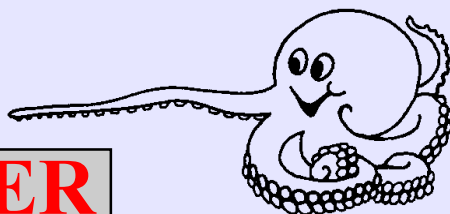


THE REEF SEEKER



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October - 2025



MALDIVES 2025 JOURNAL

I kept a daily journal for our first trip and share it with you now.

September 16-18

It's an arduous trip to get here. We left LAX late evening on September 16, flew 16+ hours to Singapore, two hour layover in Singapore, and then 4 hours to the Maldives. The Maldives has become a huge tourist destination so their airport is big and modern. Easy-peasy through Immigration and Customs and our hotel (H78Veli) was waiting to pick us up for our over-night stay.

We've stayed with them before and really like the place. H78Veli is actually their new (for us) second property and it's as nice as the original H78. They took very good care of us plus served a great breakfast (included) before we left for the boat plus they included all the transfers.

Friday, September 19

We arrived at the public ferry dock at 9:00AM and DM and tour guide Moosa Hassan was there to greet us. The crew loaded all of our bags on their dhoni, which also serves as the dive tender, and off we went to the Manthiri, our home-away-from-home

for the next 10 days.

If you're a longtime SoCal diver, think of the Great Escape or Encore, but only with 12 divers. Manthiri is about 80 feet long and perhaps 20 feet wide. Lower deck holds the staterooms, main deck is the salon and camera tables, and upper deck is the wheelhouse and sundeck. Nothing fancy but it works. Like other Maldivian liveaboards, there's a separate smaller boat called the dhoni which is where all the scuba gear lives and from where the diving takes place. It's actually a very good setup.

We sent much of the first part of the day getting an orientation to the boat as well as doing some waivers and other paperwork plus we ran about four hours (30 miles) away from Male for our first checkout dive. Pleasant but not spectacular. But it also where we introduced the group to the concept of seeing UMS: Usual Maldives Stuff. This is an incredibly diverse and rich place to dive and there are lots of fish and other critters that you don't see in other parts of the world. (Remember this is the Indian Ocean, not the western Pacific.)

Saturday, September 20

Our first full dive day. It starts pretty early: briefing at 6:30AM and we're off diving by 6:45, in the water by 7AM. Breakfast around 8:30, extended surface interval to allow for a move, next briefing and dive around 10:30, lunch a bit after 12-noon, mid-afternoon dive around 3PM, dinner at 6:30PM, and everyone's been crashing no later than 9PM. Rinse and repeat.

This is the first of our two back-to-back trips and we headed north on this part. That means we're in Manta territory and hoping to run into the massive annual Manta Aggregation, where hundreds and hundreds of mantas converge on the areas around Raa and Baa atolls to feast on plankton and maybe go through some social ordering and perhaps even mating. So we were quite happy to see a manta flying by on our first dive. And we saw plenty of UMS: Anemonefish, snappers, Red-Toothed Triggerfish by the thousands, and more. The conditions weren't ideal with about 40 foot viz and a lot of particulate and schmutz in the water.

But we were able to catch part of the Aggregation and it's fun to hear how excited the crew gets as they chatter amongst themselves in the native tongue of the Maldives. Conditions were "horrible" with lots of particulate but that's what attracts the mantas as much of that is food for them so they're zooming around with mouths agape and funneling whatever they can through their gaping maw, swallowing some and filtering the rest out.

We estimate we had 20-30 mantas in the general area with us. You do this as a snorkel. The boats drop you as close as possible – the mantas are near enough to the surface that their wings break out of the water – and then you kick like crazy to keep up. If you've got a camera, there are plenty of photo opportunities. The mantas are zooming all around and seem obviously aware of where we are be-

cause they peel off before they collide with you. We spent about half an hour in the water with them and it was wonderful.

Sunday, September 21

A special treat today was at the end of the first dive when we ran into a large school of Spadefish. What's really neat about this, and this group in particular, is that they seem to like to socialize with divers. They more or less surrounded us, came through the group, would loop around and come back again, and stuff like that. They also seem to enjoy swimming through our exhaust bubbles. This is similar (although he does it in spades) to Bubbles at the Aquarium of the Pacific who not only loves swimming through our bubbles, but will nip you on the head if you haven't exhaled to his satisfaction. This group wasn't quite that forward but they certainly seemed to enjoy a bubble bath from us.

This was also the day when we had what's probably the #1 dive so far on the trip at a manta cleaning station. There were SEVEN mantas at the station and they all stayed with us throughout the entirety of our 80-minute dive. Conditions weren't great as there's still lot of particulate in the water and at this spot, there was a pretty good current along with some surge. But we all used reef hooks to hold our spot and were able to observe.

The mantas were probably 12-15 feet across although there was one we thought was closer to 18 feet or so. (It's really hard to determine this underwater since they're always moving and it's not like we have a tape measure in our BC pockets.) But it was fascinating to watch them glide in and out and maneuver amongst themselves. On top of that, they're definitely aware that we're there – and seemingly unperturbed by our presence – and each of them individually would glide by the group and take a peek. You definitely could

feel them checking you out when you looked them in the eye. Wonderful experience.

It's also nice when you have a group that gets along and shares their impressions of the dives afterwards. When you're on a liveaboard like we are – there are only 12 of us plus a crew of 11 – the interpersonal relationship of the divers can really enhance your trip. It's a lot of fun to hear other people's experiences and underwater, divers are always willing to point stuff out to their fellow divers.

Monday, September 22

We started at a spot called "Anemone City" but we might as well have called it "Mantas Sneak In" as we ended up with an unexpected pair of them at the end of the dive. In fact, we realized when we got back on the dhoni that, with the exception of the check-out dive, we saw at least one manta – and usually more – on every dive. And it easy at times to start to take this all for granted, "Oh yeah, another manta. What else do you have?"

We retuned today to the same cleaning station we visited the day before. What a difference a day makes. There was less current, a bit more particulate, no surge, slightly less visibility, but there were still four mantas at the station, and they behaved in the same manner as the ones the day before. As you may know, you ID mantas by

their belly pattern. I haven't yet compared these to photos from two days ago to see if any of them were there both days.

The third dive was a bit of a bust. (Of course, in the Maldives, even a bad dive trumps a lot of dives in other places.) We had done a second aggregation snorkel and had hoped then to hang under them on scuba. Not a good plan. You couldn't really see what was going on and they weren't always around. So you had to work to find some things along the rubbly bottom, but there were still things to see if you took time to look.

Tuesday, September 23

One of the issues with a trip like this is that all the dives sites are named in the local language which can sound a bit like gobble-dee-gook with an Indian accent. So It's hard for me at times to remember which site is which or sometimes distinguish between different sites.

There's a running joke with Moosa, our dive guide, about "UMS" which is "Usual Maldives Stuff." But there's some truth to that as there are some critters you'll see on every dive, almost no matter where you are. And even if all you got were UMS for the entire trip, it would still represent good diving. What's gotten me down on this trip is the white-ish particulate in the water. This is a hindrance strictly from a photo standpoint and it

2026 DIVING VACATIONS

March 9-22 • Yap

July 1-14 • Indonesia (2 spots)

Sept (12-19) • Dumaguete (land)

Sept (19-26) • Dumaguete (boat)

makes it hard if not impossible to get a good shot since the schmutz in the water shows up as significant backscatter in my photos. And when I color correct, those white dots tend to turn red. First-world problems, I know, but aggravating nonetheless.

Our third dive this day was at a place called Muthafushi Thila. ("Thila" means "pinnacle.") This place has more fish than you've ever seen in your life, mostly small baitfish-types which include silversides, sweepers, and more. The schools move in unison and almost seem to throb with the pulsating currents. On top of that, there's some significant surge. You really notice that on top of the thila, where there are dozens and dozens of anemones, because the anemone tentacles sway back and forth as the surge surges. It was a magnificent dive but a LOT of work because we had to kick against the current to get to the front of the thila where the majority of the action was. So this dive really kicked our butts. And the plan was to do it again as the first dive in the morning.

Wednesday, September 24

What a difference a day makes!!!

We plopped into the water shortly before 7AM. Same site as the end of the previous day. Not a hint of current. But all the fish were still there and the various schools were doing their thing. We started by going a bit deeper than the previous day to check out a huge school of Yellow Snappers. Magnificent. The Silversides were thumping, the Sweepers were sweeping, predator fish prowled at the margins, the anemones were still waving back and forth, and there were dozens and dozens of fish getting cleaned. We saw much of the same stuff that we saw the previous day but with much less work involved. Whew!!!

And that underscores diving in general and the Maldives specifically: You can expect the unexpected. That point is driven home in spades when

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	\$\$\$
Wed.	Oct 15	--- CLASS ---	--- NITROX ---	95
Sat.	18	Veterans Park	Navigation Made Easy	35
Wed.	22	Catalina Express	Avalon UW Park	180
Thu.	30	Veterans Park	••• Night Dive •••	35
Sat.	Nov 8	Veterans Park	Surf Entries Made Easy	FREE!!!
Wed.	12	--- CLASS ---	--- FISH I.D. ---	35
Wed.	19	Catalina Express	Avalon UW Park	180
Wed.	Dec 3	--- CLASS ---	--- TABLES/COMPUTERS ---	FREE!!!

we were about to leave the Manthiri on the dhoni for a night dive when cries of "WHALE SHARK!!!" filled the air. There was one swimming by the back of the boat near the surface so, instead of putting on our scuba gear, a number of us quickly grabbed mask/fins/snorkel (and a GoPro for me) and hopped in in hot pursuit. I was able to stay over the big fish for a minute or so and shot some video that documents the encounter. It's up on my FaceBook page. Although I've seen plenty of Whale Sharks before (see Isla Mujeres trip reports), this was still fun.

Thursday, September 25

Another lovely day of diving and a lot of it comes from the group dynamics. I think a lot of times people don't realize how important that can be, especially if you're on a liveaboard.

For us, it's maybe even more critical because there are only 12 people in our group so if someone's a jerk or simply not getting along with others, it can really stand out and have an effect. I can't say that I actively curate the groups when people are booking but it seems that, over the years, certain people have gravitated towards us and others have gravitated away. But we generally seem to end up with pretty good and interesting people, and everyone seems to get along.

On a larger boat – most liveaboards nowadays are taking 24-35 people – you might have a better chance of encountering someone who could negatively affect your enjoyment of the trip. By the same token, with that

many people, it might also be easier to simply avoid people not to your liking. In both instances, it's somewhat of a crapshoot but the other thing to factor in – and I'm not going to launch into a discussion at the moment – is whether the boat is chartered by a single group (probably a better chance of everyone getting along) or if it's simply a ragtag group and there's no common thread as to why people chose this particular trip.

Anyhow, just things to ponder when you're deciding where to go and with who (or whom).

Friday, September 26

Sometimes you have a dive plan and then have to change it on the fly underwater. And that's what happened to us on the first dive when the current wasn't exactly what we thought it was. No worries as you just – literally – go with the flow. And it turned out OK as we saw a lobster and a number of very colorful Parrotfish.

But the highlight dive was #2 which was at Gamaru Crevices which is a long wall-like reef that has a fairly large crevice that pretty much runs the length of the wall. It was probably 10-20 feet cut in depending on where you were and a good 10-15 feet tall. It was a very nice swim-through with a lot of cool critters along the way.

Saturday, September 27

This was the last dive day for trip #1 so it's only planned as a 2-dive day and there were lessons learned on both dives, both of which were at Shark Tank, which is an area just outside the Male Harbor breakwater

where a tuna-processing plant drops fish carcasses, and that attracts sharks and rays and all kinds of fish looking for a free meal. But it's also deep as the bottom is generally around 100+ so you do the dive hanging mid-water around 80-85 feet.

Of the two dives, the first dive was the high voltage one. As we jumped in from the dhoni at 7AM, we were surrounded by dozens and dozens of stingrays who likely were reacting to the fact that we were the first boat on site and they wanted to see what we had to offer. There were also dozens of sharks patrolling, an enormous school of Golden Trevallies working the bottom, and some huge Marble Rays coming in as well.

I'd love to show you the pictures I took expect this where lesson #1 comes in: Check your camera before you jump in to make sure your SD card is properly seated. I didn't check,

mine wasn't seated, and that meant I couldn't shoot anything. Nothing like doing an exciting dive with a dead camera in your hands.

The lesson on dive #2, which was much less frantic that the first dive since the sharks were gone and the rays were all resting on the bottom, is that you need to know what your group looks like. One of our divers paid too much attention to his camera and got separated from our group. When he realized that, he swam in what he thought was the correct direction, found a group he thought was ours, and merged with them. Only it wasn't our group.

Meantime, we realized he was missing and started looking towards the bottom to make sure he wasn't lying motionless there. It all turned out OK as our diver surfaced with the other group, realized his mistake, and came over to our dhoni. Of course, we didn't

know that while still underwater so it was little concerning on our safety stop but once we confirmed he was on-board and OK, tension was relieved, and all well that ends well.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It was a really nice trip overall and a very good group who all got along. That's key because 8 of the 11 of them are staying with us for trip #2. We're planning on a southern itinerary for that one and it will be interesting to see how that differs from what we've already done. In the meantime, we'll have a final night on the Manthiri, get off in the morning, spend the day in Hulhumale, overnight again at H78Veli, and then begin the second adventure on Monday, September 29. (So when this goes out to you, we're already two days into the second trip.) As usual, I'll keep you posted through FaceBook as to what's going on and will be posting pix and videos.

PICTURE PAGE - Maldives critters

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2025)



***Ome of many
Manta encounters***



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***Colorful
parrotfish***



***Cute
blenny***



***One of many
huge schools of fish***



***Reef Seekers group #1
with the Manthiri crew***