

Travel

Yap: A Little Island with Big Adventures

By [Francesca Diaco](#), July 4, 2018 @ 06:00 AM (EST)



Yap enjoys a very healthy shark population and exciting close-up shark experiences

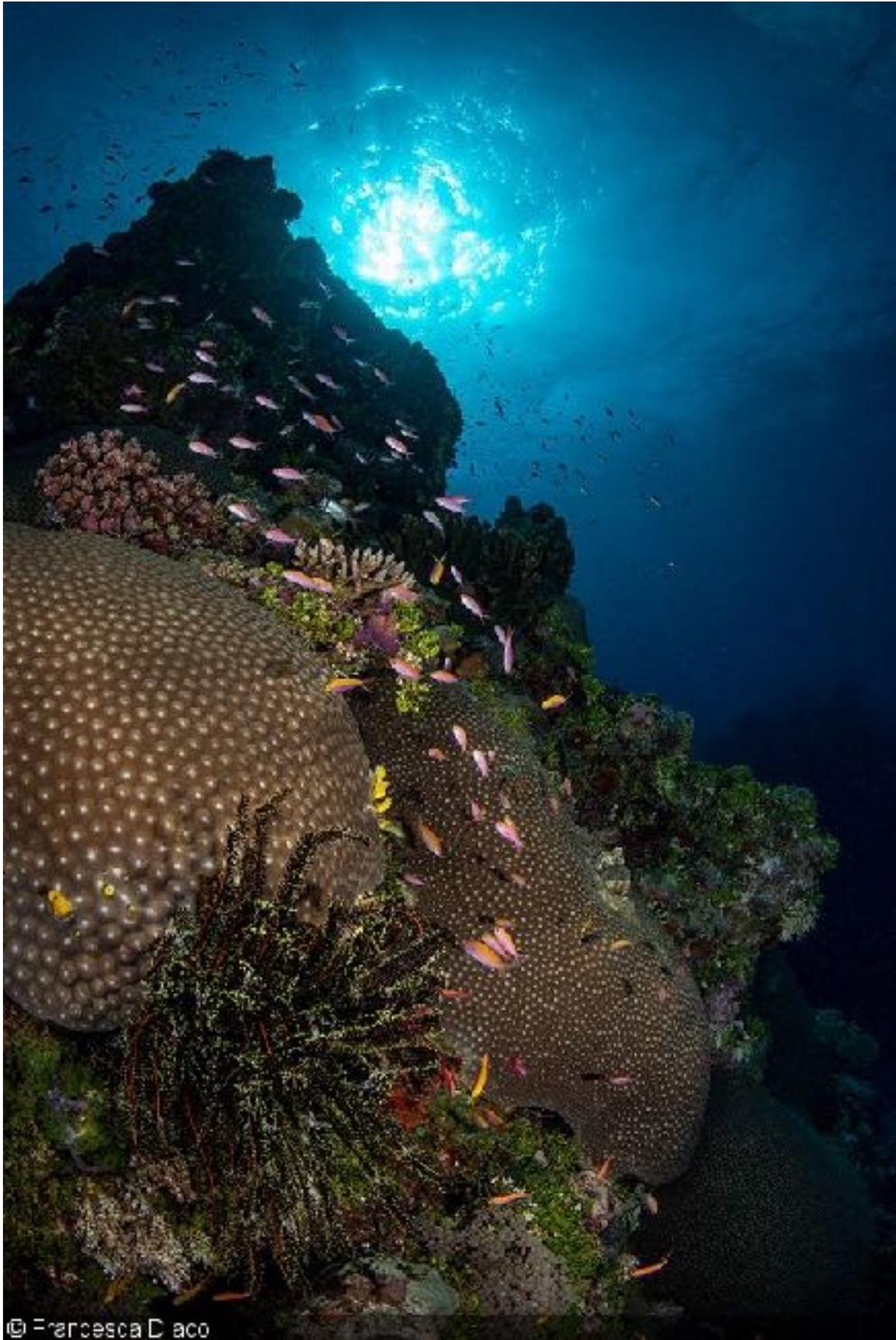
Well off the beaten path, Yap is a small island in the Western Pacific offering big experiences both above and below the surface. From close-ups with mantas and sharks to truly unique cultural encounters, you can be sure to have an adventure not soon forgotten.

An hour-and-a-half's flight from Guam, Yap—just 15 miles long and 6 miles wide—boasts rolling green hills, lush vegetation, palm-fringed beaches, beautiful mangroves, and stunning reefs. And with just over 11,000 inhabitants and 4,000 visitors per year, the island has a very quaint and intimate feeling. But what really sets this island nation apart is its unique history, distinct culture, and strong sense of community.

Yap's history and collective knowledge is largely passed down from generation to generation exclusively through oral stories, songs and dance. It is said to be the best-preserved culture in Micronesia. On any given day, the people of Yap live modern-day lives while concurrently

fulfilling their community duties and upholding traditions in the most seamless way. This paradoxical mix of tribal customs and contemporary culture creates a vibe that is both familiar and unexpected while offering a truly unique and authentic travel experience.





© Francesca D'aco

Yap's stunning topography and healthy reefs provide some amazing wide-angle opportunities

Big Animal Heaven

Yap is home to the first dedicated marine protected area in the Western Pacific. In 2008, the Yap Legislature passed a law protecting an 8,243-square-mile area that reaches 12 miles offshore, which is essentially the habitat for manta rays. This safe zone enjoys a very high density of plankton, ensuring that the mantas are year-long residents and making Yap one of the best places to see these black-winged beauties.

Yap is also a field research site for [Manta Trust](#), which coordinates global research efforts for mantas in hopes of conserving dwindling manta and devil ray populations. Yap's mantas are being identified, measured and indexed into a conservation database. Guests are encouraged to send their manta photos and diving information to the Manta Project to assist in this important research.



*A large marine protected area and high density of plankton make Yap one of the top places to see
—and photograph—mantas*

Yap also has a healthy shark population, which clearly benefits from the protected area, and offers exciting close-up encounters. While a large variety of sharks can be found, the most commonly spotted species are gray reef, whitetip and blacktip sharks. Also commonly spotted around the island are eagle rays as well as large schools of fish, such as trevally, barracuda, and snapper. Plus, there are some cool critters for the macro lovers out there including shrimp, nudibranchs and even mating mandarinfish.

The pristine reefs offer a varied topography including expansive hard coral gardens, shallow cleaning stations, caverns, drop-offs and vast channels. And with only 1,000 divers visiting per year, you can be guaranteed there will be no crowded dive sites and plenty of room to spread out and get your shots. Yap's diversity, exclusivity, clear blue water, and big animal encounters are the recipe for success for any diving adventure.



Blacktips are some of the three most commonly spotted shark species in Yap—along with gray reef and whitetip sharks



Beyond sharks and mantas, there are plenty of exciting subjects to photograph, such as this broadclub cuttlefish

Manta, Mantas, Everywhere

Paying homage to Yap's large resident manta population, [Manta Ray Bay Resort](#) gets divers excited from the first glance. There are mantas literally wherever you look—all over the walls, tiled at the bottom of the pool, as artfully shaped towels in your room, and even as freshly baked cookies complete with mandibles and wings!

Located on the water's edge, the resort has everything to make your stay comfortable and enjoyable, including well-appointed rooms, an infinity pool, a large camera room with individual stations, a full-service dive center, and even an on-site microbrewery. A 170-foot Indonesian *phinisi* schooner, the *Mnuw*, serves as the resort's restaurant and boasts three dining decks, two bars, and an extensive international menu. The whole place has a quirky kind of charm that immediately puts you at ease and makes you want to go diving.



Manta Ray Bay Resort and the MNUW bar and restaurant is the perfect place to unwind after an exciting day of diving

There are also lots of non-diving options on offer to fill your time, including fishing, kayaking, private beach BBQs, and cultural island tours. I spent my last day (and no-fly time) on a full-day tour exploring World War II sites, a traditional men's house, a stone path, the stone money banks, idyllic private beaches and stunning island lookouts. But the main cultural highlight was getting to witness the local village perform a traditional bamboo stick dance in full dress.

Cultural Fun Facts

- Yap's original name, Wa'ab, was adapted to its current form through a misunderstanding by the first visitors, who confused the Yapese word for land and canoe paddle, which is the literal meaning of Yap.
- Yap is an island of villages who fought wars against each other. It follows a highly complex caste system with seven tiers. The winner of any given battle would move up the caste system, while the loser would move down in the chain. The lower-ranked villages were often expected to pay some sort of tribute to the higher-ranked villages or relinquish some stone money. Rank also determines what you can or cannot eat: The more desirable animals or fish are accessible to the higher castes, while they are off-limits to lower-ranked villages.



Men, women and children come together to perform the bamboo stick dance, which depicts tribal battles their village has fought

- Yap's traditional doughnut-shaped stone money can be up to 14 feet in diameter and was inspired by the shape of the moon. It is the largest and heaviest currency in the world and sits outdoors, unguarded, in stone money banks. The value of each stone is determined not only by its size but how difficult and perilous it was to obtain. If the money was acquired during a great battle and transported from a far-off land, it has much more value than one carved on the island. Stone money is still used today for traditional ceremonial exchanges.



Yap's giant stone money—up to 14 feet in diameter!—sits outdoors in stone money “banks”

Manta Ray Bay hosts a few special events each year including Manta Mania (a citizen science ecotourism week), marine biology weeks, and Yap Day, which is a unique cultural experience during manta mating season. But the highlight of each year for underwater photographers is [Manta Fest](#), a two-week photo festival that, in 2018, runs from August 25 till September 9. There will be a number of photo pros on hand running photography workshops, a photo contest with spectacular prizes, special photographic dive plans, one-on-one training, and loads of exciting cultural activities. In short, it's the best of the best Yap has to offer and not to be missed!

[Yap Divers](#) at Manta Ray Bay Resort offers a wonderful dive experience, from spacious and comfortable boats to experienced guides and the best knowledge of the diving around the island—in fact, they named most of the dive sites! You will enjoy small groups and uncrowded sites, not to mention hot tea, fruit, and freshly baked bread on your surface intervals. But most importantly, they know how to put you in the right place at the right time for awesome [big animal encounters](#).



The shallow cleaning station at Stammisch is one of the best places for close-up manta encounters

The manta mating season runs from December through April and offers the best chance to have interactions with multiple animals. You may see small groups of rays during courtships, which looks like dancing as they swirl around each other. Or if you're really lucky, you'll witness a manta train, where they line up one after the other.

Cleaning station diving occurs year-round in shallow water, offering very close encounters, which is great for photography. Our best manta encounters happened at Stammisch, a shallow cleaning station surrounded by very healthy hard corals; and M'il Channel, a hot spot for schooling fish, eagle rays, sharks, and so much more. With my full-frame DSLR, I used a 15mm fisheye for close manta interactions, which allowed me to get the subject entirely in frame and light it well with my strobes. The fisheye effect also works beautifully with the mantas' graceful wing movements.



The shark feed at Vertigo is exciting and draws in plenty of sharks—providing excellent photo opportunities

Yap Divers has over two decades of shark diving experience and offers some exciting specialty dives to get you as close to the animals as possible. They offer a shark feed on the reef at Vertigo and baited surface experiences, so you can work on your shark [over-unders](#). Picture yourself leaning over the edge of the boat with dozens of sharks swarming around you and bumping into your dome while you try to mind your fingers—it's the absolute highlight of any trip to Yap!

I used my fisheye for most of the shark feed interactions, but the 16–35mm also works well, as the additional focal length enables you to isolate an animal within the action for certain shots. If you're shooting a compact, you'll definitely need a wide-angle wet lens in order to get in all the shark action and get close enough to use your strobes. For the surface over-unders, a fisheye is an absolute must, as the sharks are literally bumping into your dome. Use a large (eight-inch) dome if possible, which provides more surface area for your splits and enables you to get more sharks and environment in the frame.



Topside at Vertigo, skilled divemasters place bait at the end of fishing poles to lure sharks in for the closest shark encounters you'll ever experience



© Francesca D'aco

For over-unders at Vertigo, an eight-inch dome and fisheye lens is recommended—increasing your chances of getting multiple sharks in frame

Looking back at my week on the little island of Yap, I struggle to decide what was the biggest highlight. The special combination of exclusive diving with plenty of big animal action, exciting photographic opportunities, a quirky and quaint island charm, and unique cultural experiences adds up to a truly exceptional all-round travel adventure. There is no doubt I will be back to play with mantas and flirt with sharks—and unwind with rum-soaked fresh coconuts at sunset.



A turtle cruises the healthy hard coral gardens at Stammisch



***About the Author:** Francesca Diaco is a professional underwater photographer based in Roatán, Honduras, and the owner/operator of [Roatán Underwater Photography](#), which specializes in personalized underwater photography training for all levels, including one-on-one mentoring, group classes, weeklong workshops and online training. She also runs [Fisheye Expeditions](#), which offers underwater photography expeditions to some of the world's best diving destinations as well as customized gear advice and sales. Shooting professionally since 2006, Francesca is a Field Editor for DivePhotoGuide and publishes in a number of international magazines, websites and blogs. Visit www.francescadiaco.com for more information and a full portfolio of images.*