

Manta mayhem

Swimming with the gentle giants of Baa Atoll on Asia's western frontier

Story by Christina Hepburn

FOR HONEYMOONERS AND DESERT-ISLAND DREAMERS, the Maldives bills itself as a gateway to heaven on earth. One luxury resort after another has been built on coral-fringed atolls, encircled in icing-sugar sand and sparkling aquamarine.

So you would think it would be overrun by divers from all over. Still, the long, multiple and sometimes tedious flights to access this magical experience have allowed the Maldives to remain a frontier in diving terms, and still an otherworldly place to dive.

Only serious scuba bubbleheads come specifically to dive here. The 26 atolls and some 1,200 islands have many dive sites already mapped, but there is still much more to be discovered underwater. Climate change has affected the behavioural patterns of certain species, as have rising sea-levels.

The highest natural point in the country is now 2.4 metres, or around 8 feet, above sea level. The reefs have made a remarkable recovery from the effects of 1998's coral bleaching episode. But the threat that these picture-perfect atolls will sink into the Indian Ocean remains. Better go before they're gone!

Ari Atoll has long been a dive-vacation target, and many

Maldivian liveaboards pay a visit. At other atolls, though, encounters with other boats can be rare. The vastness of the scattered pearl-like atolls still allows for plenty of discovery.

On a recent liveaboard plying the country's northern waters, dive director Megan Collins and Maldives guide Marta Giachini pore over maps to find the best sites, sometimes exploratory, depending on weather and current.

Some such as Nelaidhoo Thila at Haa Dhaalu Atoll can be mind-blowing. Descend in the right current, and an amphitheatre opens out before you, with several dozen majestic sharks dotted around – black- and white-tips, grey-reef sharks, even the seldom-seen giant guitarfish, some even engaging in their frisky mating dance. Besides that, scrawled filefish, sweetlips, surgeonfish, giant trevally, dog-tooth tuna, spotted eagle rays and marble rays pass by, with thousands of schooling midnight snappers and jacks occasionally blocking your view of the show.

Aficionados of Palau's Blue Corner, perhaps the world's most famous dive site, will feel right at home and surface with a head shake and a giggle.

Across the country, "you can pretty much look through your polarized sunglasses, see a thila or giri [steep coral formations] and it will have tons of fish and healthy hard corals, same for about any wall," Collins says.

The far south of the Maldives is best accessed by liveaboard and allow divers in search of new experiences to dive infrequently explored sites and remote uncharted waters. The atolls of Meemu, Thaa, Vaavu and Laamu are some of the best kept secrets in the Maldives and not dived in commercial numbers.

Diving the far south around Huvadho Atoll, Addu Atoll and the Fuvahmulah Island is seasonal and requires calm seas, which are best in the months of February and March. Addu promises some pristine hard coral formations and the soft-coral-covered British *Loyalty* wreck, torpedoed by a German sub in 1944. Encounters with mantas, sharks and whale sharks are frequent here.

On a screaming hot day back in Baa Atoll, in the north of the country, Guy Stevens, the director of Manta Trust, is sitting on a liveaboard in Hanifaru Bay, guiding a BBC crew documenting the scenes of underwater life during the northern monsoon

« By 2010, Hanifaru had become a "zoo," with dozens of boats in the bay at any one time. With every diver looking for a manta encounter, its "wow" factor was making it unsustainable. »



MARINE RICHES

With a ban on net fishing, the Maldives boasts large schools of fish, such as these patrolling batfish, while a diver keeps a wary distance from a man o'war.

season. Stevens helped popularize diving during the feverish frenzy of the manta-ray mating season at Hanifaru.

Stevens is in board shorts and a baseball cap, looking more like a local dive-crew member than a renowned scientist. After a pancake breakfast and as the BBC crew descends into the turquoise blue, he chats about Baa's biosphere reserve, Maldivian government policies and of course, the mantas.

Stevens started working as a resident marine biologist at the Four Seasons in the Maldives in 2003. He went on to propose a marine-discovery centre at the Landaa Giraavaru resort in Baa Atoll. It's now a prime attraction at the resort. A major contributor towards the recent decision under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, on March 14, 2013, to heavily restrict the trade in five kinds of shark and both manta-ray species, Stevens is both humble and proud

about his part in this milestone step for marine conservation. The Maldives was mentioned as having an estimated 5,000 manta rays, data from Steven's research, collected over seven years.

He doesn't claim to have discovered the epic manta-ray feeding sessions at Hanifaru Bay. Instead, "I was able to allow people to see and experience them and at the right time," he says. Besides the BBC, that has also included National Geographic and plenty of other media.

By 2010, the mantas at Hanifaru Bay had received considerable celebrity.

"It became a zoo," Stevens says. There were liveaboards and resort boats in the dozens in the bay at any one time, with every diver looking for their very own personal manta encounter. Hanifaru's status as a "wow" destination was becoming unsustainable.

This led to the Maldivian government declaring Hanifaru a marine protected area. With the help of the Manta Trust, the government started a management plan and began regulating the number of visitors. Hanifaru Bay became a snorkel-only zone, and resorts and liveaboards can only visit on alternate days.

"2011 was an 'off' year with a very bad monsoon season, with not much wind, which brings the plankton," Stevens says. "Nature determines much of how the monsoons will affect the plankton blooms, and therefore the manta sightings."

"Dredging didn't stop plankton, and the divers didn't scare off the plankton either, which is what the mantas are here for," he adds. "But long-term negative behaviour will have an impact."

QUITE AN EYEFUL
Striped large-eye bream keep a wary watch on a photographer and hover close to the safe refuge of some impressive table corals



PHOTO: TONY HEPBURN

During the 2012 season, it was quiet at Hanifaru for liveaboards, perhaps because of the change in government policy over entry to the bay. The mantas were definitely there, and other dive sites around Baa, but not in the same numbers as in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 seasons.

When mantas are feeding on the surface, it is actually best to snorkel with them. They will parade by you doing somersaults. It can be one or two one day, by the dozens then next, or even up to a hundred or more. You accept the cards nature deals.

Despite the restrictions on diving at Hanifaru By, diving at nearby cleaning stations like Daravandhoo Thila, Dhigu Thila, and Nelivaru Thila will likely yield mantas. Dhonfanu Reef yields thousands of resident glassfish between the soft corals, as well as leaf scorpionfish, green morays, dancing garden eels, and a large school of juvenile blue-striped snappers. At a safety stop, a lucky few have claimed to have been graced by a whale shark.

Baa Atoll became a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve in 2011, after a five year application process by the Atoll Ecosystem Conservation Project, supported by surrounding resorts and communities from 13 inhabited islands. It harbours significant biodiversity, including whale sharks, manta rays, turtles and benthic fauna, and rare pink hydrozoan corals that may only exist here. The resorts in the region fund the reserve's sustainability. Armando Kraenzlin, a scuba instructor and general manager of the Four Seasons Resort at Landaa Giraavaru, sees three key functions for the biosphere: conservation, learning and research, and sustainable development.

Not far from Baa Atoll, the Lakshadweep Islands stretch the Maldivian archipelago into Indian waters, and offer even remoter diving. The area was only opened to tourism in 1989. Political issues between the locals and the Indian government have, though, hindered access and tourist development. **AD**

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