

THE RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Grey reef sharks
gather in the pass

Taking a scooter into a cloud
of grey reef sharks

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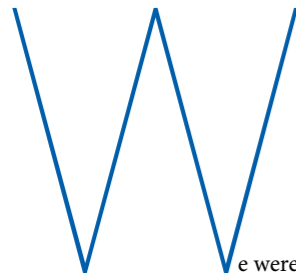


ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



A grey reef shark
in the Moofushi Channel

JAMES EMERY



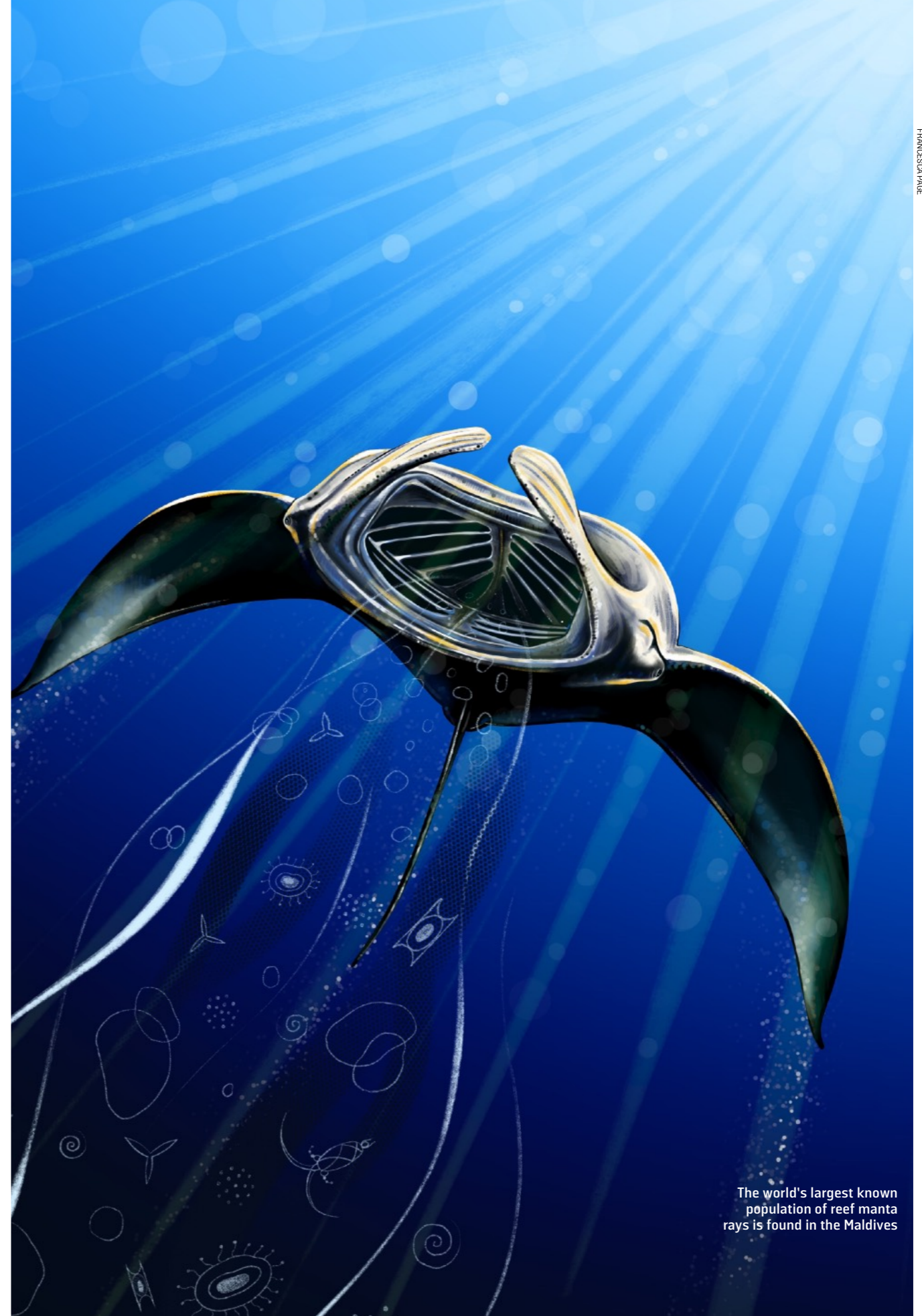
We were heading out into the pass, moving at quite a lick with the help of our underwater scooters. It's a 60-metre-deep channel on the west of Ari Atoll in the Maldives, and about 400 metres wide. Most afternoons, a phenomenal number of grey reef sharks come and hang out, and we were flying like underwater Valkyries straight into a school of more than 100 of them.

Soon we were surrounded. Above us, below us, every way you looked, there were sharks. Solitary, bulky pregnant females, playful gangs of juveniles, some moving in rapid bursts, others effortlessly cruising into the gathering current. There were more sharks than I can remember seeing in one place. This was not a skittish school of scalloped hammerheads coming in quickly from the blue and equally rapidly disappearing. Nor was it a handful of assorted reef sharks hanging out on the drop-off, only to rapidly disperse as a diver approached.

No, it was a vast tribe of glorious grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) which seemed not to mind the strange, motorised divers. The cloud of sharks opened up and let us pass into its midst, and for a wonderful few minutes that seemed like ages, we were all swept forward in the relentless current.

The Maldivian authorities introduced a full ban on shark fishing in their waters in 2010, and sooner than anyone anticipated, the archipelago's much-depleted stocks of sharks started to bounce back. Much to the amazement and delight of the team at Blue Tribe Dive Centre on Moofushi, the number of grey reef sharks found in a nearby channel was greater than anyone could remember. Sightings of 200 or more greys today are not uncommon. But before the dive centre introduced scooters, diving with them wasn't easy. Only the brave or the foolhardy would chance an arduous descent to the bottom of the pass to cling on for a few precious minutes only to be swept away by the current.

Ari is one of the bigger Maldivian atolls, it stretches 80 kilometres from north to south and is about 30km wide. The open ocean on the eastern side is around 200m deep; on the western side, it quickly plunges to more than 2,000m. On an outgoing tide it is like a ginormous waterfall with millions of tonnes of water from the atoll pouring into the Indian Ocean.



The world's largest known
population of reef manta
rays is found in the Maldives

It is in these tremendous currents that the grey reef sharks come to spend their R&R between early-morning and evening bouts of hunting on the nearby reefs. And with the help of the scooters, you can now join them for one of the best shark dives on the planet.

The team at Blue Tribe can quickly certify any advanced diver for scooter diving, with a few instruction dives in the resort's lagoon after completing a simple e-learning course. It's great fun and relatively easy to get the hang of. One note of caution: it is also equally easy to initiate a free-flow from your alternate air source if it is facing into the current as you charge into the blue. I managed it and was a tad surprised to realise I had gone through 120 bar of air in a five-minute burst, as we drove out into the channel and we were at 25m – a safe ascent needed on the guide's octopus.

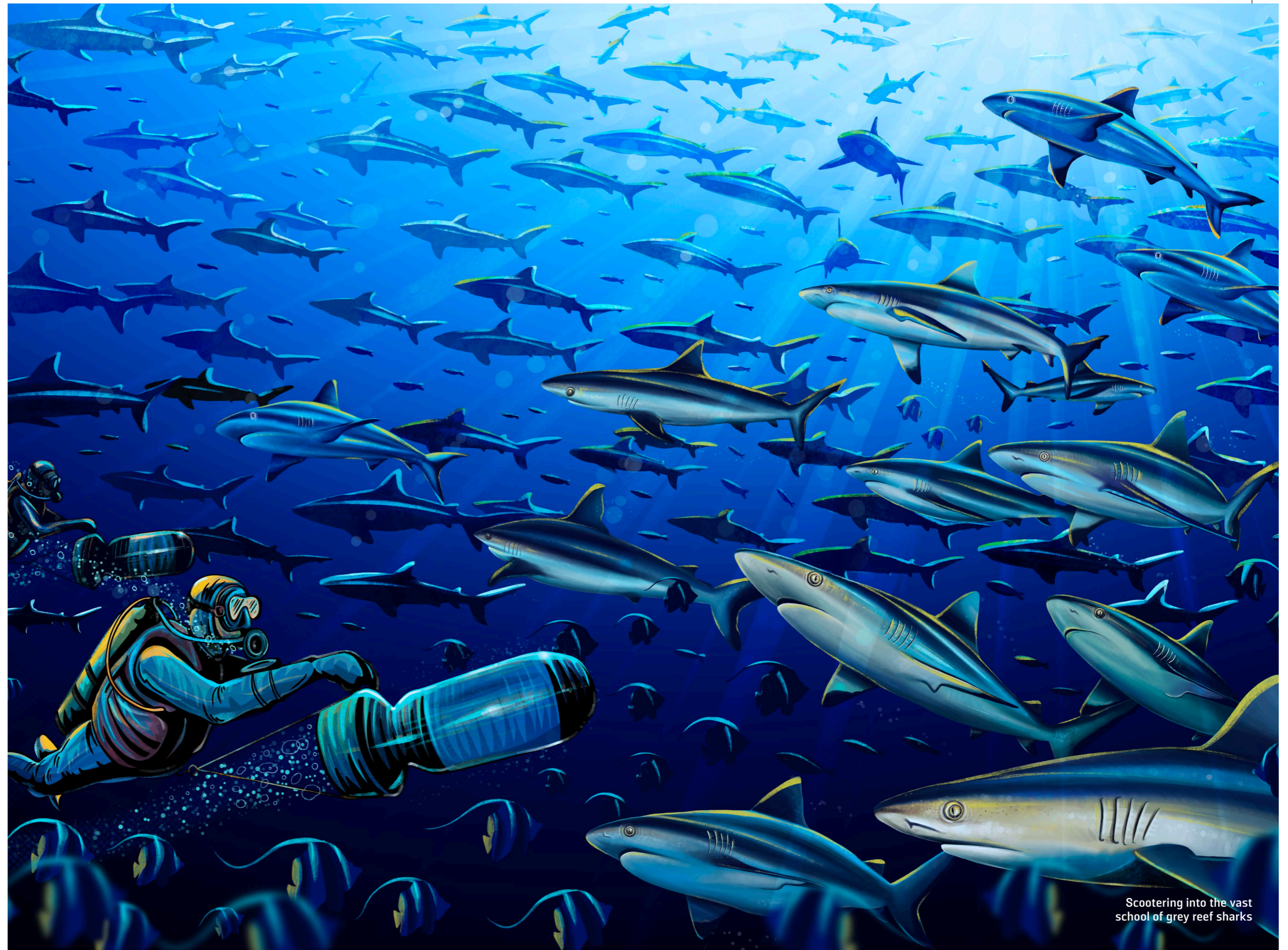
The channel is only a short ten to 15-minute dhoni ride from Moofushi. Another stunning dive, still in the channel but even nearer the resort, is the Bojahamadi manta cleaning station. This is another dive you can enjoy on a scooter, and is also equally accessible to fin-powered divers. It is a large plateau at five metres, dropping away to a ledge at 20m. On the east side of the plateau, between 12 and 20m, is a big coral block where bluntheaded wrasse wait to perform their cleaning services.

The Maldives has the largest known population of reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*) in the world. The Manta Trust estimates there are more than 10,000 resident in the archipelago. Ari Atoll is one of the best places to encounter them. It is not unusual to find six or more mantas waiting for their parasite clean at Bojahamadi. They swoop overhead as they circle the boulder, and as long as the divers are few in number, they often come remarkably close. If you are lucky, a few show-offs will throw in some barrel rolls to impress.

The mantas tend to prefer stronger currents for their pedicures, which gives scooter divers an advantage, and if none turn up or the site is too busy with divers, you can head off for a long drive along a nearby narrow ridge which is covered with soft corals and bustling with marine life. The ridge has plenty of swim-throughs and channels gaudily decorated with gorgonians and big schools of reef fish.

One of the many advantages of diving from Moofushi is its proximity to such world-class dive sites. The skippers can get you to the best sites, at the best times, avoiding the day boats from other resorts further afield and the fairly regular visits from the liveaboards working the atoll. The resort is perfect for divers: an excellent dive centre run by the highly experienced Miles Crookes from Sheffield; there are no motorised watersports (assuming you don't include electric scooters), meaning no jet skis ruining your afternoon snorkel; and generous all-inclusive packages with top-quality rooms. Constance Moofushi regularly makes DIVE's Top 10 Maldivian resorts.

On the other side of the Atoll, 30 minutes away on a fast boat, is the company's sister resort, Constance Halaveli – a five-star island. This is one of the Maldives' top resorts. It is very plush. For example, it is extremely proud of its



Scootering into the vast school of grey reef sharks

wine cellar, which it insists is the best in the Indian Ocean. The rooms are over-the-top luxurious; the restaurants are world-class fine dining and the service exemplary. All this comes with a top-end bill. If such pampering is your thing and you also love diving, this is the resort for you because, just like its sister island, Halaveli is surrounded by some of the best dive sites in the Maldives.

The renowned Fish Head is a site to behold. The 100m-long thila with a striking rock at its centre, which looks just like a fish profile, is in front of a major channel that funnels, at times, raging currents that turbo-charge the marine life. Big, female grey reef sharks feast on an absurd abundance of snappers, jacks and fusiliers. The reef is undercut with an overhang which runs along a large portion of the thila; here, you find large gorgonians and black coral trees decorated with feather stars.

Another nearby thila, which has also long been a marine

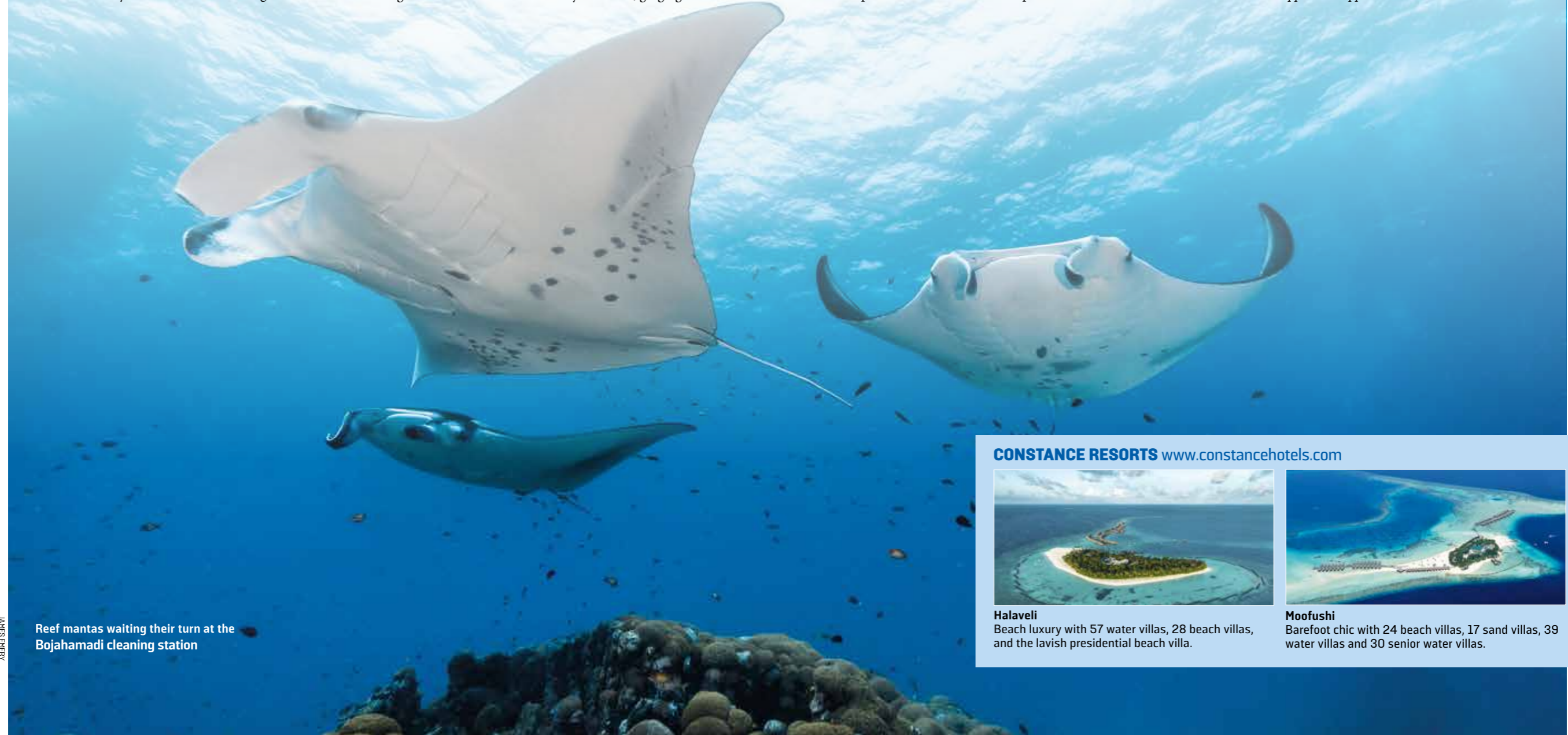
reserve, is Maaya Thila. This was the location of one of my very favourite night dives back in the 1990s, when the football pitch-sized top of the reef was literally writhing with voracious whitetip reef sharks and moray eels searching every nook and cranny for their evening meal. Thirty years later, it didn't disappoint. This time, the high point was mating octopuses. The males have a detachable arm, which they offer the females with their sperm on the end. Strange and wonderful animals, octopus! The hunting action was the usual high-energy frenzy. Giant trevallies were charging vast schools of pygmy sweepers, morays were out and about sinuously hugging the reef top, gobbling up stray fish, and small whitetips were aggressively thrusting their mouths into cracks in the coral. There is something of Hieronymus Bosch about a good night dive on Maaya Thila.

A treat not to miss is a trip out to a nearby manta-feeding lagoon. The reef mantas are there year-round, gorging in

their elegant and acrobatic manner on the plankton in the sheltered kilometre-or-so-long lagoon. As we approached, another stationary boat indicated the location of some mantas feeding. We joined a couple of other snorkellers in the water, gently sliding in so as not to spook the clearly hungry mantas. As I looked down, one barrel-rolled less than two metres away. For the next half hour, we watched mesmerised as a pair of mantas swooped down ten metres or so to the bottom of the lagoon, turned, their mouths agape and their cephalic fins channelling the plankton down their gullets, as they rose up the water column. As long as you remained calm and still, they would get as close as a metre or so away. You could peer down their throats, inspect in detail the remoras clinging to their blotchy bellies. They were in total control, precisely calibrating the distance between you and their flexing bodies as they seemingly blissfully hoovered up their thousands of microscopic morsels.

One of the rare bits of good news in these days of environmental gloom is the return of the sharks to Maldivian waters. It is remarkable how quickly once-threatened species can bounce back when sensible conservation measures are implemented. Taking a scooter out to the Moofushi channel is one of the great shark dives – don't miss it! ■

Turquoise Holidays (turquoiseholidays.co.uk, 01494 678400), offers three nights at Constance Moofushi in a Beach Villa on an all-inclusive basis, followed by three nights at Constance Halaveli, staying in a Water Villa on an all-inclusive basis from £3,699 per person. Includes international flights from London Heathrow, return seaplane transfers and inter-island speedboat transfer. Diving costs approx £128 per dive, including equipment hire and dive instruction. The scooter course costs approx £144pp.



Reef mantas waiting their turn at the Bojahamadi cleaning station

CONSTANCE RESORTS www.constancehotels.com



Halaveli
Beach luxury with 57 water villas, 28 beach villas, and the lavish presidential beach villa.



Moofushi
Barefoot chic with 24 beach villas, 17 sand villas, 39 water villas and 30 senior water villas.