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Underwater Adventures with Eco-Photo Explorers

Hurray for Huraa: A Maldives Escape

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

There's a Maldivian legend that describes how God, after he made the world, was overcome with emotion at the beauty of his creation and that he shed a few tears as a result which fell into the Indian ocean, giving origin to the Maldive Islands.

Indeed, as we flew over the atolls and islands of the Maldives on our approach into the capital city of Male, we could not help but marvel at the sublime beauty of this island nation. Myriad tiny islands, surrounded by azure blue water, lie strewn across this vast stretch of ocean as if a bag of jewels had broken apart and spilled its precious gems onto the water.

We landed into Male and the tranquility of the aerial scene was instantly punctured by the frenetic activity of the international airport. Hustling through, we caught sight of the capital city just across a small stretch of water. High rise office buildings, construction cranes and mosques all contributed to the skyline. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of boats were making their way to and fro…speedboats, fishing vessels, commercial ships and liveaboard yachts intermingled in the bustling waterway. It felt hot, crowded and chaotic.

But this was just a passing moment, the price of admission to a nation of proud elegance and jaw dropping beauty. In just a few short moments, we had been whisked away by a speedboat headed for the nearby island of Huraa, located in the Male Atoll. Huraa is 30 minutes and an entire universe away from the choking confines of Male.

We arrived shortly after to a working dock on the island and were transported by golf cart to the Pearl Sands Beach Resort, a lovely property situated on a spectacular stretch of impossibly beautiful sand. With 32-rooms, a nice open-air restaurant and an onsite spa, we were tempted to retreat the comfort of a beach chair and skip the diving.

But, we were here to dive, and the Albatross Top Dive Center on site was our first stop after checking in. Time to schedule our dives, prepare our gear and get our camera systems ready.

The next morning, we boarded the dive Dhoni at the dock and headed off to the first dive of the day at a site known as The Aquarium. This is a sloping reef that opens onto a wide, sandy channel at about 100 feet of water. The Aquarium gets its name from the extreme profusion of fish life that seems to aggregate here. Large schools of Snapper, Grunts and Bigeye Trevally meander in circles in several of the coral cutouts.

As we swam along the reef, slowly descending to the sandy bottom, we spotted a curious Spotted Moray Eel poking its head out from its lair between two rocks. We maneuvered in the slight current to try for the best camera angle and as soon as we snapped the final image, a Hawksbill Turtle caught our eye cruising about 25 feet shallower on the reef. Almost as if fake, this turtle actually had a heart-shaped marking on its shell…was she trying to send us a message?
The Maldives are known for the outrageously colorful fish life abounding on its reefs. If you are a macro photographer, you will delight in searching for nudibranchs, anemone shrimp, blennies, gobies or porcelain crabs in the nooks and crannies of the coral jungles. We spotted a Decorator Crab that had us hysterically laughing with its trio of small anemones attached to its borrowed shell.

Perhaps most entertaining, and often most frustrating for photographers, are the Anemonefish. Arrestingly beautiful they wiggle nervously in and out of the photogenic tentacles of the host anemone, moving out of focus or view the instant you press the shutter release. Good anemonefish images come with a healthy dose of throwaway images…its yet another price of admission to the beauty of the Maldives!

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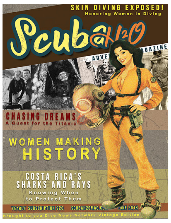

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Some of the best marine life can often be found in the passes, or cuts, in the circling coral reef of the islands. Here, large volumes of water rush through during the tidal cycles, attracting huge schools of fish and pelagics looking for a meal. At Kani Corner, a dive site located at the bend in the reef near a pass, we spotted schools of Red Tail Butterflyfish sweeping over the reef, along with large groups of snapper and barracuda. In the pass, we saw a pair of Eagle Rays swoop through along with Whitetip Reef and Grey Reef Sharks in the distance.

The action is non-stop and it always seems as if our time is too short when we head to the surface for our safety stop, regardless of how long the dive was!

Besides diving, the center can organize snorkeling tours and dolphin encounters.

There are numerous other dive sites to explore off Huraa, but we also wanted to spend some time touring the island itself. This is a special place. Only a half hour from Male, this is an island that is just beginning to open its doors to tourism. Using the golf cart to explore, we met some of the local residents and got a sense of what daily life is like in this tine corner of the world. We spotted children leaving school wearing backpacks with colorful princess images alongside their parents in traditional Muslim attire. The traditional call to prayer would often ring out from the local mosque, and everyone we met flashed us a wide smile and a friendly nod of the head.

The dive team and staff at the Albatross Dive Center were extremely professional and very helpful. Our stay on Huraa, and our dives here, were memorable in both their underwater drama and in the peaceful time above the water. Huraa seems like it exists in the way that much of the world wishes it could.

Indeed, at dinner one evening, we struck up a conversation with one of the waiters named Hassan. Born and raised on Huraa, Hassan began talking about his love for soccer, or football as he calls it. Interestingly, the topic changed to the state of the world. And here, on this remote island so far removed from the rest of the world, Hassan profoundly said that "What's happening in the world today is separating us. Sports is there to bring people together. We all need to come together!"

Hurray for Hussan, and Hurray for Huraa.

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 next 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.

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

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.

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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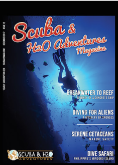

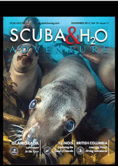

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