



:GLEN COWANS

Safari Maldivian



Main: A napoleon fish cruises up right next to me to see what I am doing.
 Top L-R: Batfish pose for me next to a gorgonian coral; Look under every ledge, fish gather in great numbers everywhere they can shelter; An incredibly beautiful purple belled jellyfish.
 Right: I watched three of these turtles chewing through the soft corals on the reef top.

✦ IT'S ALWAYS SURREAL DESCENDING INTO WARM BLUE TROPICAL WATER, BUT WHAT I COULDN'T BELIEVE WAS THAT THE PINNACLE REEF BELOW SEEMED AS IF THE CORALS THEMSELVES WERE MOVING, MORPHING AS I WATCHED. THERE WERE MILLIONS OF TINY GLASS FISH EVERYWHERE; AS ONE SHIMMERING MASS THEY HOVERED JUST ABOVE EVERY SURFACE, MOULDING THE SHAPE OF THEIR SWARM TO THE CORALS AND ANEMONES AS THEY MOVED.

The Maldivian archipelago is 480 kilometres southwest of the tip of India and 6211 kilometres northwest of Perth, Western Australia. The 1190 low-lying coral islands with innumerable reefs and underwater pinnacles, spans the equator in the Indian Ocean. With warm balmy waters they have a reputation of literally teeming with fish life and coral.

The reefs we dived were very healthy with giant gorgonians, soft coral trees, hard corals and anemones. But it is not only the reef surfaces themselves that attract divers to the Maldives, the sheer density of the fish life here is amazing. Pelagic visitors are everywhere with trevally and dogtooth tuna seen on almost every dive. Manta rays, turtles, eagle rays and whale sharks are frequent visitors and can be spotted at any time. On dives like this where you need to watch the reef and the blue at the same time, I envy those fish with swivel eyes that can look in two different directions at once. You never know what will drop in on you on a flyby and if your head's always down you can miss what thrilled the diver beside you.

Virtually every reef had thousands of blue triggerfish swarming above it like a mass of birds hovering in the sky. Watch carefully as you approach; the fish closest to the reef will duck into a tiny hole, lie down flat and go completely still, then back out and resume swimming once you've passed. They do the same when pelagics are hunting them but like ostriches with their heads in the sand they

leave their tails out to betray their presence. Several times I saw a trevally swoop in and nip the extended tail until the triggerfish panicked and darted out to be eaten in one swift gulp. This always happened too fast for me to photograph.

Most dives here had some slight current and the currents seem to be the secret to the density of the Maldivian fish life.





Fusiliers and schools of small fish flow everywhere like quicksilver out feeding in the current. Others are sheltering within the lee and shadow of the reefs, dense aggregations of dizzying stripes, merging patterns and colour. Most prolific are the bluestripe snapper that crowd and encircle as you pass amongst them. This choreography of colour, shape and pattern, be it the swirling darting schools out in the blue or the dense masses gathering in the lee, is all performed to confuse the predatory trevally, dogtooth tuna, wahoo and sharks that are constantly on the hunt and will pass by you quite close, fearless in their search for prey. Other fish seem to delight in the company of divers and at times you can even look sideways and discover your dive buddy's been replaced by a large curious napoleon wrasse so close that you look straight into its eye.

The reef itself can be just as mesmerizing. Anemones can be found on the reeftops complete with anemonefish, commensal shrimp and porcelain crabs. Shrimp gobies and sand eels litter the sandy slopes and bottoms and looking small

Top to bottom: Numbering in the hundreds this school of blue stripe snapper shelters in the lee of the reef; Moray eels poke out from everywhere; A diver on a typical reef; Resembling a mass of giant insects with legs, everyones equipment on the camera table of the Aggressor.

also reveals mantis shrimp, frogfish and nudibranchs, but be careful, there are many morays. Fiercely pulsing with jaws agape, they sit so silent that if you hover in close to the reef to photograph that nudibranch you've fixated on, you'll often be surprised as one or two morays appear right next to you. On any dive the choice of wide angle or macro is a hard one as large and small subjects abound.

A typical day on an Aggressor liveaboard starts at 6am. Most guests are already up for a light breakfast of cereals, toast, croissants, coffee and juice. Then comes the dive briefing and the first dive. On the Maldives Aggressor all dives are done from a second boat called a *dhoanis* (doe ni), a sun shaded and very stable vessel that follows the Aggressor throughout the voyage. Access to the water is an easy big stride from the back or side of the dhoanis right over the dive site. After each dive the crew hand out warm towels to dry off, then you head back to the main vessel for a full breakfast which you find yourself looking forward to. Mid morning brings the second dive, followed by lunch, then after a slightly longer rest period comes the third dive of the day. Night dives can be done most days depending on the location and tides, and are done either before or after dinner. The must-do Maldives safari night dive is Maaya Thila, where almost everything is out feeding with whitetip reef sharks jostling each other to reach fish hiding amongst the reef. A large marbled ray, seriously sucking up from the bottom in its hunt for food, would follow divers around and moray eels on the prowl were grabbing sleeping fish here and there. Amongst all this commotion, turtles peacefully slumbered.

Our week coincided with the 'Dive with the Owners Charter' with Wayne Hasson and Wayne B Brown joining the voyage. It immediately became apparent why the vessels of the Aggressor Fleet are not just diver-friendly but also perfectly set up for photographers and videographers. Both Waynes are enthusiastic divers and into anything that captures images or video underwater. The camera table was very roomy, non-slip and with plenty of shelf room underneath, the charge tables are twin and separate. This very effective space coped with both the Waynes' equipment plus my own and that of many other divers. Also on board was John Ellerbrook, president of Gates Underwater

Housings who hosted a 'Gates-Fest' where anyone could test-drive a Gates setup ranging from low-end and full high-definition to the new beyond high-definition RED system. The RED setup looked more like an underwater remote operated vehicle than a camera housing. I'd never seen so many camera and video housings on one boat before yet we all comfortably prepared our gear.

The last night of the safari is spent in port in Male; you can choose to visit a local

restaurant before spending your final night aboard. Many guests on the safari were veterans of other Aggressor trips and with the attention to detail and the quality of service it's easy to see why they return again and again. Like all such journeys it is now, just when you're parting company, you realise you've been so busy eating, sleeping and diving, you didn't notice that you've all become quite good friends.



In the words of Captain Jon Kreider of the Maldives Aggressor quoting the Aggressor Fleet version of the 'pirates' toast' – "If you lie, may you lie to save the honour of a friend. If you cheat, may you cheat death, at least for a little while. And if you steal, may you steal some time to come back and join us again".

Top to bottom: Bannerfish sheltering within a whip coral; Always incredibly beautiful, gorgonian sea fans; Glassfish swarming about the reef.



Getting to the Maldives

Flights: From Australia via Singapore & Kuala Lumpur.
 Fees: The Maldives Govt. charge US\$8 per day. No visa required for entry. There is a US\$12 Departure Tax.
 Electricity: 250v European style outlets.
 Airport Transfers: The Maldives Aggressor transfers from the airport.
 Those staying before & after a safari,

your hotel will provide airport transfers.

Nitrox: Available at additional cost.

Gratuity (Tips): Voluntary & based on quality of service received.

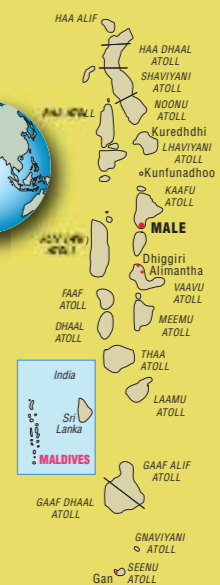
Climate: Tropical with warm temperatures year round.

February is the driest with January to April being relatively dry, May & October have highest average monthly rainfall.

Southwest monsoon May to September.

The northeast monsoon falls December to April, with clear skies, lower humidity & little rain. Diving is possible all year round & water temps range from 24°C to 27°C.

Aggressor Travel: The Aggressor fleet can also book flights & accommodation. info@liveaboardvacations.com





*The Maldives Aggressor.
(Image courtesy Capt. Jon Kreider)
Enjoying a balmy evening on deck.*

The Maldives Aggressor

Twenty-five years ago Wayne & Anne Hasson first launched the concept of a luxury dive liveaboard vessel in the Cayman Islands. With Chairman & CEO Wayne B Brown now on their team, they celebrated this milestone with the integration of their latest liveaboard, the Maldives Aggressor, into their worldwide fleet. From the very beginning the Aggressor Fleet philosophy was 'Eat, Sleep, Dive.' The intent is that you'd eat well, you'd be in great comfort with friendly helpful staff & that you'd enjoy outstanding diving. That philosophy hasn't changed, the basic concept is the same but has refined with time & experience. The fleet now has 12 vessels over 11 different locations, all with a reputation as the Ultimate in Liveaboards. At 35m long, the design of the Maldives Aggressor yacht is luxurious. Cabins range from six with a double & single berth, & four with two single berths, all with ensembles. The spacious saloon takes 20 passengers for mealtimes, relaxing, or reviewing your images. The under-cover foredeck has tables & comfortable lounges. Food is western style, plentiful, wholesome & delicious, easily catering for hungry divers. Local beer & a glass of wine is included with your meal.
www.aggressor.com

Hulhule Island Hotel

Located on the Airport Island & only 5 minutes from the airport & a 10 minute boat ride to the capital Male, the Hulhule Island Hotel is perfect for a stay before a safari. With some late night flights to Singapore, the Hulhule offers day rooms & full resort facilities. All 136 guest rooms have Indian Ocean views & the Hulhule has two restaurants, bar, pool, gym & a health spa. Wifi internet access is available. The Hulhule Island Hotel was the winner of the Luxury Airport Hotel Category of the 'World Luxury Hotel Awards 2008.'
Information, room rates & bookings:
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