

three places to

swim with gentle giants

From domestic waters to island getaways, here's where to go face to fin with spectacular marine life.



"I'm usually more of a relax-on-the-beach type of vacation guy, but I'm also really into scuba diving—the sights and colors you see underwater can be simply breathtaking!"
—JONATHAN



For more information about diving and snorkeling, and marine animal education initiatives, visit oceanwishes.org and reef-world.org.

stingrays

GRAND CAYMAN ISLAND

Like birds soaring through a cloudless sky, stingrays swirl around swimmers in shallow, clear turquoise water. The stunning sight is a daily occurrence in the Caribbean at Grand Cayman's Stingray City, one of the world's most accessible recreational dive sites. "Stingray City is the only place in the world where you can be this close to as many as 15 wild stingrays, some with wingspans measuring six feet. They're graceful, gentle, boisterous, and like being petted on the underside of their wings," says Red Sail Sports dive manager Clive Webb.

Because the water is only 14 feet deep, guests don't need to be scuba certified; they can take a resort dive course taught by Red Sail Sports (redsailcayman.com) to qualify for the underwater experience.

The 2.5-hour excursions include detailed animal interaction instructions and 45 minutes in the 84-degree Fahrenheit water. Dive-masters feed squid to swooping stingrays, while divers pet the fish and pose for pictures. And if you're worried about bites, don't be: Webb explains that while stingrays are members of the shark family, they vacuum up their food, mostly shellfish, and grind it into bits. To feed stingrays, you flatten your palm, like feeding a horse.

Families with young children can enjoy catamaran excursions to Stingray Sandbar. In four feet of water, you can see as many as 70 stingrays swim around wading sandbar visitors. Go in the late afternoon once cruise ships have departed.



whale sharks

OSLOB, PHILIPPINE ISLANDS

"Being in the water with a whale shark, looking into its eyes, changes you," says Margo Peyton, founder and CEO of Kids Sea Camp & Family Dive Adventures (familydivers.com). Each year, Peyton brings divers and snorkelers to the biodiverse Philippines to dive with whale sharks and other rare marine animals. On the seven-night trips, her team of marine conservationists accompanies guests on two 45-minute dives—often encountering a dozen whale sharks at a time.

A marine sanctuary on Sumilon Island, Oslob's clear, 40-foot-deep water attracts the ocean's biggest fish year-round. And only licensed boats operated by trained staff can enter during designated observation hours. Endangered animals, whale sharks measure up to 40 feet long and weigh as much as 21 tons. It's safe to be in the water with them because, like whales, they're filter feeders: A whale shark rises to the surface, opens its wide mouth, and sucks plankton, krill, and small fish down like a giant bathtub drain.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMANDA NICHOLLS (CPS), JESSE ALPERT/KIDS SEA CAMP, CAROL GRANT/DISCOVER CRYSTAL RIVER FLORIDA

manatees

CRYSTAL RIVER, FLORIDA

It's love at first nuzzle when swimming near a pudgy, 1,000-pound, 14-foot manatee. "Manatees are naturally curious, affectionate, and playful as a Labrador retriever," says Justin Strickland, general manager of Captain Mike's Manatee Tours (swimmingwiththemanatees.com), operating in Florida's Kings Bay.

From mid-November through March, water warmed by Crystal River's natural geothermal springs attracts the largest concentration of manatees in the world. According to Strickland, during peak season (mid-December through February), as many as 900 populate Kings Bay, the seven-mile-long Crystal River, and estuaries around the quaint towns of Crystal River and Homosassa in Citrus County.

Manatee boat-tour packages vary, but all include meeting-a-manatee instructions plus a snorkel and mask. (Wet suit and swim noodle are optional; no fins are required.) Designated manatee sanctuaries such as Three Sisters Springs in Kings Bay allow only swimming, canoeing, and kayaking (boats are available for rent). The Save Crystal River's Kings Bay Restoration Project removes invasive algae and replants indigenous eelgrass, a favorite manatee food and contributor to water clarity, helping to keep these manatee/human mixers happening.



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