

MALDIVES

These 7,000 low-lying coral islands in a 1,200-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. ... Expect year-round daily temperatures of roughly 85 degrees and abundant rainfall, which is distributed evenly from May to December.

Eurodivers, Club Med Kani, September 2002, Kim S. (ksegers@carytravel.com), Apex, NC.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, surge, currents. Diving is more difficult than in most warm water destinations due to strong currents and lots of surge. All divers are given orange safety sausages attached to a 15-foot rope. When the dive is finished and you have started your safety stop, you simply inflate the sausage with air from your reg and let it pop to the surface while you remain at 15 feet holding onto the rope. The boat is usually right there to pick you up. It

was great not having to spend half of the dive getting back to boat! Eurodivers was professional and a well-run operation. They kept novice divers separate from experienced divers and did an excellent job of varying dive sites. Experienced divers were left to dive their own profiles as long as they did not violate the government-imposed 100-foot depth limit. Dive briefings were informative and accompanied by illustrations of the dive sites on plastic boards. Complete briefings were done in several languages — English always being one of them. Although El Nino has caused the death of a lot of the corals, we still saw amazing soft corals in several locations. The highlight was definitely the mantas. On two dives at a manta cleaning station we saw four to six+ mantas that had wing spans of 8 to 10 feet. We also saw many turtles, several Napoleon fish that weighed 200+ pounds each, lots of lion fish, tropical fish of every variety, lobsters, eels, and many sea anemones with their resident clown fish (some of the anemones were more than 5 feet in diameter and at one location the sea floor was literally carpeted with anemone). The resort was a typical Club Med with basic rooms. All accommodations are in bungalows, some of which are over the water. The island is so small that all rooms are oceanfront. The rooms did have hot water pots for in room tea/coffee and refrigerators. The food for the most part was good and varied (lots of Asian food like sushi, as well as European). Fresh fruit and fruit juices were limited — practically all food items, including fruit, must be imported. The bread and pastry chefs were awesome, though!

We traveled on Singapore Air using frequent flyer mileage and with travel time and layovers it took almost three days of travel time in each direction. More direct connections are available through Germany and Britain, but it's still a long trip. Strong surge and currents made photography a real challenge on some days. Also, the plankton counts in the water caused some problems with backscatter if strobe was not perfectly aimed. The boats did not have camera tables or rinse tanks, but the crew was helpful in finding safe places to stow camera equipment on board. They were also helpful in assisting with equipment during entries and exits. There are large separate rinse tanks for camera equipment at the docks. The resort offered E-6 processing, and there were excellent photography courses for both beginners as well as experienced photographers. (www.euro-divers.com)

RED SEA

Hurghada dive operators are failing to provide loving care to nearby reefs, so divers head further south. European divers still heavily visit the area, but Americans are reluctant. Water temperatures can drop into the cool 60s during February and rise into the 80s by August. ... Many divers combine a Red Sea trip with a visit to Israel and biblically historical sites.

Egypt

Divers International, Sofitel, August 2002, David Bryan (dabmushi@aol.com), Great Missenden, Bucks,

UK. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, calm. Accommodations at the Sofitel were good. I live in the U.K., so travel was fairly easy. Decided to use dive operation on site as web site looked good and had own jetty at hotel. In reality had to be bused to town to get the boat. Logistics were poor and often it was an hour or two from meeting at the hotel's dive center to the boat actually sailing. Two dive trips could mean meeting at 8:45 a.m. and not being back at the hotel until about 6 p.m. — an appalling waste of time. Lunch and drinks on boat weren't too bad but cost extra. All gear has to be transferred into plastic crates, and they look after it and take to the boat every day. They never lost anything, but it never looked that reliable a system. Sometimes had to wait up to 45 minutes after getting back to hotel before gear arrived, so that I could rinse it. On one three-dive trip, we decided to sit out the second dive. After lunch we just sailed back to port. When I asked what was happening, they said not enough people wanted to do the third dive. We had been at the dive center at 7:45 and got back at about 4:30, so all that for just one dive. Coral looked in poor condition in many places. Saw no large pelagics. Only large fish was a good-size Napoleon wrasse. Smaller fish more plentiful, but overall I was disappointed. On one occasion I counted 14 boats moored at the same site for lunch — each capable of carrying 25 divers. It's just too much. Ports are a zoo as well with too many boats for the jetty space. On the last day I wanted to just do a shore dive. I had snorkeled over the house reef, and it looked quite