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## GO > DOWN THE ROAD

By Jeff Greenwald



# Paradise Saved

SEACOLOGY ROLLS OUT  
THE RED CARPET FOR ADVENTURE  
PHILANTHROPISTS

**E**VEN FROM 50 FEET AWAY, the strange, polka-dotted immensity fills my view. I immediately recognize it as the largest fish in the sea, and it feels as threatening as a Soviet-era dirigible. But whale sharks are actually mild-mannered filter feeders. I remember, unable to eat anything much bigger than plank-

ton. They're also the holy grail for scuba divers—so I kick my fins like a crazed showgirl in a futile attempt to catch up with the enormous creature. After two minutes my air gauge alarm is bleeping, and the contest is over: whale shark 1, diver 0.

Whale sharks are just one of the marvels of the Maldives,

LOUIE PISHO/GETTY



a nation of 1,190 coral-fringed islands some 400 miles southwest of Sri Lanka. The warm seas are protected for 200 nautical miles around the atolls, which makes the archipelago one of the world's premier scuba destinations, chock-full of pristine, seldom-explored reefs. Snorkelers get an eyeful too: Schools of neon-blue

fusiliers pulse amid colonies of manta rays, while docile leopard sharks doze in golden corals. But what looks like a perfect paradise is actually a landscape at risk. Islands the world over are in peril from climate change, deforestation, overfishing, and reef destruction.

The trip I'm on is part of

the solution. It's organized by California-based Seacology ([seacology.org](http://seacology.org)), whose motto is "Saving the world, one island at a time," and my expedition fees include funding for a local development project on Kendhoo, a Maldivian island with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Though Seacology has been around

**MOBY POLKA DOT**  
Who knew charity  
got this up close and  
personal?

since 1991, the company opened its Expedition segment to the public last year, offering journeys to Fiji, Zanzibar, and Papua New Guinea (among other destinations) that were previously limited to board members. Seacology expeditions, like ours to the Maldives, combine adventure with philanthropy in top-shelf style.

Our ten days in the Maldives launched from the breezy Four Seasons resort at Kuda Huraa, a place with technicolor sunsets and thatched-roofed, over-water bungalows that had me wondering how I might dodge our departure the next morning. Later, as I listened to a Maldivian jazz combo and looked across an ocean the color of fire opals, I asked the bartender which billionaire owned the magnificent yacht anchored off the hotel pier. When he told me the ship was the *Explorer*, the 129-foot catamaran that would be our home for the coming week, I laughed out loud. The next morning, as I sipped a cappuccino on the *Explorer's* deck and watched the resort recede beyond the horizon, I finally got it: These Seacology people know how to save the world in style.

Unlike the shirtsleeve-and-sweatband trips offered by the Sierra Club and Habitat for Humanity, Seacology's are more upmarket affairs, featur-



ing safaris, scuba diving, state-rooms with king-size beds, and line-caught dinners. After meals—at least aboard the *Explorer*—there's Cuban rum nearly as old as Castro, specially ordered by one of my shipmates. It packs a punch, sending everyone above deck to sprawl on easy chairs and soak in the salty ocean air. Candles flicker while a warm sea breeze blows, and Cygnus soars off the port bow—as impressive as the constellation of marine life beneath us.

The seed for this trip was planted in 1989, when Paul Cox, an American ethno-

botanist who has worked alongside indigenous people for three decades, discovered the compound prostratin, which held promise for HIV/AIDS patients. It was in a tree on the remote Samoan island of Savaii. “Then the loggers showed up and started cutting down the trees,” Cox recalls. “The villagers had let the loggers in to get enough money to build a school—they'd been forced to choose between their children and the forest. So my wife, Barbara, and I offered to raise funds for the school if the villagers would save the forest.” Thus

**CHARITY CHIC**  
Clockwise from left, Seacology's artificial reefs spur coral growth; Café Huraa at the Four Seasons; plenty of beach space at Kuda Huraa; Cox, at home in the rain-forest; a school of trevally.



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began Seacology.

Cox's gambit became emblematic of Seacology's strategy: establishing symbiotic relationships in which indigenous people agree to protect their reefs, forests, and wildlife in exchange for schools, community centers, desalination facilities, and piers. In the Maldives, for instance, Seacology has built a spacious new kindergarten for Kendhoo's 63 children in exchange for an agreement to protect the nesting grounds of sea turtles and ban the harvest of their eggs. "Twenty years ago," says Cox, "the Polyn-

sians taught me that the health of the forest depends on the health of the reef—and vice versa. When a forest is clear-cut, erosion chokes the reefs; when reefs are destroyed, you lose a great deal of marine biodiversity." That lesson of interdependence continues to guide Seacology's operations, including the decision to open its trips to the public. "When people visit a remote island village and see what a difference these projects are making in the islanders' lives," says Duane Silverstein, Seacology's executive director, "they want to become part of the team."

Seacology trips inspire by connecting visitors face-to-face with locals. At least one day of each tour is reserved for island visits, which often include the dedication of finished projects such as clinics and schools. Guests get to drink kava with chiefs in Fiji, dance with island tribes in Indonesia, and comb the forest for endangered primates in Vietnam. Cox considers these interactions a kind of citizen diplomacy. "It's not *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," he reflects. "When locals realize that we're interested in them, and that we've helped make their

community a better place, they get really excited to see us. Everyone—visitors and locals alike—leaves smiling."

Back in the Maldives, I'm grinning too (though it probably looks like a manic grimace through my scuba mask). The whale shark has moved on, but a pair of green sea turtles paddle by with languid strokes. A few years ago these reptiles were endangered. Now, thanks in part to Cox, Seacology, and the members of our expedition, their numbers are on the rise. It's a winning scenario—and for my money, the only way to dive. ☺