

under warm, sunny skies. Food was served before, between and after the four daily dives. The chef did a wonderful job in preparing a large variety of meals, always hot, tasty and plentiful. Theme dinners every night — Italian, Greek, Thai, Vietnamese, Balinese. After dinner, Dan Baldocchi (dan@lmindustries.com) and Michael Topolovac from Light Motion Industries (dan@lmindustries.com) would screen divers' video clips from the day's diving. Dan's Light and Motion video and photo workshop was a fantastic experience. Cost of the 11-day trip (34 dives) was \$3500, including airfare back to Bali from the end point of Bima. Nitrox (supplied by Haposan — aka Mr. 32) for 11 days was \$200. Our host Sasha even accompanied us to check in at the airport and got all 16 divers' gear on board without any excess charges!

MALDIVES

BAANI ADVENTURER, AUGUST 2006, DAVID VICKERY AND SUZANNE LEESON (TWO DIVERS@ATL.NET), HOBOKEN, NJ. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. Rates are cheaper in the low season, and at \$1,136 each for a suite, less than half what you'd pay on the Peter Hughes boat. The Maldives in the low season is apt to be a trifle rainy. We only lost one dive due to weather. The week started OK, turned cloudy, then rainy, then sunny, and finished brilliantly. There are only three dives a day on the Baani fleet. The Baani Adventurer is a four-deck monohull, 100 feet long with a 28-foot beam. Bottom deck is the engine room and engineering, the top deck is an exposed sun area with two chaises, although you could conceivably heave a few more up from the lounge area

below. Unless you have skin like a rattlesnake, it's not worth it. When the sun is out, you can burn in 15 minutes. The main deck houses the salon/dining/bar area, a few cabins, and the alfresco dining tables that also serve as the briefing area. The upper deck accommodates the two suites, the bridge, and a partially covered lounge area with about 8 chaises. Like all Maldivian dive boats, diving is from a dhoni that carries all the gear, the compressor, a selection of aluminum 80s and a few 62s. Tanks have DIN valves, but most were outfitted with adaptors for yoke rigs. No Nitrox. Fills were 3,000 psi. First dive was a 6:45. Then breakfast of fruit, pancakes, toast, eggs or cereal. Oh, and tuna mixed with onions and eggs or another left over. Second dive was at 10:30. Lunch was the big meal of the day with burgers, cold cuts, basic salads, pastas, curries or other Asian dishes. And tuna. Ice cream was served at each lunch. Dinner might be fish, another Asian dish, potatoes or rice, a well-done steak, fruit or cake for dessert, and, you guessed, it, tuna. We would make any lengthy crossings during the lunch break, with a third dive at 3:00. There were no nighttime crossings. The group of six Germans, four Americans and two French got along well, and were all pretty much on the same skill level. We thought the best place to sit was on the bench on the forward main deck. You could see everything and the breeze was better than the A/C in the cabins, which never went below 78 degrees. Once the A/C failed but was repaired during the next dive. The first day we didn't get the whole group together until noon before departing Male. There was a check out dive in the afternoon in medium current. Three large turtles, titan triggers, honeycomb and black cheek

morays. The next day we started at Lankan Beyru where we crawled hand over hand over the reef (no gloves allowed) to a rocky rise where we clung (bring your own reef hooks) waiting for the mantas. Two showed up; one stayed for about a minute. Later that day we dove Kuda Haq, twin bommies requiring a max depth of only 82 feet. Indian Ocean species galore, in great quantities, including some rarities such as long nose hawkfish and phantom bannerfish. Only a few white tips on this dive. The first day next day was at Makaru Thila which is Male Atoll's Blue Corner. Descending into a current, clinging to the reef. Large gray reef sharks, dozens of white tips, Napoleon wrasse, hordes of unicorns. Even experienced divers hit the fish books after each dive trying to list all we had seen. The 'whale shark' dive at Mama-gili Beyru was a bust, and if the big guy doesn't show, there's nothing else to see. There appears to be little use of GPS. Divemaster Hussein Abd stood in the bow and looked for the reef. When we arrived at Kuderah Thili there was one other boat. Once the other live-aboards knew we found the reef they clustered around. Eventually there were six dhonis on the reef, each with 12 to 16 divers in a 3-knot current trying to hang on and wait for the sharks. The atolls themselves are beautiful and well worth the odd shore excursion. The staff was friendly, helpful, and attentive. By sunset the third night, the barman handed me a well-made G&T without my asking. Sailing on the Baani Adventurer allowed us to save money the first week and blow it all on an expensive land-based resort the second week, and in the Maldives the resorts are spectacular. UW Photography Comments: No rinse tanks on either the dive dhoni or the mother ship for

cameras or any other gear. We had to use the fresh water showers to rinse cameras, computers, etc. No E-6 on board. (do people still shoot film?) There is a plasma TV you can connect your own laptop to and display digital pix. Only power is 240 volt. so bring your own transformers. Power strips are available.

Baani Adventurer, August 2006, Rich and Kathleen Rankhorn, Inverness, IL. (krankhorn@comcast.net) Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, currents. We went here because of the review we read in the Jan.'06 Undercurrent. We chose the Adventurer as it was the newer of the two boats, in operation since January, basically all the same specs as the Explorer. No nitrox and no hot tub working. We knew traveling during the southwest monsoon season which runs from May to October would be chancy but it was sunny every day. The was not great. We chose one of the upper deck cabins with a queen size bed and it was spacious. They kept it clean and it had a large bathroom. 2 places to eat, inside dining room and outside on the back deck. The cook was from Sri Lanka so there were many curry dishes. All meals were buffet style on the back deck. Breakfast always had eggs or you could ask for an omelet, fruit, toast, cereal, and traditional Maldivian food. Lunch and dinner always had a fish dish, curry dish and one other either chicken or beef, then salad, fruit and bread. A few dinner meals were prepared and served to everyone. One night was an island cookout. The specialty dessert was ice cream otherwise it was fruit. Soft drinks or alcohol to purchase. The boat was full with 18 divers. We were the only Americans. The group from Hong Kong brought their own dive master so we had one of the two boat dive

masters to ourselves. The back deck was the meeting place before the dive, 7 am, 11 am, 3 pm were the approximate times, wake up call at 6:30 am. One night dive during the week. All briefings in English. All dives done from the dhoni which traveled everywhere with the Adventurer. Each person kept the same spot for the week. Laundry baskets for gear that fit under the benches, plenty of space for hanging suits. Dive masters checked the currents as they were always changing. Giant stride off the sides of the dhoni. We dove 3 atoll systems, North and South Mali and North Ari. The fish about the same in each spot. Prolific groupers, fusiliers, oriental sweetlips, butterfly fish, anthias, snappers (which often were dinner we think) angelfish, bannerfish, and a variety of triggerfish. Most dives had sharks of some kind but mostly grey and whitetips reef sharks. Several turtles were curious enough to tag along on several dives. We saw a few lionfish, puffer fish, box fish and one scorpionfish. There are only a handful of fish unique to the Maldives and the dive master made it his mission to point those out to us. One spot had a couple Napoleon Wrasse that seemed to like being petted or fed which the group did not do. The highlight was a morning dive to see the mantas at a cleaning station and 8 came by. The current was strong and we had to hold on tight as not to be pulled away. The dive master said the spot was sacred to the Maldivians and he did not want people close to where they circled. We stayed at about 50 feet for about an hour watching this beautiful elaborate dance as the mantas circled above us. Some spots were calm and others had quite strong currents where we were drift diving. Each time we surfaced it seemed like the dhoni was right there,

we never had to inflate our safety sausages or even wait to climb back up the ladder. The corals varied from spot to spot. Some places it was healthy and coming back and some places looked like the coral had been blown apart and the broken pieces were every where, like a landscape from a sci fi movie. They are still recovering from the bleaching and the tsunami. The crew was extremely accommodating. After the week they rinsed all the gear and brought it to the top deck where there was plenty of space to dry it out before traveling. We flew through Dubai to Male on Emirates, great airline. Long flight from Chicago but we took a day to adjust. Arrived at 10 am, stayed at the Hulehule Hotel, near the airport, which let us check in then and sleep. Dive master picked us up at the hotel the next morning and we boarded the boat. Did out check out dive and hung in the harbor as the group from Hong Kong did not arrive until late that night. All travel between atolls is during the day after lunch — Maldivian law, so the nights were calm and quiet. Had the option of visiting a couple of the small islands to walk around and shop. You must barter for everything and everything seemed to start at \$20. When the trip was done the dive masters delivered the group to wherever they were headed next either the airport or other resorts. Spent 3 days in Angsana Resort after departing which was fabulous, a wonderful place to unwind before the long journey home. Trip was definitely worth the value, boat was great and the crew made the trip. Don't bring alcohol to the Maldives, it's illegal and they take it at the airport as the group from Hong Kong found out. Made all the arrangements through Dominick Macan who was helpful and he sent us everything

we needed.

Baani Explorer, January 2006, Jonathan Bank, Bethesda, MD.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 75 Feet. Water: 25 to 27 Celsius, choppy. The good: nice berths, spacious with clean, excellent bathrooms. Very comfortable, airy and surprisingly nice for a live-aboard. Excellent balance of Maldivian foods and standard fare, but also such exotic dishes as sashimi. Great divemasters and not overly paternalistic attention. Great encounter with three large mantas on the last diving day made the whole trip and the somewhat less than perfect viz worthwhile.

Despite the stated minimal standards of dive skill, the boat took on board some divers who had little experience, this caused the crew to immediately rethink the dive profiles for the group; after having heard of the hammerhead and early morning/high current shark encounters the previous group enjoyed, many of us were a little disappointed by the limitations the newbies imposed on us. In addition, there was no Nitrox available, which seemed to really limit dive times as well as frequency. Only three dives a day most days with the occasional night dives. UW Photography Comments: Decent dunk stations and charging area. Deck was a little crowded.

Manthiri, March 2006, Peter Van Kampen, Elkhorn, WI. Experience: 500+ dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, strong currents. Great people well planned and executed – 34 dives in 10 days. I thought, “This has got to become routine and ordinary” but after every dive I was thrilled to have gone. Best I’ve seen. Should have told us about the currents, some severely strong. Bring a safety sausage. Sun is hot and burning on a clear day. 3

degrees north of equator.

Manthiri, April 2006, Beth Bruton (bethbruton@sbcglobal.net), San Diego, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm, currents. We booked two back-to-back 9-day cruises on Manthiri. We were disappointed in the diving. The crew is good, helpful when asked. I prefer to remove my bc/tank in the water, and they accommodated my request; however, I was told this was an extra service. It is common practice on other boats. The dhoni crew washes the dive gear nightly. Dive master Manik repaired my high pressure hose connection to pressure gauge, which developed a small leak. The cruise when Manik was in charge was much better managed than the second one, when the owner’s nephew (also a dive guide) was aboard and took over. I understand Manik is leaving the boat after this season. Staterooms were large enough with adequate storage. The boat is showing some age. Cockroaches abound—I removed them from my camera housing twice. A/C in the staterooms has two settings—really cold or off. We generally turned it off or on 2-3 times each night. Smoking is permitted in all outside areas. The entire crew smokes, as did some guests. Sitting outside in the shade subjected you to constant second hand smoke. Service was generally good. Linens changed each three days, crew will wash your clothes. I liked the first dive before breakfast. But breakfast was on the table when the dhoni returned and by the time we changed to dry clothes it was cold. Most days 3 or 4 dives offered. Dive briefings good, but if conditions changed at site, we were not always advised. Communication between crew and guests could improve, especially as to time of next dive and on-site

conditions. Some reefs have beautiful healthy hard coral growth; some walls excellent colorful soft corals. Other sites are mostly sand and rubble, and not from the tsunami. Dredging at Holiday Island in South Ari Atoll has silted up a large area. Because this is the area where whale sharks are sometimes found, we had at least one day each trip here with poor diving (visibility 10-30 feet), and optional snorkeling for whale sharks. On one dive, the dhoni went off looking for whale sharks before picking me up from the dive, though my husband was aboard and reminded them I was still in the water. I was left bobbing in moderate boat traffic for about half an hour. No apology was ever offered. An outflowing current carries a lot of silt and particulate matter from inside the atoll. But most inflowing currents were equally dirty—as if bringing the same matter back in. It was not plankton. The only schooling fish we saw were fusiliers and blue-striped yellow snappers, and glass fish in a couple of caves. Occasional large tuna zipped through a few sites, but no schools of jacks or large snapper. Very few large cod. There are more than 200 live-aboards in the Maldives, plus countless resorts with day boats. Everyone dives the same sites. Halfway through a dive on Kudarah Tila, a lovely small pinnacle, seven boats dumped more than 50 divers on top of us. The site could accommodate 12-15 divers at most. The crew fished daily for our lunch and dinner. On one day, the captain and a guest caught 13 wahoo. Protected dive sites is a myth. Yes, you will see large napoleon wrasses at two sites and turtles and octopi at one or two others. We had a playful interaction with two large mantas for 20 minutes. But mostly you will see small, colorful reef fish, with little variation from one

site to the next. One 9-day cruise would have been plenty. Privately, the dive guides admit the reefs are not what they were 5 years ago. Too many tourists. Nobody seems to think anything can be done but to watch the situation continue to deteriorate. UW Photography Comments: Dedicated camera area on main boat could accommodate 4 photographers comfortably, not more. Good charging facilities. On 2-3 dives out of 54 total (two cruises) dive guides pointed out small critters. Wall dives not designed for photographers—just swim fast to cover a lot of territory. I dropped back from group to photograph and frequently surfaced half a mile or so from the others. Dhoni crew rinses cameras when they come out of water and again on dive boat.

Sea Queen, October 2005, Jack Wesolek (jack.wesolek@usa.net), Hoboken, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents. Maldives is frequented by European divers but not so much by Americans. Thanks to Reef and Rainforst, we got flights on Singapore Airlines which make the 7+12+4 hours bearable. After a quick immigration procedure (the Maldives do not require any visa in advance), we were greeted by Lisa from Maldives Scuba Tours and were transferred to the MV Sea Queen. Maldives Scuba Tours is a UK operation. They own two vessels, the MV Sea Queen and MV Sea Spirit, similar in size but the Sea Queen offers nitrox. Accommodations are excellent with ensuite bathrooms and a/c and enough space for your stuff. Food was excellent, a blend of international and local dishes. Diving is from a smaller dinghy which also houses the compressor and where you keep your equipment, so the actual boat you live on has more space

for living and the noise level is lower when tanks are filled. It also gives the advantage that dive sites can be reached easier while the main boat is anchored in calmer seas. Weather was cloudy and overcast with the occasional rain shower. We had lots of wind. All dives are drift dives in low to medium currents. If you want to remain stationary, the use of a reef hook is encouraged. Visibility is somewhere in the 30–40 feet range mainly due to the plankton rich water. This, on the other hand, is the reason for all the mantas, sharks and whale sharks that we saw. In one case, two whale sharks and a manta feeding at the same time. Besides big fish, we encountered frog fish, tons of anemone fish and other smaller reef fish. I would rate the diving and destination a notch below Galapagos but just by a tiny margin.

RED SEA, EGYPT

Blue Pearl, March 2006, Jon Bank (jonbank@mac.com), Bethesda, MD. Experience: 100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 21 to 23 C, calm and flat. Wonderful boat.

Emperor Infinity Safari, June–July 2006, Jamie Pollack (Jamie@empiredivers.com). Experience: 500+ dives. Water: 80–83 F, calm. Red Sea route: Elphinstone, Big and Little Brothers, Daedalus Reef. Seas were unusually calm; water was like glass (this, however, is not the norm). The diving here was good but not exceptional. All dives were wall dives so it got to be a bit boring as all dives looked the same. I did see lots of critters like schools of tuna and snappers, huge Napoleon wrasse, turtles, octopus, tons of anthias, butterfly fish, etc. The vis was not that

great on some reefs, particularly Daedalus Reef, when we were searching in the blue for sharks. We did see hammerheads but probably not as many as were out there. We were privileged to see a whale shark; this, however, is not the norm. The crew were always friendly and willing to lend a hand. However, this was not champagne diving where you needn't touch your equipment. The operation is run by Brits, as were our dive guides, Richard and Ally, as well as our fellow passengers, who smoked all the time, before and after dives! Food was pretty good. There were always lots of choices and the quality of the veggies and fruits was good. We did a total of 17 dives in 5 days. We were only permitted to do one night dive since we dove most of our sites in a marine park where currents can be strong. Dive day was like this: 5:15 am wake up call for briefing and dive, eat breakfast, rest, brief and dive, lunch, rest, then two afternoon dives with a snack in between, ending with dinner. Nitrox was free except the compressor broke the last two days of diving. The diving was mostly done off Zodiacs split into two groups of eight. Before each dive one of the dive guides would give a briefing. You were allowed to dive your own profile. The crew logged each of our dives — depth and time, air in and out. The guides did not dive with us on every dive nor check the current on every dive. This proved to be a problem on only one dive where we were diving against the current. The boat was large enough to accommodate all 18 passengers plus 8 crew members. However, the design has several problems. For being a dive boat, the dive deck is exceptionally small. All tanks are crammed right next to each other with no space in between. This made it difficult to put your wetsuit on