloon, along with a \$5 bill. The person who sent the bottle included his address and wanted to hear from the finder; the \$5 was intended for postage. We were delighted! What a magical thing to stumble across—a message in a bottle!

With oodles of time on our hands, we composed a return letter, and I painted a watercolor map of the area showing him



exactly where we found it. The writer was from Colorado. I sent the package from George-Town, on Great Exuma. We kept the message and money as a reminder of the thrill we felt when we found them.

Both Billy and I had fun composing our letter and felt blessed to have been the lucky finders of correspondence sent in such an ancient, time-honored method.

Linda Evans

WEB EXTRA

See how the illustrator works.

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