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- 1 Manta rays are a predictable occurrence at The Circus  
 2 Manihi Atoll from the air  
 3 A manta ray sweeps by for a closer look

# MANIHI MANTAS

> MANY VISITORS TO THE TAHITIAN ARCHIPELAGO ARE DRAWN TO THE INDESCRIBABLE BEAUTY OF BORA BORA'S FANTASTIC LAGOON, OR TO THE NEARBY UNDERSTATED BUT EQUALLY STUNNING MOOREA. THE MORE ADVENTUROUS HEAD FOR FUNKY RANGIROA WHERE A 25-KILOMETRE WIDE LAGOON DELIVERS AMAZING NATURAL EXPERIENCES. FRENCH POLYNESIA HAS SO MANY CHOICES, BUT THE MOST INTERESTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPLORATION AND ADVENTURE ARE OFTEN FOUND IN THE MOST OUT OF THE WAY PLACES.

**M**anihi is just such a place. Almost 480 kilometres northeast of the main island Tahiti. It is part of the Tuamotu Archipelago, a collection of 69 atolls and islands sprinkled across an 1100 kilometre wide swathe of the South Pacific. Though 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 only manned when inbound or outbound flights are expected. This large elongated coral atoll circling a wide lagoon has two cuts or 'passes' into the open ocean. The only village is Turipaaa, located on the Tairapa Pass. There are no banks on the island, nor restrooms at the airport. This is truly out-of-the-way.

Known primarily for its thriving black pearl farms, Manihi is home to some world-class diving opportunities. Our diving here initially consisted of intriguing dives along the sloping reef outside the lagoon where hard corals in pastel rainbows decorate a wall that tumbles gently into the deep. Along this reef are

found schools of snapper and grunt, along with emperor snapper and dozens of raccoon butterflyfish. Looking closely into the crevices, divers can often find lionfish hiding alongside squirrelfish and soldierfish.

Green sea turtles are often seen cruising the reefs, plus blacktip and grey reef sharks. Divers generally see these creatures patrolling the mixing grounds of the pass where the lagoon waters and the 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.

Manihi reefs are blessed with crystalline waters from the surrounding Pacific and diving outside the lagoon is a fabulous experience. But it held one other surprise for us...a magical dive site called 'The Circus'. Leaving the dock as we did every morning, we again motored across the lagoon. But instead of pushing out into the open ocean, our boat tender cut the engine and stopped short of the pass. Looking around all we could see was puzzled faces and low murmurs from

confused divers. Without question we heaved over the side and descended nearly 18 metres into the hazy lagoon water. Soon we were among a random tumble of large boulders and rocks. The colourful corals from the reefs outside the lagoon were absent. First impressions: not good! But patience is the word of the day here at 'The Circus' and the dive guides had prepared us. We settled in among the rocks and waited.

After only five 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 jettifighter. Amazed, we stared, while sucking down a few extra pounds of air in excitement. Soon we were surrounded! Manta rays were circling, dancing, sweeping, and flying all 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



1 A razorfish watches the action on the reef  
2 Divers observe manta rays visiting a cleaning station inside the Manihi lagoon  
3 The island of Manihi delivers a picture-perfect tropical island experience

station and each morning a dozen or more of these gentle giants converge at this rock-strewn spot seeking relief from their irritating parasites and dead itchy skin with the help of resident butterflyfish and cleaner wrasse. Manta rays by nature are watchful wary creatures. If divers try to minimize their movements and refrain from harassing them, they may get a rare and wonderful opportunity to interact with these magnificent animals up close and personal.

This dive site also features blacktip 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 mere metres from their masks can enjoy these other inhabitants in this unique location.

Our dive at The Circus ended with an amazing encounter. A sizeable ray with a wingspan exceeding 3.5 metres 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 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 behaviours to wild animals, it was hard not to envision that this ray, which had been playing in these waters for the best part of an hour, was not trying to find a way to say 'good bye' to us all. As it disappeared, we 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 cultivated in these waters, Manihi is to be savoured and experienced by those willing to appreciate its natural beauty and appeal. Linger here and you'll forget there is a frantic bustling world out there. If you come, make sure you get to The Circus... the mantas will be waiting.



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4 Manihi airport terminal  
5 A blacktip reef shark patrols the reefs near Manihi  
6 Grey reef sharks can be seen near Manihi's passes



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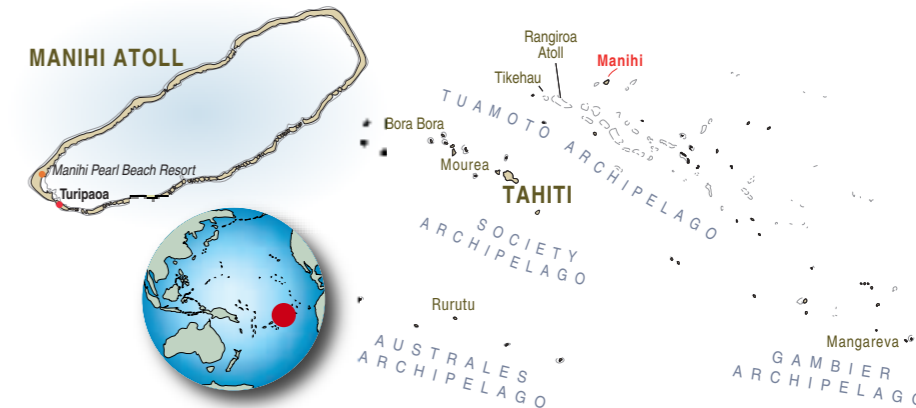
**GETTING TO MANIHI:** The international airport is on the main island of Tahiti. There are direct flights from Los Angeles, Hawaii, Paris, Auckland, Sydney, Tokyo, Osaka and Easter Island (Chile). Air Tahiti Nui, Qantas, Air France, Hawaiian Airlines, Lan Chile and Air New Zealand all service French Polynesia.

**Flights to Manihi:** Connect with Air Tahiti, the domestic carrier in French Polynesia, for frequent service to all islands.

**Entry:** A valid passport is required. For Australian visitors no visa is required for stays up to 3 months. Visitors from USA and New Zealand require a visa for stays over one month duration.

**Baggage:** Allowances vary for each international carrier. For domestic flights to Manihi, Air Tahiti imposes strict limitations on baggage: carry-on may not exceed 3kg and Standard Class passengers are permitted 3 checked items not to exceed 10kg. For passengers in the 'Y' Boarding Class, 20kg is permitted and passengers in the 'Z' Boarding Class can check 50kg. Divers get an extra 5kg by showing their C-card at check-in.

**Weather:** Manihi and all Tuamotu Archipelago islands enjoy distinct dry



and humid seasons. The dry season is April-October, with July and August being coolest. This is the Austral winter; temperatures range from 24 to 28°C. In the humid season, November-March, more rain can be expected, with higher humidity. Temperatures can range from 26-28°C. French Polynesia's climate is defined as marine tropical (hot temperatures tempered by the ocean).

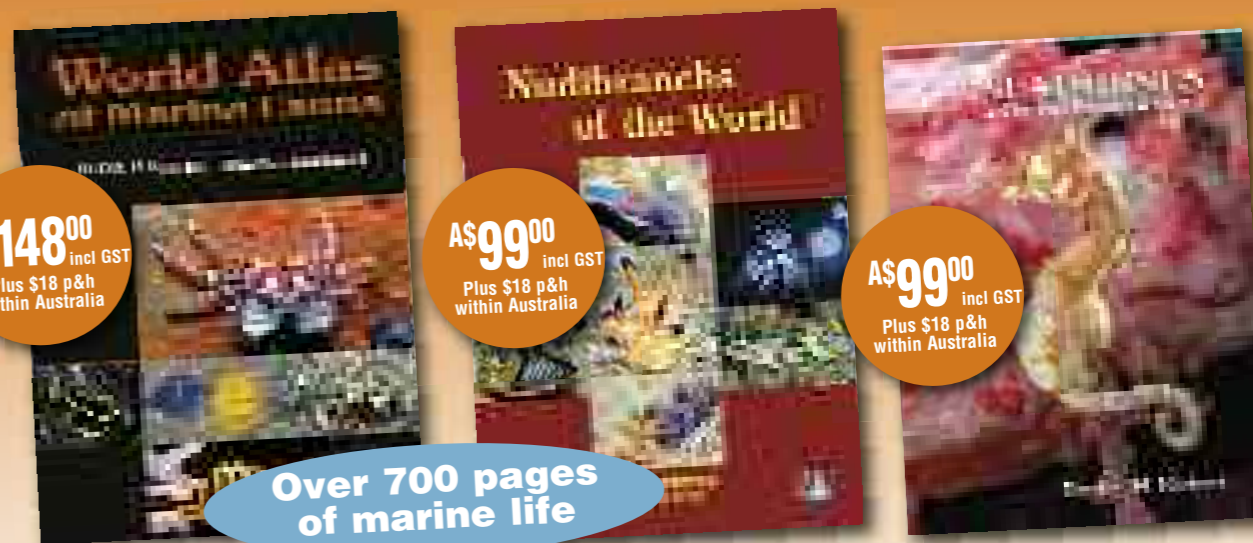
**Currency:** French Polynesia uses the Franc of the 'Compagnie Francaise du Pacifique' or the French Pacific Franc. It is abbreviated as XPF or CFP. Its exchange rate with the Euro is fixed at 119.33 Pacific Francs per 1 Euro (at time of publishing).

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

**Where to Stay:** Manihi Pearl Beach Resort [www.pearlresorts.com/manihipearlbeachresort/main.php](http://www.pearlresorts.com/manihipearlbeachresort/main.php)

**Dive Operators:** Blue Nui Dive Center is on the grounds of Mainihi Pearl Beach resort. Tel: (689) 96.42.17  
Cell 79.22.72  
Web: [bluenui.com/Ang/manihi\\_ang.htm](http://bluenui.com/Ang/manihi_ang.htm)

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