

Manatees with Mustard

Close encounters with these gentle giants, with Alex Mustard



Is this a Mermaid? (Alex Mustard)



Up close and personal (Alex Mustard)



Young manatee (Alex Mustard)

“There is no need for stealth. The manatees will seek you out. Life for a manatee is an itchy business, and there is nothing the young and old seem to like more than a good old scratch. In Crystal River they know just where to get one: from you! The youngsters, hyperactive in slow moving manatee terms, supercharged on mother’s rich milk, are usually the most playful and keenest on a good scratch. They will swim right up to you, turn on their side or back and rub their flippers on their bellies, leaving you in little doubt as to what is required. Give a manatee a good scratch and it may bond with you all morning, returning to you again and again for some attention.”

Friday 5th February – Thursday 11th February 2010 (7 days)

Leader: Dr Alex Mustard

Group size limit: 10 divers plus leader

Friday 4th February – Thursday 10th February 2011 (7 days)

Leader: Dr Alex Mustard

Group size limit: 10 divers plus leader

Mist hangs over the dark waters as the first rays of warming sunlight seep through the trees and across the Three Sisters spring at Crystal River. It is dawn and we will be there right on time. In Florida, the early photographer catches the manatee!

Crystal River in west-central Florida, about 3 hours drive from Orlando, is the winter home of the largest concentration of West Indian Manatees, or Sea Cows, in North America. Each year hundreds of these marine mammals migrate from the Gulf of Mexico up into Florida’s Crystal River to spend the period November to March in the warmth of its freshwater springs, which in winter are warmer than either the Gulf itself or the main rivers, so keeping them toasty while they sleep. Particularly when cold fronts from the north pass over Florida, the springs fill up like dormitories each night and as we arrive early we can expect quite a reception.

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Manatees always look smaller than they really are in photographs. Adults average 3 to 3.5 metres in length and weigh in at 500 kilograms! Males and females are similar in size and appearance. Their plump, grey-brown, finely wrinkled bodies have a sparse covering of short hair, while the bodies often show scars and even have attached barnacles. With their bristly moustaches there is little doubt that they possess a certain appeal, but it is difficult to understand how sailors in the past mistook these inelegant creatures for mermaids – perhaps liberal doses of rum and long deprivation of female company enhanced their imaginations!

The manatees are a popular tourist attraction in Florida and seeing them is not a challenge. However, the regular tour boats do not provide the suitable

conditions for photography. Generally the boats arrive at the springs too late in the day for the best light and manatee activity. Also they tend to be filled with people without wetsuits, who get cold and, having ‘ticked off’ the manatees quickly, want to leave after only half an hour. On this trip we will have our own very spacious boat dedicated to giving us the encounters we crave. We have hired the biggest boat available for our sole use, with the best operation, so there will be plenty of room for everyone and plenty of room for your equipment too. Time usually rewards us with the chance to photograph a variety of natural behaviours.

Our trip includes four days with the manatees at Crystal River, with boat trips each morning and some afternoons. On two afternoons, we will leave Crystal River and travel to Rainbow River, which is one of the clearest springs in the area and a real haven for wildlife. This beautiful river does not contain any manatees, but is a great location to photograph much of Florida’s native aquatic wildlife, including several species of freshwater turtles, Sunfish (not to be confused with Ocean Sunfish *Mola mola*) and the prehistoric-looking Longnose Garpike. It is also a very beautiful, shallow water, wide-angle site. Rainbow River can be enjoyed both as a snorkeler and as a scuba diver, but all manatee encounters will be snorkeling only.

This trip is suitable for both certified divers and non-divers. The trip is also highly suitable for terrestrial wildlife photographers keen to expand their

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Crystal River, above and below (Alex Mustard)



West Indian Manatees hang in the clear water (Alex Mustard)

portfolio with some underwater images. Underwater housing rental for your DSLR can be arranged (with prior notice) in Florida.

Florida early on a winter morning is not hot, though the sun does usually shine! Bring warm clothes and at least a 5mm wetsuit for the springs; we will be in the water for a long time. If you plan to extend your trip, consider extending after the manatee section because the typical jetlag from the UK/Europe is ideal for making it easy to get up for the dawn photography sessions! Florida's wetlands are a fantastic wildlife haven so it is also worth bringing a telephoto lens to photograph the abundant birdlife.

Photographically, this is mostly a wide-angle trip. The best all-round lens for the manatees is a fisheye zoom, such as the Tokina 10-17mm. The manatees can be photographed either with or without strobes. Alex will be happy to advise you on underwater photography throughout.

Our accommodation at Crystal River will be at a comfortable hotel set in extensive grounds and situated on the Crystal River itself. The hotel has a spa, golf course and tennis courts along with an outdoor swimming pool (just in case you haven't had enough time in water!).

Meals are not included in the package but Alex has already done his homework and located some great restaurants. As we have the use of a minibus for the full period of the trip, Alex will be chauffeuring you

to a selection of his favourite dining establishments!

OUTLINE ITINERARY

(for 2010; dates in 2011 are 4th-10th February)

Friday 5th February: British Airways morning flight from London Gatwick bound for Orlando, arriving in the afternoon. Road transfer (around 3 hours) to Crystal River for a 5 nights stay.

Saturday 6th February: Early morning snorkel with the manatees and, after a break for lunch, an afternoon session finishing around 1630. Time to wash and brush up before heading out to dinner.

Sunday 7th February: Early morning snorkel with the manatees. Afternoon trip to Rainbow River for snorkeling/diving.

Monday 8th February: Early morning snorkel with the manatees. Afternoon trip to Rainbow River for snorkeling/diving.

Tuesday 9th February: A last morning 'date' with the manatees, followed by either another afternoon session or a trip around the waterways.

Wednesday 10th February: Morning at leisure and your last chance for an 'American breakfast'. Dry your gear and enjoy lunch before the road transfer to Orlando for the evening flight bound for London Gatwick.

Thursday 11th February: Morning arrival at London Gatwick.

£695 Orlando/Orlando in 2010

£730 Orlando/Orlando in 2011 (provisional price, to be confirmed)

Includes:

- Airport/hotel transfers by minibus

between Orlando Airport and Crystal River.

- 5 nights room-only accommodation on a twin/share basis at Plantation Inn, Crystal River.
- 6 manatee snorkeling trips at Crystal River.
- 2 diving or snorkeling trips at Rainbow River
- Services of Alex Mustard as leader.

Single Occupancy Supplement:

£202. Please note that, while we will endeavour to find a room-mate for those on the tour who are single travellers and would prefer to share accommodation, in the event of a room-mate not being available the

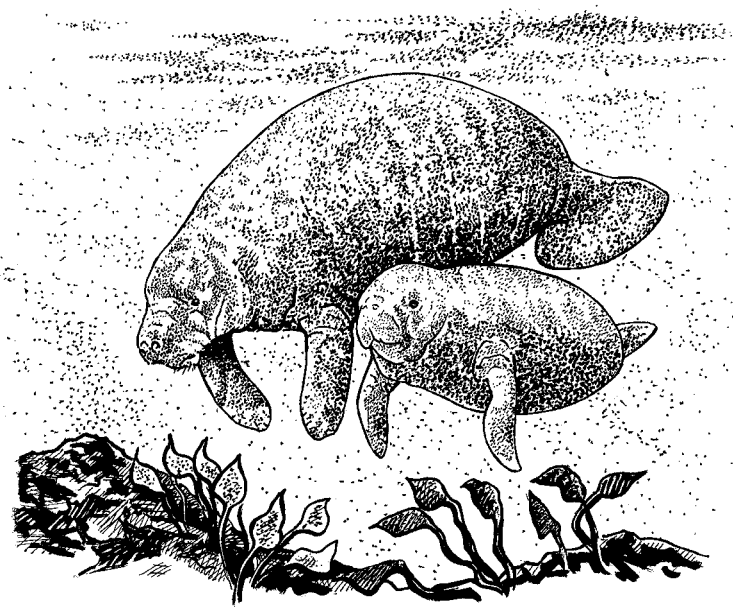
single occupancy supplement will apply. Room-mates will be allocated on a first-come first-served basis.

Deposit: £250 (for Orlando/Orlando arrangements)

Flights: From about £430 to Orlando.

HOLIDAY COMBINATIONS AND ADDITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS:

What a great chance to enjoy Florida's winter sunshine! Participants may wish to extend their stay and explore Florida's other attractions. Or you could combine the manatees with a Caribbean dive holiday. Talk to us about the possibilities.



West Indian Manatees, mother and calf (Dafila Scott)