

Published by Tauchen and Duiken 1993

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About 1700 words
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MAGICAL MANTAS OF FANNING ISLAND

by

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Overhead the silent procession glides by, squadrons of devil-fish cutting swathes through the plankton slick. The surface is glossy with plankton, but the turbid pall is only a shallow stream in the clear ocean water of the equatorial Line Islands. Before the huge animals come towards me I exhale hard, so I can rise beneath them without disturbing their entranced feeding with my bubbles. Were I not intent on the image in my viewfinder I could reach up and touch them.

I have never seen so many manta rays together. Fifty animals between two and three metres across patrol a single plankton slick a few hundred metres long just outside the atoll pass of Fanning Island.

Fanning - now called Tabuaeran - is one of the equatorial Northern Line Islands, part of the Republic of Kiribati. Roughly halfway between Hawaii and Tahiti, the Northern Line Islands are a group of four islands, though the northernmost, Palmyra, is a United States possession. Washington Island (now called Teraina) and Fanning are atolls, while Christmas Island is a raised coral island, the largest of this type in the world.

Eila - my 1935 English cutter - met the Equatorial Countercurrent a hundred miles north of Palmyra; the east-going current kicking up a steep sea against the northeast trade. Then came the first convergence zone weather of the doldrums; rain squalls, big ragged skies.

Three days later we sighted Fanning Island from up the mast, well to windward. The fresh trade wind was reinforced by occasional squalls; after each passed there was a lull before the trade resumed. In one of these calms we approached the pass through a sea like cold steel. Outside the pass were several outrigger canoes; people fishing. Amongst them were black fins, velvet wing tips; devil-fish.

There's nothing like thirty big manta rays to cheer you up on a grey afternoon. Especially after spending four months diving in Hawaii and seeing only one.

Although the Pilot book told us that the average wind speed for April is six knots, for the first ten days we hid from the short lagoon chop kicked up by a reinforced trade by taking *Eila* through the maze of reefs and shallows to the windward side. Braille navigation, touch and go, Vicki steering, the skipper up the mast with polaroid sunglasses. Eventually we ran hard aground. To get free we had to reduce *Eila's* draft by swinging out the boom and both crawling to the end with the engine in reverse.

Like the Gilbert Islands of Kiribati these atolls have extensive shallow areas best navigated - if you could stand the noise - with a hovercraft. But we did the best we could with our 2.5m RIB and splashed the rest with French jelly shoes (an excellent source of disparaging looks in nightclubs!). We explored the north-east *hoa* (a shallow channel between the *motus*) looking for clear ocean water coming through but there was nothing divable. Only bonefish, mullet and a few black tip reef sharks in the blood-warm shallows. No one lives on the windward side. In places there were forests of *Pisonia* trees where frigates nested in the highest branches; distending balloon-like their bright red throats which vibrated with their eerie call.

When the wind abated we returned to the village by the pass where we were made welcome by the Micronesian inhabitants, many of whom have moved here to escape the severe overcrowding on parts of Tarawa and other atolls in the Gilbert Islands.

I was hoodwinked into attending church in the Catholic *maneaba* - traditional open-sided meeting house - on Palm Sunday. After the service replete with beautiful singing there was a meal.

As guests, the huge platters covered with muslin and lace (to keep the voracious flies off) were laid on the floor in front of us first. Though the men eat first, Vicki fell into the guest category and so ate with them. The island is visited by a ship from Tarawa twice a year (there are no flights at all) and one was due any day. But although the meagre shops were out of tobacco, flour and rice, you would have never known from the lavish spread set before us. There was pork, chicken, terrestrial crabs, fish of various kinds, taro (which in Kiribati is a particularly tough challenge - something like stewed balsa wood), noodles and rice, baked pumpkin and pumpkin stalks in coconut cream which were hairy and hot. Drinking nuts and coffee washed it down.

Easter is celebrated throughout Kiribati with singing and dancing competitions. The first of these was held in the same corrugated iron roofed *maneaba*, which resonated with the nasal singing. Aspects of the colonial past seem to have integrated themselves into Kiribati cultural activities. With interjections from a pea-whistle the conductor of each choir guided the singers through the songs; giving shrill warning of the imminent last verse. Dancers armpits would be sprayed with Impulse body-spray or doused with Johnson's baby powder, during the dance!

The following day the Catholics from two villages put on a display of singing and dancing in a *maneaba* built of traditional materials; palm log framing lashed together with coconut fibre string and a pandanus roof. Percussionists elsewhere in Kiribati sometimes use a large block of expanded polystyrene for a communal drum. Here a wooden crate was used, passed from end to end of the *maneaba* as each village performed.

The dances are undemonstrative compared with the overtly sexual tamure, of French Polynesia. The lower body moves little; while the arms and head move in jerky bird-like jumps. The arms and fingers are adorned with flower-like bracelets, their heads with a coronet of palm and frangipani. A yoke of beads and two sashes are worn over a white shirt. The skirt is either of pandanus or palm. The men wear no shirt and a skirt of pandanus mat, tied with a belt of human hair; traditionally from the head of their mother. Entranced by the drumming the dancers reach a state of hypnosis punctuated only by their screams.

There were very few pale-faces in the audience. Diving alone anywhere new and unknown is always a bit scary for me. Rarely do we meet other people on yachts who have the same obsession about diving with sharks, or even manta rays.

Unlike Christmas Island where there are a couple of fish collecting businesses which send angelfish to Hawaii on the weekly flight, no one in Fanning dives with tanks so the fish seem curious about strangers.

At one time, there must have been beautiful coral here, but now the stands are dead, the huge *Acropora* tables turned. The size of the new growth indicates the coral was killed by the rise in sea temperature during the El Nino years of '82-'83. In a normal year the surface temperature of 28°C is only a couple of degrees below the maximum tolerated by most corals. During the El Nino it remained at 31°C for months.

My initial impression was dominated by the large numbers of big fish; snappers, Napoleon wrasse, double-headed parrotfish (*Bolbometopon muricatum*), other large parrotfish grazing partly on dead algae-covered coral, partly on the small stands of live *Pocillipora* and *Acropora*. Sometimes the double-headed parrotfish - unusually approachable here - had an attendant blue-bar jack shadow-stalking prey, by hiding behind the larger fish. Elsewhere we have seen jacks and cornetfish shadowing stingrays in the same manner.

From the blue water would come shoals of giant trevally presenting an end view like a flattened skull till they turned a metre away. Shoals of barracuda 200 strong would engulf me in their improvised purse sein, only a silver window at the top, elsewhere a uniform mesh of barracuda. If they feed like this, I wondered how they organised the subsequent feeding. Do they take turns like dolphins?

There were fish here I didn't know from Hawaii or French Polynesia. I liked to think there was some larval transport east with the Equatorial Countercurrent, bringing fish and invertebrates from the richer Palau/Philippine region. One angelfish *Apolemichthys xanthopunctatus* I had never seen before. Sharks were rare. I saw a few black tip reef sharks and one large grey. Sharks are killed here for their fins which are dried, and shipped to China for soup. A buyer in Tarawa pays \$30Aus/kg for them. Sometimes the teeth are made into traditional artifacts to sell to the occasional visitor. But there is little else to earn money for flour, rice and tobacco in such a marginal economy, with the depressed price of copra. Turtles

too are killed to vary the monotonous atoll diet of fish and rice. In an island without electricity or refrigeration any surplus turtles are kept alive by lying them on their backs.

In contrast to the Gilbertese dancers, the trance of the feeding mantas is silent. Often during the ebb, especially in the morning calm, long clouds of plankton would snake along the reef and out into deeper water leaving a slick upon the surface. Up and down this river of food worked the mantas, often as many as fifty animals, sometimes fifteen in a single eyefull. Though the visibility in the slick was poor, just outside it was more than 20m. In the deep water I was reluctant to get in with them. But in the shallower water I could wait for them to fly directly overhead like silent bombers. When my air had gone I would snorkel down as they came towards me, sometimes in a line single file, rostral paddles cupped, mouths agape. They would pick up air which spilled in silver streams from their spiracles when they banked and turned. One was all black, another had monofilament fishing line caught round its rostral paddles; all were big.

As *Eila* slipped out the pass bound for Christmas Island, we could see them through the silky surface all along the windrow of plankton, soaring back and forth in endless procession.

end