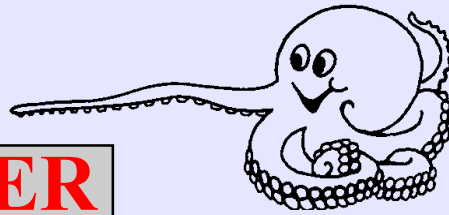


THE REEF SEEKER



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December - 2023



MARVELOUS MALDIVES

If the Maldives ISN'T on your diving bucket list, it really should be. If you're a fish aficionado like me – or would that be “fish-ianado” – you want to come here. I'm privileged enough to dive many places in the world and there's no place that I've been to that's fishier than the Maldives. (And the corals and reefs are very healthy too.)

It's a schlep to get here. But then again, places that are somewhat off the beaten path usually are. However, it's hard to consider the Maldives “off the beaten” path even though it's remote from the US. They've got a world-class international airport that major airlines (Singapore, Turkish, Qatar, Virgin, Emirates) fly into daily. And they don't use puddle-jumpers. We flew in on a 737 and are flying back on an A350.

From the west coast, you've got a couple of options. On the way in, we flew non-stop from LAX to Singapore (three of our folks went non-stop from SFO), there was a 3-hour layover in the incredible Singapore Changi Airport, and then it was a 4.5 hour non-stop flight into Male. Total travel time was about 24 hours straight.

On the way back, the connections aren't as convenient so you're going to kill 12 hours somewhere. We were fortunate to get a 1PM Singapore Airlines flight, overnighted in the Transit Hotel within

the Singapore Airport, and then the next morning flew to Tokyo, short layover, and then back home to LAX (and three folks to SFO). The nice thing about this routing is that it breaks things up nicely. It's just under 5 hours to Singapore, then we'll get a 12-hour break and get some sleep in an actual hotel bed, 6 hours to Tokyo, a 1-hour break there, and then about 10 hours back to LAX. (And we even landed an hour ahead of schedule.) So it's more travel time overall, but it's nicely broken up.

There is also flight routing through London (Heathrow – British Air), Istanbul (Turkish), Dubai (Emirates), and Doha (Qatar). The point is that while it takes a while to get there, there are numerous options that are worth investigating. While we came in through Singapore, one of our other travelers went through Doha, and previously we've gone through Istanbul.

Speaking of people on the trip, there were 12 this time. Some have been to the Maldives before and some were newbies to the area. (This was my fifth trip to the region.) Our group consisted of John & Debbie Nichols, Katy & Tom Burns, Henry Gittler & Lisette Lieberman, Patti Wey, Marilyn Lawrence, Michelle Leonard, Rachel Cappocia, Glenn Suhd, and me (Ken Kurtis).

This was a 9-day trip, so just a tad longer than most of our foreign trips. The extra two days certainly gives you more options to explore the underwater marvels of the Maldives. Or, as our lead DM Moosa Hassan likes to say, “The UMS” which stands for “The Usual Maldives Stuff.”

We were able to do 25 dives during our time in the Maldives with each dive being about an hour long. Water temp was a steady 85° and visibility was quite vari-

able with a high of about 80 feet, a low of a hazy 20 feet, and an average of probably 50 feet or so. Some of this was quite current-dependent. Some sites we dove in the afternoon with low vis, but then dove them again in the morning to excellent viz.

We did all of this from the relative comfort of the Manthiri, an 85-foot liveaboard that's been plying these waters since 1996 (which is when I first dove with them). And the really nice thing is that the crew, certainly the key players, like the captains and DMs, have changed very little over the years.

In terms of how the boat is built and laid out, it's very similar to the larger California boats like Encore, Great Escape (previously Charisma), Horizon, Peace, and Vision. There are three decks with the lower deck hosting six 2-person state-rooms. (Capacity on the Manthiri is limited to 12 guests plus 10 crew.) The main deck is split in two with the forward half being the salon and the rear half providing a coffee/tea area, a camera table, some shelf storage and the stairs to go below, as well as a small back deck. The upper deck, only accessible through the rear deck stairs, has a large sundeck and the wheelhouse.

You may have noticed there's no mention of diving-related stuff. That's because there's no diving from the Manthiri itself. Say what????

I don't know how this trend started (Moosa didn't know either) but the Manthiri and every other liveaboard in the Maldives has a companion boat known as a dhoni (DOE-nee). In the case of the Manthiri, the dhoni is called the Vasantha and is 65 feet long and about 15 feet wide. The dhoni is the platform from where all the diving takes place. All of your dive gear – except cameras –

lives on the dhoni. The dhoni has compressors onboard, tank stations, storage cubbies, and a head. So anytime we were ready to dive, we'd go to the outer deck of the Manthiri, go down a small ladder to the dhoni, and off we'd go.

This also works well because for a lot of the diving, you need a boat that's more maneuverable and more nimble than one the size of the Manthiri. The dhoni fits the bill perfectly. Again, nothing fancy, but eminently serviceable and practical, with four exit points (giant stride into the water – everyone's geared up waiting for Moosa to cry out "Okie-dokie!!!" as the signal to go), a really nice ladder to come back up, rinse buckets for gear and cameras, and fresh water showers for divers to boot.

And speaking of rinsing things, on the Manthiri, you won't be doing that. When you come back on board Vasantha, the extremely attentive crew will walk you to your station, make sure you're seated and your tank is secure in the holder, and then will insist on taking your wetsuit/booties/hood/etc., will give them a good rinse, and then hang everything up – in front of your station no less - so it will be dry in time for the next dive. They also rinse cameras and then when the dhoni pulls up to the side of the Manthiri, hands them off and they are rinsed again and back on the camera table by the time you get back on board.

Did I mention how attentive the crew is? This holds true on the main boat as well. Food is served family style at two large round tables, beds are made while you're out on the first dive, there's always bottled water around including at your dive station on the dhoni, and basically anything you need, they're happy to get for you.

The general plan was three dives each day although one day we did four, the first day we did only one, and the last day we did two. You could probably convince Moosa to do four dives each day but that would then affect the run times between dives sites – sometimes we'd move 5-10 miles between dives – and the one 4-dive day we did was definitely a faster pace than the others with shorter runs between dives.

In general the overall daily sked saw most people up by 6AM – my alarm was

set for 5:15AM – for coffee/tea, stretching, and a pre-breakfast. First dive briefing was at 6:30AM and off we'd go to do dive 1. Breakfast was around 8:30AM – always more food than we probably needed - with all sorts of varieties of eggs, breads, meats, fruits, oatmeal sometimes, and other tasty treats, dive 2 briefing at 10:30AM and then off we'd go, lunch around 12:30PM and always starting with soup and various choices of vegetables, pasta, rice, meats, chicken, fruits, and other goodies (and always ice cream for dessert), with the dive 3 briefing at 3:30PM and then off, back on board around 5:30PM in time for the 6PM dinner – again, no complaints in the food department (although the meat dishes sometimes seemed a tad too much towards well-done for my taste buds) - and always tasty, varieties of fish/chicken/lamb and plentiful vegetables, pasta, rice and fancy dessert, and then folks settled in for the evening either reading or tweaking pictures. Most people were in bed by 9PM to recharge and start the cycle again the next morning.

We have to add one more thing about the food as we were there over Thanksgiving. Prior to the trip, I'd sent Moosa an e-mail explaining about turkey and stuffing and asking if they could do something. Boy, did they ever!!! We not only had turkey – not easy to find in the Maldives – but also mashed potatoes, gravy, Beef Wellington, lamb, sushi, salads, vegetables, pastas, and even pies for dessert. It was quite a feast and the kitchen crew definitely outdid themselves.

When I first dove with Manthiri in 1996,

they were the first or second liveboard in the Maldives. Now, there may be as many as fifty. When I was here the first time, there were also only a few diving resorts scattered around on various islands. Now, they are likely a hundred or more of those as well. So the Maldives, in terms of having the place to yourself (always a diver's dream) is much more-visited than it used to be. There were certainly a number of sites we dove – I'd say 80% of the time – where we had the place to ourselves. But there were also a few spots where we were joined by other groups, sometimes from another liveboard, sometimes from a nearby resort. This was especially the case the last two days as we dove reefs closer to the main city of Male.

If you look at a map of the Maldives, you'll see there are a number of major atolls, all with atolls inside the atolls, strung throughout the Indian Ocean. I'm not sure exactly how far we traveled, but on Google Earth it looks like roughly 200 miles over the course of our nine days. That's the advantage of a liveboard. From a resort, you'll do a lot of out-and-back. On a liveboard, you can roam to wherever you think the best diving will be.

Originally, Moosa and I had talked about doing a northern route. This would have taken us into the Baa and Raa Atoll areas where there's an annual aggregation of hundreds of manta rays. We had done this route in 2019 with much success. But the prevailing winds shifted earlier this year. The trip before us did the northern route and had rougher seas, less visibility, and not too many mantas. (Al-

2024 DIVING VACATIONS

March 18-22 • San Ignacio

May 18-25 • Roatan

July 8-19 • Indonesia

November 1-10 • Palau

though there are other things – UMS – to see as well.) But Moosa and I thought a southern route would serve us better so that’s what we did.

And while the prevailing wind shift, from NW to SE, means the mantas are in transition, boy did we ever hit one spot perfectly. It was our first dive on Tuesday (our eighth dive overall) at the appropriately named Gangehi Manta Rock which is a cleaning station. Bear in mind that, up until this point, we’d only gotten a fleeting glimpse of a couple of mantas and that was in low-viz conditions.

When we dropped in here, not only was the visibility good – 60-80 feet – but there were already two mantas casually gliding in and out over the cleaning station, pausing to let the cleaner fish do their job, then shaking them off and circling around for another pass. As we all settled in, another manta showed up. Then another. And then a fifth one. (We think there might even have been a sixth one.) Best of all, this manta dance continued for the full hour-plus that we were down there. Sometimes there were two or three mantas on the cleaning station, sometimes five. They would glide off and then come back in right over our heads, close enough that you could have easily reached up and touched them (but no one did that). Best of all, not only were we checking out the mantas, but the mantas were checking us out too.

Afterwards, everyone on the dive mentioned how at least one or two mantas had made a close, slow pass at least once and seemed to make eye contact as if they were trying to figure out what exactly these bubble-blowing things in the water were. In a word, it was magical. And just about everyone agreed that this dive earned a place on their Top 10 Lifetime Dives list.

As I mentioned previously, the Maldives is REALLY fishy. We saw enormous schools of Bluestriped Snappers, Neon Fusliers, Longfin Spadefish (who were also quite sociable), Humpback Wrasses, Bannerfish, Red-touted Triggerfish (and yes, there teeth really ARE red), Midnight Snappers, Bream of all sorts, various Emperors, Glass Sweepers, Scissor-tail Damsels, Bluefin Trevallies everywhere you looked, Eagle Rays often, and more. Plus there were anemones with various Anemonefish species just about

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Wed.	Dec. 6	--- CLASS ---	--- NAUI Nitrox ---	95
Sat.	16	Redondo/Vets	Taming Surf Entries	35
Wed.	20	Catalina Express	Avalon Underwater Park	175

2024 SCHEDULE COMING SOON

everywhere, dozens of species of parrotfish (some of which I’d never seen before and all colorful and large), different varieties of Sweetlips, numerous sharks, butterflies, wrasses, blennies & gobies, and more. As Moosa says, the Usual Maldives Stuff.

One (of the many) really memorable sites is called Yellow Grunt City, although it should be renamed Bluestripe Snapper City, since that’s what they are. It’s a somewhat small site, but every inch of it is covered by yellow Bluestripe Snappers, like a fishy blanket covering the place. If you told me there were a million fish there, I might think you underestimated. And they seemed quite content to allow us to just become one-with-the-fish as we floated amongst them. In fact, I’ve even posted a short video clip (shot by Patti Wey) of me in the middle of the school to give you a small taste of what being in the midst of all of this was like.

We also discovered another interesting thing about the Bluestriped Snappers and I admit I started taking perverse pleasure from this.

I have an OrcaTorch D570-GL clipped to the right shoulder-level D-ring on my BC. That means it’s always easily accessible to me, even when I’m holding my camera. The OrcaTorch is a really great and bright small light (1,000 lumens – costs about \$190 – I recommend them highly) but it’s special feature is that it also has a built-in green laser (which is what “GL” stand for), which can either be used alone or in combo in the center of the light beam. This makes the OrcaTorch a really great spotter light because you can put the laser right on the animal you’re trying to show people without disturbing the animal itself one iota. Unless of course . . .

You know how cats are fascinated by laser beams and will try to catch them? Turns out the same thing applies to Bluestriped Snappers, although what they

try to do is eat the laser beam. And not just one or two fish will do this, but most of the school will do it. I’d shine a laser beam on a rock just under the school and one, then two, then five, then five hundred fish would madly dive for it, fruitlessly trying to eat the projected beam. Eventually they’d give up until they saw the next time the beam was projected and then the chase started all over again. It certainly didn’t hurt the fish at all but I’m definitely guilty of making them exhibit this behavior on multiple occasions over a variety of dive sites. It was fascinating to see such consistent behavior and also amazing to me at how quickly and vigorously they responded each and every time.

Our trip was not without a few disappointments. One of those was one of my all-time favorite sites, Shark Circus in Felidhe Atoll. This is a dusk dive (sundown was around 6PM so we entered around 5:15PM) where you settle in to a sandy channel in the reef and wait. After a while, you start to see large – 9-10 feet long – Nurse Sharks cruising overhead. As you wait, they settle into the sand around you and eventually start nuzzling right up to you like they want to cuddle. I have no idea how this came to be – and this is a site that you will definitely be sharing with other groups – but it’s been a highlight every time we dove it previously.

Not this trip. The sharks didn’t start showing up until around 5:45PM and none of them settled into the sand around us (or anyone else it seemed). So we definitely got half of the dive experience which is to have numerous of these sharks cruising overhead – I’d say we saw a couple of dozen overall, including a single group of eight – but we didn’t get the payoff half which is when they become your dive buddy.

But we had other highlight dives that are worth mentioning. Most memorable was at Middle Point in South Male Atoll

where, at a depth of around 100 feet (the legal maximum you can dive in the Maldives), we hoped to find three usually-elusive creatures: (1) Black Ribbon Eel, (2) Blue Ribbon Eel, and (3) Decorated Dartfish. We went 3-for-3.

We found the Black Ribbon Eel first, In fact, we found TWO of them, the second being a very small presumably newly-born juvy. As ribbon eels are wont to do, they were stretched out of their holes with their mouths agape, trying to look fierce. Shortly after that, we spotted a Blue Ribbon Eel exhibiting the same behavior. And then we came upon three or four of the Dartfish.

The most common ones are the Fire Dartfish (white and red) and the Two-Tone Dartfish (white and black with a very wide rear dorsal). The Decorated – I’ve also heard them referred to as Elegant – are the most striking as they have a pale yellow-ish front half that fades into a purple-ish back half and then fins are all tinged with bright red and purple. Plus they’ve got purple lips that extend

into a purple stripe that runs over the top of their head. They are really a strikingly beautiful fish and you can see pix of them in the SmugMug slideshow and below.

Much is made of currents in the Maldives but those didn’t pose an issue for us most of the time. Some of this was because Moosa was choosing lesser-current spots. And anytime there was a current, we’d drift with it as the reef passed by – once or twice flew by – underneath us. Both dive guides carried SMBs (Surface Marker Buoys) which were deployed on a line from the 15-foot safety stop so the boat knew where we were, and many of the divers carried one too, so if they got separated from the group, they could mark their spot and get picked up. Most of the time every stayed close to either Moosa or Ali (the other dive guide) and there were no issues of divers drifting away or failing to be quickly spotted once they surfaced.

There’s plenty more we could share but suffice it to say that 3,300 words seems

adequate to give you an idea of what this was like. The Maldives is really a wonderful place to go explore and, as far as we’re concerned, the Manthiri s the perfect platform to use to do so. Will we got back? Absolutely. In fact, Moosa and I have already talked about doing September 19-28 in 2025. This will allow us to do some of the sites we covered on this trip as well as a more northerly route to hit the manta aggregation and perhaps even a Whale Shark (or two). Want to get in on that? We’re happy to take a small (\$500) deposit now to secure one of the 12 spots for you.

But whether you go with us or do it on your own, make sure you get to the Maldives. It’s truly one of the relatively unspoiled spots left to dive in this world, and I can promise you it will be an expe-



PICTURE PAGE - UMS

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2023 - sunset shot by Katy Burns)



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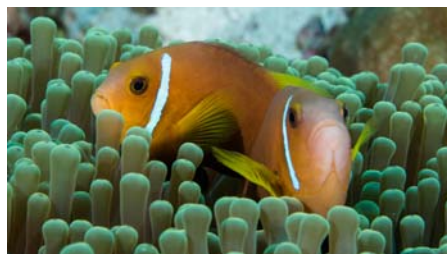
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