

Cuddly creatures from the green lagoon

By YVETTE CARDOZO

Nothing can quite prepare you for the initial close-up glimpse of a manatee, a thousand wrinkled pounds of ballooned blubber capped by a bulbous, whiskered face.

The water was thick with silt and swimming through it was like flying through a fog. The green soup went on unbroken for yards, smothering rocks and weeds alike.

Off to the right a lighter blob slowly took shape. A reflection? A patch of sand against the rock? No. The blob grew a partner, then two, then six. They hovered over the bottom, motionless, like half a dozen Goodyear blimps with tails.

Two sank to the sand, kneading the grass with elastic, probing snouts. Abruptly, a gray mass loomed close, then rolled, presenting a soft, smooth stomach. There was no subtlety to that demand for a tummy rub.

Nothing can quite prepare you for the initial close-up glimpse of a manatee, a thousand wrinkled pounds of ballooned blubber capped by a bulbous, whiskered face.

Yet for all their size, sea cows are as gentle as the land cows for which they are nicknamed. They're shy, yet friendly. Curious, even playful. But it's hard to describe what it feels like to have some-

thing twice your length and six times your girth nuzzle you like a dog.

They seem to like it when someone hums into a snorkel. "Try the Star-Spangled Banner," one patriotic local suggested, murmuring off-key as he paddled into the murk of northwest Florida's Crystal River. Indeed, manatees are definitely no judges of good music. They'll always come if you hum, no matter how badly you do it.

The massive hulks in the water that morning were oval-shaped creatures with seal flippers up forward and flat, wide tails in the rear. Their faces were a blunt-nosed, crinkled, living cartoon. In all, they came off as a cross between a seal and a hippopotamus with a bristly five o'clock shadow.

None of them this day tried to drag its bulk onto land for some tasty weed, as they're known to do occasionally. They preferred to stay in the water. But every so often, a dark nose would break the surface and snort once, then suck in with a wheezing gasp before closing down nostril flaps and disappearing again.

LIKE MAN and the porpoise, manatees are warm-blooded mammals and seek the constant 70-degree waters of various springs around Florida from October through March. Cold water makes them susceptible to pneumonia. The rest of the year they live in rivers and coastal ocean waters, apparently doing as well in salt water as fresh.

The several dozen manatees (87 by count one day) which seek warmth in the spring-fed headwaters of Crystal River, 65 miles north of Tampa, have come to accept people along with the bream and aquatic weeds in their lagoon.

Like a formation of blimps, half a dozen manatees will undulate through the green mist in total union, making noises among themselves. There's one fellow with a split tail who's particularly fond of having his nose rubbed. If you don't catch on right away, he'll bump you until you get the idea.

As long as a person doesn't play rough, the manatees will allow him to swim in formation with them, maybe even let him rest a hand on one back. But riding is out. Try it and you'll learn how fast a manatee is capable of moving.

They don't seem particularly fond of bubbles made by Scuba gear, either. A person will have better luck approaching manatees if he sticks to snorkel.

Manatees go to several springs in Florida and can also be found hanging around the warm water discharge at coastal power plants but the most popular spot is Crystal River. And though a person is liable to find manatees here any time during winter, the best months are December and January, particularly just after a cold snap.

A person should go out very early in the morning during mid-week when the usual crush of divers is absent. You'll need mask, fins and a snorkel, a wet-suit (air temperatures will be in the 50s), and a low-powered boat.

Most people rent a 15-foot, flat-bottomed, aluminum fishing boat with six-horsepower engine. All of this equipment is available at one of the four dive shops in the town of Crystal River.

The best idea, said one shop owner, Charles Talley, "is to plan to stay two or three days. That way the animals get to know you. Then they'll really get friendly."

THE MANATEES' favorite spot appears to be just south of Banana Island at the south end of the

The best chance for seeing and swimming with manatees is at the spring-fed head waters of the Crystal River in the town of Crystal River, along Florida Route 19, 65 miles north of Tampa. Best time is mid-winter, especially after a cold snap.

Snorkel equipment or scuba gear, boats and advice on where to find the manatees are available at a number of shops in the area, among them: Talley's Pro Dive Shop, Port Paradise Inn, Crystal Lodge Diver Center and Plantation Inn.

large bay which runs along the town of Crystal River. Here the main spring feeds out of a huge, shallow sink, 75 feet across and 30 feet deep at the center.

The place teems with bream, which have grown so fearless they'll practically chew through a person's knuckles to get at any scraps of bread in hand. The bream feeding circus is a favorite of divers, who pack compressed bread balls in plastic bags just for this purpose.

If the manatees seem to take over like they own the place, it's because they probably do. It was manatees that European sailors saw as they rounded the Cape of Good Hope in the 15th Century. (Legend has it the sailors called them mermaids, which doesn't say a lot for their state of mind then.) It was manatees that 18th Century Danish explorers found — and ate — on islands near Alaska.

Once manatees swam in nearly every U.S. bay and coastal river from the Carolinas to Mexico. Today, nearly all of the nation's remaining manatees — an estimated 1,000 — live in mid-Florida waters. And that figure is half the nose count made five or six years ago.

THE PROBLEM, it seems, is man.

Most manatees are killed by power boats, said John Waldron, a ranger at Blue Spring State Park near Orlando where manatees also congregate. They like to swim just beneath the surface, sticking their hairy, wet noses up for air every so often. But their color blends in so well with the gray-green water, they're practically invisible.

Some people seem to think certain kinds of boat engines are less dangerous to manatees than others but Talley at Crystal River says no. If a boat has an engine and it's moving, it's a potential danger.

People at Crystal River and Blue Spring identify their favorite manatees by the propeller scars on their backs. Divers are warned to park their boats well outside the manatee gathering area.

Because of this problem, the manatees have become a focal point in an argument between powerboat owners and environmentalists.

Manatees are covered by both the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Fines up to \$20,000 are supposed to deter people from killing or molesting them. Late in 1979 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gained power to set up protection areas.

These are divided into sanctuaries, where both diving and boating are not allowed; and refuges, where specific activities (diving in some areas, boating in others) are not allowed.

Thus far, only the most strident of the environmentalists want to see a total end to diving with the manatees. Sport Diver magazine quoted Robert Prather of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as saying, "If divers are looking at manatees, we won't say a thing. If they're chasing them, we'll stop them. If they're grabbing manatees, we'll arrest them."

Right now, Crystal River is one of the few places in Florida where there is relatively clear water, a good number of manatees and no rules against swimming with them. Local divers agree it's not often man can pay freely with a water mammal on his own home ground. It remains to be seen, however, just who is making a pet of whom.



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travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones
contributing travel editor



Marshall is a nice winter's stop

Famous Last Words: "Let's take a 10-minute detour through Marshall."

I'm on Interstate 94 en route to Chicago with Doris Schafenberg of Farmington Hills. The land is snow white to the horizon, and the cars ahead disappear into a mist of snow.

It's only a five-hour drive to the Windy City, but we have enough food, drink and warm clothes to last us a week in an emergency, with sleeping bags and snow-mobile boots in the trunk for good measure.

Marshall was definitely not on our itinerary, but it is hard to resist its historic rooftops on such a day.

The snowy road leading from Exit 112 curves through barndores as we enter the gentle hills. Industrial buildings sootgreen to green and yellow and white clapboard houses, washed and white with snow.

DOWNTOWN, THE OLD storefronts make shaped windows carved rooftops against the winter sky. There are historic houses all over town, but most are near the great traffic circle which curves around the white handstand.

The National House Inn, Bed-and-Breakfast, makes a neat rectangle in the snow nearby. The National House, built 1835 and restored in 1976, is the oldest operating inn in Michigan. It was once a major stagecoach stop between Detroit and Chicago.

The Inn, set in a snow-frosted Williamsburg garden, has 15 guest rooms and a beautifully restored dining room for regular breakfasts and special luncheons. Rates are from \$30 might for two to \$60 for the Ketchum Suite.

There is good news/bad news this winter at the inn, which offers candlelit tours every second weekend through April 10. The good news is that the candle-lit tour package, \$160 a couple, includes room and board for the weekend, candle-lit tour of three 19th century houses, dinner at Win Schulers, and little extras such as a wine and cheese party and mulled wine by a roaring fire.

The bad news is that these packages are so popular that



The National House Inn, the oldest operating inn in Michigan, has winter weekend candle-lit tour packages that have proven so popular that they're booked through the season.

they are booked for this winter. Mark your calendar and reserve for next year.

MARSHALL IS NOT exactly a tourist town, although most Michiganders have explored its historic houses at one time or another, usually in summer. A winter visit is another matter.

Most of the historic houses are closed, but you can still eat at Win Schulers, take a warm side-trip to the inn and explore antique shops.

No photographer could resist a look of the town in winter, its 19th century houses capped and dripping elegantly with snow. It is a wonderful diversion on the way to Chicago, but remember those famous last words. It will take you a lot more than 10 minutes.

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