25
6–9 days







Dive into Luxury

TEXT: Mafaz Haleem PHOTOS: Shafraz Naeem

■ THE CHINESE WERE among the earliest travellers to the Maldives, describing it as the "Three Thousand Weak Waters" – because of the calm waters inside the atolls. To the numerous well-to-do tourists who make the long haul, this island nation of 26 atolls remains the epitome of luxury, with stunning white sand beaches and equally impressive resorts. Divers know it simply as one of the finest spots on the planet to conduct their favourite pastime.

Flying over the Maldives by plane, the first thing you'll notice is the necklace-shaped atolls emerging from the bluest waters imaginable. As you descend towards Hulhule International Airport, you'll begin to make out the individual islands and beaches, before finally touching down on a runway that seems to be surrounded on all sides by water.

Most of the resorts are located on Ari Atoll and Kaafu Atoll, and depending on where you're staying, it will take a substantial boat or seaplane ride to get there. One thing is universal, however: the warm welcome you'll receive when you arrive and the exemplary hospitality on offer throughout your stay. After the long journey to get here, you'll almost certainly want to spend what's left of your first day chilling out and lapping up the luxury.

With unfailing sunshine and cobalt blue waters at a temperature that's like getting in the bath, it's no surprise that snorkelling and diving are huge in the Maldives. It's a rare visitor who doesn't want to give it a try, and the dive centres at each resort cater to every level, from absolute beginners to advanced divers who can tackle deeper water and difficult currents.

A dive centre will typically plan up to four dives per day to various locations near the resort, using local boats called *dhonis* to navigate between sites. As a diver, an unbeatable option is joining a liveaboard, as you'll have the opportunity to see diverse dive sites at various atolls and pack in all the top locations in one trip. Maldivian liveaboards don't skimp on luxury either, and food and service on board will be top notch. Their popularity means that many vessels are fully booked several months in advance, so make sure you plan well ahead.

HOW HARD?

PHYSICAL: ★★☆☆☆
Three dives a day can be tiring, but you can always just hang out on the boat

MENTAL: ★★☆☆☆
There's a good chance of shark encounters

SKILL: ★★☆☆☆
Many of the best dives are below 18 metres, so Advanced Open Water certification is recommended

Each dive site has particular characteristics and unique residents, but what they all have in common is fabulous multi-coloured corals and a mind-blowing abundance of fish species. You'll be greeted by playful sea turtles, moray eels and stingrays. Sharks such as whitetips and blacktips are a common sight, although they tend to swim around in deeper waters looking for pray. Manta rays and whale sharks are also spotted throughout the year.

With so many dive sites to choose from, you'll have to be selective. Firm favourites include Maaya Thila at Ari Atoll for its easier currents and endless parade of exciting creatures including turtles, sharks and barracudas; Rasdhoo for its hammerheads, grey reef sharks, whitetips and rays; Nassimo Thila and HP Reef for their amazing reef formations and sheer densities of marine life; and Gangehi Kandu for possible encounters with leopard and zebra sharks, eagle rays and stingrays.

Take a break from diving to visit a local island to see how ordinary Maldivians live, try the tasty local cuisine, and indulge in some Bodu Beru song and dance, with its distinctly African vibes. After a week or two of this, you'll probably have no choice but to head home – financially ruined, irreparably tanned, and hopelessly smitten.







GETTING THERE AND AROUND
Singapore Airlines, Malaysian Airlines and Emirates, among others, have daily flights to the one international airport of the Maldives, a couple of kilometres across the water from the capital Malé. If you're not joining a liveaboard, get around using two charter seaplane companies, Trans Maldivian (*www.tma.com.mv*) and Maldivian Air Taxi (*www.maldivianairtaxi.com*), or the various charter boats and speedboats.

WHEN TO GO
There's no bad time to visit the Maldives for diving, but most prefer to come between November and April. May to November is the monsoon season, but diving is generally not affected. The best time for surfing is from March to October.

ACCOMMODATION
Atoll Cruiser Liveaboard *www.faunutravels.com*
Bandos Island Resort, North Malé Atoll *www.bandosmaldives.com*
Holiday Island Resort, South Ari Atoll *www.villahotels.com*
Kuramathi Island Resort, North Ari Atoll *www.kuramathi.com*
Kuredu Island Resort, Lhaviyani Atoll *www.kuredu.com*

FOOD
Maldivian cuisine has Sri Lankan and Indian influences, so expect lots of tasty, spicy flavours. Curries, soups, local vegetables, tropical fruit and lots of fresh seafood are all available. To keep tourists happy, the resorts also offer international fare – and alcohol, which isn't available elsewhere, owing to the largely Muslim population.

INFORMATION
Maldives Tourism Promotion Board *www.visitmaldives.com*
Maldives Liveaboards *www.maldivesliveaboards.com*

ITINERARY
7 DAYS OF DIVING IN LUXURY

DAY 1 Arrive and transfer to your boat bound for the South Malé Atoll. Do a check dive in the afternoon.

DAY 2 Do an early morning dive after you wake up before cruising to the next dive site while having breakfast. Do two more dives before and after lunch. Spend the night in a quiet lagoon and watch the stars while relaxing on the sun deck.

DAY 3 Dive one of the channels to watch the shark action, depending on the currents. Sail to the South Ari Atoll and dive one of the submerged reefs. The night will be spent anchored by a local island.

DAY 4 Spend the morning cruising up and down the southern edge of Ari Atoll searching for whale sharks to snorkel with. After, do two dives with the whale sharks. Your third is at a manta ray cleaning station.

DAY 5 Dive Fish Head, where the friendliest Napoleon wrasse hang out, and see the grey reef sharks at the famed Maaya Thila. Dive Maaya Thila again at night to see the whitetip reef sharks hunting and some friendly barracudas.

DAY 6 Do a morning dive to a nice Thila and then move to the northern part of the Ari Atoll. Do two more dives at the Rasdhoo Channel. Party the night away on an uninhabited island with a beach barbecue and traditional Bodu Beru music.

DAY 7 Dive Hammerhead Point in Rasdhoo to see the hammerhead sharks. Cruise back to Malé Atoll and get ready for departure.