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IN THE MALDIVES



GENTLE GIANTS in a fragile world

Year-round habitat for the planet's biggest fish and other spectacular marine life, Ari Atoll is but one of many cruising possibilities in the remote and vulnerable Maldives archipelago.

Words - Kara Murphy

Seas are stewing off Maamigili, the southernmost island in Ari Atoll, one of 26 natural atolls in the 1,190-island Maldives archipelago, which rests upon a vast underwater mountain range in the Indian Ocean, southwest of India. Our excursion craft, a traditional wooden Maldivian *dhoni*, rocks like a caffeinated cradle alongside our main vessel, 128-foot M/V *Four Seasons Explorer*, making transfers between the two to be undertaken with care. This morning's adventure is worth weathering waves, though. We're setting out to look for the planet's biggest fish, the magnificent, vulnerable whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*), which

cruises the atoll's outer edge year-round. This U-shaped, 4,863-hectare South Ari Atoll marine-protected area (MPA) is the largest in the Maldives, extending from Rangali Island in the west, around Maamigili to the south, to Dhigurah Island in the east, with a boundary one kilometer seaward from the area's epipelagic reef fringe. It was established in 2009 because of its year-round whale shark aggregations.

Conditions are too rough, unfortunately, to explore the MPAs northwestern half, so the *dhoni* steers toward its southeast, which, today, is calmer. Several of *Four Seasons Explorer's* 23 crewmembers perch on the roof, the best spotter position, and two smaller tenders motor nearby, also scouting. Dhonis from nearby resorts, most carrying scuba divers, pass us, but their passengers' semi-dour expressions convey that their whale shark luck today has, thus far, been cloudy. Despite their more than 40-foot-long magnitude, the harmless, plankton-



eating giants can be tricky to spot from boats, particularly if they're cruising at depth.

After about an hour-and-a-half, cruise director Angela Gitaprakasa advises our search is over, and the divers among us should prepare for the day's first dive. Knowing how badly I want to see a whale shark, though, she offers to continue scouting with me on a tender. And so the driver, Angela and I set off, a container of *gulha* – fried dough balls stuffed with tuna, coconut, onion, chili, ginger and garlic – on hand, just in case we're famished after a lengthy swim alongside the famous fish. As we speed away, the divers step off the *dhoni* into the Indian Ocean's 82-degree Fahrenheit water, forming two groups and preparing for descent.

But then, within minutes, a monsoonal deluge spills from the sky, further disturbing the already choppy water and reducing above-water visibility. Angela sighs: "I won't be able to look for whale sharks in these

WHEN TO GO:
Anytime, although seas tend to be calmest in March, and June through October is the best time to see manta rays. Whale sharks are present year-round in the South Ari Atoll MPA.



conditions. Do you want to change your mind and go diving?"

And so we race back, Angela calling ahead so the second group of divers will wait for me. When we arrive, they're huddled on the surface, their faces suffering pelting raindrops. I quickly don my gear and join them; fortunately, we descend immediately and there's no time to determine if they're annoyed about the delay.

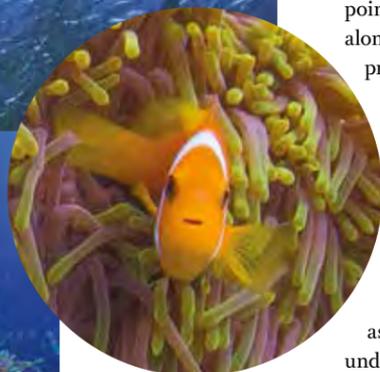
Like other dives we've experienced on Ari Atoll, this one sports vibrant coral along its steeply sloping wall – deep reds, delicate pinks, royal purples, soft lavenders and blazing oranges – as well as intriguing marine life: a toothy giant moray with a beady purple star; an exquisite pink-and-white scorpion fish, pretty enough to model for a child's stuffed toy but probably too deadly to be considered; nudibranchs; a distant green turtle; and a ghost pipefish, which I probably wouldn't have noticed if dive master Bella hadn't pointed it out. In efforts to conserve air, I hover around 50 to 60 feet, while a few fellow divers swim at least 15 feet below, closer to the wall's base on the edge of the blue. They're looking, I expect, for a whale shark, but I've given up hope.





THE OTHER GENTLE GIANTS

Whale sharks aren't the only gentle behemoths that frequent the Maldives. Reef manta rays, their wings spanning up to 13 feet and their brains larger than any other fish, are regularly spotted in Baa Atoll's Hanifaru Bay, a Marine Protected Area and core zone of the UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve. Between June and November, lunar tides and monsoon currents trap plankton in the football field-sized bay's steep side, attracting masses of up to 200 of these hungry, inquisitive creatures, particularly at high tide during the full and new moon periods.



Above: The Hafsa Thila dive site in Ari Atoll is adorned with hundreds of beautiful sea turtles, anemones and anemone fish. Opposite top: A dinner table prepared in the sand on an uninhabited island in Ari Atoll.

After 40 minutes, I'm at about 35 feet, looking for morays and expecting Bella will soon lead us upward in preparation for our three-minute safety stop, when I hear frantic banging on someone's tank. I look down, and there, swimming leisurely and magnificently alongside us at about 80 feet, is a 33-foot-long whale shark. I swim down to it as quickly as I can, reaching a point a few meters behind its white-spotted caudal fin, which, along with the rear of its body, sways gently back and forth as it propels itself forward. *Four Seasons Explorer's* videographer, Musab Moosa, manages a better position beside its mighty, elegant head and tiny right eye until, after about 30 seconds, he can no longer keep pace. The entire episode, from the moment I hear the banging until the shark swims beyond view, lasts just over two glorious minutes, the most exhilarating of the trip.

Beaming brighter than the blinding white sand that graces this archipelago's abundant beaches, our group ascends to our safety stop, a couple of us performing a joyful underwater dance. Upon surfacing though, we realize the first group of divers, about five minutes ahead of us, had already begun their safety stop when the whale shark appeared and didn't see it at all. Immensely grateful for our delayed start, the divers in my group thank me for my tardiness.

Ari Atoll is one of five atolls *Four Seasons Explorer* visits on its regular, seven-night circuit itinerary, which begins on a Monday



PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS PAGES: KARA MURPHY (INSET LEFT, TOP CENTER); FOUR SEASONS (TOP LEFT, TOP RIGHT, CIRCLE); ISTOCK/SHALAMOV (BOTTOM). THIS PAGE: FOUR SEASONS (TOP, CENTER LEFT); KARA MURPHY (BOTTOM, CIRCLE); OPPOSITE: KARA MURPHY (TOP LEFT), KEN SEE/FOUR SEASONS (TOP RIGHT, BOTTOM), FOUR SEASONS (CENTER)

at *Four Seasons Resort Maldives* at the private island of Kuda Huraa, its homeport, in North Male Atoll. The 11-stateroom, three-deck catamaran spends three nights cruising northwest to *Four Seasons Resort Maldives* at Landaa Giraavaru, in UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Baa Atoll, then heads south to Rasdhoo Atoll, Ari and northeast to South Male Atoll before completing the circuit. The vessel is also available for exclusive charter, following customized diving, surfing or leisure itineraries according to guest interest.

South Ari Atoll and Gaafu Alifu in the south are the best places to see whale sharks, says Captain Bonifasius Sebayang, who has been skipping this vessel for 14 years. Surfing charters might begin near North Male Atoll's famous surf breaks – Chickens, Cokes and Sultans, for example – and cruise to rarely surfed breaks in the outer atolls. Other possibilities for a 10-day charter include Lhaviyani Atoll, north of Baa, which has excellent wreck dives, and some of the southern atolls, including heart-shaped Addu, giant Huvadhu, Meemu with its excellent surf breaks and Vaavu, which is one of the best for diving.

When cruising these atolls, stretching your legs on a tiny, deserted island that takes only five minutes to lap, it's easy to forget that this remote Muslim nation has one of the highest population densities in the world. Although it covers 35,000 square miles, only 115 of those are above water, and less than 16 percent of its islands are inhabited, with one-third of its 345,000-strong population living on just over two square miles on the capital island of Male.

It's impossible to miss the nation's low-lying nature – its average elevation is just five feet above sea level and its highest natural point, on Villingili Island in Addu Atoll, is seven feet, 10 inches – the lowest high point in the world. Should climate change cause seas to rise high enough, many



FOUR SEASONS EXPLORER
sleeps 22 in ten
215-square-foot en suite
staterooms and the
484-square foot Explorer's
Suite, which has a wall of
windows and a private deck.
To charter her, email
reservations.mal@fourseasons.com. For more
information, visit www.fourseasons.com/maldivesfse.



TASTE OF THE MALDIVES

Tuna (sustainably caught with poles or lines) is the Maldives' main export and, along with locally grown coconut, it often features in the country's spicy, Indian-influenced cuisine. *Mas huni*, a popular local dish made with tuna, coconut, onion and chili, is served cold with unleavened bread for breakfast.



Above: The Island Spa at Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa is the only spa in the Maldives on its own isle. Top and opposite bottom: More than 2,000 frames grow coral off the Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru, which offers a children's program at its Marine Discovery Centre that includes helping marine biologists transplant coral frames (opposite top).

Maldivians would need to relocate. To help ease Male's population pressure and create slightly more elevated (around six feet above sea level) space, the Maldives government began an ambitious land reclamation project in 1997. Artificial island Hulhumale is built atop a reef and connected to the airport island via a causeway. Already more than 30,000 people live there and when it's complete, it will span over 400 hectares and accommodate about 100,000 people.

Rising sea levels aren't these fragile atolls' only climate concern. In 1998, an El Niño global-warming event damaged around 90 percent of the Maldives' shallow water reefs, largely due to coral bleaching. Some reefs have recovered (and the southernmost reefs were largely unaffected); however, future warming events are a worry.

I've noticed some evidence of bleaching while snorkeling (particularly off Machchafushi in Ari Atoll), but most of the sites we've visited appear to be in good condition. And while these natural reefs have been lovely, swarming with angelfish, fusiliers, butterflyfish, tangs, parrotfish, wrasse and triggerfish, as well as psychedelically colored anemones, the coral frames off the Four Seasons properties at Kuda Huraa and Landaa



PHOTOGRAPHS: FOUR SEASONS (TOP), KARA MURPHY (CIRCLE, BOTTOM)

PHOTOGRAPHS: FOUR SEASONS (TOP), MARKUS GORTZ/FOUR SEASONS (CENTER), KARA MURPHY (BOTTOM)



DON'T TRUST YOUR CHARTS!
Navigation in the Maldives is "very difficult," says *Four Seasons Explorer's* Captain Bonifasius Sebayang. Depths within atolls are taken almost entirely from leadline surveys done in 1835, and depiction of reefs and other dangers on maps is based on satellite imagery and aerial photos. "If you trust your map," he warns, "you'll be grounded all the time." Sebayang says his course often looks like it's moving directly through an island, when, really, it's traveling through deep water. And sometimes 20 or 30 meters on the map is really just three meters, he says. "Trust your eyes, and use a sonar."

Giraavaru have impressed me most. Here, resident marine biologists from Male-based environmental consultancy Seamarc have been successfully growing coral since 2007, attaching coral fragments to more than 4,000 locally produced frames, then placing them in waters just off the islands. Off Kuda Huraa's eastern beach, dozens of frames create an artificial, thriving reef, where pufferfish and other fish species dance and seek shelter. While the newer frames are obvious, some of the older ones are completely covered. The frames, sponsored by the resorts and their guests, are regularly monitored and photographed, and the marine team is working to identify species better suited to higher water temperatures and thus, more resilient to coral-bleaching events.

The morning after our extraordinary dive with the whale shark, I skip the scheduled dive and instead revisit Dhigurah's southern side to take another look for the elusive creatures. The vessel's marine biologist and I scan the surface as our tender cruises southwest along the reef edge, but nothing necessitates pause. Finally, near Dhigurah's southernmost tip, we cease our boat search and enter the water for a snorkel. After all, who knows? One of the mighty fish could be swimming deep – visible, perhaps, from an in-water vantage, but not necessarily from the boat.

And while I wouldn't say we're unlucky (as we do spot a couple of shy hawksbill turtles, an eagle ray and an adorable pufferfish), the subject of our search fails to appear. Disappointing, yes, but I appreciate the serendipitous nature of yesterday's sighting even more. As much as we long to see these wild ocean beauties, satisfaction depends on timing and luck. I long to return another time and try again. ☞