

Maldives Paradise

by Michel Braunstein

Everything that had to be written has already been written about the Maldives. Every superlative has been used to describe the local “wallpaper” filled with enchanting islands and atolls, beautiful reefs, white sand beaches with deep green palm trees and the turquoise sea in the background. Let’s not forget the dream resorts which can’t leave anyone unmoved. Maldives is a paradise for every visitor, especially divers.

The Maldives Archipelago is in the Indian Ocean, south west of India and Sri Lanka. It contains 26 atolls with almost 1200 islands. Some Islands are simply beaches in the middle of the ocean. Tourists can stay on approximately 100 islands; the rest is occupied by the Maldivian people or it is unpopulated.

Male is the overcrowded capital island of the Islamic Republic of Maldives. Male and Ari are probably the most popular atolls of all and closest to the international airport. The Baa atoll is also well known for having the largest manta rays aggregations worldwide. Sometimes, 30-40 manta rays can be spotted swimming together.

The country is very appreciated

by the divers, particularly because of its high-quality tropical dives and for very fair travel and live-aboard prices. The dive spots are sometimes overcrowded, but you can always find enough room for everyone.

The sea life is so rich; it includes of course manta rays, several kinds of sharks, not to mention the beautiful whale shark, dolphins, huge shoals of fishes, and an amazing macro life.

Lately, the Maldives has also become very popular for hosting tiger sharks in Fuvahmulah, in the deep south of the country. The southern atolls are mainly reached by local seaplanes. Some local resorts with dive centers and live-aboard boats take divers to meet with the impressive sharks, just like in the Bahamas Tiger Beach.

We travelled on a luxury live-aboard owned by an Italian company, the M/Y Princess Dhonkamana. The team was really great and offered a very high quality scuba diving vacations to all the visitors in the pristine waters of the Maldives. The boat is usually doing the “standard” circuit, which means between Male and Ari Atolls, both located in the center of the country. In November/December, the boat is usually going

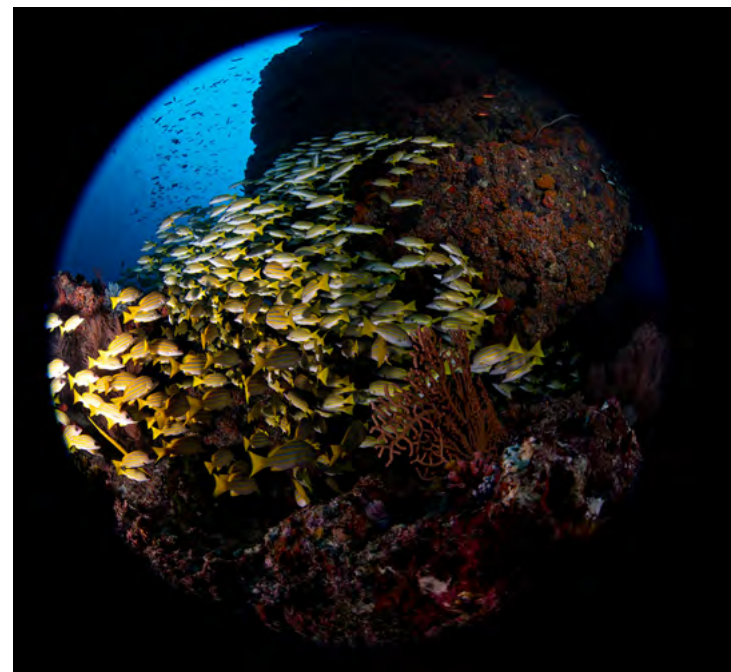


deep South for tiger sharks and other big animals encounters.

The very first dive to check our weights was in a quite cool place named Fish Tank, in the North Male Atoll. As the name tells, there are many many fishes in that location, but especially a huge quantity of large moray eels.

After that check dive, the boat aimed to Ari Atoll.

Many of the Maldives dive sites are called “Thila”, which mean underwater pinnacle. When diving the thilas, you can see such a lot of kind of fishes, many times in huge shoals. You will often see stingrays passing



by and also turtles at the top of the thila.

The currents bring food and are propice to a healthy underwater ecosystem.

You can’t go to dive in the



Maldives without having an amazing Manta experience. Many manta cleaning stations are located all over the Maldives. A beautiful and famous one called “Paradise” in North Male Atoll. It’s all a question of luck, the first dive we did at a manta cleaning station spot, was quite unfortunate, there was no action. We saw only one manta from far away.

Fortunately, the day after, we had the chance to dive Mahibadhoo Rock in South Ari Atoll, where we could spot to an amazing manta action. They were turning around above our heads and above the rock block in front of us.

It’s also really fun to dive with a whale shark, but again you have to be lucky. They are not always there. We saw one in “Lux Beyru”, in the very South of Ari Atoll. As soon one boat identifies a whale shark, all snorkelers and diver boats which



are around, approach quickly and all the tourists swim with it. Watching all snorkelers swimming at the surface from deep under the water, while they try to catch the huge shark, looks a bit like a sperm race.

Whale sharks in that region are quite “small”. They can be up to 5-6 meters (large whalesharks size can be 15-17 meters).

After approximately 35 years of dives all over the blue planet, I had the chance to live many exciting and funny experiences under and above the seas. I think that one of the funniest, if not the funniest, was probably during this recent trip in the Maldives, when we arrived for a night dive at the Alimathaa dive spot, in the South Male atoll. We first saw 4-5 nurse sharks swimming in the back of the boat. That was a nice hint for what was coming next, during the dive itself.



When we got into the water for the night dive, we saw such a huge aggregation of nurse sharks; they were all over. Sometimes they were swimming very closely in front of me, sometimes next to me, some even touched me. One even swam between my legs and suddenly, I noticed its head under me. That was so funny. The sharks were not intimidated or afraid of us at all. They just proceeded with their regular life, as if we were not existing. There were dozens of sharks all over, some were swimming while others were resting on the ground.



That was such an amazing and funny experience, like I have rarely had the chance to live.

The Maldives has so many surprises below the sea level! That experience is really worth living and re-living!

Some practical info about diving

- The sea in the Maldives is not too salty and you will need only a very few weights. I didn't take no weights at all.
- A shorty wetsuit or only a lycra t-shirt is enough, because the water are not cold at all. Sometimes currents/surge may be rough, in that case, it can be nice to protect your knees.

- Reef hooks may be useful at some dives to remain still while looking at mantas or whatever else.

- Diving knives are forbidden

- Visibility is usually very good.

Depending of the location, between 20 to over 40 meters.

- Most of the boats offer 3 dives per day with 2 or 3 night dives during the week.

The Maldives provide a very high standard dive quality for very affordable prices. We chosed to complete our live-aboard week with a three days stay in a beautiful resort located in a South Male island. We could rest from our dive week

Getting there: Many airlines

are flying to the Maldives, either from Istanbul, Moscow, Colombo, Beijing...

Visa: No pre-arrival visa is required. A thirty day free visa is issued on arrival for all Nationalities.

Language: The official language is Dhivehi, and whether English can be talked all over.

Currency: The local currency is the Maldivian rufiyaa. 1USD exchange rate is approximately 15.5 rufiyaa. Many changes are available locally but US dollars may also be used.

Electricity Most of the boats in the Maldives have UK electrical plug and 110V. Usually there are also

options for 220V

Consider bringing adaptors with you, although they can lend you one on boat.

One more piece of advice

In the 21st century we need to remain connected. Our boat offered a wifi connection for \$10 for the week. Not all the boats do offer that service and if they do, their wifi is not always efficient. I would recommend to by a local SIM in a shop at the airport (Dhiraagu for example). You will have quite a good connection all over the Maldives, except during the crossings between atolls or islands.

Michel Braunstein

Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter No
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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