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Maldiving Mantas

In 2010 I embarked on a journey to the Maldives with my diving group. The logistics was very familiar: we would be staying for a week in a “live aboard”, a boat specifically made for divers, where the routine consists of five daily dives with meals inbetween. It might sounds insane, but there is nothing like enjoying the type of quietude you can only get by being in small vessel in the middle of the ocean.

I had been to many amazing diving locations by that point, had seen the colorful majesty of the Red Sea, the deep darkness of the Blue Hole in Belize and experienced the exciting fear of shark diving in Nassau. Arrogantly, I figured nothing could really surprise me anymore. But I guess the Ocean felt insulted and decided to prove me wrong.

One early morning, when I was still a bit groggy and the sun was more silver than gold, we went in the water and I felt that shock that only comes from being thrown in cold water before you have a chance to think. We had been instructed to find a reef formation and clip ourselves to it, since the current was so strong and wait for the manta rays that normally traveled that way.

I was excited to see them, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw, majestic creatures, flying slowly toward us, with the confidence that showed maybe they knew how incredible they looked. As I lay there, in awe, one of them turned my way and started to approach. I got anxious. She was twice my size and there she was, less than a hand away, evaluating me and must have liked what she felt, because in a second she was parked right above me, the bubbles from my regulator tickling her belly and making her sneeze from time to time. We stayed there, not moving, for forty minutes until I felt confident enough to reach up and touch her, scared that she would leave. But instead, her eyes closed and she swam lower as I pet her, satisfied and in that moment I felt so alive, so separated from everything above the waves, I started to cry, sobbing with diving mask and regulator on.

When the time came to go back up, she left slowly, giving me time to say goodbye and as I felt the sun on my face again, not knowing the difference between tears and sea water, I knew that I had emerged changed.