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Shades of Blue



**MICHAEL SALVAREZZA
& CHRISTOPHER WEAVER**
dive the central atolls of the
Maldives by liveaboard

AZURE. INDIGO. TURQUOISE. Aqua. Sapphire. Cobalt. There are seemingly innumerable shades of the colour blue... and every single one of them seems to be on display in the Maldives.

Standing on the deck of the *Conte Max*, the luxury liveaboard that was to be our home for the next week, we gazed out across a patch of South Male Atoll and tried to count the different shades of blue we could see.

We stopped at seven, not because we couldn't count more colours but because the ship's bell had rung,

indicating that it was time for the next dive-briefing.

From the air, the Maldivian islands appear very much like a set of small stones flung across a wide expanse of the Indian Ocean. Each of these tiny specks of sand is surrounded by a fringing coral reef, creating the idyllic postcard-perfect tropical island vistas prized by the resorts that have been built on many of these islands.

The islands themselves are part of the coral-reef systems of the various atolls that comprise the Maldives, atolls that have become legendary in the world of

diving, such as Ari, South Male, Felidhoo, Malaku and Baa. While land-based diving from the resort islands can be very rewarding, the best way to explore this vast ocean wilderness is by liveaboard.

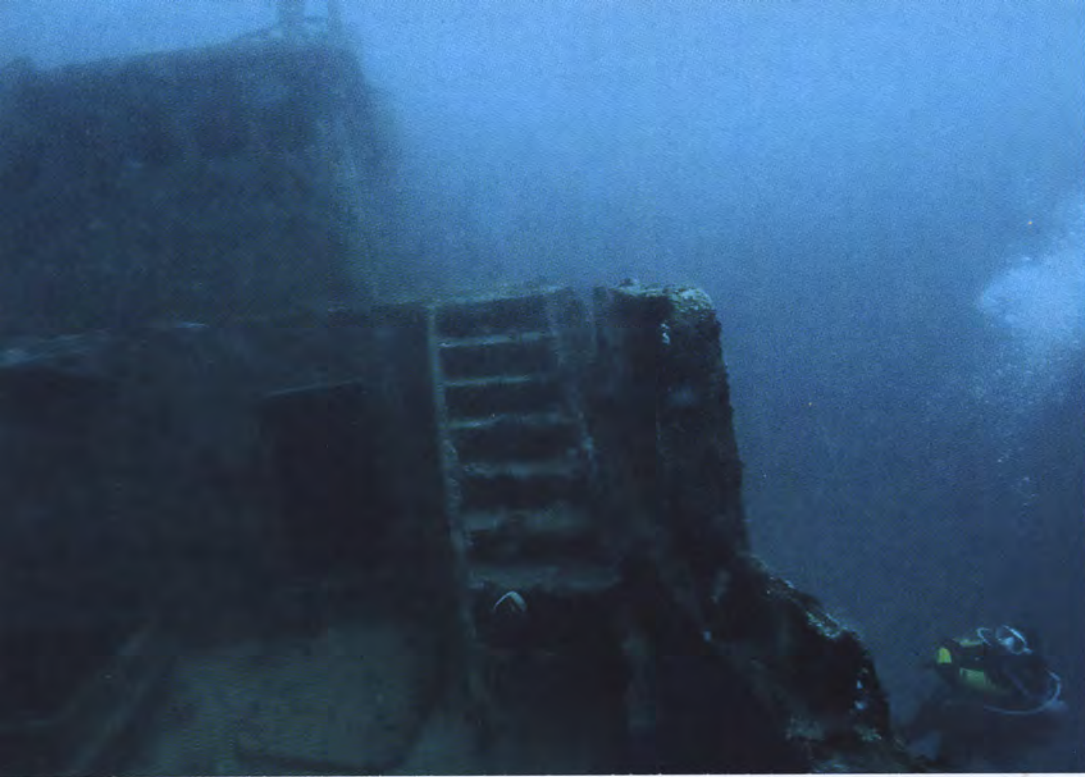
Shortly after our arrival in the capital Male, we met the boat and began steaming south to South Male Atoll, our overall objective to explore the central atolls.

Within a few hours we had pulled up at our first dive-site, Velassaru Giri, a massive coral outcropping off Velassaru Island that would be our check-out dive.

We quickly climbed aboard the

Below, from left:
A juvenile emperor
angelfish is hard to miss;
the liveaboard *Conte Max*.





dhoni, the dedicated dive-tender, and after a short ride and a giant stride entry later we were on the reef.

We were immediately impressed by the clouds of anthias darting in and out of the hard-coral outcroppings, and the countless redtooth triggerfish along the coral wall. None of these dared to stray more than a few inches from the safety of the crevices into which they would quickly hide on our approach. For a check-out dive, this wasn't bad.

OUR DIVES AT VELASSARU ISLAND

included exciting drifts through the channels in the fringing reef and one on an unidentified fishing-boat known as the Kuda Giri Wreck. This picturesque shipwreck lies perfectly upright alongside a coral drop-off, and is an ideal place to observe the schools of brilliant red soldierfish that hide within the wreckage.

To reach it, divers descend along the coral wall and then make a 100m swim over the sand at about 25m. The ghostly bow of the vessel emerges from the blue and the wreck comes into view.

You can swim along the deck, peering

Above: Divers explore the wreck of a Maldivian fishing vessel.

Below: Soft corals come into full bloom at night.

Bottom, from left: Clouds of anthias swarm on the reef; a sting ray searches for food.

into the dark recesses of the cargo holds, but for the experienced it is very difficult to resist the temptation to venture inside. The vessel, once dedicated to removing marine-life from the sea, now provides a home for a large population.

Divers exploring the Maldives must be prepared for strong tidal currents that flood in and out of the atolls. They can be disconcerting for unprepared divers, but they bring with them breathtaking action.

At Gulhi Island we dived Miyaru Faru

Corner, a bend in the coral formation marking the entrance to a channel.

After a quick descent to the reef, we were swept up in the powerful current and were soon flying over the reef. Our hearts raced as we passed over hard- and soft-coral colonies, and glimpsed briefly the brilliantly coloured tentacles of sea anemones flapping in the tidal flow.

These flyovers were nice, but our objective was the actual bend in the reef, where the big action of predators and prey was taking place. We were there in a few moments.

Using current-hooks, we allowed ourselves to float in the water column like kites and watched excitedly as grey reef sharks, jack, tuna and eagle rays drifted by in the deep water.

When it was time to move on, we detached our hooks and resumed our flight over the reef until we reached a more tranquil area and slowed to enjoy the shallow sections of the coral jungle.

FURTHER SOUTH, WE VISITED the reefs alongside Alimatha Island in Felidhoo Atoll. The memory-cards in our cameras were quickly filled to capacity with macro and wide-angle images. Green turtles, schools of oriental sweetlips and massive clouds of red-tailed butterflyfish come first to mind.

But it was the tiny world of macro photography that really came to life here. As we peered beneath coral overhangs dripping with soft coral, we spotted many species of angel and butterflyfish, all featuring dazzling colour designs, like the bold yellow bands of the royal angelfish, or the mesmerising line-drawings of juvenile emperor angelfish – nature's true works of psychedelic art.

Before the *Conte Max* moved on for its final island destination of Guraidhoo, we carried out a unique night-dive at the Alimatha Jetty. Here, as local fishermen clean their catch and discard bits of fish into the water, dozens of nurse sharks, opportunistic jack and stealthy sting rays congregate for an easy meal.





Above: Watching curious nurse sharks.

Right, from top: Convict surgeonfish often occur in vast schools that roll over the reef in search of food; a strikingly coloured starfish; Maldives anemonefish usually live in pairs or family groups.



For divers, the action is spellbinding as the predators search for food, completely unaware of and uninterested in the voyeurs. We remained fairly motionless on a sandy bottom in about 14m and watched as 70-80 nurse sharks patrolled above and countless jack sliced through the water column.

An occasional ray would glide lazily through the group of divers, scouring the sand for food. It's a somewhat artificial dive because the marine-life has been conditioned to seek food there, but it's still an exciting experience that produces smiles of satisfaction every time.

Fierce currents and dizzying arrays of marine life characterised our final dives at Guraidhoo Island. At a site known as Kandooma Beyru, we descended along a dramatic vertical wall to about 36m and began a brisk drift along the reef, stopping periodically to explore cuts in the wall where we could get out of the current and search for photographic subjects.

It's an interesting sensation to duck into these natural shelters and turn to

peer back out into the blue, watching divers and the occasional jack or trevally glide by in the current.

Careful examination of whip-corals and gorgonians revealed the presence of tiny gobies, each perfectly camouflaged to blend into the host coral they inhabited. But stopping in the flowing water, maintaining neutral buoyancy, and focusing the camera on these tiny subjects as the whip-coral or gorgonian flaps in the watery breeze is no small feat!

IT WAS HERE THAT WE also found a rainbow of large anemones, each with its attendant anemonefish. Green, yellow, white, purple and even day-glo orange were just some of the colours of these anemones, causing us to begin referring to the Maldives as the Rainbow Reef!

While many of our dives would begin in deeper water, often the true circus could be found in the shallows atop the coral-heads. Clouds of yellow sweepers, blue and gold fusiliers, and many schools of snapper and grunt, along with a wide

array of reef fish in eye-popping colours, kept us endlessly entertained.

On one dive, an army of convict surgeonfish rolled over the reef feeding on algae and other detritus in unison, while on others we encountered Napoleon wrasse, titan triggerfish and the uniquely patterned clown triggerfish in the shallows. There really is no reason to go very deep in the Maldives, because much of the interesting life of these reefs can be found in 12m or less.

Pulling anchor and heading back to Male after a week of spectacular diving, we faced into a freshening wind and watched as flying fish took to the air

Below, from left: Jack photographed below a pier at night; a school of red-tailed butterflyfish scour the reef for food.



ahead of the boat while dolphins cavorted in the distance.

The northern monsoon was upon us, and dark clouds hinted at troublesome weather to come. But despite the choppy seas between the atolls, and the growing wind and rain, the *Conte Max* remained a comfortable home on the Indian Ocean.

There are few better ways of becoming immersed in the ocean world of the Maldives than to experience it from a liveboard, free to roam from atoll to atoll, and to discover the wonders that lie beneath the waves in the Maldives' coral jungle.

Below: Even uninhabited islands have been colonised!



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Flights from the UK into Male.

Liveboards such as the *Conte Max* will arrange pick-up at the docks alongside the airport. No visa is required.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ The 33m *Conte Max*, built in 2004, has eight large cabins – a suite, four triples and three twins, taking up to 21 guests. All are *en suite* with air conditioning and there are no bunk beds. There is a diving *dhoni* and a crew and instructor team of at least 11, www.luxuryyachtmaldives.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ The Maldives has an equatorial tropical climate. December-April is the dry season. February-April is the hottest period and May-November is the rainy season.

CURRENCY ▶ Rufiya, but US dollars and euros accepted at most resorts.

PRICES ▶ *Conte Max* charges from US \$2310pp for two sharing on one of its eight-day itineraries. In low season group prices start from \$1850pp. Return flights to Male from £420.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.visitmaldives.com

DEEPER LIGHTNESS.

SEAC scuba snorkelling F1S

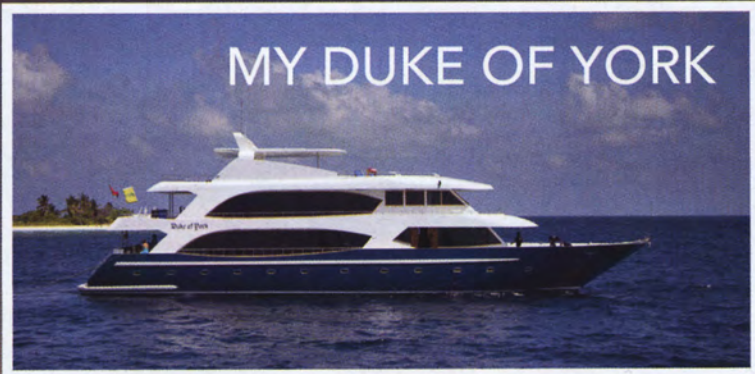
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