

storing/drying gear, and harbors a decent bench for quickie repairs, you carry any parts you need. There is only a modest amount of rental gear, and very little for sale. Bring all that you need, plus critical spares. But, I'm picking nits. After all, one reason the diving is excellent is because it's not developed, not easy to get to, and not fully fished out. Clearly, it's one of the top diving destinations in the Caribbean.

Overall, I had an excellent trip. It's definitely for one who needs no stimulation beyond diving. The only tourist activities are a visit to the salinas to see the flamingos or a bone-fishing jaunt on the new 24-foot airboat. My big nights out were hashed lobster at Mama Love's, a restaurant complete with Christmas-themed place mats, Coke Classic and a couple of cold beers on one of the two bar stools at the Eastern Light Inn Bar (aka "chicken ranch"). South Caicos is the old, undeveloped Caribbean, and with it goes outdated accommodations, few tourists, and pristine reefs.

When you hear older divers talk about the good old days, back in the '70s, visit South Caicos and you'll see exactly what they mean.

-- Doc Vikingo



**Diver's Compass:** Fly into Provo on Delta from Atlanta, AA from Miami, TWA from NYC. Rooms start at \$749 p/p double, all meals for seven nights and five days of two-tank morning dives. Website shows specials and details ([www.oceanhaven.tc](http://www.oceanhaven.tc)). Bring along everything you might need for personal comfort and diving. Peak humpback season is Jan-Mar, although the resort makes no dedicated trips to observe them. Soda \$1; beer \$2.50; mixed drinks \$3.50. If you really want to

go on the cheap, Mae's B and B, in the Old Governor's House, has three non-A/C rooms on the upper floor with commanding views and a shared bathroom. It looks every bit of its reputed 106 years, but somehow exuded the same ineffable trashed and tatty charm that characterizes much of South Caicos. Mae herself was preparing to host a dignitary, and the kitchen was covered with picture perfect quiches. Give her table a go ... Nearest chamber is on Provo.

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## The Maldives Aboard the Manthiri

*great diving despite El Niño*

It was with some trepidation that I began my giant stride from the Manthiri dive tender. The last time I dived the Maldives was just before the 1998 El Niño that had caused massive coral bleaching. *Undercurrent* readers had reported the death of much of the hard coral. Anticipating my first dive for a 20-day trip, I hoped I was not going to be visiting an underwater desert.

Dropping down off the wall I was excited to see the familiar clouds of fish. But as I finned closer to the wall, I saw that indeed a lot of hard coral had died, perhaps as much as 90 percent. There lay piles of rubble that was once healthy *Acropora* branching coral. I was happy to see lots of healthy soft corals, gorgonia, tubastrea, and a profusion of mushroom corals everywhere -- and the buds of new hard coral growth. I didn't see any 'bleached' coral -- that which bleached had died. One encouraging sign was the number of tridacna clams. Since they, like the corals, need zooanthellae to survive, their condition indicated that at least part of the reef system is on the rebound.

This was NOT the Maldives I visited three times before -- still excellent diving, considering the wealth of fish life of all descriptions on every dive, which

seldom exceeded 100 feet. The turtles were plentiful and unafraid. I often saw eagle, manta and stingrays. Eels were prolific. Drifting down the reef with a Napoleon wrasse bigger than a Saint Bernard is a thrill. Large trevally jacks, mackerel, and dogtooth tuna prowled the walls. At Deburi Tila -- Anemone City -- I dropped into a school of tuna, saw flying eagle rays, then spent most of the dive visiting with the anemones and the endemic black foot anemone fish that blanket the reef. At Angoli Caves, red-toothed triggerfish in the thousands stuck their forked tails out of holes as a massive cloud of bannerfish streamed over the reef near the end of the dive. The highlight here was the orchard of sea fans with resident long-nosed hawkfish. The dives I enjoyed the most were at the reef channel fronts where white-tip and gray-reef sharks patrol. Ascending through the swirling fusiliers and snappers is a good way to end these sharky dives. On the reefs, varieties of butterfly fish, parrots, anthias, flame gobies, scorpionfish and lionfish provide photo opportunities as do the more elusive clown triggerfish. There were plenty of posing Oriental and spotted sweetlips. I saw many more sea cucumbers and starfish (though not the crown of thorns that was once a major problem) than on previous visits. I wonder if they flourish in an environment of recovering corals?

I like the Maldives. I like the country. I like the people. And I like the diving. For more than 25 years I enjoyed the best reefs the world has to offer: Cocos, Galapagos, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Solomons, Truk, and most of the Caribbean. Still, I keep returning to the wondrous waters of the Maldives. This necklace of almost 2,000 coral islands with blinding white-sand beaches, glistening green palm trees and underwater glories comes awfully close to an ideal vacation spot -- almost a New Yorker cartoon of the legendary "desert island." The friendly people welcome tourists as a primary source of national revenue. There is no crime or rampant disease like malaria to concern visitors. The government is stable and riots that are a concern at destinations like Indonesia are almost unthinkable. On the dozens of tourist islands there are no buildings higher than a coconut palm and the government rule of one resort per island prevents the overcrowding that plagues so many places like Sipadan and Little Cayman. The people are followers of Islam, but are pragmatic so that they serve alcohol at resorts and on live-aboards. Sure, it's a long way from Paducah, but so is Australia.

There are several NonHughes/Aggressor fleet live-aboards operating around the world that have

## *Coral, Science, and George W.*

A reef conference in Indonesia last year brought the hard facts of coral reef distribution:

- \* More than a quarter of the world's coral reefs have been destroyed by pollution and global warming.
- \* In the Maldives and Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean, up to 90 percent of coral reefs have been killed over the past two years by an increase in water temperature from the El Niño weather pattern.
- \* Half of Indonesia's coral reefs are dead and the other half could soon follow suit.
- \* The loss of the coral reefs would also be a devastating blow to the medical industry, which is exploring the possibility that the marine ecosystems may unlock secrets to new medicines.
- \* Unless drastic measures are taken by the major nations to cut global warming, most of the remaining reefs may be dead in 20 years.
- \* The loss of the reefs would threaten the livelihood of half a billion people around the world who rely on them for food and income. People in poorer countries may not be able to find alternate sources of income and may become reliant on foreign aid.

While global warming is not mentioned in the environmental policy section of President Bush's website, during the debate he said, "I don't think we know the solution to global warming yet and I don't think we've got all the facts before we make decisions ... There's a lot of differing opinions and before we react I think it's best to have the full accounting, full understanding of what's taking place." By rejecting the international pact to reduce greenhouse gases – the Kyoto protocol – and by making other policy pronouncements that do nothing to slow global warming, the President is failing to take responsibility for an issue that concerns all divers, indeed all people and nations.

If you don't think our coral reefs can wait around for the President to get a "full understanding about what's taking place," you may wish to write him, in care of the White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20500. Or send him an e-mail at: [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov).

gained a major reputation among keen divers. The Lammer Law in the Galapagos, the Nai'a in Fiji, and the Bilikiki in the Solomons come to mind. The Manthiri, which has been operating in the Maldives for six years, is another. Each time I visit, I find improvements. It is air-conditioned and spacious with roomy cabins and baths for a maximum of 12 guests. The main salon with its six overstuffed sofas is almost like a clubroom albeit more often a video/photographers/computer work area. Especially noteworthy is the positive and enthusiastic support of the crew. However, I was disappointed at the number of roaches that appeared during the latter part of my trip, but was assured that major fumigation is scheduled frequently. I guess I caught a period before the slaughter.

Meals are varied and the food plentiful. After a pre-breakfast of tea comes the first dive, then a breakfast of eggs, imitation bacon or ham, pancakes, peanut butter, jam, cheese, bananas, pineapple, mango, and papaya. Lunch consists of salad, soup, two main courses, perhaps fish and chicken or a pasta dish, fried potatoes or rice, followed by ice cream or a fresh fruit or a pastry. Dinner has complimentary wine, soup and a salad. Two choices -- usually a baked fish, perhaps a chicken curry, maybe a fried fish and a baked chicken -- and potatoes or rice. Dessert is fresh fruit or cake. No pork in this Muslim country. And as a fishing nation (and the crew does catch lots of fish) ... it seems to be their avocation, recreation and specialization, that there is going to be lots of fish on the menu. Like most live-aboards this is not a time to follow a low-fat, low-salt diet.

The name of the game is diving. However, an entertainment center, stocked library, ice cream, plenty of hot water and frequent sheet and towel changes do not make a dive trip. What makes a dive trip is the dive operation. And here the Manthiri excels. Divemasters Manik and Moosa plan, brief, and lead the dives with keen enthusiasm (you may dive your computer, however). Captain Razaq, the tender driver, and his two assistants know these waters well and as divers themselves, enjoy treating visitors to the best spots. All diving is from a separate dive tender where tanks and gear are stored. Each diver has a roomy plastic bin for storage. The crew sets up tanks before dives. They provide bottled water. There are four entry points for 12 guests so crowding is minimal. One strong ladder forward is used to climb back on board. Clean, dry towels are provided as they rinse regulators. There are roomy fresh-water containers for photo/video gear that is carefully handled to and from the Manthiri. They fill the tanks from the compressor on the tender, so noise on the Manthiri is primarily from CDs brought by guests. Dive skins and suits are kept on the tender eliminating the reeking rubber often cluttering other live-aboards.

One thing to remember -- the Maldives does not provide 'unlimited diving' -- often promoted elsewhere. The most you can do from the Manthiri is four per day, and there are several three-dive days as the boat crosses to different atolls. And you won't get a night dive every night. Still this boat provides more dives than any other operation in the Maldives. And the crew seems to enjoy providing other diversions like a picnic one night on a deserted island. There is a night at a local village listening to boderberu drum music and watching various ethnic "Fishermen Dances." They provide walking tours of a resort island and a local village, and a shopping/sightseeing tour of Male at the end of the trip.

## The Manthiri

Diving (Experienced)	★★★★1/2
Diving (Inexperienced)	★★★★1/2
<i>(one divemaster guides the experienced, the other guides the less experienced.)</i>	
Accommodations	★★★★★
Ambiance	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★★★1/2
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

(Worldwide scale)

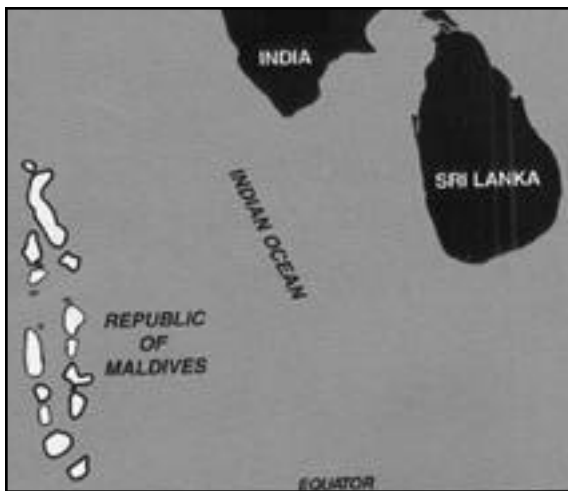
Will I return? Certainly. And I won't wait 10 years for the return of the hard corals. Life is short, the gods are capricious, El Niño is lurking, and I get more for my diving buck in the Maldives than almost anywhere else on this planet, even though some -- not all -- of the lush, hard coral, no longer remains.

-- E.E.



**Divers Compass:** The Maldives are 300 miles southwest of India. The weather is warm with cooling breezes, especially in the evening. Prime diving is November through April. More rain and winds in June and

July. Whale sharks more frequently September through November ... More than 95 "safari boats" operate throughout the atolls. Comfort ranges from primitive to five-star. There are 87 island resorts -- with comfort ranging from modest to five-star. Diving at almost all resorts and on almost all safari boats. Many resorts cater to a particular European nationality so if your Italian, German or French is barely adequate, search for a more user-friendly island via your travel agent or on the net ... Flights from the U.S. via Singapore or through Europe on a number of carriers. I flew three legs from East Coast via London and Dubai with no overnights for \$1,200 from a local travel agency. I saw much higher prices quoted on some internet airfare sites ... Arrive a day early to sleep off the jet lag so as to start diving refreshed. Economical hotel in Male: \$60 at the Kam Hotel (kamhotel@dhivehinet.net.mv) and the Relax Inn (sales@hotelrelaxinn.com). Both are modern, air conditioned and around the corner from the more expensive Nasundura Palace (around \$100). In Male you can pick up items like snacks unavailable at the



resorts. Internal flights from the international airport are no longer on the old Russian helicopter death traps. A fleet of Twin Otter Seaplanes provides fast service. Speedboats provide slower but cheaper transfers ... You'll need a passport. A tourist visa good for 30 days is provided on arrival. Book through Sea-N-See Pvt. Ltd, Male Maldives. E-mail: dhivehinet.net.mv. Web site: www.manthiri.com. Or through most of the dive travel wholesalers. Rack rate is \$270/day. Discounts are offered occasionally and the price is less for groups and back-to-back trips. E-6 processing on demand. Rates vary by season and discounts may be available for large groups. Liquor bar in refrigerator in room. Beer avail-

able at nominal price. Alcoholic beverages cannot be imported to the Maldives or purchased in Male. Oxygen and first aid kit on boat and on support tender. Chamber in Male Atoll. Ninety-four-cubic-foot steel and 82-cubic-foot aluminum tanks available. Water was 82 degrees F in February. 110v and 220v current in cabins and in salons. Bring a couple of u/w ID books. *Marine Life of the Maldives* by Neville Coleman, and *Photo Guide to Fishes of the Maldives* by Rudie Kuiter, both by Atoll Editions are recommended. A couple of your favorite CDs and VHS movies would not be a bad idea either.

## *No more jelly stings*

As we reported last October, after 10 years of research, Israeli scientists have come up with a lotion to protect against the stings of most jellyfish, anemones and corals. In tests, each volunteer touched a stinging jellyfish with a hand protected by the SafeSea lotion and with an unprotected hand. For all volunteers, the hand protected by SafeSea had no pain or skin irritation, whereas the unprotected hand developed pain and a rash. To purchase: call 1-800-826-0440, 813-882-4320 or order online at <http://www.lifestylesdirect.com>.