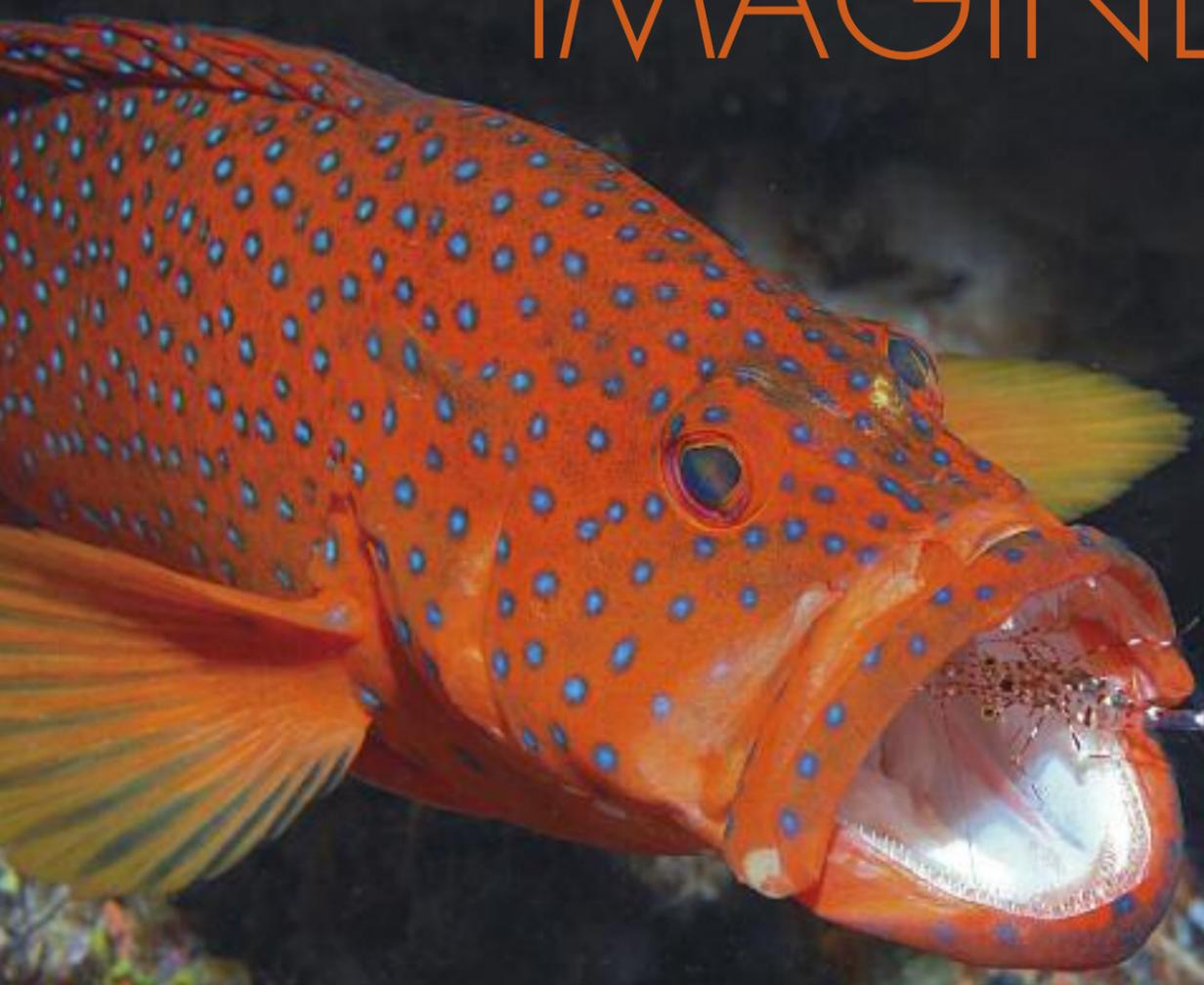


➤ THE FANTASY OF ARRIVING ON A REMOTE ISLAND FAR FROM THE EVERYDAY HUSTLE WAS SHATTERED. THE BLACKBERRY BEGAN BUZZING ALMOST AS SOON AS WE REACHED THE DOCK OF RANGALI ISLAND, A TINY OUTPOST IN THE ARI ATOLL. YES, RANGALI IS HOME TO THE PLUSH AND LUXURIOUS CONRAD RESORT BUT IS THERE NO ESCAPE FROM EMAIL AND TEXT MESSAGES AND... WELL, CIVILIZATION? A FURTIVE GLANCE AT THE BLACKBERRY SCREEN CONFIRMED IT – THERE WAS AN EMAIL FROM THE BOSS. THAT'S WHAT THE 'ON/OFF' SWITCH IS FOR, RIGHT?



# IMAGINE A RAINBOW SEA...



The Maldives have long been a destination at the top of many divers 'bucket list' and for good reason. With picture-perfect lagoons, brilliant white sand beaches, swaying palm trees and colourful coral reefs teeming with life, the Maldives hold the allure of visiting a living postcard.

The Republic of the Maldives is a small Islamic nation of roughly 1190 tiny islands and 270,000 people stretched across a vast expanse of the Indian Ocean just south and west of India. The low-lying coral islands, none reaching higher than a few metres above sea level, and innumerable reefs form 26 atolls and the total territorial area is 115,300 square kilometres, of which only 298 is actually dry land. Many islands are uninhabited. Many are home to the Maldives residents and are difficult for tourists to visit. But a number of small islands scattered throughout the

archipelago have been set aside for tourism, each with a single resort.

Some divers come here looking for liveaboard adventures. With so much ocean to explore, who can blame them? For those seeking shipboard adventures, there are several well-appointed and well-known liveaboards that operate in these waters. But for some, the idea of spending time in a luxury resort with access to world-class diving just minutes away from spectacular beaches and comfortable accommodation is an unbeatable combination.

Our adventure in the Maldives centered on the Ari Atoll, with a home base on Rangali Island and the Conrad Resort. After arriving in the international airport on Male, we boarded a seaplane for a quick

30-minute flight to Rangali. From the air we had spectacular views of the islands, reefs and atolls of this very special place. Like a necklace of fine jewels, the islands dot the blue water below and each one looks more inviting than the next. Visitors take speedboats or seaplanes to their respective resorts. We were fortunate that a seaplane is necessary to get to Rangali, which provided us a unique perspective on the islands and, for us, was the much-preferred option!

After settling in and getting a good night's sleep in an over-water bungalow, it was time to go diving. Our first dive



- 1 A coral grouper opens wide for a tooth cleaning session
- 2 The reefs of the Maldives explode with colours
- 3 This honey combed moray leers at the camera
- 4 Mantis shrimp defending its lair
- 5 A superbly camouflaged leaf fish blends in with the reef terrain



6 A school of plankton eating white edge soldierfish *Myripristis vittata*

7 The striking powder blue surgeonfish *Acanthurus leucosternon* often forms large and dense schools in the Maldives Found in most clear water reef habitats to about 20m.

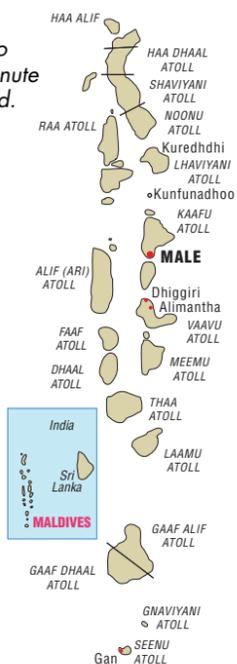
8 A gaudily coloured bivalve.

9 The jewel fairy basslet *Pseudanthias squamipinnis* is found around coral outcrops in clear lagoons, patch reefs and steep slopes to a depth of 35m.

10 The beautiful red fire goby *Nemateleotris magnifica* is found on the upper reef.

11 Visitors transfer to seaplane for a 30 minute flight to Rangali Island.

12 These fish know they have to give this shark a wide berth!



was on the Angaga Thila, a short boat ride away aboard a traditional *dhoni*, which was set up as a well-equipped dive boat. A 'Thila' is a coral formation that rises sharply from the atoll floor and reaches within five to 15 metres of the surface. Clouds of colourful reef fish swarm the tops of these small coral mountains while the sides provide endless nooks and crannies for more secretive marine life. We spotted schools of fairy basslets in blazing reds, oranges and purples flitting among the coral fingers, inspiring us to refer to these waters as 'The Rainbow Sea'. In addition, blue fusiliers patrolled the reefs, swooping along and paying us divers almost no mind. Deeper along the reef walls we found parrotfish, groupers and moray eels, all warily casting an eye to the strange bubble blowing visitors swimming through their territory.

Fenfushi Thila is another spectacular coral jungle, complete with cleaning stations, resident moray eels and numerous anemones, each with a resident family of photogenic anemonefish. Here we were mesmerized as gaudily coloured surgeonfish swam by, the powder-blue surgeonfish perhaps the most frequently seen in these waters.

Our dives in the Air Atoll also included the famous Manta Point, where we encountered manta rays hovering above in the currents. We were also very fortunate to swim with a juvenile whale



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shark for a few moments before it descended out of view, even though we were here at a time when whale sharks are not very commonly seen.

At Mandhoo Corner, a curve in the fringing reef near Mandhoo Island, our macro photography interests exploded as we spotted an ornate ghost pipefish hiding expertly among the fronds of a sea fan. Without the whoops and hollers of the dive guide, we'd never have seen it! Later, as we descended along the reef, we encountered a sedentary leaf fish and managed to pop-off several shots before moving along down the reef.

On a night dive at Mirhi Thila we saw basket and feather stars in abundance, along with a large peacock mantis shrimp. These crustaceans are perfectly suited to their habitat and have been known to literally smash aquarium glass with their modified front claws. Looking very much like *The Blob* from the movie of the same name, the Maldives sponge snail is endemic to this region and we spotted a nice specimen as we neared the end of our night dive.

Rangali Outside was a reef on the outside of the fringing coral reef near Rangali Island, and it was here that we photographed sweetlips, grouper and myriad species of wrasse. In the Maldives butterflyfish and angelfish come in the most outrageous colours and designs and all were prominent on these dives.

CLOUDS OF COLOURFUL REEF FISH SWARM THE TOPS OF THESE SMALL CORAL MOUNTAINS WHILE THE SIDES PROVIDE ENDLESS NOOKS AND CRANNIES FOR MORE SECRETIVE MARINE LIFE. WE SPOTTED SCHOOLS OF FAIRY BASSLETS IN BLAZING REDS, ORANGES AND PURPLES... DEEPER ALONG THE REEF WALLS WE FOUND PARROTFISH, GROUPERS AND MORAY EELS



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Throughout the week of diving we visited shipwrecks, thilas, walls and other coral mazes filled with abundant marine life. Lionfish, soldierfish, pufferfish and many other intriguing fish species kept our cameras firing and our memory cards full.

Resort diving in the Maldives does not come at the expense of great diving. Divers can enjoy world class diving along spectacular coral jungles while also drinking in the comfort and beauty of the island based resorts. Most of the dives are done as two-tank excursions, although an occasional all-day 3-tank diving safari is offered along with shorter one-tank trips and night dives.

The best months for diving in the Maldives are January through April when the islands are blessed with fine weather and terrific visibility. Once the rainy season starts in May, clouds and storms are frequent all the way through September, with many days of diving lost



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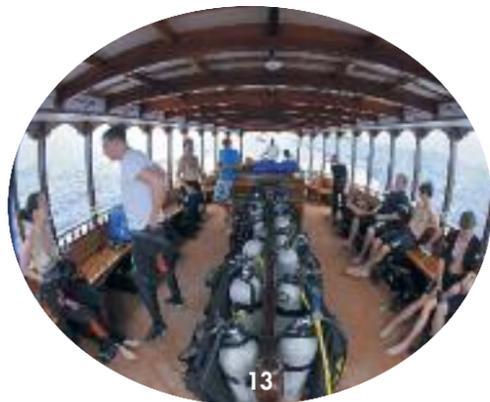


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to rough water conditions. October and November have calm weather but the waters are cloudy due to annual plankton blooms. These months offer reduced visibility in exchange for the opportunity to see larger pelagics such as whale sharks and manta rays. In all seasons, divers should be prepared for strong currents on many dives.

The Maldives have been at the forefront of environmental protection. Recently Mohamed Aslam, the

Environment Minister of the Maldives, announced the protection of coral reefs and waters in and around Baa atoll Hanifaru, Baa atoll An'gafaru and South Ari atoll Maamigili, all with a focus on protecting sharks and other critically threatened species. The reefs here are under siege, as they are the world over, from rising water temperatures and other pressures. For divers who visit today, however, these reefs remain a rainbow of brilliant and vibrant colour and they host a fascinating array of marine life.



13 Divers prepare for their next adventure aboard a well-equipped dhoni

The low-lying coral islands of this pristine paradise are extremely vulnerable if sea levels continue to rise. The government has already been looking for land to purchase for a future relocation of residents if and when that time comes.

So, divers, the time is now! If you're after exciting diving adventures with a dash of decadence, consider one of the Maldives' many luxurious island resorts for a diving vacation unlike any other. You'll be pleased that you did.

#### Getting There

The international airport is located on the main island of Male and is serviced by direct flights from Dubai, Colombo (Sri Lanka) and a few other destinations.

Visitors will board speedboats or seaplanes depending on the location and distance of the resort. Check with your resort for arrangements. Many upscale resorts have pleasant lounges at the main airport where visitors can wait for transfers. Tours of Male can be arranged if the transfer time is longer than a few hours in duration.

A valid passport is required for entry. Visas are not required.

#### Baggage

Allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave. There are strict weight limits on the seaplanes so check with your carriers before departing.

#### Weather

The Maldives has an equatorial tropical climate. December through April is the dry season. February through April is the hottest time of the

year, with temperatures in the 80s and 90s Fahrenheit each day. May through November is the rainy season.

#### Currency

The local currency is the rufiya (Rf) but US Dollars and Euros are generally accepted at all resorts.

#### Electricity

Power voltage is 220 Volts to 240 Volts (50 Hz). Double-check your appliance compatibility before plugging them in!

Converters/adaptors are usually available on request at your hotel front desk.

#### Customs

The Republic of the Maldives is a strict Islamic nation. Alcohol, firearms, pornography, pork, narcotics and 'idols of worship' are among the prohibited items. Because of the concern over evangelists spreading their beliefs within the country, attention is paid to religious items. A small crucifix, worn as jewelry, is unlikely to be a problem but a suitcase with several bibles will likely create concern!



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