

**T**Travel Story

## The Maldives: more than a manta paradise

*For many years the Maldives remained a destination we could only dream of as it was expensive and distant. But during the winter months, we would be taunted with stories of divers with amazing trips to the Maldives.*

Incredible! What you absolutely must do are night dives," was what we heard again and again. I remember reading that the Maldives in a trip in 2009 was that it was full of sites with strong currents. We flew over the reef and before we even noticed or could realize it half of the group was lost and the dive ended. And now... they recommend us night dives in the Maldives?! After seeing several recorded video clips of those night dives, we did change our mind very rapidly and booked our trip.

The Maldives are located in the Indian Ocean. They consist of an archipelago of 1,190 coral islands grouped into 26 atolls. Besides the wonderful and really expensive water bungalows, the Maldives are known for its white sandy beaches and azure blue waters. Mostly you fly directly to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. After a stop of almost two hours you fly then another four hours before you reach the capital of the Maldives, Male.

Meanwhile, we are at the start of a cruise which has built a strong reputation. *Comfort*, excellent diving, great food and a very competitive price are according to the organizer only the basic concepts of the success of this operation. And ... we can only confirm this. On this liveaboard, the captain and guides of the 'Princess Rani' know exactly what they are doing!

After a relaxing first day of check diving, at the end of the second day the anchor is thrown out. We are at the 'Alimatha Jetty' on the Felidhe Atoll (also known as the Vaavu Atoll). During this trip the boat stays anchored at night and so it is promised to be another quiet night. But first we are going to have our very first night dive in the Maldives. As – may I say - experienced underwater photographers we know exactly what we are going to see. It was recommended to us to keep the wide- angle or fish-eye lens and not to change to the macro lens. But some guests love surprises and without knowing anything they jump into the dark water. A few seconds later, together with the group we arrive at the bottom at fourteen meters. Four nurse sharks and a few large marbled stingrays are making some circles around us.

A few meters higher and somewhat closer to the pier of a resort, some blacktip reefsharks are going crazy. Each day the sharks get a portion of the waste of the dinner (leftover tuna, reef fish ...). Without doing much effort the sharks can enjoy a free meal and fill their belly full of food. During the day nurse sharks usually rest on the sandy bottoms. At night these innocent animals are very active. It is as good as a non-dangerous dive, and ... sixty minutes for this night dive was indeed far too short!

The next morning the wake-up call sounds again ... at 5:30. So early! Is this really a vacation?

Today we go searching for manta rays. And finally, our search for the place where we would get huge manta rays just in front of the lens of our camera is at an end! During our dive at a leaning station for manta rays, and the afternoon snorkelling in the shallow lagoons, everyone in the group was able to enjoy these graceful animals. To end a great diving day the boat moves inside an oval-shaped lagoon with only one single entrance. We anchor at Fesdhu Manta Point.

This time, huge lamps are mounted behind the boat. And now we wait ... we wait until the sun goes down and the first manta ray shows up. When it gets really dark, we notice an increasing amount of plankton at the surface. A little later the first manta ray pops up. With open mouth he makes three or four loops, swallowing a huge amount of plankton. How they kept us another 45 minutes on board, I really do not know. However, our second night dive in the Maldives we will never forget! For the first time, almost everybody goes down individually. As clearly agreed in the briefing, all our fellow divers kneel down on the sandy bottom. Together we make a big circle. A moment later we all shine with our torch towards the surface. An enormous amount of plankton is attracted. Suddenly a huge manta ray moves just above the dive lights, hoping to catch as many plankton as possible. This is a night dive as seen on the video footage! But I guarantee you the reality is even ten times better! When everyone is out of the water, the manta ray returns back to surface just behind the boat and continues its loops. Rapidly I shoot a few other photos before they ring the bell to announce that dinner is ready.

The sport that is practiced the most in the Maldives is scuba diving. Not a single island is pointing more than three meters above the sea level. Above water there are no mountains or rock formations. But the islands have a beautiful underwater world of colourful coral reefs and a huge variety of fish species. Due to the plankton the waters have an enormous richness of marine life, but this causes also the visibility is sometimes limited.

The next day we have encounters with eagle rays, grey reef sharks, large schools of yellow-fin jacks, turtles and so much more. But during our third and last night dive of this wonderful liveaboard, one of our records has been broken. Like the night manta dive the day before, this night three manta rays are circling around and pass just over our heads. Halfway through the dive however, the manta rays have stirred up so much sand that shooting photos becomes useless. Yet we continue our dive and enjoy more of this spectacular night dive. Due to the poor visibility only at the last moment, out of nowhere, you now see a manta ray popping up right before your mask. Occasionally we even get a gentle touch of a wing when one of the manta rays makes a turn and starts its next round. Well prepared and with few expectations, we started this journey and liveaboard. But, unlike in 2009, this time we did not get much time to make our preconceived creative photos. When most of us were relaxing between the dives in their cabin or on the upper deck, the Maldives showed us always something new.

'Bruno! Bruno! Big jelly fish in front of the boat.' Add an extremely flat sea and a bright sunshine to it, and great photos are guaranteed. That day, in the late afternoon we make a dive on a small wreck. On board we have a ski-champion, and the white sands of the Maldives bring a strong contrast with the red skis. The strong reputation of this trip is repeatedly confirmed. You should of course always have a bit of luck because not all trips are like this. The mild currents, good visibility and the close encounters with the big marine life are this time at our side. But it is the reputation and the organization of this trip that is indeed the key to the success of this liveaboard.

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