

Yappy Days!

Diving in Micronesia

SARAH RICHARD discovers the diving world's "best-kept secret".



Photos by Sarah Richard and Manta Ray Bay Resort



You've probably already asked yourself (and the person sitting next to you), "Where's Yap?" So let's get that sorted first.

Yap is located in the Caroline Islands of the Western Pacific Ocean, and is a part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Micronesia is made up of approximately 2,100 islands, the largest of which is Guam.

It's also a lot closer to Hong Kong than it might seem: my flight to Guam took less than five hours. Arriving in such a short period of time in a country that's part of the US felt very strange. However, the American pancakes and bottomless coffee were a much-appreciated treat during my one-night layover in Guam's Santa Fe Hotel.

The next day, after an additional 70-minute flight, we were greeted at the airport at Yap with a traditional flower garland or *lei*. Swiftly escorted to Manta Ray Bay Resort by complimentary shuttle (10 minutes), I was one step further – though I didn't know it yet – to fulfilling a lifetime dream of diving with manta rays.

My room looked out onto the ocean and although the sun had set I could just tell that there was something different about this place; my first dive would be starting at 8am and I contemplated not even sleeping and waiting on the harbour with my fins on, ready to dive in. But jetlag had its own ideas.

When the day dawned I saw a huge boat moored next to the resort; "Why is there a 55-metre schooner right here?" I wondered. Moving closer, I heard a voice say, "Miss Sarah, that's where you will be eating breakfast". And she wasn't joking; before I knew it, I was enjoying a freshly made omelette on the bottom deck of an Indonesian schooner, named *Mnuw*, watching the sun come up while coffee was brought to my table. I guess I've had worse Wednesdays.

Brad, the resort's underwater photographer, sat with me and explained the week's itinerary. He had me at "shark dive"; the rest was a blur of "Sorry, when are we going shark diving?" and "Okay, that sounds great" and "When are



we seeing the manta rays?" I'll admit when it comes to diving I'm like an over-excitable puppy – and I have been since I first put a regulator in my mouth eight years ago. To me, scuba diving is the most fantastic thing on the planet, and it seemed everyone at Manta Ray Bay Resort agreed.

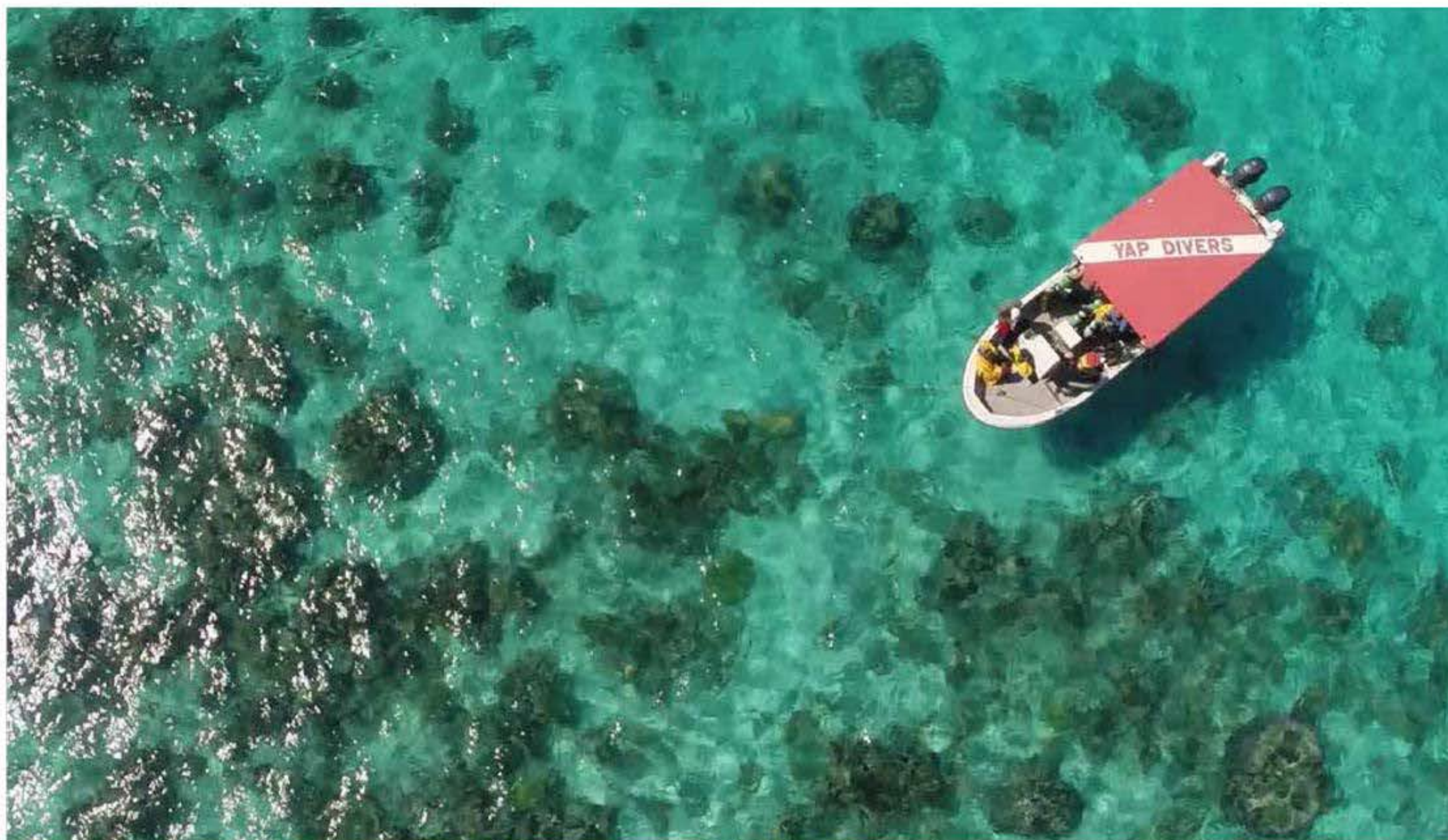
Boats go out every day at around 8am, 10.30am or, for a night dive, 7pm. You can choose whether you want to do a two-tank or a three-tank day. If you choose three tanks, lunch is also provided on the boat.

With around 50 dive sites in Yap, you're spoilt for choice. You can choose which sites you want to go to on which days, and a schedule is put up every evening for you to see. Inevitably, one boat heads to the manta cleaning station each day. Although they can't guarantee mantas, there are only distant memories of days without sightings. It's safe to say, within your week at Manta Ray Bay Resort, you are highly likely to see them.

And when you do, you won't believe your eyes. For me, they're the most beautiful creatures in the ocean; nothing can prepare you for the euphoric feeling of being in their presence.

There was more excitement in store: my next dive was at Vertigo, a drop-off dive that's home to dozens of black-tip and white-tip reef sharks. While not as majestic as mantas, sharks are fascinating to watch – and, happily, they're more scared of you than you are of them. They kept their distance as we floated through their world, and our mutual respect was rewarded by a display of 25 sharks going about their everyday lives. Yap is a great place to try shark diving for the first time as the conditions are perfect and the guides extremely experienced.

I did at least two dives every day, seeing a variety of wildlife and corals; the water was warm enough that I didn't need a wetsuit. Not a day went by without a pod of dolphins following the boat for a time, and we were even fortunate enough to see pilot whales. On one occasion, we jumped into snorkel with the dolphins, and we followed a pod for a good half hour in the open ocean. This was one of my most magical



Five minutes with...

Underwater photographer Brad Holland (originally from LA, working with Manta Ray Bay Resort for the past three years)

What drew you to Yap and what made you stay?

It completely appealed to my adventurous side; I found it alluring that no one really knew about it – most divers had been to the Philippines or Thailand, but hardly anyone had been to Yap. Once I got here, I realised it had everything the modern world had and everything I needed, but in perfect harmony with nature. I feel very lucky to have found such a great place to work and live, and I get to meet people from all over the world.

Best thing about working and living in Yap?

The diving! The waters are uncrowded and the interactions with the animals are very personable – it's unlike anywhere else in the world. I have mantas swimming above my head on a daily basis. Also, once you're out of the water, the traditional community is so welcoming and open to foreigners. Ninety percent of people here live a traditional life, sustained by the land and ocean; I love being a part of that.

Tell us more about the mantas.

Yap is the world's first government-backed manta ray sanctuary; this has ensured the manta population has stayed the same year after year. We have a manta ID database to track their lives, so we know their social behaviour, and whether or not one of them is pregnant or has been bitten by a shark. Regulations stop boats and divers from disrupting the behaviour and habitat of the mantas, which means divers get a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It isn't a sighting but an *interaction* – one that's unlikely to be possible anywhere else in the world.

What else can guests expect to see on dives?

Well, if you're getting bored of the mantas (you won't!) there are beautiful hard and soft corals on all of our dive sites, along with schools of fish, moray eels, eagle rays and turtles. Another popular dive site is Vertigo, where you can be surrounded by dozens of white-tip and black-tip sharks at any point. We even had a whale shark sighting last month. Dolphins ride along with us all year round, and orcas have shown up, too.

What kind of diver should come to Yap?

All of them! From novice to expert, we've had them all. The diving is easy, making it perfect for beginners, but it can always be made more challenging by going to deeper sites. Our boat captains and dive guides know the sites inside out. You tell us what kind of diving you want and we'll strive to give you what you want.



little added extras. When you think about going on a diving holiday, you rarely think about the hotel itself – more about what awaits underwater. However, Manta Bay has created a sanctuary that's not only the perfect place for divers, but also non-divers. I could've easily entertained myself wandering around the local villages, kayaking out to the mangroves and reading a book by the infinity pool for the whole week without even picking up a tank.

From the freshly baked cookies, home-brewed beer and locally made coconut oil, to the banana bread on the boat and the way the towels are folded into mantas, it all added up to the ultimate holiday – one that allowed me to live out a childhood dream and left me with precious memories.

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE There are four flights a week from HK to Guam (Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday); United Airlines is the sole carrier to Yap (70 minutes; Tuesday, Saturday). Manta Ray Bay Resort then escorts you to the resort. For flight deals, contact the resort directly (yapdivers@mantaray.com).

COST Manta Ray Bay Resort's standard package costs US\$1,419, including seven nights' accommodation, with buffet breakfast, five days' diving (two dives per day), airport transfers and taxes. Extras include Nitrox, shark-feeding dives, a third tank and night dives. Room-only rates start from \$149 per night.

DINING The *Mnuw* is the most unique restaurant in Micronesia, if not the world. She's a 55m Indonesian *pinisi* schooner with three dining decks, two bars and a kitchen. Breakfast is included in all packages, and you can unwind after a full day of activities with a cold homebrew or a coconut. Freshly caught fish is served every day, and there are vegetarian options and a kids' menu. Head upstairs to the rooftop bar to end the day with a cocktail or another glass of beer.

SPA The Taro Leaf Spa takes the best of everything that is Yapese to bring you an experience that will leave you relaxed, invigorated and harmonised. The décor is based on island themes, and all the products use locally sourced plants. A range of treatments is available, and they can fit in around your diving schedule.

WHEN TO COME Mantas can be seen all year round; however, the best manta diving is in the mating season, from December through to April. The climate in Yap is hot and humid – the annual average temperature is 27 degrees Celsius, and the average water temperature is 28.

DIVING COURSES Yap is a perfect place to learn to dive or to advance your diving career. Junior Open Water courses are available for children from age 10. Open Water (your first scuba dive certification) costs \$495 and can be completed within your own time frame (minimum three days); Advanced and Rescue are also available, and you can even complete your DiveMaster training, getting you on the road to working in the dive industry.

FAMILY OPTIONS *Kids' Sea Camp, 18-25 June 2016*
Manta Ray Bay Resort has put together a summer dive and culture package for divers and non-divers, catering to family members of all ages. Parents dive with adults in the morning while kids do junior dives in concert with PADI Seal Team and SASY (snorkelling) activities. Afternoons involve family dives for both parents and kids. (All these activities can also be arranged outside the scheduled camp in June.) Childcare is provided if your young ones don't dive or if you need some relaxation time. The resort's double suites sleep up to six people; extra beds are available. **✎**

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experiences in Yap – and completely unexpected.

With my dives over, I would relax back on the *Mnuw*, drinking coffee and talking all things scuba with other guests. One day, I went to check out Manta Ray's own private beach, with picture-perfect white sand and hundreds of palm trees shading me from the afternoon sun. The resort owns a cute section of the beach, where it has added a sitting hut, restroom and barbecue spot, along with optional hire of kayaks and snorkels – and not another soul for miles. Another day I decided to treat myself in the Taro Leaf Spa; I opted for a full body massage with coconut oil and came out smelling like an exotic goddess.

Among the most enduring features of my time at Manta Ray Bay Resort were the

