



MALDIVES

MANTAS, MORAYS & MESSAGES

ARTICLE BY DUANE SILVERSTEIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW OLDFIELD - SCUBAZOO IMAGES

Just hours before, I had surfaced from one of the most thrilling dives of my life. Manta rays surrounded me, performing an endless ballet of loop-the-loops. But now I am experiencing a tingling sensation in my arms and pain in the muscles of my back. Having logged 300 dives, I am beginning to wonder if my luck has run out and I have decompression sickness. I am drifting in and out of consciousness and am quite surprised that the tingling in my hands and the backache, are really rather pleasant. I open my eyes and am looking not at a physician in a recompression chamber, but a massage therapist



Lloyd Bridges was born. But please don't launch into the "Those were the good ol' days of diving-hardship" stories while we are in the *Explorer's* Jacuzzi – we might fall asleep and drown.

The Maldives are a chain of about 1,200 small low-lying coral islands or atolls in the Indian Ocean, located about 360 miles southwest of Sri Lanka. In fact, the term "atoll" is the only commonly used word in the world that derives from the Maldivian language, Divehi. To get here from the west coast of the U.S. requires several long flights. In fact, the Maldives are literally halfway around the world. If you go too far, you are now returning home. Is it worth it? The answer is a resounding yes. To quote that famous scuba diver, Horace Greeley, "Go west, young man." Of course, if you are living on the east coast of the U.S. you might wish to disregard Horace's advice and go east to get to the Maldives.

In my case, it wasn't even the spectacular diving that brought me to the Maldives. As executive director of Seacology, a non-profit organization with the sole focus of preserving island environments throughout the globe, I came to visit our newest project site. Seacology

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on board the world's most luxurious liveaboard dive boat, the *Four Seasons Explorer*, in the Maldivian islands. This isn't the bends at all but a wonderfully relaxing massage.

"Massages after a dive?" I can hear the veteran divers mutter. "Why, when I started diving we didn't have buoyancy compensators or even certification cards. Getting a post-dive massage isn't diving at all. Why in the old days..." Well, guess what, you old salts? Most divers I know are as interested in your stories about how difficult diving used to be as my two teenage kids are in my stories of life before email. That is to say – not interested at all. The dive experience has evolved over the years, and has now reached new heights of luxury with the recent launch of the *Four Seasons Explorer*.

Ancient mariners, continue if you must, fighting this trend toward more comfortable diving. Feel free to interfere with our enjoyment of a great dive by regaling us with tales of how you were certified in a dive bell years before



searches for "win-win" solutions where islanders get a critically needed tangible benefit in exchange for making a sacrifice on behalf of the environment. In partnership with the Four Seasons Maldives, we are visiting the island of Kendhoo in the Baa Atoll. There, Seacology will be funding the construction of a much-needed preschool in exchange for an agreement to stop harvesting endangered sea turtle eggs.

Our visit to Kendhoo was an unforgettable



experience. "On arrival, the whole community including every school-aged child was there to greet us," stated Ken Murdock, president of Seacology. "The children formed a receiving line and their greeting was just the start of a perfectly planned yet heartfelt experience which included traditional dancing and food."

"We are delighted to be associated with Seacology and look forward to working with the people of Kendhoo on this project," said general manager of the Four Seasons Maldives, Armando Kraenzlin. "Together we believe this project will not only benefit the people of Kendhoo, but generate awareness and interest in saving the turtles throughout the republic and beyond." The *Four Seasons Explorer* visits the beautiful island of Kendhoo once every other week, and passengers are welcome to visit the Seacology-funded Kendhoo preschool while there.

Of course, to visit Kendhoo or any of the many other stops along the route, guests must first be able to tear themselves away from the boat – something that is more easily said than done. The 125-foot double-hulled catamaran has ten large, well-appointed staterooms, each of which, in the words of Seacology board member James Sandler, was "as big and comfortable as a nice hotel room." According to Sandler, "This is a beautiful ship with a great and professional crew." In addition to the ten staterooms there is also the Explorer suite, which is so big if that boat were in

the U.S., it would have two separate Zip Codes.

Diving is done off a tender designed like a traditional Maldivian boat called a dhoni. While the dhoni is very comfortable, it is also very slow. Every dive site seemed to be a half hour ride from the mother ship – inordinately long for a liveaboard tender. But it is worth the wait. In my week of diving the Maldives I saw more fish than I would normally see in three years of diving elsewhere. At Nelivaru in Baa Atoll, you drop into a school of tens of thousands of glassfish beside a large pinnacle (called a thila in the local language). The school of glassfish is followed by schools of thousands of anchovies and fusiliers as well as hundreds of unicorn fish, blue fin jacks, blue fin triggerfish and rainbow runners. This was the first dive I have ever been on where the visibility was poor due to the sheer number of fish in the water. As Seacology board member Shari Sant Plummer puts it, "I couldn't see the fish for the fish!" Throw in some garden eels, moray eels, hawksbill turtles, boxfish and scorpion fish and you have the recipe for the perfect dive.

Or so we thought, until we visited Manta Point on Lankan Reef two days later. This is the location of a world-famous manta cleaning station, and if you are lucky the mantas will put on quite a show. And we were lucky! After a few minutes, ten or so enormous manta rays showed up. The performance they put on was nothing short of spectacular. The acrobatic maneuvers



took place so close to us that there were several times that the mantas were within inches of my dive mask. At times they seemed to be doing the loop-the-loops in tandem, with one huge manta on the back of another. The dive was so good that the one member of our group who decided to pass it up is undoubtedly still receiving psychotherapy for an acute case of depression.

Though the week aboard the *Explorer* entails a few less dives than many other liveaboards throughout the world, this is more than compensated by the unusually large number of other activities provided by cruise director



One of the few drawbacks to Maldives diving is that this part of the world suffered massive coral bleaching in 1998 due to a particularly severe El Nino-caused extended period of high water temperatures. The soft corals were unaffected. Though they are slowly making a comeback, count on seeing loads of dead hard corals near the surface. If diving in currents or long plane rides are not your cup of tea you also might wish to give the Maldives a pass.

However, if you like seeing massive quantities of fish and enjoy watching manta rays perform, you might want to make a beeline for the Maldives. If you are not a crusty old salt and can actually appreciate a liveaboard boat with terrific rooms, great food, outstanding service and the occasional après-dive massage, you might want to consider taking out a second mortgage on your home and booking a cruise on the *Four Seasons Island Explorer*. [FSA](#)

Duane Silverstein is the executive director of Seacology, a non-profit organization with the sole focus of preserving island environments and cultures throughout the globe. For 20 years prior to heading Seacology, he was the executive director of the Goldman Fund, one of California's largest philanthropic foundations. He also headed the Goldman Environmental Prize, which has been dubbed the "Nobel Prize of the Environment" by *National Geographic* and news media from many nations around the world. He is a national fellow of The Explorers Club.

Michael Clarke and his wonderful staff. This should come as no surprise as Clarke's previous post was "leisure director" for a resort in India. There's a job title we should all aspire to.

Throughout the week there are tours of several islands, barbeque picnics on deserted islands, a daily fish talk by a marine biologist, and daily guided snorkel and fishing trips. In fact, this is the perfect liveaboard cruise for a diver whose partner does not want to strap on a tank.

