



THE MALDIVES HAS SOME OF THE BEST DIVING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND ONE OF ITS SPECIALITIES IS DIVING WITH MANTAS. CHAS ANDERSON TRAVELS THE ARCHIPELAGO IN HOPE.

# IN SEARCH OF THE GIANTS

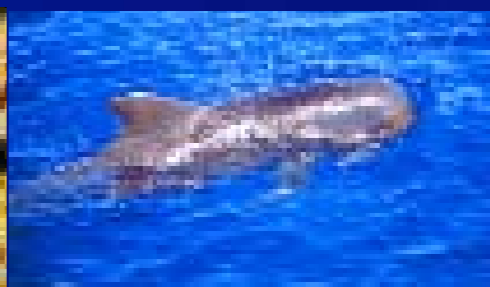
**I**t's mid-afternoon and I'm writing this on the upper deck with a distracting view over the reefs surrounding our anchorage. With family at home I know there'll be no time for this when I get back. A distant banging comes from a fishing boat pulled up for repairs on the island half a mile away. A pair of black-naped terns are calling as they hunt for small fishes over the reef. Otherwise, all is quiet.

We had a couple of good dives this morning – both were in atoll channels in an area well-known for its manta rays. But today the mantas weren't on show. The first dive was in the mouth of Guraidhoo Channel, a well-known dive site in South Malé Atoll. With the current sweeping into the channel we jumped into clear deep water upstream of the entrance and swam straight down through schools of fusiliers and red-toothed triggerfish. We hit the bottom about 50 metres in from the dropoff, having been pushed in as we descended. We worked our way back out to the edge against the current. Four grey reef sharks patrolled just below us and one little whitetip sped by. We loitered to admire the

action. All good stuff – but no mantas. Perhaps it was too clear for them.

The second dive was very different. The current had changed and was heading out, laden with all sorts of plankton. The visibility had dropped to about 15 metres. I relied on Ali Niyax, *Carina's* experienced dive instructor, to alert me to any mantas and turned towards the reef to concentrate on the macro stuff. I'm a fan of sea slugs and flatworms and this is a great place to hunt for them under the overhangs that studded the reef wall. Time quickly passed, with a handful of species photographed. The entire dive had been in thick manta-soup, but still no sign of the big fellows. Maybe tomorrow.

It's evening, one day later. A move to a new anchorage this morning after our pre-breakfast dive took us outside the atoll. Most of my fellow divers used the travelling time to do a bit of reading or catch an hour or two's sleep. Nothing wrong with that; I used to do it myself before I realised just how many whales and dolphins there are in the Maldives!





## IN SEARCH OF THE GIANTS



**JACKPOT! AS THE MANTAS CAME DOWN OVER THE CORALS, CLOUDS OF WRASSES ROSE UP TO GREET THEM AND SWARM ALL OVER THEIR GREAT BODIES.**



### AFTER THE TSUNAMI

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 brought terrible destruction to great swathes of coastline right across the northern Indian Ocean. Who can forget those awesome images from Sumatra? However, many other areas, including the Maldives, were much less affected.

In the Maldives the steep sides of the atolls didn't allow the tsunami to build into a classic destroying wave; instead the islands were hit by a surge of water more akin to a freak high tide. That was bad enough – 82 confirmed dead, many houses knocked down on a handful of fishing islands and some resort islands having to close temporarily. But it could have been so very much worse.

Immediately after the tsunami, the need in Maldives as elsewhere was for humanitarian aid for those affected. Attention then turned to reconstruction. The Maldives depends entirely on the marine environment for its only two industries, tourism and fisheries, so there was a real need to assess the extent of any environmental damage.

After a meeting between PM John Howard and Maldivian President Gayoom on 6 January 2005, the Australian Government committed to a range of assistance to the Maldives. One initiative was the provision of a team of experienced Australian marine scientists to conduct an assessment of the damage caused by the tsunami to the Maldives coral reefs and fisheries. A team of eight top specialists was rapidly assembled from CSIRO, AIMS, JCU GBRMPA, with coordination by AUSAID. They were in the Maldives from 23 January to 8 February, working closely with colleagues from the Maldivian Marine Research Centre.

A rapid assessment of 124 reef sites in 7 atolls showed that 'direct damage to reefs from the tsunami was minor'. Local divers agree, noting only a handful of sites (out of hundreds) were damaged. A survey of 281 fishermen showed that most felt there had been no impact on catches of baitfish, reef fish or tuna. Overall, the impact on marine life was minimal. Indeed, travelling round by safari boat now you'd not know that anything had happened at all.



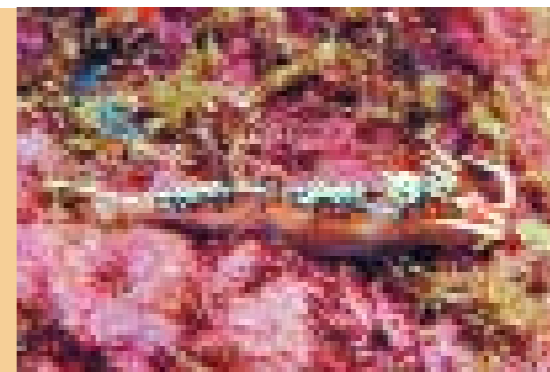
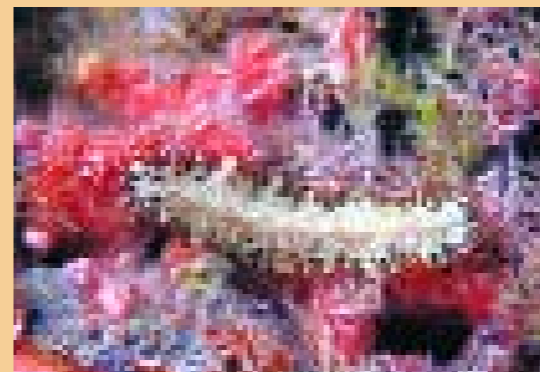
The bottom slopes down so steeply here that the waters just a mile or so offshore are usually over 1000 metres deep. That means that oceanic whales and dolphins come right up to the coast. Several species, mainly squid-eaters, are actually concentrated over the steepest slopes and in the deep channels between atolls. So now any time I am on a boat travelling between atolls I make my way to the highest shaded spot, settle down with my binoculars, and savour the possibilities of the journey ahead. On a calm day like today, it really does seem better to travel hopefully than to arrive.

And today we were in luck. A glimpse of a fin, a shout to the captain to starboard, and we were soon approaching a pod of about 20 pilot whales. These were the short-finned species of the tropics *Globicephala macrorhynchus*, not the long-finned species of cooler temperate waters including southern Australia. Suddenly no one was interested in reading or kipping. Cameras were clicking and everyone was cursing or

laughing depending on their photographic luck. We were all still abuzz with excitement as we left the pilots and continue north to the next atoll.

This afternoon's dive was at Sunlight Thila. Jackpot! Just off the main reef, a detached bommie in about 16 metres is humming with mantas. It's a cleaning station and as the mantas came down over the corals, clouds of wrasses rose up to greet them and swarm all over their great bodies. The mantas seemed to enjoy the attention, lingering over the bommie and only reluctantly moving on as more mantas crowded in from behind. We were definitely enjoying the show and waited quietly on the sand to one side, enthralled by the mantas' graceful ballet for as long as our computers allowed.

It was difficult to know how many mantas there were, but at any one time there were up to nine in view at once, and I guess a total of at least twice as many. That's a good



number at a cleaning station, but many more can be seen when they congregate to feed. In certain channels an incoming spring tide brings plankton in from the open ocean – and the mantas know it. It is common to have up to 50 mantas feeding in one small area and I've seen an estimated 100 at one time. And that is at just one dive site. There are dozens of known manta sites in the Maldives, which suggests that there must be thousands of mantas.

But even one manta is something special, and I'm already looking forward to tomorrow's dives at the same site. As far as I'm concerned, when it comes to mantas, it's great to travel hopefully. It is even better to arrive.

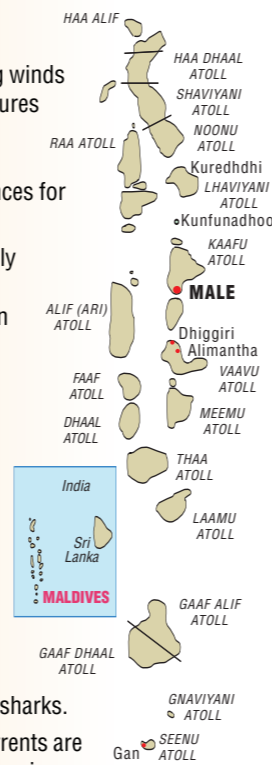
**THE AUTHOR - Dr Chas Anderson is a professional marine biologist, who has lived in the Maldives since 1983. He's an authority on the country's fish and fisheries, the pioneer of whale and dolphin watching and a sea slug enthusiast. He can be contacted on [anderson@dhivehinet.net.mv](mailto:anderson@dhivehinet.net.mv).**

**WHEN TO VISIT?** The Maldives is affected by seasonally changing winds and currents, the so-called Monsoons. The very word Monsoon often conjures up images of howling wind and lashing rain, but that's a misconception; Monsoon simply means season. There may be wet and windy seasons but there are also calm and sunny seasons. This has two important consequences for visiting divers.

**1** If you're thinking about a liveaboard holiday in the Maldives, you probably want to visit during the calmest times of year. There are two calm periods: late January to April and October-November. December to mid-January can be windy (which is a pleasure on an island but not always appreciated on a boat); this is also peak season because of the Christmas and New Year holidays, so you can expect to pay a premium if you visit at this time. May to September can be wet and windy, but interspersed with calmer, sunnier periods. If you're prepared to take a chance on the weather it is possible to get good rates and great diving at this time of year.

**2** The Monsoons impact on the distribution of marine life around the Maldives. The Maldivian archipelago runs roughly north-south. In contrast the currents run roughly east-west. The Maldives therefore acts like a giant wall in the path of the ocean currents, which are forced up and over the barrier. This brings nutrients up from the depths, promoting a plankton bloom on the downstream side. This in turn attracts a host of plankton-feeders, from tiny silver sprats to magnificent mantas and whale sharks.

As a result, during the Northeast Monsoon (December to March) when currents are mainly from the east, you can expect clear oceanic water with 3-plus metres vis on the eastern side of the Maldives, and all the manta and whale shark action on the west. During the Southwest Monsoon (May to October) when currents are mainly from the west, the opposite applies. If you want to see mantas and you choose the wrong resort (or the wrong season), you're stuck. But on a safari boat you can just sail to wherever the diving action is!



## MALDIVES BRIEFING

Chas Anderson travelled on MV Carina with Navis Holidays, Maldives. For more information on Carina and other dive opportunities, check out [www.safarimaldives.com](http://www.safarimaldives.com)

**Getting there:** Maldives is just 4 hours flying time from Singapore (Singapore Airlines and Emirates) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysian Airlines).

**Resort or safari boat?** Maldivian diving resorts and liveaboard diving safari boats both offer excellent but very different experiences. If you want a relaxing beach holiday (perhaps with partner or family in tow) and some diving thrown in, then a Maldives resort is hard to beat. But if what you really want is diving, then a liveaboard safari is definitely the way to go.

**More info:** Maldives is not the sort of place to turn up without a reservation. For an introduction to the country and a complete listing of resorts and safari boats check out [www.visitmaldives.com](http://www.visitmaldives.com)