



Scuba Diver Senior Travel Editor Don Silcock kicks off this series looking at different big animals - and where to find them – with a focus on manatees, and specifically those found in Florida’s Crystal River

Photographs by Don Silcock

The manatee and its close-but-smaller cousin the dugong are truly fascinating creatures - but they are naturally shy and are both listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List with declining populations, so they can be hard to encounter and even more so to photograph.

While there are a few locations with a decent track record of dugong encounters, like Abu Dabbab at Marsa Alam in the Egyptian Red Sea and around Busuanga in the Philippines, by far the best place to get close to one of these Sirenians is Crystal River in Florida. And the basic reason it is such a great location is really very simple - warmth...

The Florida manatee is an iconic and generally much-loved creature found both on the eastern, Atlantic side of the state and on the western, Gulf of Mexico side. They are there because of the extensive seagrass meadows, which provide their primary source of nutrition - with each manatee consuming up to 40kg of seagrass per day, or roughly one football field of it! Contrary to what the rotund appearance suggests, their vegetarian diet makes manatees into really ‘lean machines’ with almost no fat or blubber to keep them warm in the winter months and they simply have to find a source of warmth.

Warm water...

The Florida peninsula is formed on a huge plateau of karst limestone that accommodates one of the world’s most-productive aquifers - the massive Floridan Aquifer, covering a total area of almost 260,000 km².

Rather than running off into river systems, that porous limestone allows Florida’s rainfall to percolate down into the underground chambers of the plateau and, as new water makes its way into the aquifers, hydraulic pressure forces previous rainfall out where the chambers are closest to the surface. Importantly for the manatees, that water is a constant 22°C - two above the 20°C needed to maintain core body temperature and avoid death from cold stress. In very simple terms, the abundant seagrass and the warm winter water is why the Florida manatee is what it is. ▶

Did you know?

Manatees are herbivores, with a diet of more than 60 species of underwater, shoreline and floating plants, but primarily eat seagrass along the sea floor.



Did you know?

Manatees are more closely related to the elephant than they are to other marine creatures. Each species of manatee is a member of the sirenian family, which shares a common ancestor with the elephant, armadillo and small gopher-like hyrax.

BIG ANIMALS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

**THE MANATEES
OF CRYSTAL RIVER**

Kings Bay

Located on the Gulf of Mexico side of the Florida peninsula, Kings Bay has in an area of 2.5 km², around 100 warm water springs - 15 of which are significant 'first magnitude' ones. Combined they pump out some 110 million litres of 22°C water every day - filling the bay and forming the head waters of the Crystal River, which flows out into the Gulf of Mexico.

All of which makes the area prime real estate for the Florida manatee and has been for a very long time... The difference now though is all the humans with their boats and canal-side residences. If you are considering a trip to the Crystal River, you need to understand that not all the locals are enamoured with their Sirenian winter visitors, because of the access and speed restrictions introduced under legislation to make all of Florida a manatee refuge and sanctuary.

Swimming with the Florida manatee

The Crystal River is the only location in the United States where tourists are allowed in the water with manatees, because swimming with them was always a tourist drawcard and was 'grandfathered' through the legislation - something that would never be permitted if proposed today. Manatee

swimming is a significant employer in Crystal River and pre-pandemic there were some 26 companies catering to the estimated 150,000 tourists in the season. So be aware that the chances of a quality encounter are pretty slim if you are there on a busy weekend or when one of the regular bus-loads of excited schoolkids and their moms arrive!

The Three Sisters Springs

This set of three large springs is probably the most unique and inspiring place to see the Florida manatee. Located in a wildlife refuge of some 58 acres of pristine vegetation, the Three Sisters is one of Florida's last remaining urban springs.

Unlike the other springs in Kings Bay, at the Three Sisters those crystal-clear waters from the underground chambers do not merge with the darker waters of the canals and the bay until exiting the refuge. Which means that undisturbed the visibility is absolutely stunning and creates a magnificent backdrop for the manatees that enter through the narrow channel to the canal system.

However... it is also open to the public and what can seem like a tranquil haven if you are there alone, quickly turns into thriving mass of assorted legs and torsos suspended from flotation sausages as the next party of excited tourists arrive!

“ When Lady Luck does shine on you and you get a great encounter, it really is an incredible moment - these animals simply grace you with their presence ”

Out on a snorkel and dive trip



Manatees are threatened by recreational boaters



Manatee dives are shallow





Kayaking to the manatees



Snorkellers searching for manatees

How to get good images

Obviously... you need to be there when the manatees are - which means in winter from November to April. But the best chances are when the water is coldest, which typically means around mid-December to late-January. Don't expect to get great images in one to two days as there are just too many variables with the weather, water temperature and tourists. My first trip was ten days and I needed them to achieve most of my objectives because of a couple of washed-out days. What worked best was going out on an organised early morning trip to be at the Three Sisters by 7am when it opens - sometimes that saw me there with just a few others and at other times a couple of dozen people - there is no way to plan, it's all completely random.

Then in the afternoon I would rent a kayak and go back to the Three Sisters where, if I was lucky, I would find a spot to tie up the kayak and snorkel my way into the Springs. Late afternoon can be really excellent as most of the day tourists have departed, the water is gin-clear again and the manatees are calm and relaxed.

Special use permit

The best chance of good images is with a special use permit from Fish and Wildlife Services. This requires watching an instructional video on how to behave and paying US\$100, for which you are given a bright, numbered vest so the rangers can identify you, and are allowed to submerge rather than stay on the surface like all the other tourists.

Under no circumstances can you pursue the manatees and you must 'observe passively', but you soon learn when the sleeping manatees need to breath and submerge in position to capture them mid-water – all without harassing them.



Manatee portrait

Equipment

You need a wide-angle lens to capture the manatees as they are big animals and I found that a 16-35mm zoom on my Nikon D800 DSLR was a great combination. Strobes are no longer allowed unfortunately, which obviously impacts early morning shooting, but there is plenty of light in the afternoon and if it's behind you all is good!

In summary

My initial manatee trip was one of my first big animal trips and it taught me two basic things – firstly, it's never easy to get good images and while preparation can get you in the zone, luck has a significant role to play... Secondly, when Lady Luck does shine on you and you get a great encounter, it really is an incredible moment - these animals simply grace you with their presence. Briefly but very significantly! ■

Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

www.indopacificimages.com



Playful manatees