

Atoll Addiction by Peter Pinnock

I am not one who pays too much attention to the stars and astrology. Me, I'm a water person. The oceans and the creatures that live within it hold the most fascination for me. I've always been sceptical about fortunetellers. Do people really change their lives according to what they read in astrology columns? Earlier this year I found myself reading my stars in a glossy girlie magazine. I'm also not one for female magazines but this one had a picture of Liz Hurley draped over the front cover. What a babe! Visually navigating around her ample curves I found myself being drawn into the magazine.

"This is a year for eliminating effete materials from the body - detoxing will go well. This is also a great year for surgery, meditation, psychic cleansing and breaking various addictions." I turned pale. My hands began to shake. Slamming down the magazine I realized that 2002 was going to be a tough year. I visited my local friendly travel agent for solace.

"Lyn, I need to detox."

"Oh Pete, detoxing is sooo boring. Here, let me pour you another margarita."

"No, no - I am serious. You have to send me somewhere to dry out. Somewhere exotic. You know: palm trees, sandy beaches, clean water, good diving."

"Oh, very well, how about the Maldives?"

The Maldives is an old favourite with South African divers. Since the direct flight from Johannesburg was cancelled it has been difficult and expensive to get there. Air Seychelles has introduced a flight to Male via the scenic Seychelles and soon I found myself sipping my last vodka and orange juice 30 000 feet above the Indian Ocean.



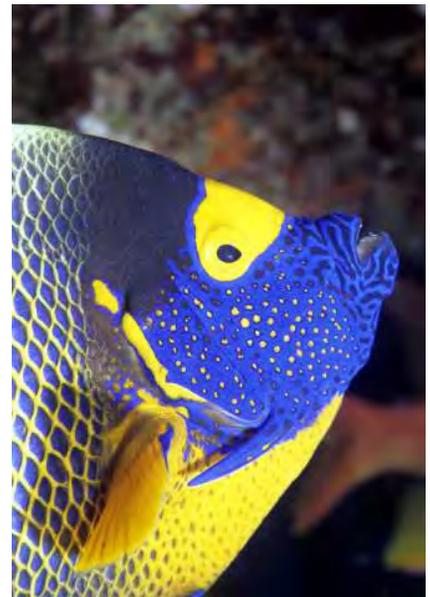
There is no other nation quite like the Maldives! It consists of 1190 coral islands that are spread over a distance of 868km in a north-south direction. Only 200 islands are inhabited with a total of 87 resorts to choose from. The Maldives





offers the classic fantasy of a tropical paradise: palm-fringed, crispy white beaches, turquoise lagoons, clear warm water and coral reefs teeming with colourful marine life. From the air the Maldives appears like a necklace of confetti sprinkled over the blue velvet of the Indian Ocean. Few of the picture-perfect tropical islands are longer than 2km or higher than 2 meters and you can walk across most in 10 minutes.

Transfer from Male airport to the islands is by speedboat or seaplane. Our first visit is to Kuramathi Island in the Rasdhoo Atoll – a 90-minute boat ride from the airport. Kuramathi is one of the largest islands that can accommodate over 500 tourists in 3 resorts. The vegetation on the island is lush with fig trees, frangipani, bougainvilleas, palms, coconut trees and many happy honeymoon couples all enjoying the warm tropical climate. Paola – an Italian beauty, who after only 5 months on the island wants to go home because she misses her *momma's ravioli*, introduced us to the underwater world. The most memorable dive was on Fan Reef – a sheer wall in front of the resort that sports some enormous sea fans draped with feather stars that cling to the reef at between 30m and 40m. Peering into the inky gloom below we could make out the shape of schools of kingfish patrolling the reef face. Returning up over the ridge we find a sandy patch that is home to a family of garden eels. Regarding us carefully they retreat in unison back to the safety of their holes. A whitetip shark lies sleeping nearby on a sandy patch. It sails off into the blue when we approach. Whitetips are common in the Maldives but tend to shy away from divers.



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After a few days on Kuramathi we transfer by ferry to Paradise Island. Because of the proximity to the airport the islands of North Male atoll were the first to be developed for tourism. Paradise Island is one of more than 12 resorts within 15km of the airport. The advantage of a resort close to the airport is the saving of time, trouble and expense in transferring and the ease with which you can make an excursion to the capital. Riet Wubs from Delphis Diving welcomed us to Paradise Island. Riet is a towering Dutch lady with a personality to match her stature. She owns a number



of smooth and professional dive operations in the Maldives that are frequented by British and Japanese tourists. Within minutes we were briefed and on our way to dive the "Maldives Victory" – possibly the best-known wreck in the Maldives.

The "Maldivian Victory" was a cargo ship carrying food, drink and construction material from Singapore to the Maldives. On the night of 13 February 1981 it ran aground on Hulule, the island-airport. It is believed the captain was drunk and a sailor was at the helm. Within an hour the ship sank and settled on the sandy bottom. No lives were lost and the crew and a few passengers were able to swim to the airport. Anchored above the wreck, Boeing 747's take off and land on the island less than 30 metres away. A current is ripping over the wreck as we pull ourselves down the anchor line. My mask squashes against my face and my demand valve free-flows as it presses into the current. The main mast rises to twelve metres below the surface. Below lie cargo holds wide open and empty. Tugged by the current the bridge looms ahead of us. Entering the superstructure we gain respite from the current. All the fittings and marine articles of interest have long since been removed. Corals have colonised the walls and ceiling and in the gloom they are feeding – their polyps extracting microscopic plankton from the water. A school of batfish has made the wreck their home. They pass by, eyeing us curiously. In a cabin lies an AM/FM radio. A member of the dive group jokingly holds it up to his head and does an underwater bee-bop. Heading back to the surface we are surrounded by clouds of fusiliers that dart in amongst us.

There are a number of new terms to come to grips with when diving the Maldives. One of them is a reef structure called a "*thila*" in the local Dhivehi language – a coral reef formation found inside an atoll. The reef top rises to a few metres below the surface providing excellent light for the very best coral growth. The sides drop steeply to over 30 metres and are interspersed with caves and overhangs waiting to be explored. It is possible to swim around a thila comfortably in a single dive. A thila resembles an oasis in the desert and attract the full spectrum of reef and pelagic fish.

One such thila is Okobe thila, a few minutes by boat from Paradise Island. Entering the water a large napoleon wrasse eyes us carefully through chameleon eyes. It must





have been fed boiled eggs as we are followed like a shadow for the rest of the dive. Hundreds of coachmen and black pyramid butterfly fish flutter alongside the reef face. Facing into the current they dine on microscopic zooplankton as it sweeps past them. Schools of goldies swarm like butterflies about the nooks and crannies of the reef. If a predator appears, they take cover in amongst the lush coral growth. Beneath an overhang schools of bigeye soldiers converge. Here they wait until dusk to start their nocturnal foraging. At the base of the reef oriental sweetlips hang motionless under a large coral formation.



After the dive I realised that there are two things that I still don't fully understand. Firstly, what did Liz Hurley ever see in Hugh Grant? And even though the reefs in the vicinity of Paradise Island are close to the capital, why do they offer some of the most pristine diving that we had in the Maldives? You certainly don't have to travel to the outer islands to find the vibrant reefs that have made the Maldives world famous.

"Hey Lyn, I'm having a great time! This place is like paradise - I feel like a new person."

"That's nice Pete. How is the meditation and physic cleansing going?"

"Well, errr. I've been kinda busy diving and doing stuff.."

"Try this then: Get ye onboard the Manthiri immediately."



There are divers amongst us that are happy to do a single dive and spend the rest of the day propping up a palm tree. Boring! There are also those that prefer to dive all day, talk



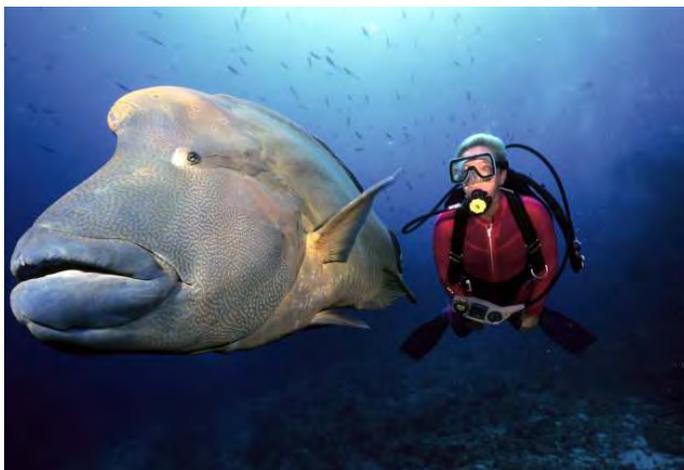
diving at dinner and collapse early into bed. For these people the only way to dive the Maldives is on a liveaboard. Take the time to do the maths and you will find that it is also the most cost-justifiable way of doing up to 4 dives a day.

The Manthiri is a Maldivian owned luxury liveaboard. It plies the atolls visiting dive sites that are out of reach to the island based resorts. Over the next 9 days we would travel to the remote Raa atoll and return via Rashdo, Ari and South Mali atolls.

Heading north from Male we dived a number of *kandu's*, or channels, on the outer edge of the atolls. These are breaks in the atoll rim connecting the waters of the atoll to the open ocean. Nutrients are swept into the atoll by the incoming tide. Channels mean current – roaring currents. The stronger the current the better as it acts as a magnet for fish life! Descending on the outer wall of the atoll one drifts to the entrance of the channel. At this



point the current picks up remarkably and you quickly find a convenient rock to hold onto. The enormous flow of water attracts fish of all shapes and sizes. Patrolling in front of you dogtooth tuna, giant kingfish, eagle rays, grey reef and whitetip reef sharks are a common sight. When it is time to surface the current sucks you through the pass and you surface well inside the atoll next to the waiting dhoni.



In 1998 El Niño ravished the Maldives. If sea temperatures rise more than one degree Celsius above their normal height, and the temperature lasts for more than



approximately 2 months, corals starve and die as their zooxanthellae algae are killed. The sea temperature in the Maldives rose to 30 degrees and did not drop for 6 months – even at a depth of 30 metres. Coral bleaching was widespread. From our observations the reefs in the north were the most affected. Today new corals are sprouting and the fish life in the Maldives remains as rich and vibrant as ever. It is common to see giant napoleon wrasse, dogtooth tuna and kingfish on just about every dive.



A superb reef with awesome fish life is Fish Head in the east of Ari atoll. This is the type of reef where you want to bolt your sofa down and watch the action unfold before you – very much like watching a game of rugby on Saturday afternoon. Clouds of fusiliers hover on the current-facing side of the thila. They cast dark shadows onto the reef below. Bluefin kingfish dart in amongst them. A napoleon wrasse slowly circles the pinnacle while a hawksbill turtle nonchalantly pecks at algae in a cave behind us. Before us whitetip and grey reef sharks patrol the depths. A pair of dogtooth tuna appear and with a snap of their tails blast into the fusiliers. With a whoosh the fusiliers dive as one for the protection of the reef. Cautiously they emerge a few seconds later. Hanging at 12 meters we lie motionless watching the action. It seems as if everything with a tail is out to entertain us. A pair of robust giant kingfish join the free-for-all. Their silvery colouring has turned to dark grey giving an indication of their age. When we think that we have seen everything, mantas gracefully soar overhead. The dive was so good, we went back for more the next day.

The Maldives is a world of its own – traditional, unhurried and almost unchanged for centuries. It is as simple and well ordered as the straight village streets or the tenants of Islam.

“Hey Lyn – the Maldives is great. But now I have a new problem to cope with.”

“What’s that Pete?”

“Atoll addiction!”



FACT FILE

Getting there: Air Seychelles flies weekly to Male via the Seychelles.

Grading: Open water certificate.

Visibility: 10 to 40m.

Water temperature: 28° C to 30°C.

Best time to go: December to April is the dry season. May to November is the period of the southwest monsoon when rain and storms are more likely.

Visas: South African passport holders do not require visas to visit the Maldives.

Travel Tips: Pay for all your diving, accommodation and meals before departing. A liveaboard may seem expensive but it offers good value as it is fully inclusive of dives, meals and drinking water.

Manthiri Liveaboard: 12 passengers, air-conditioned throughout, up to 4 dives a day, all meals, drinking water and wine.

Currency: Local currency is the Maldivian rufiya but US \$ is the accepted currency at all resorts.

Restrictions: No alcohol, drugs or pornographic literature. Nudism is banned. Custom searches on arrival are the norm. Any duty-free alcohol is impounded upon arrival in the Maldives until your departure.

Travel Contact: seensee@dhivehinet.net.mv <http://www.manthiriliveaboard.com/>

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