

Maldives *Sea Safari*

An indepth guide

Text and photography by Michael Aw





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Close up of sea anemone; jewel islands of the Maldives; three spot angelfish hovers over lush pink corals; luxury live-aboard dive boat; sea turtle swims through sun rays

One thousand and 192 islands, islets and sand cays string the 26 atolls of the Maldives; from the air they float like emerald necklaces flung upon a cobalt blue sea. Sitting right on the trade route of the early Arab merchants, the human history of these islands dates back some 15 centuries. The Maldives archipelago comprises of uncountable submerged reefs call thila in 'dhivehi'—the local language—stretching 760km north to south and 120km from east to west. This natural barrier of walls beneath the sea has evoked fear among even the most seasoned of seaman since time immemorial; for them, it is a place to be avoided—a place where careless ships go to die.

The islets with names such as Kuda Huraa, Maayafushi, Kurumba, Ihuru, Kanifinolhu, Nakatchafushi and Feshu are themselves exotic, magical, romantic, only limited to one's imagination of fantasy that may become reality. The atolls, each composed of uncountable submarine reefs and islets fringed with glistening white sand beaches.

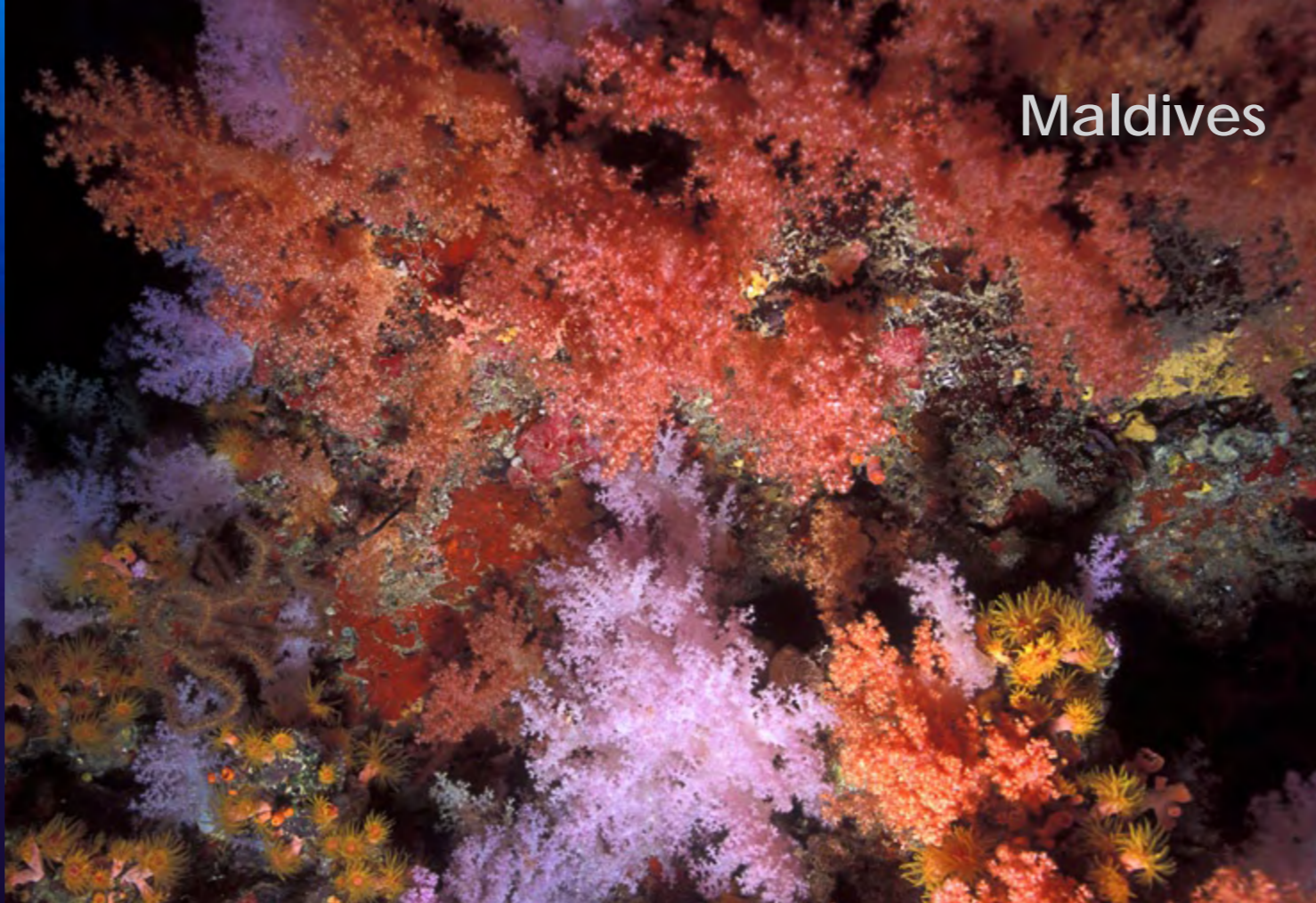
No other tropical isles or dream-like atolls rival these remarkable gems of the Indian Ocean. Some islands are adorned with lush foliage of coconut palms and banyan trees while others are just powdery white sand islets with waving palms.

Well-traveled writers describe the country as sexy, exotic and alluring; a setting for the romantic, the adventurer and the explorer—an expanse of sea, of open sky that canopies one of the richest celebrations of life beneath the seas.

For the intrepid diver, a live-aboard trip is the obvious option to explore the best dive sites of underwater Maldives. In 1996, for the Rainbow Sea project, I embarked upon my first live-aboard or safari as is commonly known in this country of infinite horizon. With friends, we started our sojourn from Male across to Rashdoo, Ari Atoll then back to, Felidhoo, South and North Male atolls onboard a replica of an 18th century galleon. For the entire expedition



PREVIOUS PAGE: Underwater photographer and school of bright yellow Blue-striped Snappers



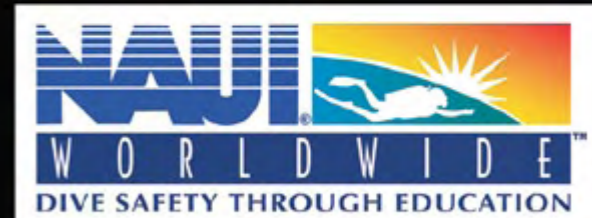
Maldives

6.5 billion people inhabit 30% of the planet's surface...

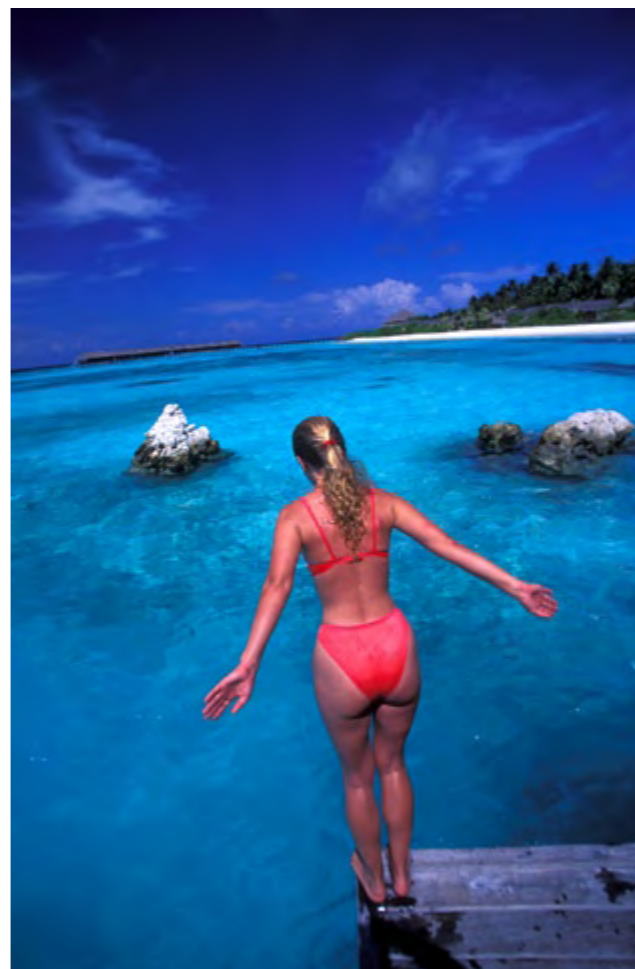


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we were blessed with mirror flat seas; we dived into a school of hammerheads, swam with two giganormous whale sharks, played with spinner dolphins, spent three hours with mantas, tunas—big tunas—turtles, napoleon wrasse, boisterous reef sharks, snappers and more snappers in uncountable numbers were sighted on almost every dive.

The highlight was, of course, the orcas that came alongside our boat one early dawn in South Male atoll, the first recorded sighting of a pod in the Maldives. Sightings over our 11-day expedition were extraordinary. Our experiences were the stories divers' dreams are made of.

Since then, I have been back for several more safaris on a few different boats to produce feature documentaries, videos or just a feature assignment for diving magazines. I was fortunate that all my safaris in the Maldives were productive, pleasant and memorable. However, I have had reports from many first timers that their trip was far short of expectation.

For us folks from the Asia Pacific, we must first understand that in the mainstream of

divers visiting the Maldives, the European rules. Apart from the Red Sea, the Maldives is their escape from the maddening crowds. Blue water, spectacular marine life and ease of diving have made the Maldives the Mecca for the European.

Supported by 95 dive resorts, and just about the same number of live-aboard dive vessels, there are options to suit every whim and fancy. Much like the resorts, standards on safari boats varies considerably. While the quality of diving may differ dramatically from atoll to atoll and island to island during the year, the standard and skills of the diving operations are varied suiting the type of clientele they service best. Obviously, choosing the 'right' live-aboard is an important issue, which may turn one's dream holiday into a nightmare. Careful planning is essential.

Though there are now quite a few that are locally owned and managed, the majority of safari boats have a definite European flavor, dedicated entirely to serving either the German, Italian, Swiss or French clientele. While some are relentlessly Western, others offer local Maldivian curry



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: An adorable little orange blenny, about the size of a green pea, peeps out of its hole; diver and huge Napoleon wrasse; vibrant pink, purple and yellow soft corals decorate the reefs of the Maldives; jumping into paradise from the pier



Beware, the Maldives is like eating M&Ms—addictive—once is never enough.

BELOW: Bigeye fish

Dive safari boats are particularly “photographer friendly”. They will dive the well-known sites at times when there are never any other divers around



solely for variation sake. Don't expect authenticity, quality varies from canned food or basic buffet to fine dining.

Many boats are small; cabins are at best toilet-sized cubicles, but there are always generous sun decks for those who insist on returning roasted.

Except for a few vessels that make the effort to market to the USA and Asia, the majority are dominated by client of one nationality—though this tends to be a result of marketing, rather than coincidence. As I mentioned earlier, book into one that is not your kind, and though mostly unintentional, discrimination can be obvious.

These days, the safari boats range from cattle class converted from fishing boats, locally built cruisers, to the

opulent class specially built live-aboards like that of the Four Season's *Island Explorer*. Expect to pay about USD 190 for an above average class boat; pick one of any less, and you will be likely to find yourself sharing space with a boat load of laid back European taxi drivers.

Remember, you will only get what you are paying for. Again, I emphasize generally the concept and style of service is predominantly European, with a laid back attitude amidst a relaxed atmosphere of sun, beer and sleep, and if the spirit moves, maybe one or two dives per day. If you are a die-hard diver, these are the boats to avoid.

However, if serious diving is of primary concern, a diving safari through the Maldives is definitely the way to go.

In the past few years, the number of boats offering extended trips around the atolls has increased exponentially. Luckily, there are now a few good ones dedicated to serve the serious divers. With careful planning and by asking the right questions before committing to one, you can be sure of a memorable safari adventure in the Maldives.

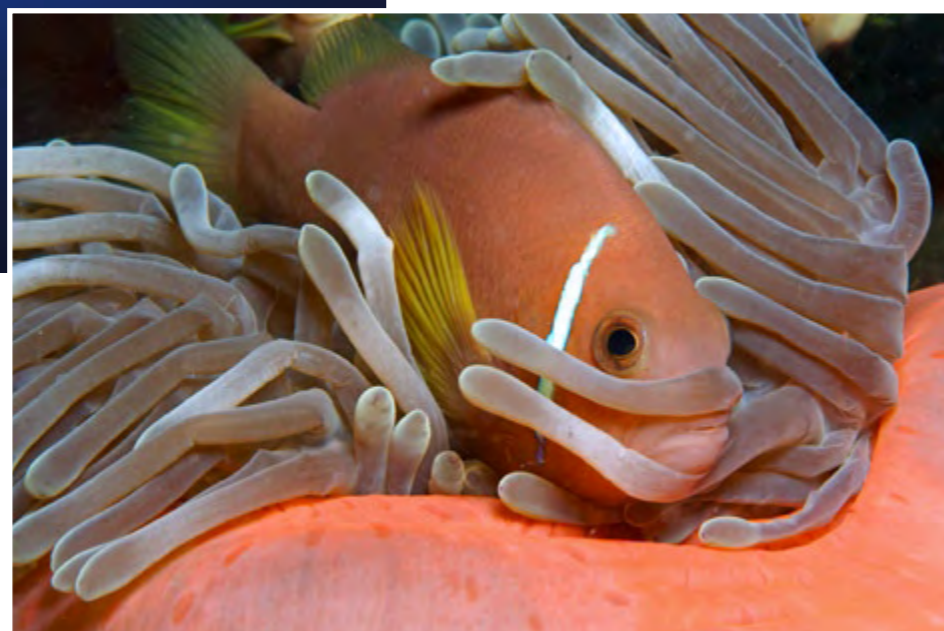
I have personally tested the *MV Guilla*, *Island Explorer 7*, *MV Sea Queen*, *Sea Spirit*, and *MV Manthiri* and find that they are most suitable for the enthusiastic divers. A Peter Hugh boat has just recently begun operation this season.

Life on board these boats are the typical cliché when talking about world class live-aboard diving—dive, eat,





CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Clown fish in anemone; Manta ray silhouette; coral reef garden with anthias; View of the Maldives from transport boat on arrival; Water planes are available for transfers



sleep, dive, eat, sleep... After the first dive is a hot breakfast, a quick 40 winks, a dive at about 11am, followed by lunch, a longer snooze, a dive at about 2:30 pm, followed by a snack, and if you feel up to it, a night dive before dinner and back to bed.

These vessels are neatly furnished, with the comfort of en-suites, individual control air conditioning, hot water, and offer everything from fine wine and palatable Western cuisine to Asian delights.

These boats are also particularly "photographer friendly" by diving the well-known sites at times when there are never any other divers around. I am also sure non-photog-

raphers appreciate not having to share the reef with "ferry" loads of divers from other boats and resorts.

Rinse tanks for cameras are sensibly positioned along side an outdoor shower. Work area and storage areas for cameras are lavish and one can choose to recharge batteries in the cabins or in the saloon. The better boats are now installed with a digital studio and some extend to

offer video and E6 processing service.

If you ever feel like indulging in the lifestyle of the rich and famous, book the Four Season's *Island Explorer*. The cabin of the vessel boasts hotel-sized rooms measuring 20 square meters

lavishly furnished with contemporary teak wood and complemented by soft furnishings of of subdued tones. All cabins are air-conditioned and feature twin beds (that can be converted to a king bed), couch, writing desk, mini bar, satellite TV, VCD and music system, telephone, in-cabin safe and en-suite bathroom with large bath tub/shower, and double vanity.

The elegant Explorer Suite boasts expansive panoramic windows, measures 45 square meters, featuring a king bed, daybed and indoor dining area. Of course, all these come with a price tag to match.

One unique approach that is common to all live-aboard boats in the Maldives is that the diving is always done off a traditionally-crafted dhoni boat, which follows the main vessel like a puppy dog.

Compressors, tanks and dive gear stay on the dhoni for the entire trip. They serve strictly as a dive platform, as well as a pick up boat. This is an excellent idea and a hard act to follow elsewhere; compressor noise is not exactly music neither to ears nor lullaby for that all-important snooze between dives.

Unless otherwise pre-arranged, most dive safaris begin and end at the airport. For those flying out in the evening, the afternoon may be an ideal chance to visit Male. Transfer by dhoni to Male, the country's Capital Island, from the airport costs US\$5 and is well worth a visit if you have a spare afternoon.





The myriad of life in every imaginable and unimaginable colour and form is signature of underwater Maldives rivaled nowhere else in intensity.

The bazaar of downtown Male offers souvenirs catering to every tourist's fancy and delight; hand painted T-shirts, fish designed playing cards, fish guides, cheap sculptures, postcards, coconut monkeys and silverware are all on bargain as long as the exchange is for Uncle Sam's dollars.

If you are arriving early for a safari trip, overnight stay at the airport hotel or one in Male may be required. Note: do not bring any duty free alcohol into the Maldives—it will be confiscated on arrival. You will not find a single bar or bottle shop in Male either. But don't despair, most safari boats are licensed to sell beers and fundamental liquor mixes.

To make the most of every diving day on a safari, it is a good idea to stay for a day or two in one of the resorts near Male to off gas as well as to practice the art of doing

nothing on one of the most idyllic islands on earth.

Insight into Safari Diving

Though many of the dive sites in the Maldives are suitable for inexperienced divers, raging and unpredictable down currents have through the years been responsible for many diving accidents.

A safety sausage with an 8m line attached to the opening should be a mandatory accessory for all divers. Especially diving in area known for boat traffic, you should first deploy the safety sausage 5m from the surface. This will warn boaters of the presence of divers in the water, as well as attract the attention of the pick up boat.

With the exception of a few sites, most of the diving in the Maldives is drift dives that

can be classified into two groups: dives outside the atoll and dives inside the atoll.

Dives outside the atolls are generally done during an outgoing current, where visibility is better than inside the atoll. Typical terrain is a steep slope that goes down in steps or a wall that plunges into dark abyssal depths. These are the sites for great pelagics, hammerheads, eagle rays and whale sharks. Stick close to the reef unless you wish to hitch a ride to Burma or Africa—both are a long way away.

Dives inside the atoll are on the inner reef and submerged reefs dives. Generally, they are safe and easy diving for all levels, especially when they are not in the vicinity of a channel and are dived with an incoming current. Reef fishes in

unbelievable abundance are predictable at these sites and as most are territorial species, familiar faces are found in each place year after year unless otherwise exploited by selfish and bad human beings.

Diving in the channels are high-pressure

dives. The ocean flushes into the atoll and out again through these channels. Like a great plumbing system, each incoming tide brings clean, nutrient rich water while outgoing tides wash out the dirty water. Obviously, the best time to dive these

channels is during incoming tide when visibility is at the optimum to watch pelagics, tunas, jacks and sharks hanging out to feed at the mouth of the channels.

The best staging area to watch the show is close to the reef but away from the mouth of the channel at a 20–30m depth. If caught in the incoming current too soon, especially in shallower depths, you will miss the show entirely but the ride is guaranteed to give the adrenaline a work out.

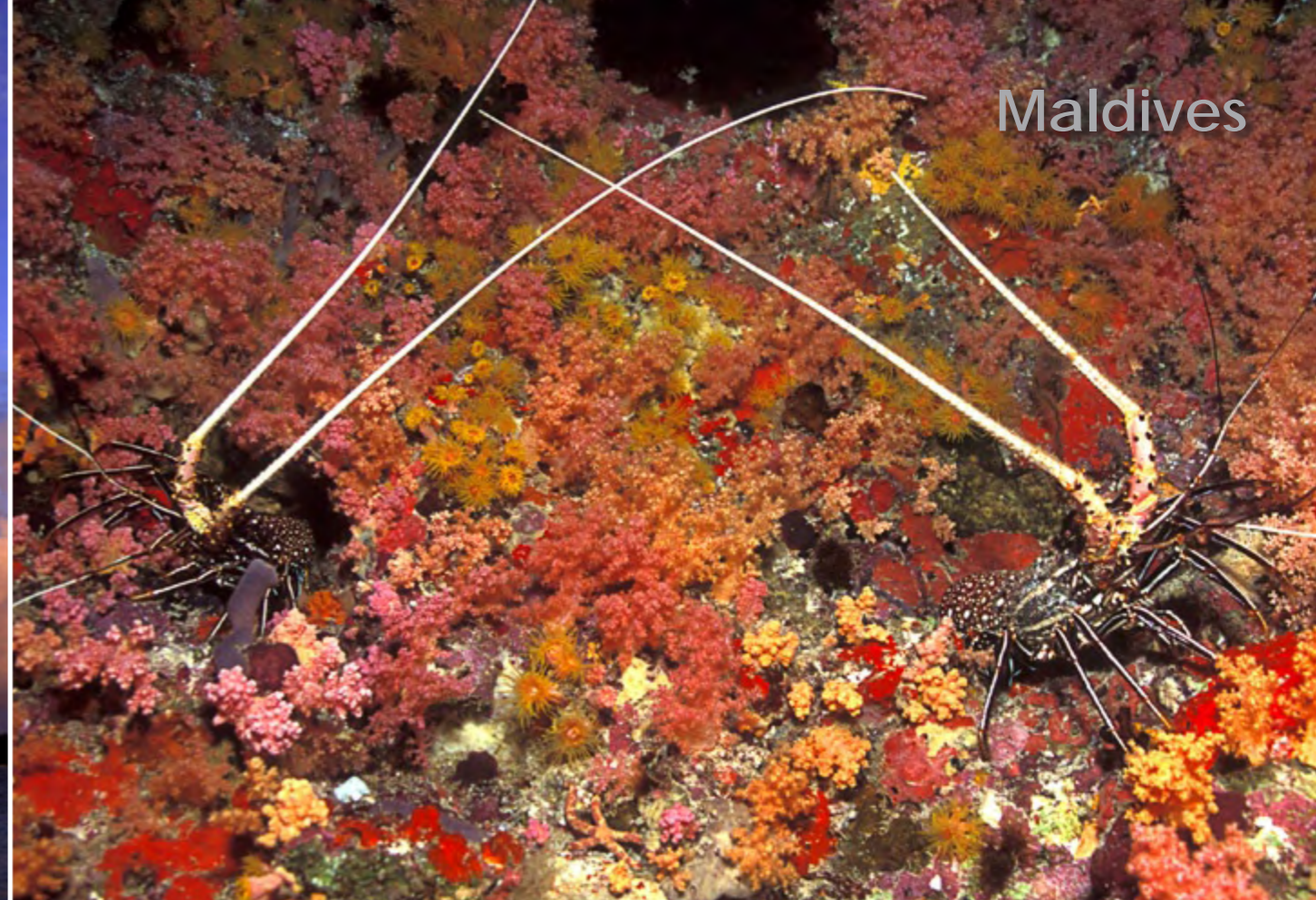
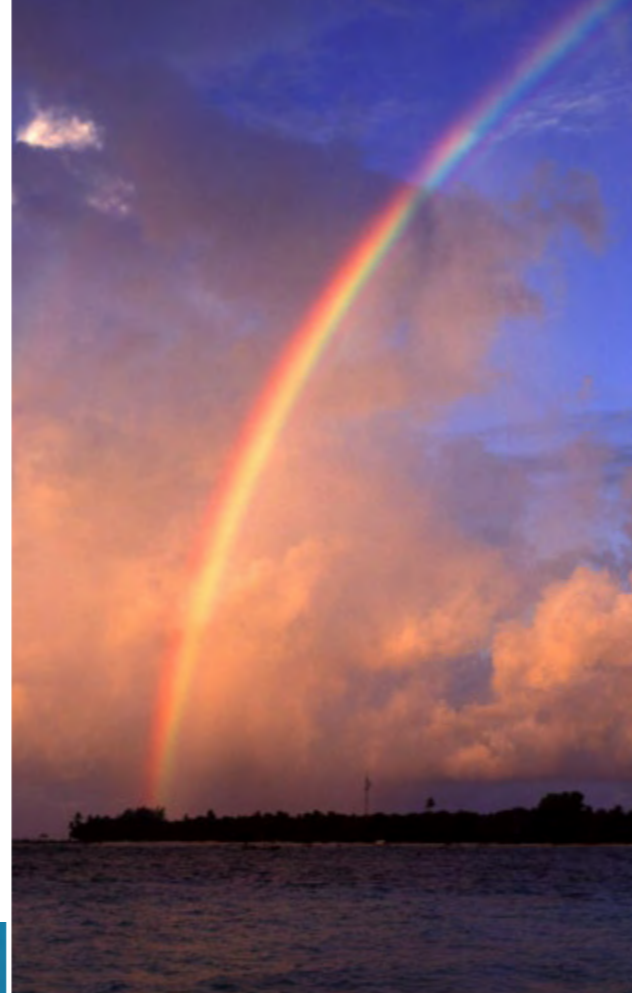
The currents in the Maldives defy even the most experienced oceanographer. The theory of the 'seven and a quarter hour' tidal change cannot be used to predict the time for slack water and change of

Rainbows above the sea rival rainbow reefs below the waves; Lobsters guard their vibrantly coloured territories; BELOW: Two remora fish catch an easy ride on the underside of a Manta

current direction.

On one of my trips, a Maldivian divemaster predicted incoming tides for all the three channel dives within a ten-hour period for the next day of diving. A law professor challenged the briefing. His ego was reduced to a smitten the next day after the third dive. There is a moral somewhere in this story—listen to your divemaster, especially if he is Maldivian. Inside the atolls, water often runs in or out long after the tide has turned. Precise and long term data on tidal ranges, flows and patterns are non-existent in the Maldives.

Beware, the Maldives is like eating M&Ms—addictive—once is never enough. The myriad of life in every



Maldives



imaginable and unimaginable colour and form is signature of underwater Maldives rivaled nowhere else in intensity. If I had to choose three words to describe the diving in Maldives, they would be "predictably great" and "abundance".

Underwater Maldives is remarkably different from the surface—a metropolis of never ending reefs composed of ridges, mountains, valleys, and fjords, columns and chasms extending right out to the edge of the atolls. Outer atoll slopes or walls plummet steeply to oceanic mountains, and the mountains themselves drop to abyssal depths of 2km and beyond.

Because the Maldives sit in the middle of the Indian Ocean, great migratory currents flow through the atolls, leaving behind rich plankton to procreate. Like an oasis in a desert sea, pelagics often drop in to check out the local scene. Hammerheads, whalesharks, tunas and Oceanic white tips are frequent visitors.

Tidal currents flushing through the channels brings a constant food source into the atolls, sustaining spectacular soft coral growth, which in turn supports

a realm of reef fishes in extraordinary abundance. I call the Maldives the fish pond of the Indian Ocean. Since 1996, I have made at least one yearly pilgrimage to the Maldives, and I will not hesitate a second time each year.

Once DIVE, a UK-based dive magazine, asked me to name the top ten dive sites in the Maldives. It was a huge task! After much deliberation, I chose ten sites that I will religiously turn to each year, as I can predictably say that I will find mantas, huge Napoleon wrasse, sharks, sea turtles, lush soft corals at these sites, and where I am not sure of the number of whale sharks have swam right pass me when my focus was on shooting an orange blenny the size of a green pea!

Top 10

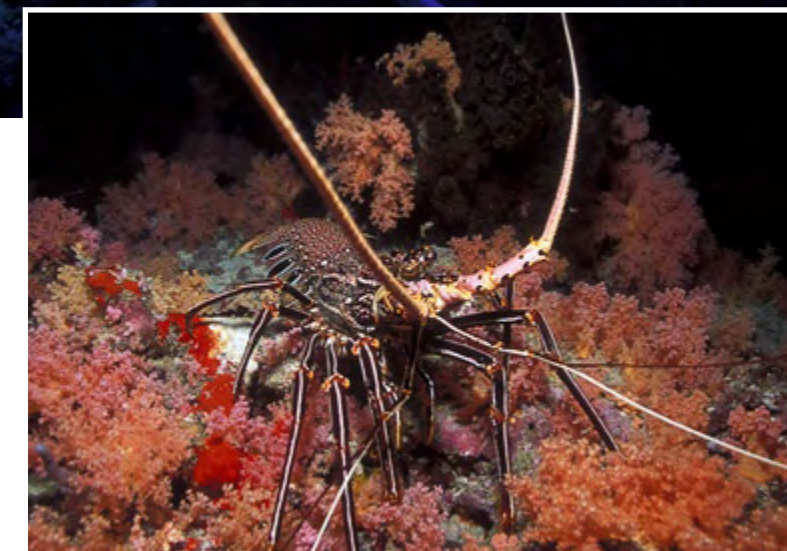
Following are ten dive sites not to be missed on a Maldives Safari trip.

Rainbow Reef or HP Reef

North Male Atoll. Nearest Resort: Maldives Four Seasons at Kuda Huraa. My assumption is that HP is short for 'high power' as the dive has a lot to do with

the name. Because of the profusion of multi-coloured reef life on this reef, it is also commonly known as the Rainbow Reef. Between the tides, an enormous flow of water oozes through this thila. Jacks, Blue striped (*Lutjanus kasmira*) snapper, groupers and fusiliers indulge in a sea of nutrients. Lurking amidst the corridors of a luxuriant coverage of iridescent corals are red coral groupers, giant cods, Napoleon wrasse, and scorpionfish. Eagle rays are often seen soaring majestically near the surface, undeterred by swift moving water. This is one of my favorite dives in the world!

With swift currents, the substrate on the reef top is typical of such environs, hard corals abound with anthias frolicking among stumps of green coral trees. From 15m to 25m, carpets of red, yellow, iridescent purple soft corals, orange sponges and cup corals cover the outcrops and overhangs, from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling. The plethora of soft corals in purple, yellow, orange, pink, red, white and blue explodes like paint splash over three enormous coral heads and overhangs. With such a profusion of corals



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lobster; Schools of barracudas and jacks are predictably found between coral heads; Divers inspect lush overhangs laden with coral; Diver finds a group of Oriental Sweetlips hovering in a cave

OKOBE Thila

North Male Atoll.
Nearest Resort: Bandos
This site comprises of three coral heads, the largest—an ox-bow shape—is 265 ft (80m) in length, separated from the two smaller mounts by a 100ft(30m) wide and 80ft (25m) deep canyon. A family of three Napoleon Wrasses are

resident on this reef. Apparently, German divers seeking soul mates in a most unlikely place befriended this family by feeding them hard-boiled eggs. The feeding of any marine animal has since been banned by the authorities, but these gregarious fish still see terra firma beings as a source of a free hand out. They are known to follow divers for an entire dive. To get them close, really close, just hold out your hand and wave secretly with cupped hand before hiding it again. We were contented to once again

realise that animals of the ocean have indeed a memory, and are capable of responding and playing just like any of us. If left alone, these fish live up to 50 years in the wild.

A cavern beneath the most easterly coral head is home to a resident group of 20 or so Oriental Sweetlips. Schools of barracudas, batfish, surgeonfishes and jacks are predictably found hovering between coral heads. The flow of nutrients feeds the reef; green tubastrae coral branch out among outcrops of luscious soft coral highlighted with tapestries of orange, purple and green Anthias fish, covering the walls of the canyon in entirety. Not all dives at Okobe Thila are great—some are only good.

Rasdho — Madivaru Corner

North Ari Atoll. Nearest Resort: Kuramathi
This site has its fame amongst seasoned

divers of the Maldives.

Just before the sunrise, schooling hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*) emerge from the depths to this corner on queue each morning. Chances of seeing them are good, but without daylight, it makes publishable images tough. They are known to turn up in big numbers. Big Dog-tooth tunas (*Gymnosarda unicolor*) and Dolphinfish (*Crayphaena hippurus*) also lurk at the reef edge together with schools of black snapper to feed in the morning current. There are many other Hammerhead points in the Maldives, but Rasdho is the most well known.

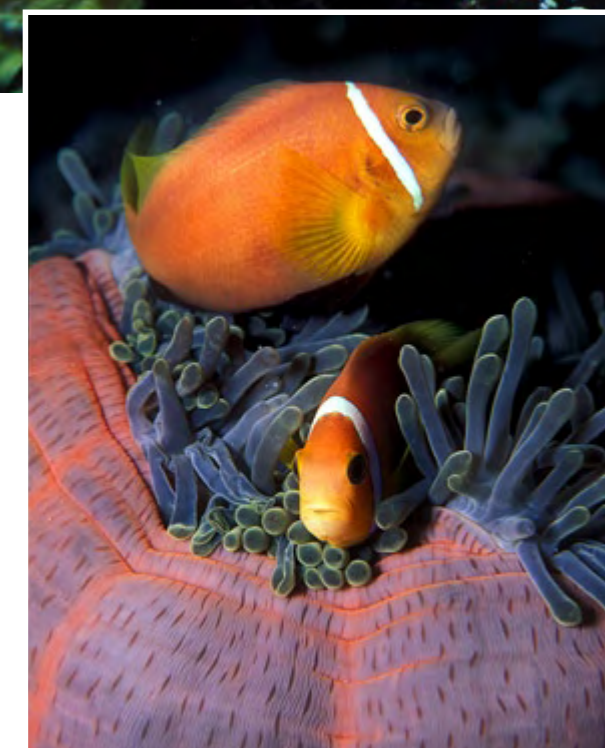


Nassimo Thila

North Male Atoll. Nearest Resort: Paradise
The main attraction of this thila is the series of large pinnacles scattered just off the reef on the northeastern side. Purple and yellow soft corals like marshmallows cover the surface and overhangs in entirety. Napoleon Wrasse and jacks are frequently found swimming in unison among corridors full of Squirrelfishes and Orange Fairy

in kaleidoscopic colours, Rainbow Reef is aptly named.

However, it is after dark that the reef really shows its true colours; the orange and yellow tubastrae blooms along side plethora of soft corals in every conceivable colour with their tentacles outstretched to feed in the night current. While parrotfishes sleep, the nocturnal morays are seen on the prowl for an unwary fish or lobster. If I were to do one last dive in the Maldives, it would be a night dive on Rainbow Reef.



Scorpionfish are found in abundance. Nassimo Thila is another one of the best dive sites in the Maldives. Drop me there any day, I may just find my camera.

Guraidhoo Kanduu & Embudhoo Express

South Male Atoll. Nearest Resorts: Fun Island, Kandooma and Embudhoo Village. With 4-6 knot current conditions, these sites are for experienced divers only. Beware, the current boils on the surface on both channels. Must be dived during incoming current to see the pelagics.

Embudhoo Express and Guraidhoo Kanduu are easily the most exhilarating dives in the Maldives in terms of pure adrenaline rush. Both dives are a challenging experience, testing skills in current conditions to the extreme, but the reward is some of the best

pelagic action in the sea. The staging area is outside the atoll. Drop into the reef slope to about 25m and head towards the mouth of the channel cautiously. Believe me, you will know when you get there. Best viewing area: hang out at about 28m and watch the greatest show on Earth.

Flocks of eagle rays soar like Stealth bombers, grey and white tip sharks in uncountable numbers whiz back and forth the entrance while jacks, tunas, rainbow runners and fusiliers engage in a chaotic melee right in front of you. Look out for a couple of large tame Napoleons, they are so to speak local identities at the site—familiar faces that you can look upon for comfort when the going gets tough. Masks are known to have flown.

Once bored with the show or when air is down to 100 bars, take off for a ride of your life. Embudhoo Express

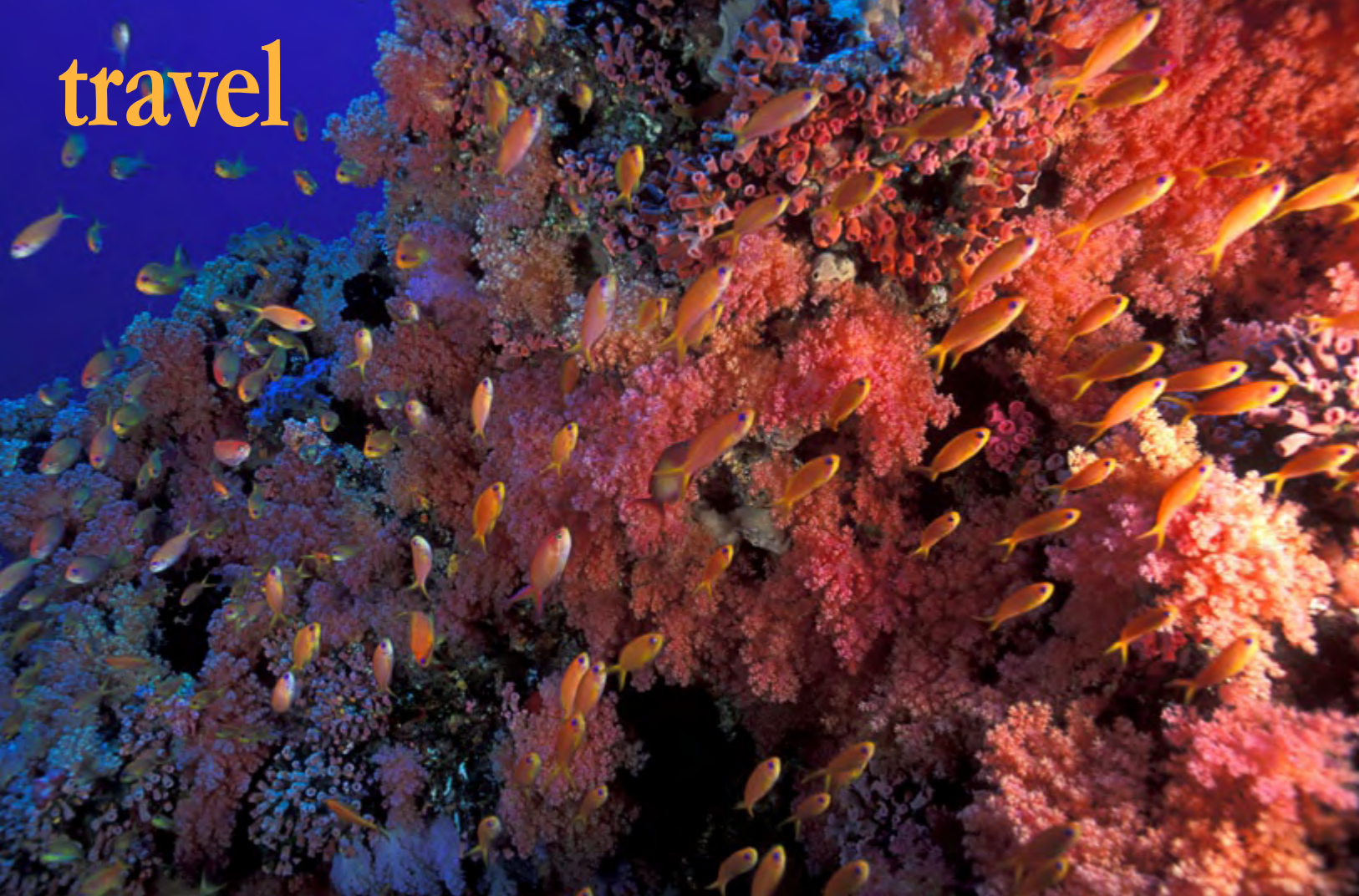
offers a swift 2km ride into the channel in 3-4 knot current. Guraidhoo offers more of a roller coaster ride; a whirlpool effect cause by numerous overhangs tends to drag divers up and down during the journey into the atoll—stay close to the reef at all times.

Kuda Giri

South Male Atoll. Nearest Resort: Palm Tree Island This is an excellent dive site for both day and night dives. Situated on the leeward side of a large reef, there is little current. This coral head is almost perfectly round with a vertical wall reaching a depth of 30m. Kuda Giri is one of my personal favorites for many reasons; there are a few swim through caves between 10-15m with their entire wall covered with yellowed sponges, soft corals, oyster



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clownfish guard their anemone home; hard corals decorate the reef; underwater photographer visits with Manta ray; beautiful bouquets of white, orange and yellow soft corals dangle from an overhang



LEFT: Neon orange Anthias are abundant on the coral reefs
BELOW: Bright yellow, red, pink and orange soft coral display

abundance on this reef is incredible. The thila is about 80 meters in diameter and can be easily circumnavigated in one dive—that is if you can resist other distractions.

The top of the reef starts at six meters, sloping to 12m, before dropping to beyond 30m. Caves, overhangs and ledges are found all along the reef wall. Though solidly built, Grey Reef sharks are common, but it is the number of White-tip sharks that are impressive. They are everywhere.

Millions of anchovies disperse and regroup to form a variation of shapes stealing the show from the Grey sharks and their companions, the Rainbow Runners.

While schools of Snappers and Batfish hover beneath coral trees, lone Great Barracudas play havoc with the fusiliers. Blue-faced angelfish, Clown triggerfish, Blue triggerfish, Dog-tooth tuna, Hawksbill turtles, jacks, moray eels, stonefish, and Anglerfish are all part of the ensemble that make this reef one of the greatest in the Maldives.

The best action is always found on the side that faces into the currents. Beg on your knees to do a night dive on this reef—it is a highlight of anyone's diving career.

In terms of action, Maaya Thila is dramatic after dark. Sharks seem to zoom in from every direction. Their sense of urgency and hungry

search for prey is felt in wave after wave of electrifying melee. Even the bold divers are on guard.

Moray eels are seen leaving their holes to search for unsuspecting prey. Octopuses are sighted in ambush position for a shellfish in passing. Marble Rays appear out of the dark to sweep on sand patches for shellfishes, bloating up occasionally when they land on an ill-fated prey.

I was so impressed with Maaya Thila that I have selected the site to be the location for my first feature documentary—a 24-hour documentation about life on a coral reef system. Maaya Thila is a marine protected area.

shells and are home to numerous Big-eyed soldier fish. Some of most photogenic clownfish I have ever seen live at the mouth of these swim-throughs. Most of them are of the *Clarkii* species, but their choice of home (anemones with white tentacles), makes them look like playful ermines in snow. Beware, ill-tempered moray eels live among them.

Around the giri, groups of friendly batfish are predictably found hovering near the surface. Turtles, Nurse sharks and White-tips take refuge within the many caverns around the giri. If you like wrecks, there is a very well behaved steel wreck in perfect condition, sitting upright from 20 to 35m. Kuda Giri is an extremely productive site for underwater photographers.

Fotteyo
Felidhoo Atoll.
Nearest Resort: Alimathaa

Best dive during in-coming current; if caught in an outgoing, surface close to the outer reef. This dive is a real treat, regarded by many as the best in the Maldives. I have dived this site six times and have fought to absorb each impression. Immense has a whole new meaning.

Fotteyo has many possibilities; schooling jacks, tunas, sharks, turtles, Napoleon, snappers. But what make Fotteyo special is the series of caves between 25–40 m which are covered by some very unique soft corals not found in similar form or abundance any where else in the Maldives or in the world. The thick, lush soft yellow and purplish soft corals are overgrown in exaggerated fashion.

These caverns have been described by guidebooks as the cherry caves of the Maldives. Their intensity and lushness often enralls the first timer; prepare to be breathless on first sight.

On the eastern side of the channel is Fotteyo Falhu, a fringing reef rising to a sand cay; the coral formation appears to be untouched. Prolific large coral plates are scattered over the reef slope as far as the eye can see.

Beware of accidentally wandering into 'Trigger Valley', a sand cay on the right side of the channel. Titan Triggerfish by the hundreds are local denizens, and they are mean and foul-tempered. They attack divers for no rhyme or reason.

If you make an effort to rise before daybreak, Fotteyo is another hammerhead point. I was keen to see them, and predictably, we found them, or they found us, drifting in the blue at half past six in the morning.

Mayaa Thila
Ari Atoll. Nearest resort: Mayaafushi
In terms of fish life, the sheer





Cod, Triggerfish, Pufferfish and Pipefish in various combinations of colours lurk among the corals and gaps.

Moving through this gap in a slow current, subliminally evokes feelings of a journey through an artist's paint box. This site bears its name from the international Pantone Colour Matching system (PMS colour) used by graphic designers, printers, painters all over the world. The PMS swatches comprise of more than 500 colours varying in hue and contrast.

Panettone is the most colour intense dive in the Maldives. A school of Giant Trevally (*Caranx ignobilis*) is denizen of Panettone, though not necessary attracted by the colours but the bottomless pantry of tasty morsels. The channels are ideal country to look out for reef sharks, Dog-tooth Tunas, Eagle Rays and Mantas.

Madivaru/ Manta Point

Ari Atoll. Nearest Resort: Hilton Rangali
The season for manta at this site is from January

to April. The staging area is the outer reef, south side of Rangali Kandhu. During the northeast monsoon, this is the best manta point in the Maldives. During outgoing current, the mantas—big mantas—are found swimming up and down the reef slope to feed on nutrient rich water from within the atoll. Descend to the reef edge about 10m, swim along with the edge. Mantas are seen here enjoying themselves at cleaning stations as well as dancing blithsomenly in the blue. Attempts to approach them will make them swim away; just hover and watch, and in most instances, they will swim right up to you to meet eye to eye. This is one special place in the Maldives where big gentle animal encounters are predictably good. On a few occasions, I have seen flocks of 30 to 50 Mobula rays flying in formation through this reef. But the reef top here is a good enough reason to distract one's attention from the mantas—find turtles, clownfish, octopus, schools of Bannerfish, Powder Blue Surgeonfish plus a school of over three thousand bright yellow Blue-striped Snappers. ■

Panettone

Ari Atoll. Nearest resort- Moofushi
Panettone sits in the middle of Kalhahandhi Kandhu. As water flushes back and forth, this giri receives replenishment on a continuous basis. A long overhang between 12m to 25m along the reef wall is covered floor to ceiling with a plethora of multi-colored soft corals, sea fans, sea whips, and sponges. Squirrelfish, Angelfish, Fairy Basslets, Butterflyfish, Scorpion-fish, Coral

LEFT TO RIGHT: Manta rays enjoy cleaning stations on the reefs where cleaner fish tend to them; swirling school of Blue-striped snappers; fun in the sun is ample on a tradition Maldivian boat called a 'dhoni'

fact file



Maldives



SOURCES: YANN SAINT YVES, MICHAEL AW, US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM

History Archaeologists conclude that the Maldives Islands have been a port of business since antiquity, but the certainties concerning their history appear only from the second century. The Arabic traders nicknamed them then the "Islands of Money" because of one local shell, the Cauris, was internationally used as currency. Cowries were used internationally as bargaining chips.

The Portuguese came to the islands in the 17th century. The Maldives Islands became successively a Dutch protectorate in the 18th century, then British in 1880 by the signature of an agreement officializing this status and recognizing Maldivian sovereignty. The country obtained its independence in 26 July 1965, and became a member of the UNO. In 1968, it became a republic.

Elected to six successive terms via single-party referendums, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom dominated the islands' political scene for 30 years. Riots in the capital Male in August 2004, led to the president and his government pledging to implement democratic reforms with a more representative political system and more political freedoms.

However, progress in many promised reforms were slow in coming. Yet, in 2005, political parties were legalized, and by June 2008, a constituent assembly (the "Special Majlis") finished writing a new constitution, which was ratified by the president.

In October 2008, the first-ever presidential elections under a multi-candidate,

multi-party system were held. Mohamed Nasheed, a political activist previously jailed by the former regime several years earlier, defeated Gayoom in a runoff poll. Challenges facing the new president include strengthening democracy and combating drug abuse and poverty. Government: republic. Legal system: based on Islamic law with English common law used mostly in commercial matters. Capital: Male.

Geography The Maldives Islands are located in Southern Asia. They are a group of atolls in the Indian Ocean, south-southwest of India at coordinates: 4 10 N, 73 30 E. Surface area: 90,000 km² (ocean makes up 99.9 percent). Terrain: flat islands with white sandy beaches. Coastline: 644 km. Lowest point: Indian Ocean 0 m. Highest point: unnamed location on Wilingili island in the Addu Atoll 2.4 m. Note: The Maldives are 1,190 coral islands grouped into 26 atolls (200 islands are inhabited and 80 islands have tourist resorts). The archipelago has a strategic location adjacent to sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.

Economy Maldives' largest industry is tourism, which accounts for 28% of GDP and more than 60% of the Maldives' foreign exchange receipts. Import duties and tourism-related taxes make up over 90% of government tax revenue. The second leading sector is fishing. The limited availability of cultivable land and the shortage of domestic labor constrains

agriculture and manufacturing, which continue to play less and less of a role in the economy. A majority of staple foods must be imported. About 7% of GDP is generated by industries such as garment production, boat building, and handicrafts. In 1989, the Maldivian Government began an economic reform program, lifting import quotas and opening some exports to the private sector. Regulation have been liberalized regulations to allow more foreign investment. The December 2004 tsunami rampaged the islands and left more than 100 dead, 12,000 displaced, and property damage of over \$300 million. However, there has been a rebound in tourism since then, as post-tsunami reconstruction, and development of new resorts helped the economy to quickly recover. Even so, high oil prices and imports of construction material has increased the trade deficit. Challenges facing the country include diversifying beyond tourism and fishing and increasing employment. Global warming and erosion are a real worry over the longer term for the Maldivian authorities. Eighty percent of the area in this low-lying country is just one meter or less above sea level.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid with a dry, northeast monsoon from November to March and a rainy, southwest monsoon from June to August.

RIGHT: Location of the Maldives Islands on global map
FAR RIGHT: Map of Maldives Islands



Currency 20.5 Maldivian ruppies (MVR)= 1€ (2008), but many resorts show prices in US dollars and in Euro.

Population 385,925 (July 2008 est.) Malé, the capital city of the Maldives, is home to 27 percent of the population. Ethnic groups: South Indians, Sinhalese, Arabs. Religion: Sunni Muslim. Internet users: 33,000 (2007)

Language National language is Maldivian Divehi—a dialect of Sinhala with a script derived from Arabic. Working language is English.

Habits & Customs You are in a Muslim country. Nudism and the monokini are totally forbidden and liable to strong fines. It is the same at resorts. Light dresses are frowned upon in the city and outside island hotels. Going topless is totally prohibited and punished even at resorts.

Gastronomy The Maldivian cuisine is simple and easily accessible, although you can dive a little into the local life, on an island, or to Malé. Otherwise, resorts offer a variety of cooking, often dominated by Indian cuisine.

Diving If the Maldives Islands can be a true paradise for the diver, it is necessary to know that what you will see depends essentially on the experience of the captain and on the dive director. The one or the other can be replaced at the drop of a hat, risking a missed opportunity to see the good stuff on the way to the main show. Inquire about the staff, crew and supposed route to the dive site before leaving the dive center.

Phone Country code is 960. Cell phones can easily connect to some networks almost everywhere. Depending on your network – GSM roaming is enabled for some carriers. For Australia is Telecom or Optus and Singapore is Starhub, M1 and Singtel – check with your provider for service and charges. Since 2002, I was able to check email using my GSM phone on all my safari trips in the Maldives.

Time UTC+5 (GMT/Zulu +5)

Links Maldives Tourist Promotion Board
www.visitmaldives.com ■



In face of climate change

Maldives seek to buy a new homeland

The Maldives' newly-elected president has said that his government will begin saving to buy a new homeland in case global warming causes the country to disappear into the sea.

The inhabitants of the Maldives do not want to end up like Atlantis. The new president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, has said he wants to set up a fund to acquire land in other parts of the region and buy a new homeland for his people. "We cannot do anything to stop climate change, so we are forced to buy land somewhere else", Nasheed, told the English daily The Guardian last month.

Fund

The idea is to create a sovereign wealth fund with revenue from tourism in the style of those of the oil-producing Arab countries.

Nasheed said he intended

to create a "sovereign wealth fund" from the dollars generated by "importing tourists", in the way that Arab states have done by "exporting oil". "Kuwait invests in companies, we will invest in land" Nasheed said. "We do not want to leave the Maldives, but neither do we want to live like refugees in tents for many years" he added.

He wants somewhere within the region - possibly India or Sri Lanka. He said Sri Lanka and India were targets because they had similar cultures, cuisines and climates. Australia was also being considered because of the amount of unoccupied land available.

The president, a human rights activist who swept to power after ousting Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the man who once imprisoned him, said he had already broached the idea with a number of countries and found them to be "receptive".

Environmentalists say the issue raises the question of what rights citizens have if their homeland no longer exists. "It's an unprecedented wake-up call," said Tom Picken, head of international climate change at Friends of the Earth. "The Maldives is left to fend for itself. It is a victim of climate change caused by rich countries."

- The highest land point in the Maldives is 2.4 metres above sea level, on Wilingili island in the Addu Atoll
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that sea levels could rise by 25-58cm by 2100
- The country comprises 1,192 islands grouped around 26 Indian Ocean atolls. Only 250 islands are inhabited. The population is 380,000
- The main income is from tourism, with 467,154 people visiting in 2006

The Maldives holds the record for being the lowest country in the world, with a maximum natural ground level of only 2.3 m with the average being only 1.5 m above sea level, though in areas where construction exists this has been increased to several metres.

Mohamed Nasheed is the current President of the Maldives. He is the founder and the Maldivian Democratic Party and was its presidential candidate in the October 2008 presidential election, defeating long-time President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in a second round of voting. He was sworn in as President on November 11, 2008. Nasheed is commonly known in the Maldives as Anni and is a former member of Parliament for Malé. He was an outspoken critic of Gayoom and his policies. Due to his criticism of the government, over the years he was arrested and sentenced several times.

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA



INDIAN MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATION

NASA/GSFC/METI/ERSDAC/JAROS



Whale Shark Park

Maldivian Protection Area

Text by Dennis Kaandorp,
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Photos courtesy of Dennis
Kaandorp and Yann Saint Yves

On 4 December 2008, the first Maldives Whale Shark Protection Area (MPA) meeting was hosted on the beautiful five-star deluxe resort island, Diva Maldives, located in the South Ari Atoll. The Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP) has been established by an international team of biologists, who since 2006, have been working to build up a profile of the whale shark population in the Republic of Maldives. The MWSRP has been invited by the former Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Dr Shaugee, to assist in a community driven initiative to designate South Ari's southern outer reef as a 'national whale shark park'. The MWSRP is working hard to build strong relationships with local community representatives, and as a result, preliminary discussions with resort managers, dive center managers and island chiefs in the region regarding the development of a marine protected area have been very positive.

The meeting's aim was primarily to initiate this development by bringing together, for the first time, partners in this fight. In the meeting gathered were from the local islands: Ahmed Qasim, Ahmed Junah (assistant island chief and airport development manager from Maamigili), Mohamed Abdulla (assistant island chief Dhidhoo), Hussain Fayaz (school headmaster Digurah), Ibrahim Hassan (assistant island chief Digurah)—and from Fenfushi—Shahid Abdul Raheem (island chief). But also representatives from the resort island were present. Diva Maldives was represented by both the general manager



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strong relationships with local community representatives and as a result preliminary discussions with resort managers and island chiefs in the region regarding the development of a marine protected area have been very positive.

At the moment, the South Ari Atoll is one of the only places in the world known to have year-round Whale Sharks. This, combined with a big variety of dive sites, makes it one of the top dive



YANN SAINT YVES

THIS PAGE: Snorkeling divers are dwarfed by the gentle giants. RIGHT: Team members

Johnny Matis, the resident manager Xavier Arnoux, and the Euro-Divers Dive Center manager, Dennis Kaandorp. From neighboring resorts Euro-Divers Vilamendhoo Dive Center Manger Mike Cristiani was there and representing Holiday Island and Sun Island, Thomas Weber was present. From the initiators of the MWSRP, we had Adam Harman, Morgan Riley and Richard Rees.

The goal of the MWSRP is to be a Maldivian-run program that exists to facilitate perpetual whale shark research projects and to foster community-focused conservation initiatives within the Maldives.

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conservation initiatives within the Maldives.

Since 2006, the MWSRP has been investigating the demographics and behavioral ecology of the Maldivian whale shark sub-population through photo identification, prey surveys and collaborating on international genetic analysis and satellite tagging projects. Over three distinct field work periods, the program has logged over 350 whale shark encounters, and by utilizing photo-identification software, a database of 100 individual sharks has been compiled. The MWSRP are also currently conducting a nationwide survey to investigate whether there are any other significant whale shark aggregation sites in the archipelago.

The program has been working closely with the government, tour operators and local communities to make currently unregulated whale shark directed tourism sustainable. In June 2008, the MWSRP



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gave a presentation to the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation and the Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Water on the status of the whale shark population. On the strength of the evidence presented, it was requested that a workshop be organized for the MWSRP to discuss best-practices with key industry stakeholders. This workshop, also held in June, was successful and the resulting whale shark encounter policy has been officially endorsed by the government.

The MWSRP has worked hard to build

destinations, not just in the world, but also in the Maldives. Yet, we have to do our share in protecting these magical creatures. Certain rules have to be made to protect them as much as possible. Many Whale Sharks here, like other places in the world, bare scars from encounters with humans. This can be avoided by education and regulation. It became clear during the meeting that the Maldivian themselves see these

creatures as their legacy to their children.

As result of the meeting, all gathered agreed to set up a committee to achieve the goal. More meetings are expected to take place soon. ■

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