

RIOT OF COLOUR: When the mantas move on there's plenty of other underwater delights to enjoy.

Sharing the realm of majestic manta

Give them the right of way and these graceful creatures will do you proud, writes **Richard Moore**

THE signal drum sounds to let everyone know that the mantas are in the channel.

That sends a lot of people scurrying for the small boats that will take them out to watch the giant marine creatures swim by as they feed on plankton.

The tiny plankton flow through a narrow gap between Drawaqa and Naviti islands and the mantas, swimming against the current, enjoy a good meal.

The current can be very strong — too much to swim against for long, even with fins — so the boats drop you in an area where you can snorkel in comfort to see the mantas and then go into the deeper channel to be whisked across to where the same boats now wait.

Before we enter the water the guides tell us not to chase the mantas.

Stay still and they will pass by and then come around again to check you out. If you chase them you may frighten them away.

So with that in mind, and camera ready, it is over the side into a slightly choppy sea.

Once the bubbles have cleared I can see a manta below me.

It seems to be going gracefully but slowly. However, given that it is going against the current its obviously capable of considerable power. It is soon out of sight but hopefully there'll be another along soon.

Meanwhile, my eyes are attracted to a myriad of vividly coloured fish that teem around the coral reefs on either side of the channel.

There are thousands of them, zipping around with nary a care in the world.

All of a sudden I'm caught by the current.

It's fun being pushed along at a great rate of knots — I can't swim against it so I go with the flow.

Holding my camera out steadily in front it is a real buzz whooshing through schools of fish that part for you as if by communal agreement.

This is way cooler than fun-park rides.

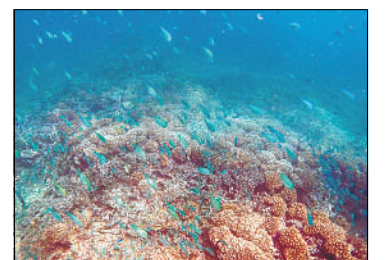
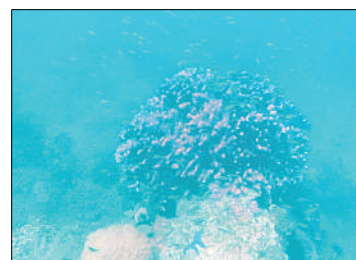
Lifting my mask I can see the boats up ahead and groups of snorkelers holding on to a trailing rope to make for the boat's ladder in an orderly manner.

Once everyone is back on board the boat cruises back to the head of the channel so we can try again.

Remember, don't chase the mantas comes the order. Okay, everyone nods, before disappearing over the side again.

This time we are lucky, well sort of, as a manta ray is heading our way. It could be 2m across and looks magical.

All of a sudden my vision — and my GoPro camera lens — is filled with bubbles, flailing legs, flapping arms and even more



bubbles. The manta powers away and I watch it disappear into a forest of fins.

I cannot repeat what I said through my snorkel, although I'm certain everyone around me knew I was not best pleased with their antics that went directly against instructions and shortened our experience through what I can only describe

as selfish idiocy.

A bit later our media party went out again to try to find mantas without hordes of flipping fools but the graceful manta had decided enough was enough and was long gone.

It looks likely there will be limits set in the future about how many people can see the mantas at one time and that is a

good thing for both the snorkelers and the creatures themselves.

Despite that could I recommend time in the water with them — absolutely.

■ *Richard Moore was in Fiji courtesy of Barefoot Manta Resort, Awesome Adventures Fiji and Vinaka Fiji.*