

UNDERWATER *Journal*

A Diving Adventure Magazine

Maldives' Ari Atoll **- Resort Based Diving in the Rainbow Sea -**

**Diving the Beagle Channel -
Discovering Patagonia's Underwater Attractions**

Subspace RED EPIC-X Underwater housing

Profile - UW Camera Man, Didier Noirot

DAN Corner: Mastering the Art of Buoyancy Control

Diving with the Chambered Nautilus

This publication is
underwritten in part by:



Issue 28 - 2013

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Cover: Portrait of this Jewel Fairy Basslet was made with a Nikon D200 DSLR camera and Nikon 60mm f2.8mm macro lens with exposure setting 200 iso with shutter speed at 60 sec. at f18. Photo: © Eco-Photo Explorers



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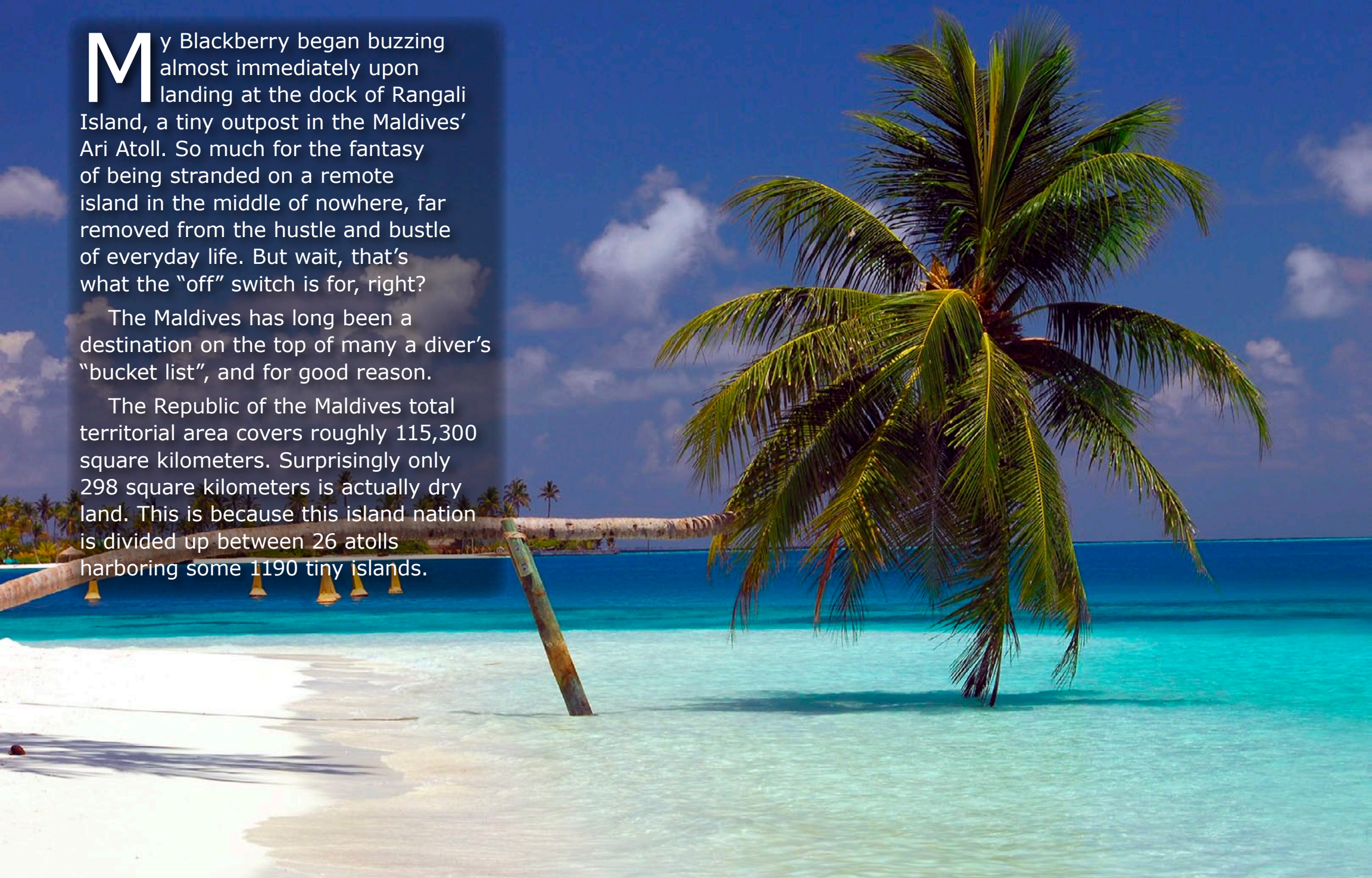
Maldives' Ari Atoll Resort-Based Diving in the Rainbow Sea

*Story & Photos by
Michael Salvarezza &
Christopher P. Weaver*

My Blackberry began buzzing almost immediately upon landing at the dock of Rangali Island, a tiny outpost in the Maldives' Ari Atoll. So much for the fantasy of being stranded on a remote island in the middle of nowhere, far removed from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But wait, that's what the "off" switch is for, right?

The Maldives has long been a destination on the top of many a diver's "bucket list", and for good reason.

The Republic of the Maldives total territorial area covers roughly 115,300 square kilometers. Surprisingly only 298 square kilometers is actually dry land. This is because this island nation is divided up between 26 atolls harboring some 1190 tiny islands.





But for some, spending time in a luxury resort with access to world-class diving just minutes away from spectacular beaches and comfortable accommodations is a more alluring combination, and less difficult to find than you think.

While many of the islands are uninhabited, mainly due to their size being too small for habitation, a number of islands have been set aside for tourism, each generally home to a single resort. Surrounded by innumerable reefs teeming with life, the Maldives low-lying coral islands uphold the promise of a living postcard; each with picture perfect lagoons, brilliant white sand beaches and swaying palm trees.

A split view of a few coral outcroppings mere steps away from our room.

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Our own Maldivian adventure begins in the center of Ari Atoll, with a home base on Rangali Island, home to the plush and luxurious Conrad Resort. Adding to this oasis of civilized living is a vast and pristine ocean, just waiting for us to dive in.



After arriving in the international airport on Male, we quickly boarded a seaplane for a quick 30 minute flight to Rangali. Along the way, we got 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!



The Maldives are spread across a large swath of ocean like so many jewels cast into the sea.

Due to the region's limitation of dry land, seaplane service is one of the primary means for divers to get to Rangali Island.

Who wouldn't dream of being here?





After settling in and getting a good night's sleep in an over-water bungalow, it was time to go diving. Our first dive was on the Angaga Thila, a short boat ride away aboard a traditional Dhoni, which was set up as a well-equipped dive boat.

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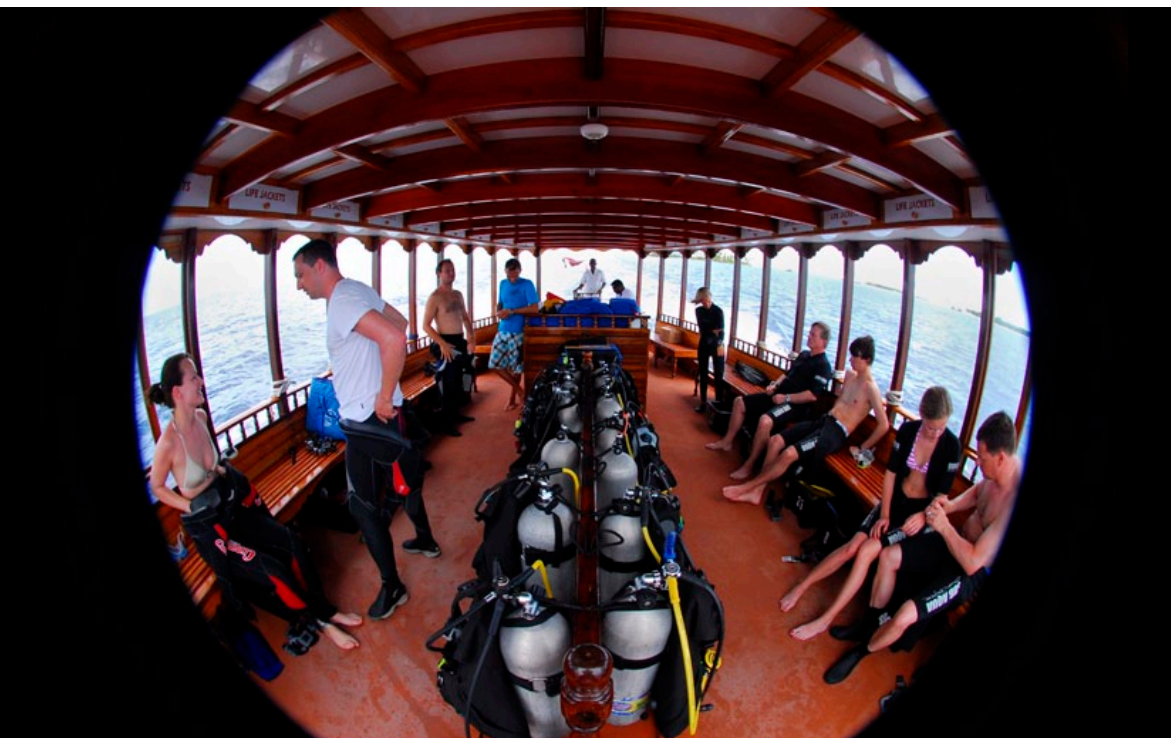
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ISLAND EXPOSURE





A "Thila" is a coral formation that rises sharply from the atoll floor and reaches within 5-15 meters of the surface.


Clouds of colorful reef fish swarm the tops of these coral formations while the sides of these small mountains provide numerous 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 Parrot fish, Groupers and Moray Eels, all warily casting an eye to the strange bubble blowing visitors swimming through their homes.



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 colored Surgeonfish swam by, the Powder-Blue Surgeonfish perhaps the most frequently seen in these waters.

A Coral Grouper opens wide for a teeth cleaning



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Our dives in the Air Atoll also took us to 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 Shark for a few fleeting moments before he 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 would never have seen it! Later, as we descended along the reef, we encountered a sedentary Leaf Scorpion fish (above) and managed to pop-off several photos before moving along down the reef.



Rangali Outside was the name of the 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 of colors and designs and all were on prominent display on these dives.

Through a week of diving, we visited shipwrecks, Thilas, walls and other coral mazes filled with abundant marine life. Lionfish, Soldierfish, Pufferfish and many other species of intriguing fish kept our cameras busy and our memory cards full.

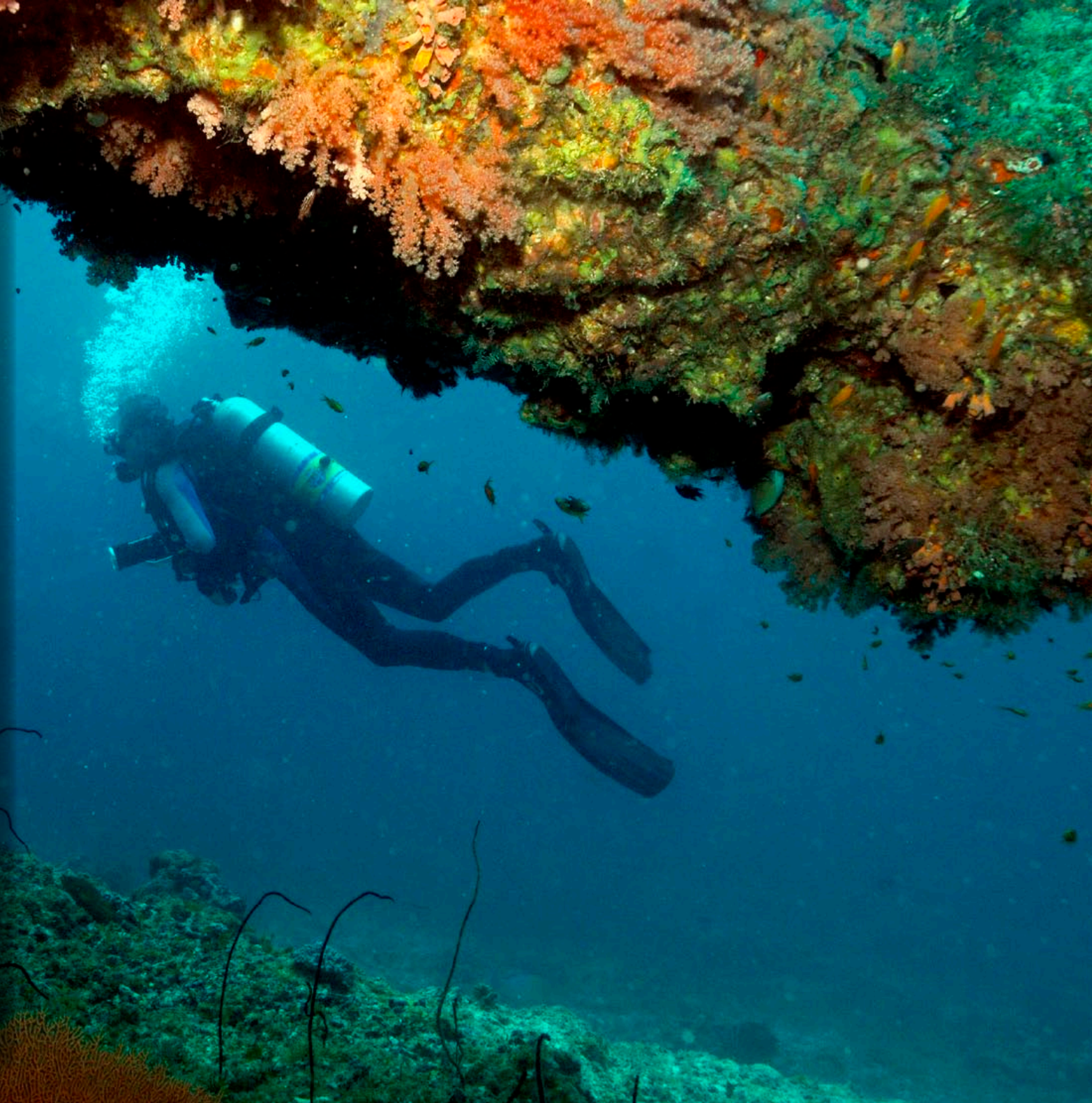
On a night dive at Mirhi Thila, we saw Basket Stars and Feather Stars in abundance, along with a large Peacock Mantis Shrimp. These crustaceans are perfectly suited for their habitat and can literally smash aquarium glass with their modified front claws. Looking very much like "The Blob" from the movie 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.



The Diving Experience

As we discovered, choosing a resort-based dive vacation in the Maldives does not represent a compromise as compared to live-aboards. Indeed, divers can enjoy world class diving along spectacular coral jungles while also drinking in the comfort and beauty of the islands. 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 to rough conditions on the water. October and November have calm weather but the waters are cloudy with 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.



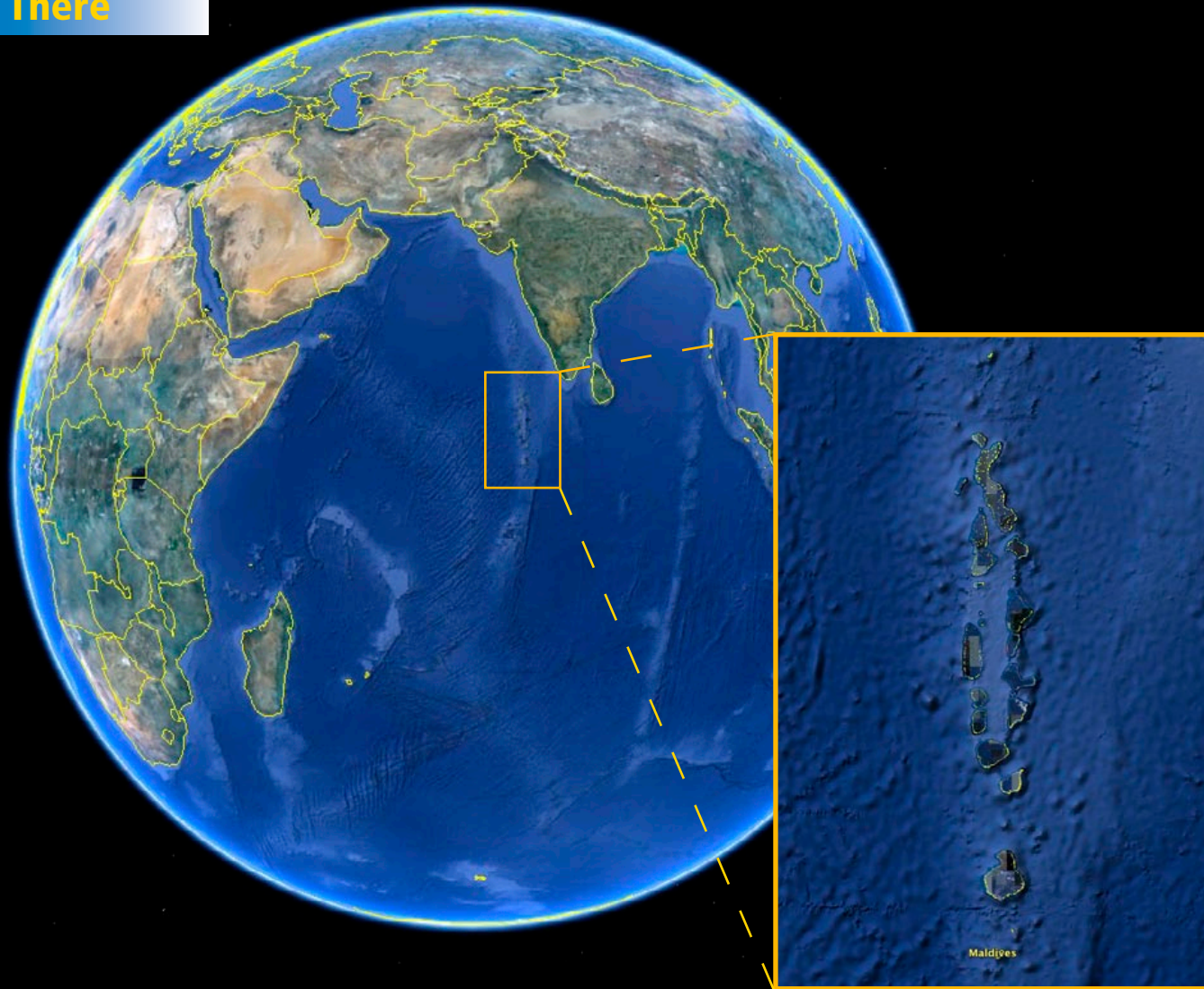
The Maldivian Islands have been at the forefront of environmental protection. Recently, Mohamed Aslam, the Environment Minister of the Maldives, announced the protection of coral reefs and waters in and around Baa atoll Hanifaru, Baa atoll An'gafaru and South Ari atoll Maamigili, all with a focus on providing protection for 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 color and are home to a fascinating array of life.



Sadly, the Maldivian Islands are one of the most vulnerable nations on earth to the effects of climate change. With low lying coral islands comprising the entirety of this nation, rising sea levels will someday swallow up this pristine paradise. Indeed, the government has already been looking for land to purchase for a future relocation of its residents when that time comes.

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

- MS & CP



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 only international airport in the Maldives is located on the main island of Male (airport code MLE). It is serviced with direct flights from Colombo, Sri Lanka (airport code CMB) and a few other destinations.

Visitors 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.

Baggage: 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 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.

Passports & Visas: A valid passport is required for entry; no Visa is required.

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!

Diving the Beagle Channel

Discovering Patagonia's Underwater Attractions

*Story & Photos by
Michael Salvarezza &
Christopher P. Weaver*

The southern tip of South America is where you will find Patagonia, a region as wild and remote as any other on Earth. It is also known for its rugged landscape, temperamental weather and frontier feel. Outdoor enthusiasts from around the world come to hike in mountains so jagged they resemble the wild drawings of a child. They also come to experience the region's expansive deserts and impressive waterfalls, and to witness a robust diversity of life, including some 200 species of seabirds that come here to breed.

Indeed, this confluence of natural beauty and remoteness, of unpredictable weather and fearsomely wild landscapes serves as a demarcation point between the tamed and untamed natural world. Patagonia, in many ways, is not just a region of South America...it is very much a state of mind.



Slicing through Patagonia and the area known as Tierra del Fuego is the Beagle Channel. This navigable 150 mile (240km) stretch of water spans the entire southern tip of the South American continent. Along with the Straights of Magellan to the north, and the open ocean Drake Passage to the south, the Beagle Channel is one of three navigable passages around South America between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. For those journeying onward towards Antarctica, the Beagle Channel serves as the gateway to the Drake Passage, known for having the roughest water in the world.

For divers caught up in their excitement of preparing for their polar adventure these waters are often overlooked.

Yet, for those who do, find that it is more than merely as a prelude to the remote regions to the south, but a pleasant surprise in discovering the diving here is quite beautiful with interesting shipwrecks, large jellyfish, huge king crabs, to a multitude of tiny colorful creatures.

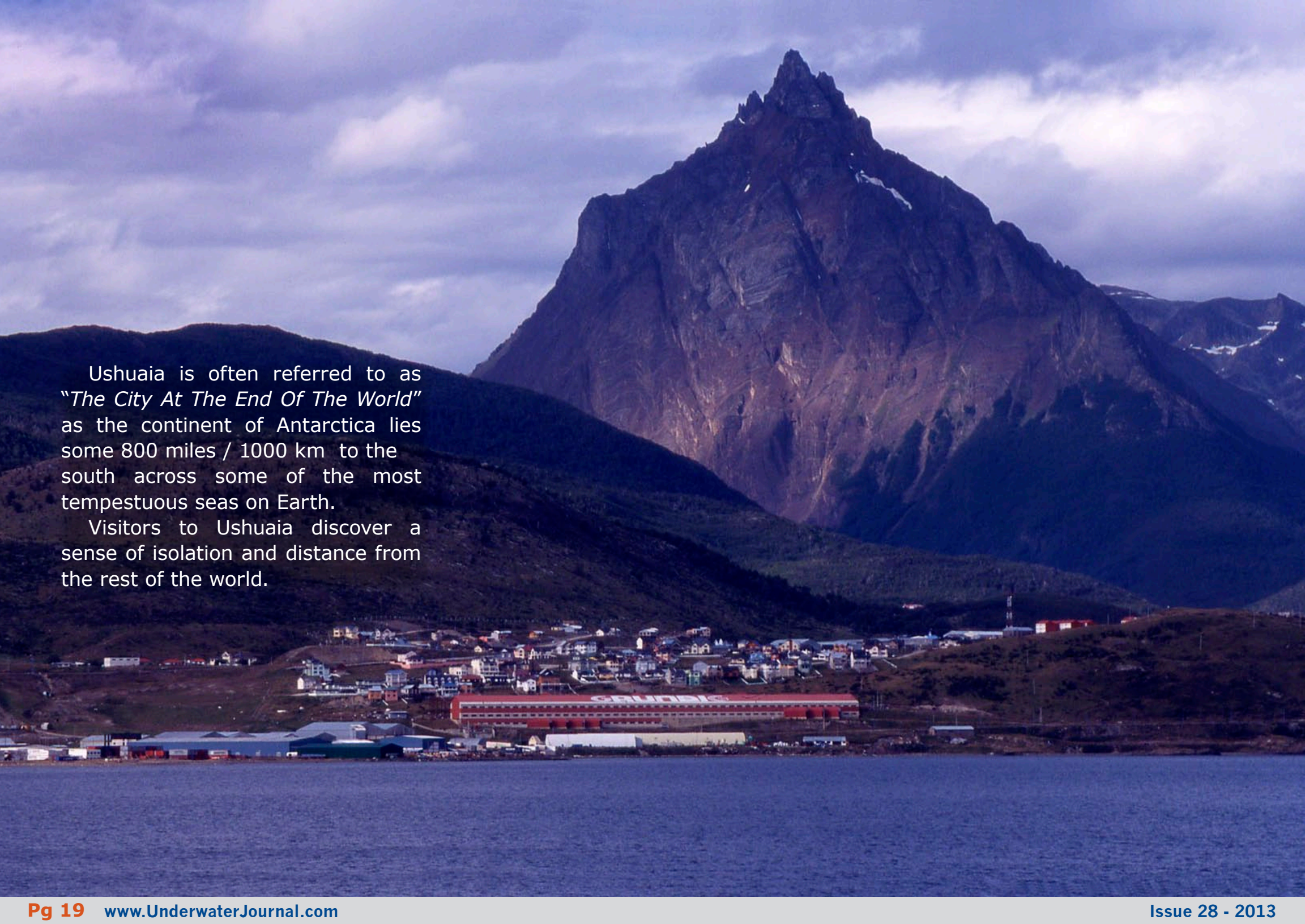
As much as we were eagerly anticipating our own Antarctic adventure, we decided to try the diving in the Beagle Channel when our home away from home on this voyage, the *Polar Pioneer* made a stop at a seaport at the foothills of the Patagonian mountains named Ushuaia.

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Ushuaia is often referred to as "*The City At The End Of The World*" as the continent of Antarctica lies some 800 miles / 1000 km to the south across some of the most tempestuous seas on Earth.

Visitors to Ushuaia discover a sense of isolation and distance from the rest of the world.



Diving in Patagonia is a unique experience as you might decipher by the looks of Ushuaia Divers small dive shop and dive boat.

As inexplicable as it may sound, the town is not without a local dive operation. Ushuaia Divers offers personalized service, a clean and comfortable boat and an unparalleled knowledge of the changeable conditions in this region.

After meeting up with local dive leader Carlos Giuggia, we suit up in our dry suits for our first dive. The waters in the Beagle Channel are certainly on the cold side with water temperatures in winter generally around 36-40°F / 2-4°C. During summer months, temps will reach 46-50°F / 8-10°C.



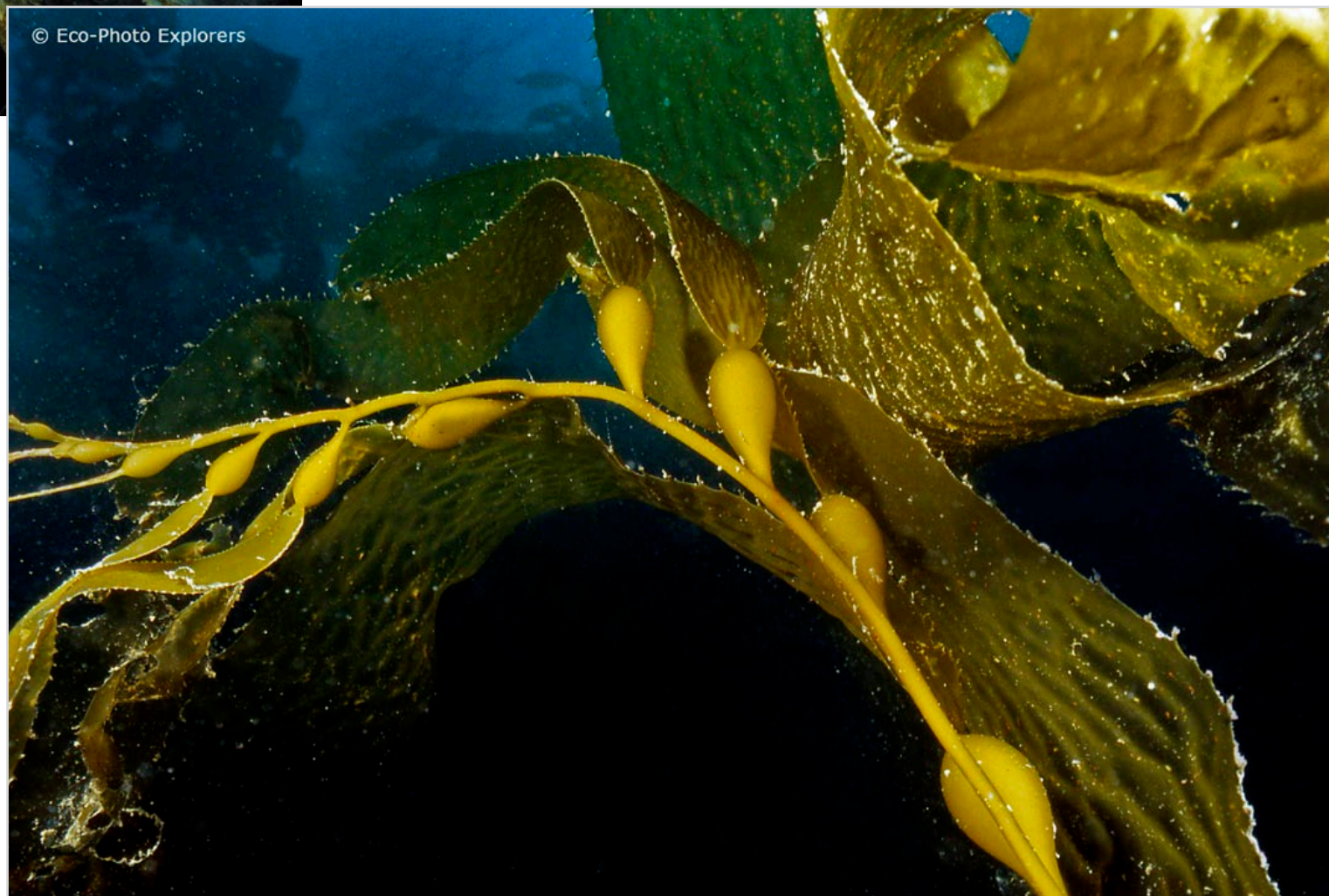


If you do happen to get snagged, try to free yourself without twisting your body. Doing so will only tangle yourself further! If freeing yourself fails, try to double the kelp back on itself until it snaps. This is usually a better solution than using a knife. All good to remember seeing our first along a drop-off near the East Point of Bayo Casco comprised of a pretty large kelp forest.

We dove to 50 feet / 15 meters for 40 minutes and found clear water (30 foot / 9 meter visibility) and a fascinating array of marine life, including King Crabs, Decorator Crabs, starfish and a variety of other crustaceans inhabiting this site. For us, this site reminded us of some of the kelp forest diving in California or the Pacific Northwest, albeit with much different marine life.

The area is also home to dense forests of giant kelp. As much cold water experience as we had, it was still our first time diving in a dense kelp forest.

Carlos gave us the kelp diving basics. To avoid entanglement, avoid descents while inside the kelp, and remember to use the kelp crawl if you find yourself on the surface in the middle of a kelp bed. To perform the kelp crawl, fully inflate your BC to remain as high in the water as possible. To lessen the chance of getting tangled, all dive gear should be tucked away and any loose kelp should be cleared from the gear as much as possible. Then with alternating arms, push the kelp under your body and glide over the top of the canopy. Fins should be trailed behind with no kicking, as they would most likely get tangled. During a kelp crawl, plan the shortest path through the kelp in order to get back to the boat or shore safely.



While this specimen is no giant, King Crabs grow large in the cool waters of the Beagle Channel





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Weathered Wrecks

The weather and water conditions in this region are extremely unpredictable. Indeed, it's been said that in Patagonia the wind is the landlord. Strong storms and lashing winds can arrive suddenly, with almost no warning, and the water conditions can deteriorate rapidly. Because of this, the sea floor is littered with the remains of many unfortunate casualties of this climatological battleground. Many of these shipwrecks are not easily accessible as the same conditions that sank them make diving them nearly impossible. But for shipwreck enthusiasts, there are some wrecks that are regularly visited.

While waiting out our surface interval, we came face to face with the ferociously unpredictable weather in this region. After a morning of calm weather with no winds and peeks of sunshine in the generally cloudy sky, wind speeds suddenly cranked up in a matter of minutes, creating an almost instant 2-3 foot / 1 meter chop in the previously calm channel.

Dark moisture-laden clouds began to roll by, and an ominous drop in temperature blew through the area. It never actually rained, but the howling wind was hair-raising enough!

With that as backdrop, we made our second dive on the *Mañana*, a small wooden boat that ran aground near the airport that sits in 40 feet / 12 meters of water. Covered in sponges, kelp and sea squirts, this wreck is a thriving little eco-system to several species of small fish and King Crabs.

Favorite Sites

Within a short distance of Ushuaia are a number of interesting and colorful dive sites.

Estancia Tunel features a sloping wall of rocks and kelp that drops to about 75 feet / 23 meters in a sheltered bay. Here underwater photographers can enjoy wonderful macro opportunities along with frequent visits from sea lions.

Isla de Los Lobos, located next to the picturesque Les Eclaireurs lighthouse, is surrounded by a huge kelp forest and is home to a sea lion colony. Dives here extend to about 75 feet / 23 meters in depth.

Islas Bridges are a group of four islands that form a natural harbor offering protection from the strong winds often encountered in this area and is a favorite for novice divers and students.

Isla Estorbo is a favorite place for night dives, where divers can find octopuses poking around the kelp along a gentle slope that goes no deeper than 40 feet / 12 meters.

Isla Redonda is a small island located in the heart of the Beagle Channel, directly in front of the Tierra del Fuego National Park. On this island is a small base for the Coast Guard and, colorfully, the World's End Post Office. Deep walls that drop sharply to 88 feet / 27 meters of water surround the island. Here, divers will find giant King Crabs and can explore dense kelp forests.



Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

Michael and Christopher head the New York based organization, Eco-Photo Explorers. Its mission includes promoting interest in protecting our ocean environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography.

You can read about their adventures in Antarctica in issue 25 of the Underwater Journal.

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Other shipwrecks in the area include the *Sarmiento*, a partially submerged old steel steamer located near the eastern part of the Beagle Channel and the *Monte Cervantes*, situated near the Les Eclaireurs lighthouse.

The *Monte Cervantes* is broken into two distinct pieces. The hull lies beyond recreational diving limits at 330 feet / 100 meters but the ship's decking, masts, cabins and other pieces of wreckage are more accessible at 130 feet / 40 meters. However, given the depth, and an absence of natural shelters in an area known for unpredictable weather an advanced dive, this is an advanced dive.

Surfacing from this dive, we were again greeted with the unexpected: a swift surface current had cropped up and the dive boat was pivoting wildly as it struggled to remain at anchor in the chaotically fast-moving waters. We quickly grabbed a stern line and held on tight as we swung back and forth in the water while deliberately making our way back to the boat.

Soon enough we were safely on board, sipping hot coffee, eating fresh biscuits and marveling at this strange and wonderful place.

Ushuaia, the city at the end of the world. The Beagle Channel, gateway to the infamous Drake Passage. Patagonia, land of wild mountains and wilder weather. What more do you need to get your explorer juices flowing?

If you are in these parts, don't overlook the diving opportunities here. Just remember to keep an eye to the sky!

- MS & CP

Language:	Spanish (official), English, Italian, German, and French
Currency:	Argentina peso
Time:	GMT -3
Climate:	Mostly temperate; arid in SE; sub Antarctic in SW
Natural Hazards:	Earthquakes, violent windstorms (pamperos), heavy flooding
Diving Season:	Year round
Diving Services:	Ushuaia Divers (www.tierradelfuego.org.ar/divers/pages/home.html)