



How could anyone mistake this for a mermaid? Well, it takes several months at sea and a vivid imagination.

© SeaPics.com

UNDERWATER ADVENTURE...

Swimming with manatees

There are unexpected perils when you dive into the water with a bunch of large aquatic mammals – you can't stop laughing. **Sanjida O'Connell** dons her snorkel to get a clearer view of the Florida manatees.

IN YEARS GONE BY, sailors believed that manatees were mermaids. All I can say is that, after months of eating only ships' biscuits and staring at the sea, their brains must have become addled. These 'mermaids' grow to three metres long and weigh a blubbery tonne, so how anyone could have confused them with women – albeit women with a fish's tail – beats me. Manatees are from the order Sirenia (Greek for sea cow) which is a little more accurate because these enormous vegetarians generally

bumble about in shallow seas slurping little else but seagrass.

Seeing manatees today is as surreal as it was for the sex-starved sailors, but in a somewhat different way. The species I saw, the Florida manatee (a subspecies of the West Indian manatee) lives in the warmish waters of Florida, floating serenely by the tasteless retirement homes crammed along the Crystal River, each house accessorised with speed boats and jet skis.

We took a short boat ride with one of the directors of American

Pro Diving, Sean Bradley, and hopped into the water with our snorkels at the Three Sisters Spring. We swam up a narrow channel, which opened out into a large clear pool. The first manatee I saw made my heart leap it was so huge, and as Sean said, was "proof that not all vegetarians are skinny." Within minutes a calf came over to us – less than a year old but already weighing two thirds of a tonne.

Though there are strict dos and don'ts about swimming with manatees (see 'Manatee Ethics',

right), you are allowed to tickle them under the armpits. I had a go, and the calf's tiny eyes rolled back in what I took for manatee-bliss. It then hugged my arms tightly with its flippers and started sucking my hand with its whiskery little muzzle. Fortunately, laughing insanely into my snorkel didn't result in me choking to death.

Monty Halls, marine biologist and presenter of *Great Ocean Adventures* (see TV review, pxx) nearly had his mask slurped off by the calf – it was certainly the first time I have ever seen an ex-marine reduced to a gooey wreck by the marine equivalent of an overgrown puppy. When we'd stopped fighting for the animal's attention, I realised that the pool was packed with 40 manatees,

THE INFORMATION

FLORIDA AND THE CRYSTAL RIVER Everything you need to know to plan your own snorkelling with manatees trip.

most sleeping on the sea floor; I had blithely swum over them thinking they were rocks.

What brought home to me how special these encounters are was a trip to King's Spring. Here, much of the river is cordoned off to humans. A mother and calf swam over to us, but when they drifted back into the sanctuary, we were unable to follow. Nevertheless, they came back to us, even though they had the whole river to swim in. Clearly, the manatees are more than tickled by their primate encounters.

SEA COWS IN TROUBLE

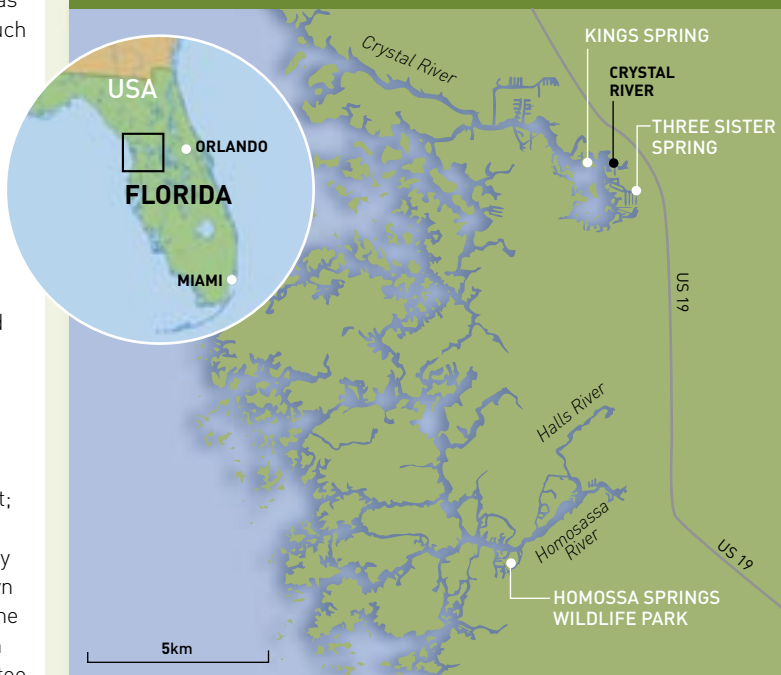
Manatees are regarded as 'vulnerable' by the IUCN. They were once hunted for their meat; the flesh was called *bucca* in South America and was eaten by pirates, who thus became known as buccaneers. Hunting led to the extinction of Steller's sea cow in 1768, and today, all three manatee species, as well as their relative the dugong, are under threat from habitat destruction and are vulnerable to death or severe injury if they are hit by a boat.

In Florida, manatees are flourishing – their numbers may even have reached 5,000 – but Sean believes this is no reason to be complacent. "Without the same restrictions we have now and without the national parks, we'd quickly end up back in the same situation where manatees were in danger of extinction," he said. Since in this one area of Florida alone, Crystal River, there have been 20,000 applications for new boat licenses, we would do well to be cautious.



Sanjida O'Connell is a tv presenter and journalist and enjoys travelling to places where the sun is sure to shine and pina colodas sure to flow.

THE NAVIGATOR



LOCATION Three Sisters and Kings Spring and the Crystal and Homosassa Rivers are all found in Citrus County in the north-western part of peninsula Florida. It's an area of extensive wetlands with plenty of aquatic life, including alligators.

MANATEE FACTFILE

- An average adult grows to 3m and weighs a tonne. They need to eat more than 45kg of food a day.
- A manatee's brain is the size of a tennis ball and possesses little of the 'folds' associated with higher intelligence in mammals.
- Its lungs go round the heart and extend back over the stomach and liver, stretching almost as far as the anus.
- A manatee normally surfaces to breathe every 3-5 minutes, but it can stay submerged for up to 20 minutes.
- When resting, a manatee's heartbeat slows to once every 10-15 minutes.
- A manatee can live for up to 60 years.



The crystal-clear water of Three Sisters Spring are an ideal place to go swimming with manatees. © Seapics.com

NOW YOU DO IT

CONTACTS

American Pro Diving Center runs snorkelling with manatees in the Crystal River. ☎ 001 352 563 0041; www.americanprodiving.com

Wildlife Worldwide also runs tours. ☎ 0845 130 6982; www.wildlifeworldwide.com

WHEN TO GO

Either late spring or early autumn are warm but not too warm, but you can go at any time of year. Most of the manatees migrate out of the Crystal River in the summer, but about 75 remain.

OTHER THING TO DO

Visit the **Rainbow River**. American Pro Diving drop you and your snorkel off upstream and you coast downstream with the current, watching snapping turtles and 1.5m leopard-spotted garfish.

Homosassa Springs Wildlife Park has an underwater observatory where you can see manatees. ☎ 001 850 245 2157; www.floridastateparks.org/homosassasprings

MANATEE ETHICS

DO...

- Interact passively with manatees – allow them to come to you.
- Leave them alone if they are feeding or sleeping.
- Scratch them on one side and use one hand only to give them an escape route.
- Stay out of manatee sanctuaries (cordoned off by ropes and buoys).
- Observe speed restrictions in a boat and stop if you see a manatee – hitting one with the bow could result in death due to internal haemorrhaging.

DON'T...

- Hug a manatee, no matter how tempting it is. Only touch one if you are supervised.
- Dive underneath them.
- Touch their sensitive muzzles or tails.
- Use flash photography or go scuba diving with them – both of these can frighten manatees.