

Atoll avant-garde

There are many liveboards in the Maldives. Most of them will take you on a tried-and-tested itinerary, however, there are those that head off the beaten track, as Rose and Udo Kefrig discovered when they joined the MV Sheena

Photographs by ROSE and UDO KEFRIG (TEAM OCEANPICS)





Haneef gives the briefing



Getting ready to go diving

Suddenly a strong wind tore through the upper deck, pulling me from my dream aboard our floating hotel. An unexpected problem with the air conditioning had meant a night outside. Drawing the sheets around us, staring up at the Milky Way, the soft rippling of the waves against the side of the ship lulled our senses once more. Just before falling asleep, I had found myself recalling the past day's diving - the descents in the southern Laamu Atoll at the channel entrance, the currents and the vibrancy of the abundant sea life, so common in the Maldives. We shared the space with sharks - as predicted by Haneef, the dive guide aboard the MY Sheena. Small, big and so numerous you could hardly count them. Some of them swam a little too close for comfort, while others kept their distance. We found ourselves growing jealous, given our clumsy effort to get into a secure position at the reef's edge.

Out of the blue depths, manta rays appeared and floated gracefully around us, with the elegance only a ballerina could achieve. This spot in the south of the Meemu Atoll is something of a seasonal rendezvous spot for these beautiful creatures. They often turn up in the small channels in large numbers, but this time only a couple appeared, accompanied by two eagle rays. Most likely the current was too weak, or the cleaner fish weren't yet in a mood to work. Nevertheless, slowly and determinedly, they approached us. From out of the diffused nothingness of plankton-rich soup, their bodies assumed a splendid contour. They encircled us and with every flap, u-turn and pirouette demonstrating an ease of movement one would never have thought possible. Filled with wonder, we gazed at their primeval mouths, so different from our own.

While I stared around wide-eyed, my buddy had no clue where to point his camera first. It's not an easy task for a photographer, especially when the 'studio' is stocked with an abundance of models. To

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Soft corals and sponges under an overhang



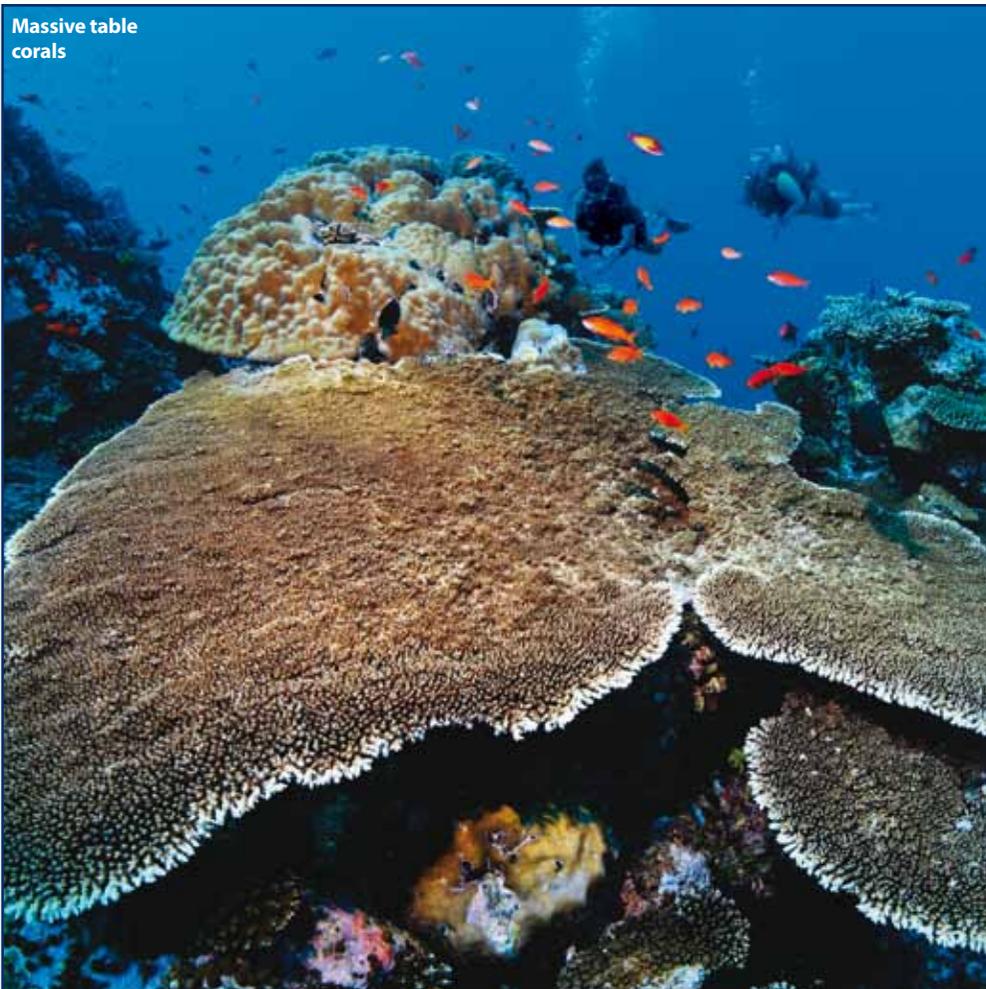
Shoal of bannerfish

our right, a large school of sweetlips sway effortlessly back and forth in the current. Wait, look how languid the Napoleon over there in the back looks. There is an abundance of colourful angelfish and batfish. The powerful silver cloud on the blue 'horizon' turns out to be a myriad of barracuda - fast as lighting they move through the plankton-saturated current. Soft corals create a display of fireworks; a symphony of colour is found in the many grottos and caves. The overhangs are like a painter's palette. Thousands of glassfish form what seems like a curtain of shiny beads. Would this curtain deny us a

look at some 'hidden treasures'?

Suddenly, as if an invisible hand lifted the veil, a great rumbling tore me abruptly from my dream. The crew ran back and forth across the ship, tying down securely anything that could be washed overboard. A tropical storm had announced itself, with an unmistakable rolling of thunder and lightning on the horizon, whipping the sea into a frenzy of spray. I entertained the thought of defying the power of nature and to sleep in the protection of the awning, but an 'Act of God' changed my mind. Pouring rain set in and water by





Massive table corals



Batfish



Giant stingray



Grey reef shark

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the bucket load washed down on me, as if in a car wash. The storm cleaned out every corner of the deck with thick sweeps. We all cut and run, to get below into the secure cabin. As I dared to look out the little window, with the water falling in droves from the sky, the rain looked like little, pale blue droplets in the Indian Ocean. We were surrounded by tiny phytoplankton, which turned the water into an illuminated sea of light. In the morning, everything appeared as if polished: paradise once again restored, the sky and the horizon a glorious blue. The sun bathed the upper deck of the Sheena, on whose frame and planks we would discover the southern atolls of the Maldives.

Actually, I had had certain reservations before the tour - would I cope with the heat, the boat, and the strong currents? Would this two-week tour on the Sheena - with the character of an expedition - put my hesitations to rest? The dive programme didn't sound too bad. The atolls of Felidhoo, Meemu, Thaa and Laamu were on the dive map. All of them unknown dive spots, which had never been logged in my book. Of course, you also have to have dive

experience under your belt, to enter into a 'tour into the unknown', and to dive around the island of Medhufushi in the Meemu Atoll, as the exit channels (also called Kandus) of the southern atolls are infamous for their current.

Captain Harish explained to us that the position of the Maldives archipelago is such that huge amounts of water are always crashing into the mountainous plateaus which the atolls ascend from. The sea currents then pick up lots of power and are influenced by the varying global winds, such as the north-east and south-west monsoon winds. In the past, captains used native guides for crossing this section of the Indian Ocean, so they could manoeuvre their ships safely through the unknown maze of reefs and currents. "This is because", continued Captain Harish, "when crossing the atolls, the currents - which follow the prevailing winds - can behave completely erratically due to the islands' reefs and sand banks". Harish then added: "Divers should also be aware that sudden strong currents, even vertical water movements, can occur, which whip you up and down, as if in a centrifuge."

So, diving in a spin cycle? It is well known that in the Maldives, you drift dive. However, I had never heard of this 'washing machine' effect.

Our guide Haneef handed out reef hooks. I had only ever used them once before, during a descent near the Micronesian island of Palau. The hooks, attached to a good two-metre long line, should be latched onto dead coral or stone. The other end is then secured to an available carabineer hook located on your diving jacket. Finally, the jacket should be inflated a little bit more. Now that we were 'anchored', we hovered above the seabed in the current. This way, you use less air than when you have to hold on, it is less harmful to the reef and you'll be able to enjoy your encounter with the pelagic world better.

With the air conditioning still out of action, we braved the deck once more. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, just a cool breeze, which felt like silk on my skin. But suddenly, the other guests tumbled around deck and surrounded me. What was wrong? Did I sleep through an alarm? There! At the stern of the ship, something





WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



THE MALDIVES

HOW TO GET THERE

There are direct flights into the capital Male from the UK, or you can travel via places like Dubai, Qatar or Sri Lanka. Once in the Maldives, you can get a seaplane taxi down to Medhufushi to pick up the Sheena.

WHEN TO VISIT

You can dive in the Maldives all year round, but certain times of the year are better for big animal sightings than others. Look at the itineraries on offer, decide which suits you the most and then plan your trip accordingly.

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ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

British citizens just need a valid passport with six months left to expiry.

CURRENCY

Rufiyaa (£1 = MVR25).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

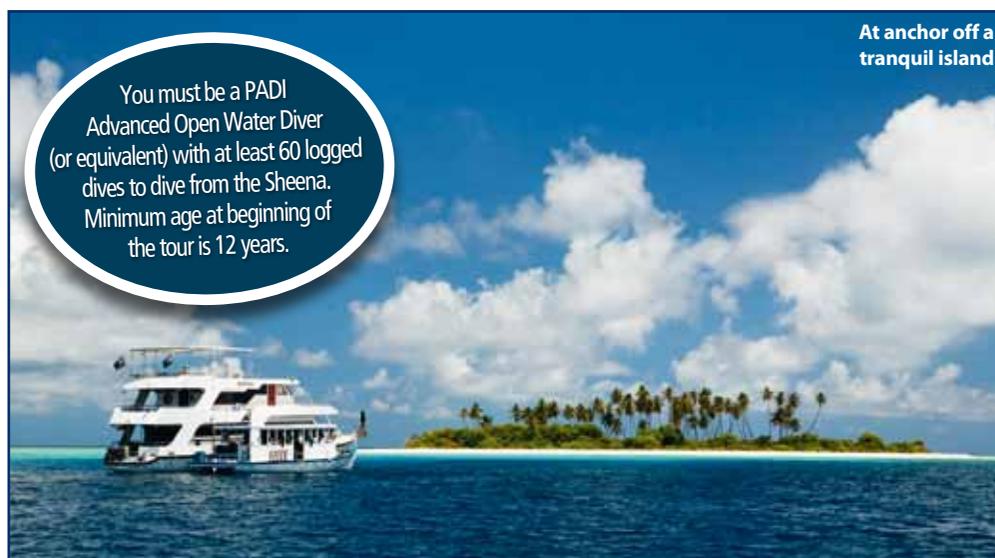
Chef Lawrence Manapparet serves up some delicious culinary creations from the small galley on the Sheena, all enjoyed on the al-fresco dining table at the back of the vessel. Supping a cold beer on the top sundeck is a relaxing way to round out a great day of diving.

VERDICT

Liveaboard diving in the Maldives certainly opens up myriad dive sites to be explored, and the MV Sheena is a comfortable, well-organised base from which to experience them.



The Sheena at her mooring



At anchor off a tranquil island

You must be a PADI Advanced Open Water Diver (or equivalent) with at least 60 logged dives to dive from the Sheena. Minimum age at beginning of the tour is 12 years.

was going on. A good seven-metre-long whale-shark! It's wide-open mouth breaking the surface of the water, closing in on countless fish, attracted by the artificial light of the ship. For half an hour, the sea giant captured our attention - except for that of my photographer husband, who slept through the whole show. Next morning he insisted that it would have been better to sleep, rather than watch the spectacle. Haneef couldn't help but laugh.

There is an enormous amount of ground to cover between four atolls; too much for a one-week trip. But everyone is feeling good. Everything is comfortable and cared for. There is a spacious lounge and sun deck. Even the two top-deck rooms are spacious, though the five rooms below-deck, with raised beds, are rather narrow. Meals are served on a large, communal table outside at the stern. Delicious, is all that can be said for what Lawrence Manapparat conjures up for his guests. In his 'pantry', the young Indian chef dices and chops the entire day, at least when he isn't slaving over the stove. How he manages to conjure up so many

culinary delights with only two burners is nothing short of a miracle; his curries are simply divine.

The MY Sheena is tailored towards the individual/buddy pairs, as Haneef had made clear with the first briefing. Although there are certain ground rules (depth/time/air limits/gear), the individual buddy teams must decide for themselves what their dive will look like and what they could/would want to be responsible for. For the guides and Werner Lau, it is important that less-experienced divers leave the safari boat having learned many new skills, becoming more confident in their diving. Above all, Werner and his team want them to have an exciting experience.

The southern island of Medhufushi, with its diving locations and wellness spa, offers the best in rest and recovery. This is diving, wellness and relaxation, deep in the south of the Maldives, beyond the mainstream, far from the beaten path. ■

Udo and Rose's trip was organised by Werner Lau (www.wernerlau.com)