

THE REEF SEEKER



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MALDIVES MINI-REPORT

You can read the full report on the Reef Seekers website but here are two of the highlights of the trip.

Mantas are somewhat common in the Maldives but one reason we picked this time of the year and the combo North/South route was the hope of finding a manta feeding aggregation up in the Baa Atoll area. Each year round this time, thousands of mantas migrate to the area because it becomes very plankton-rich. At certain times depending on the tides, time of day, and location, you may run into hundreds of mantas gathered together near the surface, with their mouths open and cephalic lobes curved to scoop up plankton, gracefully making a mad dash through the water as they feed.

My oh my, did we get lucky. (And we have the video to prove it.)

The hotspot at Baa Atoll is Hanifaru Bay, which is a UNEXSO World Heritage site. It's also limited access as you need a permit that's only good for 45 minutes, it's snorkel-only, and they only give out a few permits each day. Moosa (our DM)

is friendly with the rangers there so he called them to see if there was any activity while we were in the area. Turns out there wasn't, but the rangers said they thought stuff was happening on adjacent Raa Atoll.

We did a late afternoon dive at Vandhoo Wall in Raa which was a wonderful dive in and of itself. But what made the dive even better were the number of mantas we saw streaking down the wall through the course of the dive. At one point in the dive (and we got this on video), ELEVEN mantas winged their way on by us in the space of 35 seconds, gracefully flapping their huge wings as they moved down the wall and faded out of sight. Something was afoot.

When we surfaced, the dhoni crew was very excited. While we were under, maybe 100 yards away, mantas were everywhere on the surface, moving as a herd, their wingtips breaking the water and then splashing down as they flapped. We quickly reboarded the dhoni and Moosa said, "Get your snorkels on!!" The dhoni maneuvered to get ahead of them and then we'd jump and hope the mantas all came by.

Wow!!!! I shot with my GoPro7 and in one one-minute long shot, I count 25 different mantas, all passing by, all feeding, all moving like graceful 2,000-pound ballerinas. When they moved off, we'd all reboard the dhoni, reposition, and try again. We did four different jumps over the course of about 30 minutes and it's

something we will all remember for a long time. (You can also see a two-and-a-half minute video of our experience on my YouTube page.)

The other amazing dive we did, unique to the Maldives as far as I know, was a place called Shark Circus in South Male Atoll. The site, right in front of a resort, has a large population of resident Nurse Sharks, each about 9-11 feet long (Moosa measured one). Every night around dusk, they become very active and are apparently feeding. (We also did this dive in 2016 and were blown away.) But this year – and maybe it's because we were in a more wide-open area than previously – the sharks seemed to want to cuddle. They'd be swimming around and then all of a sudden would drop to the sand and glide to a stop right by all of the divers and nuzzle up. This all went on for about 45 minutes. (We have video of this too.)

What was really nice, other than the experience itself, was that we dropped in around 5:30 so it was still light enough – sundown was around 6PM – to see what was going on without lights. As the dive wore on, we had to turn our dive lights on, but it's definitely an ethereal experience and if/when YOU go to the Maldives, this dive is something you have to do.

We've done four trip to the Maldives and each one has been wonderful. Give some thought to joining us (soon) when we do #5.



GOPRO HERO7 THOUGHTS

To steal from Charles Dickens: “It was the best of cams, it was the worst of cams.”

Just before our Maldives trip, I decided to upgrade from my GoPro Hero4 and go with the GoPro Hero7. The reason was that the 7 was supposed to have an upgraded and improved video processor plus it offered image stabilization (called Hypersmooth), which wasn't available on the 4. The other improvement was that the 7 was watertight down to 33 feet while the 4 was not.

A week after I got the camera, GoPro came out with the Hero8 but the differences between the 7 and the 8 are very minor IMHO and many - like adding an external light, an external top-mounted monitor, and front-facing microphone - have no application underwater.

I have always used my Hero4 mounted on a tray with video lights attached at each end. The tray was actually wide enough, and had multiple drilled holes, that I was able to mount BOTH the 4 and the 7 on the tray side-by-side so I could initially do some simultaneous video tests. I was able to do this on one of our dives at the Aquarium of the Pacific in our Tropical exhibit. By shooting both cameras simultaneously, I could get a true A/B comparison.

To my eye, the 7 looked a bit better than the 4. (Everything was shot in

1080/30fps.) The colors from the 7 seemed a bit richer and more saturated (in a good way) and the overall exposure was better. On the 4, you'd lose some detail, especially in dark areas.

One thing I didn't like about the 7 was that you lose a field-of-view choice. On the 4, you have Wide/Medium/Narrow. On the 7, you only have Wide/Linear but they added Superview, which is even wider than Wide but adds a fisheye effect that's very noticeable - especially if you're panning the camera or if your subject moves off the edge of the frame - which I don't like at all. But . . .

The 7 adds what I thought was going to be a great feature which is a zoom option in each mode. Now, you won't have to toggle between FOVs to change your view. You can activate the zoom, slide it to whatever you want within the range, and you're good to go. Except . . .

The only way to do this is through the touchscreen on the back of the 7. And once you put the 7 into the housing (now called the Dive Suit), guess what's inaccessible? In fact, the biggest drawback to the 7 is that GoPro has given you a lot

more control over the image you create . . . BUT . . . almost all of those controls have been moved to the touchscreen. So as soon as you put the camera into the housing, you lose all of that fabulous flexibility. Inside the housing, there's no way to change the zoom, you can't alter any of the video settings through ProTune, and you're basically stuck with whatever you started with. There is a way to change the field of view, but it involves tapping both the shutter and mode buttons at the same time underwater (which is a little clunky to boot), and most of the time when I tried it, I either pushed one too hard and changed the mode to still photo, or pushed the other too hard and ended up turning the camera off.

So I ended up just setting the camera in Linear FOV (this gets rid of most of the fisheye effect although there's a little barrel distortion at the edges of the frame) and dealt with it that way. The first time or two on dives in the Maldives, I kept both the 7 and the 4 mounted on the tray and shot with both. (I had the 4 in Narrow so I had different FOVs to choose from.) But I finally decided that the images I was getting with the 7 were far

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Where else in 2020???

superior to the 4 and ended up taking the 4 off of the tray and just used the 7.

That all being said, and I'm going to do some more fiddling with the camera outside of the housing since you can take it down to 33 feet, to see if the touchscreen will work submerged (GoPro says it won't), I was really happy with the stuff we shot in the Maldives. We ended up creating five different videos, including one where we essentially kept the came only inches away from a turtle while he grazed around the reef, and everything looked really good.

Although I had to pre-set everything before I went under, you can do things like lock in ISO settings so the camera isn't constantly adjusting for changing light and you can even play with video shutter speeds and white balance if you're so inclined. But again, everything had to be done before you snap the Dive Suit shut.

I also shot everything through a red filter. I found an inexpensive filter set through a company called SandMarc and found them to be as effective as ones I've gotten through FlipFilter. The SandMarc ones are definitely cheaper (\$30 for a set of five filters - three for day UW of varying redness by depth, plus one for green water, and one for night) but since the filter holder snaps over the Dive Suit lens, make sure you tie it down with the provided string. Also the filters slide in the top of the holder through slot but they also slide out too easily as well. So I added a small piece of duct tape over the top to make sure I didn't lose a filter during a dive.

The other thing that's a vast im-

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Sat.	Nov. 9	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Thu.	14	Redondo	••• Night Dive •••	\$25
Sat.	23	Redondo	Navigation dive (single tank)	\$25
Sun.	Dec. 15	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Thu.	19	Redondo	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE!!!

provement over the Hero4 is that the Hero7 takes pretty good still pictures. The Hero4 takes fairly crappy UW pix because it generally gives you a very slow shutter speed so everything is blurry. Not so with the Hero7. All the still shots we did generally came out pretty good, although they pixilated a little bit if you blow them up too much or crop in too tightly.

But overall, the Hero7 is a huge step above the Hero4 and I'll look forward to refining my technique and trying other tricks as I play with it more. If you haven't already seen the videos we shot on this trip, go to the Reef Seekers website home page and click on the "Pix & Videos" link for the Maldives trip. Let me know what you think.

MARAUDING PURPLE URCHINS IN NorCAL

Purple urchins are out of control in Northern California (and spreading up to Oregon) and are devastating the kelp forests up there, specifically eating bull kelp.

It all started back in 2013, when sea stars were being affected by Wasting Disease. Since the stars eat sea urchins, the urchin population started to grow with nothing to hold them in check. Urchins eat kelp so they started grazing on the

very dense kelp forests found up there. It is estimated that 90% of the kelp has been eliminated along a 200-mile stretch of NorCal coastline. Not good. And while kelp, especially bull kelp, is fairly hardy, there's no telling what the recovery prospects are, but right now, things don't look as promising as one would hope.

In fact, on just one Oregon reef alone, the urchin population increased by 10,000%. That was 350 MILLION purple urchins on this single reef (though they don't say how big it was - still a staggering number).

The ripple effect has carried over as 96% of the red abalone population up north, who also feed on bull kelp, have died. Red urchins are declining due to a scarcity of food. The recreational abalone fishery up there has been closed and the commercial red sea urchin fishery collapsed. (There's only a minimal market for purple urchins.)

Scientists are investigating some possible solutions but the overall thing to look at here is that, regardless of whether you think climate change is reality or not or man-made as opposed to natural cycle, these events have far-reaching consequences and simply cannot be ignored or pushed aside. What we do - or don't do - matters and it's better to act now even if it's an over-reaction, than wait until it's too late.

WHY IT PAYS TO SHOP AIRFARES

I know I've made this point before but I'll underscore it again: It pays to shop when you're buying airline tickets.

I'm going on a FAM (Familiarization) trip to the Philippines in late January and I've been looking at airfares on United through Honolulu, Guam, and then into Manila. It started at around \$750, then went to \$766, and over the past weekend was \$850. I looked again this morning and it was - for the exact same flights - \$696. So I grabbed it right away.

The advantage of repeatedly checking back on an airline as well as checking out alternate dates is

that you'll get a feel for what their pricing structure is and you'll have a sense of when they're jacking things up as well as when they're dangling a bargain in front of you.

The other thing to do when you're thinking of a trip is, regardless of what price they're showing you, check the available seats in whatever class you're looking at. Remember that they've got to fill empty seats somehow. All airlines now use what they call "dynamic pricing" which means the price changes daily based on ebb and flow of the demand. So seeing how many empty seats they've got on a flight will also give you an idea of whether or not prices may head up or down in the near future and help you time your time-to-buy better.

Good luck!!!



TURN CLOCKS BACK THIS WEEKEND

Just a reminder that Daylight Savings Time ends this weekend so make sure you turn your clocks BACK one hour at (or before) 2AM Sunday. If you've got a day dive planned for Sunday this becomes even more important, unless you LIKE arriving an hour earlier than you need to.

PICTURE PAGE - Maldives favs

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2019)



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