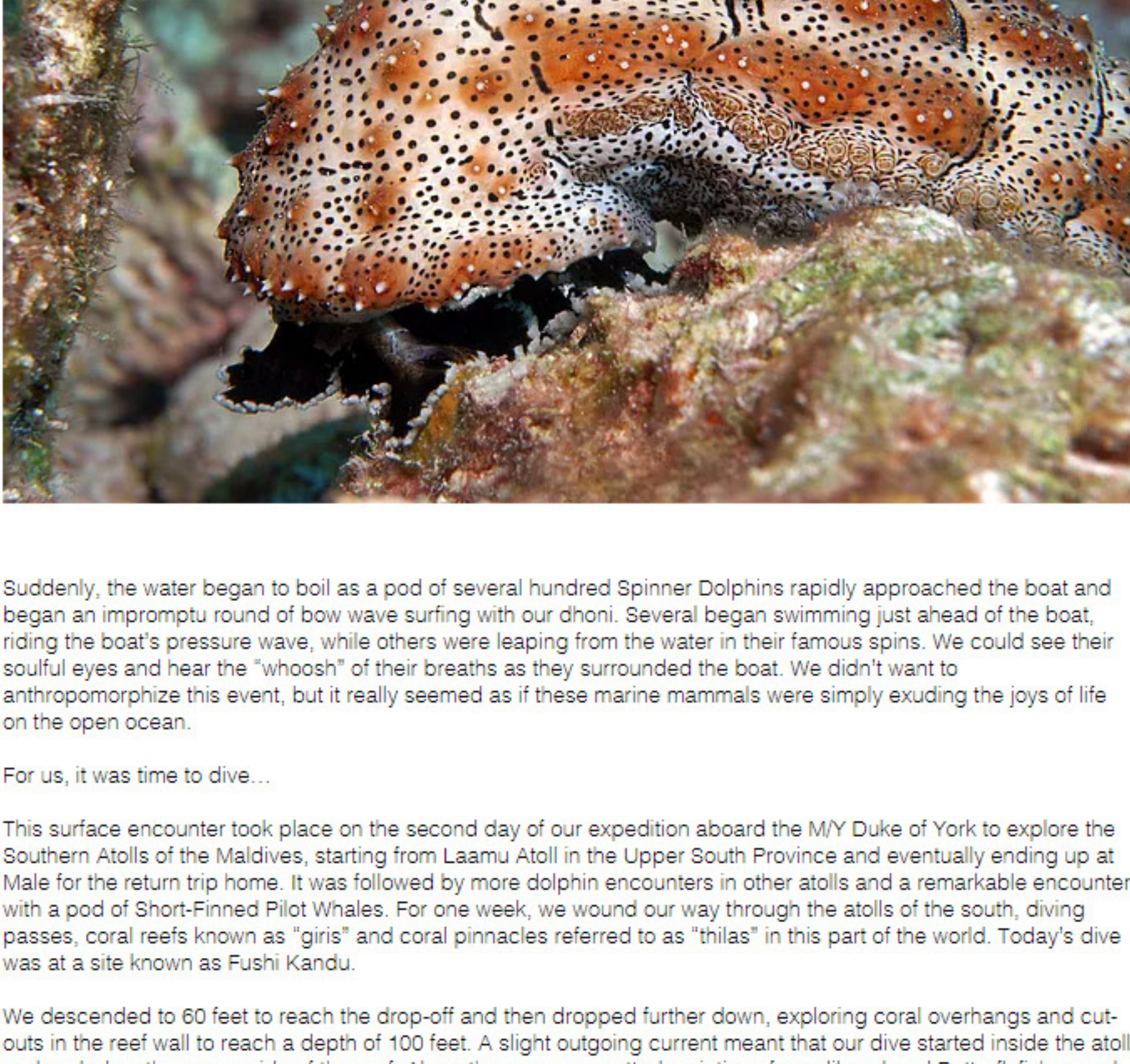


Underwater Adventures with Eco-Photo Explorers

Where the Water Meets the Sky: Exploring the Southern Atolls of the Maldives

December 11, 2018 | Article and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers Michael Salvatoreza and Christopher P. Weaver

The dhoni cut through the flat-as-glass water leaving a wake that quickly disappeared behind us into the sultry haze of an early spring morning in the Maldives. With no other boats in this remote and uninhabited area of the Thaa Atoll, we were enveloped in silence save for the engines of the dive boat and the chatter of the divers preparing for their next dive. Periodically, a Flying Fish would leap from the languid sea and skip across the water leaving fleeting tell-tale tracks on the surface before dropping back into the ocean a few hundred feet away. We were headed to a "pass", a cut in the fringing coral reef around one of the local islands, in the hopes of an exciting dive.



Suddenly, the water began to boil as a pod of several hundred Spinner Dolphins rapidly approached the boat and began an impromptu round of bow waves surfing with our dhoni. Several began swimming just ahead of the boat, riding the boat's pressure wave, while others were leaping from the water in their famous spouts. We could see their soulful eyes and hear the "whoosh" of their breaths as they surrounded the boat. We didn't want to anthropomorphize this event, but it really seemed as if these marine mammals were simply enjoying the joys of life on the open ocean.

For us, it was time to dive...

This surface encounter took place on the second day of our expedition aboard the MY Duke of York to explore the Southern Atolls of the Maldives, starting from Laamu Atoll in the Upper South Province and eventually ending up at Male for the return trip home. It was followed by more dolphin encounters in other atolls and a remarkable encounter with a pod of Short-Finned Pilot Whales. For one week, we wound our way through the atolls of the south, diving passes, coral reefs known as "grins" and coral pinnacles referred to as "nias" in this part of the world. Today's dive was at a site known as Fushi Kandu.

We descended to 60 feet to reach the drop-off and then dropped further down, exploring coral overhangs and cut-outs in the reef wall to reach a depth of 100 feet. A slight outpacing current meant that our dive started inside the atoll and ended on the ocean side of the reef. Along the way, we spotted varieties of gaudily colored Butterflyfishes and Angelfishes, such as the Redtail Butterflyfish and the Yellow-face Angelfish. Swarms of Anthias, sporting brilliant reds and purples, flew above the corals while timid Soldierfish clustered together under coral shelters and rocky crevices.

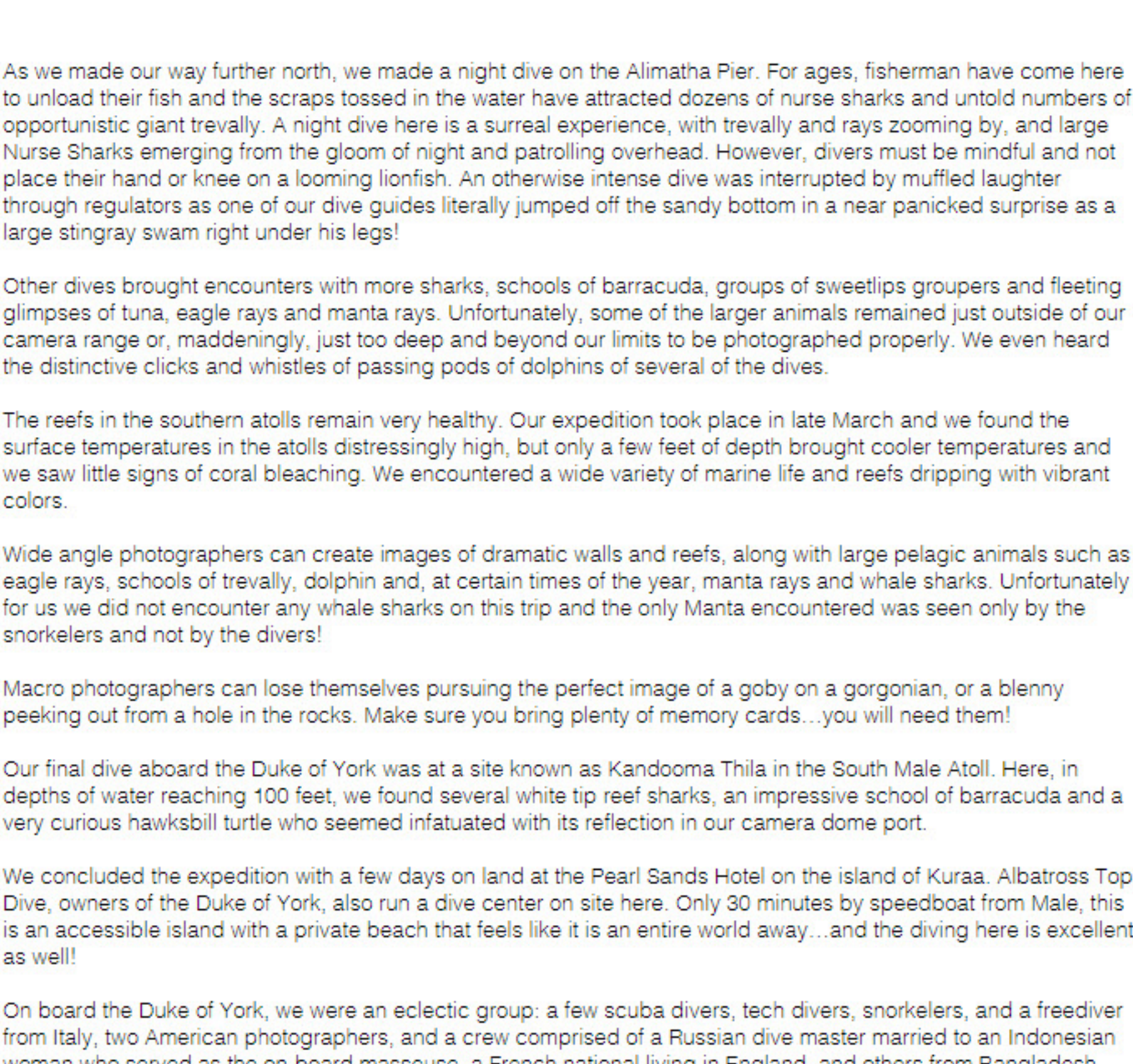
But the real action started as we reached the corner or bend in the pass opening. Because of the rush of water entering or leaving the atolls on the tidal exchanges, large schools of pelagics gather here looking to prey on smaller fish who are similarly taking advantage of the nutrients introduced by the movement of the water. Here, massive schools of Bigeye Trevally mixed with equally dense groupings of snappers, and all of them kept a wary eye on the Whitestrip and Grey Reef Sharks patrolling through the pass in the distance.

Emerging from the water into the warm morning air, everybody had a huge grin on their face as we all prepared for breakfast.

The daily routine aboard the Duke of York allowed for plenty of dive time between sumptuous meals and ample opportunity for rest and relaxation. We would wake each morning to a dive briefing before heading out in the accompanying custom dive boat known as a dhoni for a typically exhilarating dive followed by breakfast, a mid-morning dive, lunch and an afternoon dive before dinner. Plenty of nitrogen to be had by all!

After leaving the Thaa Atoll, we headed for a secluded stretch of the Meenu Atoll and a dive at a site known as Kureli Kandu. On this dive, we found ourselves photographing a curious Honeycombed Moral Eel as he poked his head out of its lair to inspect our wide-angle domes on our camera housings. On this dive, we had more current than previous dives. Diving the Maldives often involves careful consideration for the currents and paying attention to dive briefings is important. SMBs and reef hooks are also a good idea as the water rushing through the pass openings can do so with unpredictable fury at times. Of course, it is this movement of water that brings the astonishing aggregations of marine life to these sites.

In the Vaavu Atoll, we made a dive on a place known as Fotteyo Kandu. The coral walls of this pass are literally draped in soft corals. Brilliant yellow, orange, purple and red corals adorn the rocks and coral overhangs while schools of snapper, soldier fish and butterfly fish filled by. Here, we also encountered giant triggerfish, lionfish and various species of the ubiquitous anemonefish. The dive was so special we decided to repeat it the next day.



As we made our way further north, we made a night dive on the Alimatha Pier. For ages, fisherman have come here to unload their fish and the scraps tossed in the water have attracted dozens of nurse sharks and untold numbers of opportunistic giant trevally. A night dive here is a surreal experience, with trevally and rays zooming by, and large Nurse Sharks emerging from the gloom of night and patrolling overhead. However, divers must be mindful and not place their hand or knee on a looming lionfish. An otherwise intense dive was interrupted by muffled laughter through regulators as one of our dive guides literally jumped off the sandy bottom in a near panicked surprise as a large stingray swam right under his legs!

Other dives brought encounters with more sharks, schools of barracuda, groups of sweetlips groupers and feeting glimpses of tuna, eagle rays and manta rays. Unfortunately, some of the larger animals remained just outside of our camera range or maddeningly, just too deep and beyond our limits to be photographed properly. We even heard the distinctive clicks and whistles of passing pods of dolphins of several of the dives.

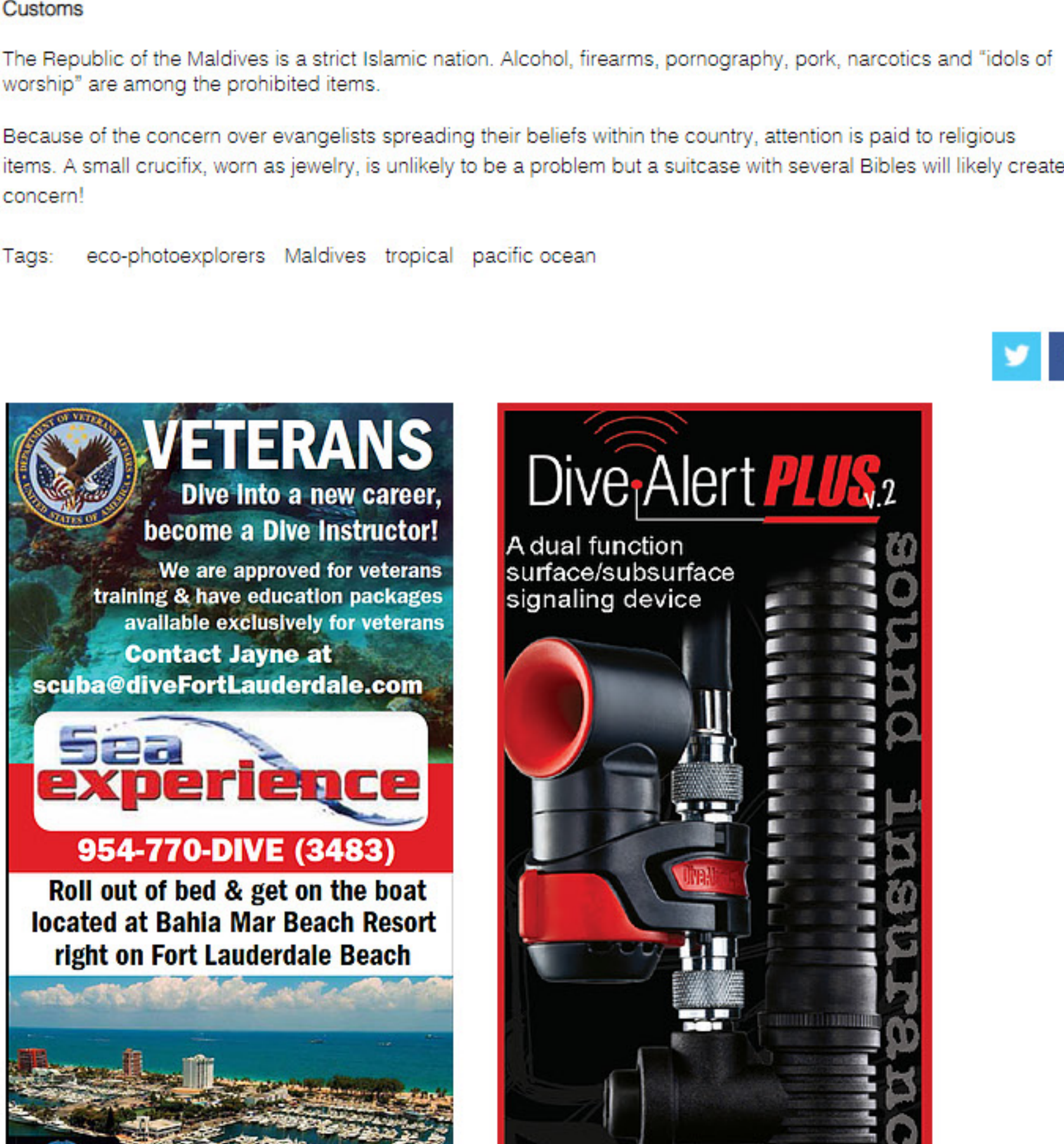
The reefs in the southern atolls remain very healthy. Our expedition took place in late March and we found the surface temperatures in the atolls distressingly high, but only a few feet of depth brought cooler temperatures and we saw little signs of coral bleaching. We encountered a wide variety of marine life and reefs dripping with vibrant colors.

Wide angle photographers can create images of dramatic walls and reefs, along with large pelagic animals such as eagle rays, schools of trevally, dolphin and, at certain times of the reef, manta rays and whale sharks. Unfortunately for us we did not encounter any whale sharks on this trip and the only Manta encountered was seen only by the snorkelers and not by the divers!

Macro photographers can lose themselves pursuing the perfect image of a goby on a gorgonian, or a blenny peeking out from a hole in the rocks. Make sure you bring plenty of memory cards... you will need them!

Our final dive aboard the Duke of York was at a site known as Kandooma Thila in the South Male Atoll. Here, in depths of water reaching 100 feet, we found several white tip reef sharks, an impressive school of barracuda and a very curious hawksbill turtle who seemed infatuated with its reflection in our camera dome port.

We concluded the expedition with a few days on land at the Pearl Sands Hotel on the island of Kuraa. Albatross Top Dive, owners of the Duke of York, also run a dive center on site here. Only 30 minutes by speedboat from Male, this is an accessible island with a private beach that feels like it is an entire world away... and the diving here is excellent as well!



Getting There

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

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

There are domestic flights available on Maldivian Airlines for atolls in the south and north.

Liveaboard dive boats, such as the Duke of York, will arrange pickup right at the docks alongside the airport.

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

Diving and Accommodation

The 118ft36m Duke of York built in 2010, has 10 large en suite cabins all with air conditioning. There is a diving dhoni and a team of at least 11.

www.luxuryyachtmaldives.com

When to go

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 used in the Maldives is 220 Volts to 240 Volts (50 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk.

Prices:

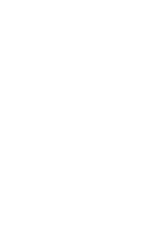
Duke of York charges from US \$2555 pp for two sharing an 8-day itinerary. Nitrox is available on board free of charge.

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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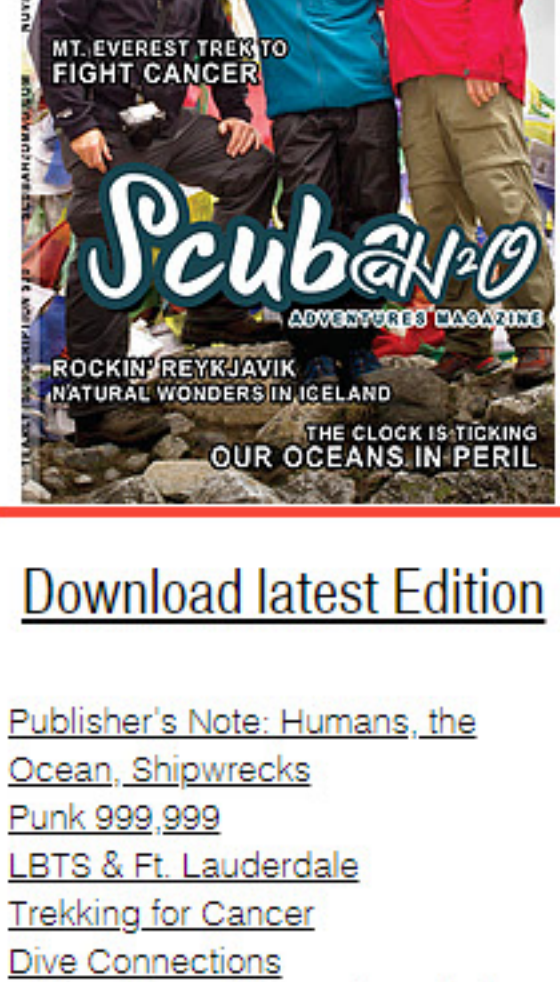
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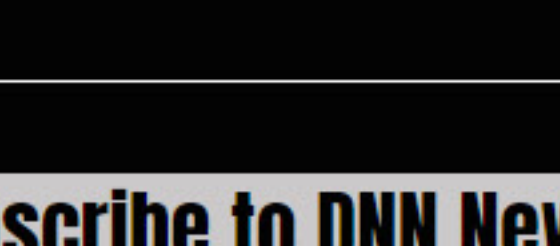
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