

blue spot ray. Part of the adventure is a flight via a Russian airplane charter. Smooth trips, but, they flew at 10,500 feet on the way out and 9,500 feet on the way back, un-pressurized both ways. I feel this is a little high for divers. Our travel arrangements were made by Great Destinations-Sacramento (<http://www.skindiver.com>).

Pulau Payer

Langkawi, June 2001, Randy Sanecki (rsanecki@hotmail.com) Hainesville, IL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 75 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm currents. Pulau Payar Marine Park supplies a large assortment of underwater species surrounded by beautiful corals gardens in warm clear water. An excellent day trip for the whole family with snorkeling and swimming facilities provided along with diving packages. Composed of three small islands, Pulau Payar Marine Park is about 60 Km from the Island of Penang, Malaysia. Visibility was about 70 to 85 feet at depths down to 65'. One day is too short. Bring lots of film.

MALDIVES

These 7000 low-lying coral islands in a 1200-mile chain southeast of India will be the first to disappear if global warming raises sea levels significantly. Warming has already taken a serious toll on the reefs, which suffered significant coral bleaching. About 200 of the islands are inhabited (although visitors have very little interaction with the 175,000 predominantly-Muslim residents), and several are

devoted entirely to small resorts that offer average to excellent tropical reef diving with big fish action — if the resort has a knowledgeable staff that knows where and when to find it. However, the Maldives are best dived from live-aboards. . . . Dive rules are strict for this part of the world. . . . Expect year-round daily temperatures of roughly 85 degrees and abundant rainfall, which is distributed evenly from May through December. . . .

Nakatchafushi Resort, January 2001, Terry Umbach (Janzart@sunshine.net) Sechelt, BC. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 29 Celsius, calm choppy currents, no currents. This was a return trip to the Maldives — last in 1992. Coral is definitely in bad shape however there are signs of regrowth. Lack of colorful coral has not affected the fish life! Snorkeling on the house reefs rivals the boat diving! Very expensive! Even with your own gear, the cost of renting just a single tank and weights for a shore dive is \$35US! A boat dive is the same plus \$14 for a seat plus \$1 for the crew to put your tank on the boat. Some dives were very rewarding (sharks and mantas) while others were very disappointing (basically diving over a dead coral garden which had less fish life than back at the house reef). Nakatchafushi is a superb resort (great staff, good food, very nice accommodation, beautiful setting, superb white sand beach with sun loungers, nice areas for swimming/wading and a great pool/deck/bar/restaurant area.

Not bad value for \$155US per day double including breakfast. However, to add 2 dives per day for 2 people puts the daily cost way up there relative to a live-aboard. (Ph: (+960) 443847 (Maldives); fax (+960) 442665; e-mail sales@unisurf.com; website www.unisurf.com)

Soleni Dive Centre, Soneva Fushi, March 2001, Erwin P. Staller (STALLER@VDOT.NET) Hauppauge, NY. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 84-87 F. Dives logged: 200+. The Soneva Fushi Resort has divers from Germany, France and Great Britain mostly. We didn't meet any other Americans. The Soleni Dive Centre is a great operation with divemasters from Australia as well as Switzerland. Thomas Walchli runs the Center and he tries to dive everyday and make each dive an interesting experience. His staff would do anything to help you. A cup of tea, a towel and a piece of fresh coconut would be waiting for you on your return. I have had major surgery and cannot lift my tank and equipment so they brought my equipment to me at the edge of the boat and I would roll in. Most divers enter with a giant step. On the return, they removed my equipment in the water so that I wouldn't have to carry it up the ladder. The dhonis are sturdy and well maintained. Most dives are 30 minutes or less from the resort and definitely worthwhile. In 13 dives, we never repeated a dive site. Palau's Blue Corner cannot compete with my dive at the Shark Nursery, with sharks, manta rays and dolphins. The soft

coral still exists on wall dives but little coral is seen on the shallow surfaces although they do show signs of coming back. (Ph: 00960 23 03 04/05; fax 00960 23 04 74; e-mail soleni@dhivehinet.net.mv; website www.soleni.com)

Vakarufalhi Resort, March 2001, Hellmuth and Ginette Kimberger, Austria. Vis: 150 ft. Water: 27 C. Dives logged: Hellmuth: 1,455 and Ginette: 632. Dive restrictions: 30 meters. Possibility of "over-booking." Alternative accommodations provided at another island (Rangoli Hilton). (Ph: (+960) 450004; fax (+960) 450007; e-mail info@vakarufalhi.ch; website vakarufalhi.com)

SEYCHELLES

Billed as 3000 miles from anywhere, this group of islands has been trying to promote itself to divers as THE place to see whale sharks, but this is unproved. From time to time live-aboards run to the out-island of Aldabra, which is reported to have excellent diving. . . . Island prices are high. . . .

THAILAND

Thailand is a bargain. . . . Whale shark season is usually from March through May, with Richelieu Rock providing an excellent chance of encounters. . . . Trips to the Burma Banks were stopped for political reasons, but this area has been reopened along with some other