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# THE LURE OF DIVING IN LESS TRAVELED PLACES



# ScubaH2O

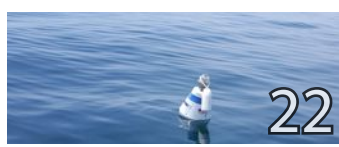
ADVENTURES MAGAZINE

THE RANK SMELL OF BLOOMING ALGAE & ROTTING CORPSES:  
**FLORIDA'S TIPPING POINT**

EXPLORING THE SOUTHERN ATOLLS OF THE  
**MALDIVES**

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ABOUT THE COVER:  
*Eco-Photo Explorers*  
*A Nurse Shark on the night*  
*dive at Alimatha Pier*

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We encourage readers to participate in determining the content of this publication by giving us their opinions on the types of articles they would like to see. We invite letters to the editor, manuscripts and photographs related to diving or dive-related business. Send us your stories and photos!

# Where the Water Meets the Sky: Exploring the Southern Atolls of the Maldives

Article and Photos by Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

The dhoni cut through the flat-as-glass water leaving a wake that quickly disappeared behind us into the sultry haze of an early spring morning in the Maldives. With no other boats in this remote and uninhabited area of the Thaa Atoll, we were enveloped in silence save for the engines of the dive boat and the chatter of the divers preparing for their next dive. Periodically, a Flying Fish would leap from the languid sea and skip across the water leaving fleeting tell-tale tracks on the surface before dropping back into the ocean a few hundred feet away. We were headed to a “pass”, a cut in the fringing coral reef around one of the local islands, in the hopes of an exciting dive.

Suddenly, the water began to boil as a pod of several hundred Spinner Dolphins rapidly approached the boat and began an impromptu round of bow wave surfing with our dhoni.

Several began swimming just ahead of the boat, riding the boat’s pressure wave, while others were leaping from the water in their famous spins. We could see their soulful eyes and hear the “whoosh” of their breaths as they surrounded the boat. We didn’t want to anthropomorphize this event, but it really seemed as if these marine mammals were simply exuding the joys of life on the open ocean.

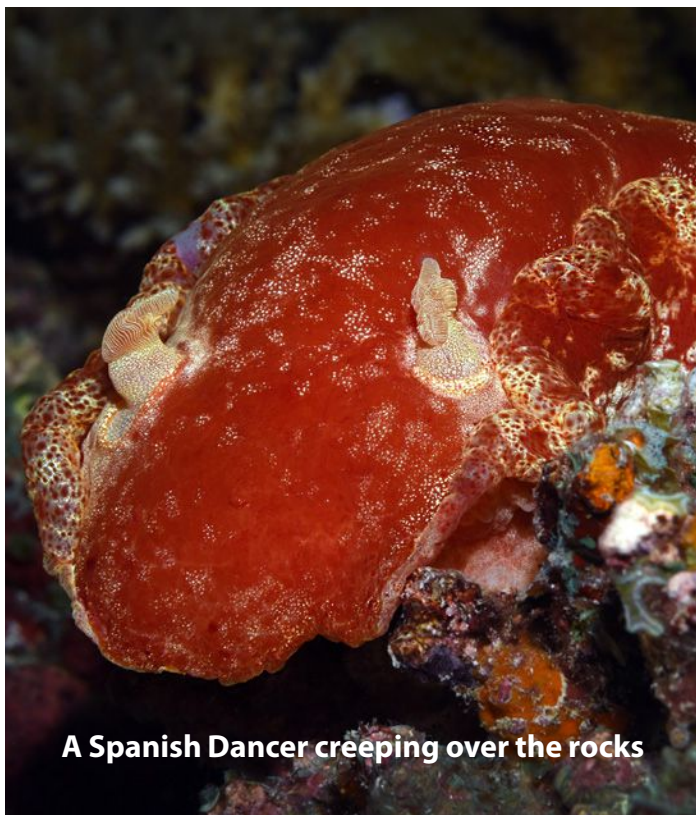
For us, it was time to dive...

This surface encounter took place on the second day of our expedition aboard the M/Y Duke of York to explore the Southern Atolls of the Maldives, starting from Laamu Atoll in the Upper South Province and eventually ending up at Male for the return trip home. It was followed by more dolphin encounters in other atolls and a remarkable encounter with a pod of Short-Finned Pilot Whales. For one week, we wound our

way through the atolls of the south, diving passes, coral reefs known as “giris” and coral pinnacles referred to as “thilas” in this part of the world. Today’s dive was at a site known as Fushi Kanduu.

We descended to 60 feet to reach the drop-off and then dropped further down, exploring coral overhangs and cut-outs in the reef wall to reach a depth of 100 feet. A slight outgoing current meant that our dive started inside the atoll and ended on the ocean side of the reef. Along the way, we spotted varieties of gaudily colored Butterflyfishes and Angelfishes, such as the Redtail Butterflyfish and the Yellow-face Angelfish. Swarms of Anthias, sporting brilliant reds and purples, flew above the corals while timid Soldierfish clustered together under coral shelters and rocky crevices.

But the real action started as we



A Spanish Dancer creeping over the rocks



A Foster's Hawkfish waiting for prey to swim by



**Yellow-Spot Emperor Fish** are sometimes found in large schools near on Thilas



**Christopher Weaver** exploring the reefs near Huraa Island



**Black-Spotted Moray Eels** can be found along the Thilas



**An uninhabited island** for an afternoon break

reached the corner or bend in the pass opening. Because of the rush of water entering or leaving the atolls on the tidal exchanges, large schools of pelagics gather here looking to prey on smaller fish who are similarly taking advantage of the nutrients introduced by the movement of the water. Here, massive schools of Bigeye Trevally mixed with equally dense groupings of snappers, and all of them kept a wary eye on the Whitetip and Grey Reef Sharks patrolling through the pass in the distance.

Emerging from the water into the warm morning air, everybody had a huge grin on their face as we all prepared for breakfast.

The daily routine aboard the Duke of York allowed for plenty of dive time between sumptuous meals and ample opportunity for rest and relaxation. We would wake each morning to a dive briefing before heading out in the accompanying custom dive boat known as a dhoni for a typically exhilarating dive followed by breakfast, a mid-morning dive, lunch and an afternoon dive

before dinner. Plenty of nitrogen to be had by all!

After leaving the Thaa Artoll, we headed for a secluded stretch of the Meenu Atoll and a dive at a site known as Kureli Kanduu. On this dive, we found ourselves photographing a curious Honeycombed Moray Eel as he poked its head out of its lair to inspect our wide-angle domes on our camera housings. On this dive, we had more current than previous dives. Diving the Maldives often involves careful consideration for the currents and paying attention to dive briefings is important. SMBs and reef hooks are also a good idea as the water rushing through the pass openings can do so with unpredictable fury at times. Of course, it is this movement of water that brings the astonishing aggregations of marine life to these sites.

In the Vaavu Atoll, we made a dive on a place known as Fotteyo Kanduu. The coral walls of this pass are literally draped in soft corals. Brilliant yellow, orange, purple and red corals adorn the rocks and coral overhangs while schools of snapper, soldier fish and

butterfly fish flitted by. Here, we also encountered Giant Triggerfish, Lionfish and various species of the ubiquitous anemonefish. The dive was so special we decided to repeat it the next day.

As we made our way further north, we made a night dive on the Alimatha Pier. For ages, fisherman have come here to unload their fish and the scraps tossed in the water have attracted dozens of Nurse Sharks and untold numbers of opportunistic Giant Trevally. A night dive here is a surreal experience, with Trevally and Rays zooming by, and large Nurse Sharks emerging from the gloom of night and patrolling overhead. However, divers must be mindful and not place their hand or knee on a looming lionfish. An otherwise intense dive was interrupted by muffled laughter through regulators as one of our dive guides literally jumped off the sandy bottom in a near panicked surprise as a large stingray swam right under his legs!

Other dives brought encounters with more sharks, Schools of Barracuda, groups of Sweetlips

groupers and fleeting glimpses of Tuna, Eagle Rays and Manta Rays. Unfortunately, some of the larger animals remained just outside of our camera range or, maddeningly, just too deep and beyond our limits to be photographed properly. We even heard the distinctive clicks and whistles of passing pods of Dolphins of several of the dives.

The reefs in the southern atolls remain very healthy. Our expedition took place in late March and we found the surface temperatures in the atolls distressingly high, but only a few feet of depth brought cooler temperatures and we saw little signs of coral bleaching. We encountered a wide variety of marine life and reefs dripping with vibrant colors.

Wide angle photographers can create images of dramatic walls and reefs, along with large pelagic animals such as Eagle Rays, schools of trevally, Dolphin and, at certain times of the year, Manta Rays and Whale Sharks. Unfortunately for us we did not encounter any Whale Sharks on this trip and the only Manta encountered was seen only by the snorkelers and not by the divers!

Macro photographers can lose themselves pursuing the perfect image of a goby on a gorgonian, or a Blenny peeking out from a hole in the rocks. Make sure you bring plenty of memory cards...you will need them!

Our final dive aboard the Duke of York was at a site known as Kandooma Thila in the South Male Atoll. Here, in depths of water reaching 100 feet, we found several White Tip Reef Sharks, an impressive school of Barracuda and a very curious Hawksbill Turtle who seemed infatuated with its reflection in our camera dome port.

We concluded the expedition with a few days on land at the Pearl Sands Hotel on the island of Kuraa. Albatross Top Dive, owners of the Duke of York, also run a dive center on site here. Only 30 minutes by speedboat from Male, this is an accessible island with a private beach that feels like it is an entire world away...and the diving

here is excellent as well!

On board the Duke of York, we were an eclectic group: a few scuba divers, tech divers, snorkelers, and a freediver from Italy, two American photographers, and a crew comprised of a Russian dive master married to an Indonesian woman who served as the on-board masseuse, a French national living in England, and others from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and, of course, the Maldives. A group of individuals, all with common interests and all working to make the expedition a success in a wide swath of Indian Ocean where the tiny islands of the Maldives mark the almost indiscernible threshold between the water and the sky.

### Getting There

The only international airport is located on the main island of Male. It is serviced with direct flights from Doha, Dubai, Colombo (Sri Lanka) and a few other destinations.

Visitors to the resort islands will next board speedboats or seaplanes depending on the location and distance of the resort. Check with your resort for arrangements. Many of the upscale resorts have comfortable lounges at the main airport where visitors can relax while waiting for transfers. Tours of Male can be arranged if the transfer time is longer than a few hours in duration.

There are domestic flights available on Maldivian Airlines for atolls in the south and north.

Liveaboard dive boats, such as the Duke of York, will arrange pickup right at the docks alongside the airport.

A valid passport is required for entry. Visas are not required.

### Diving and Accommodation

The 118ft/36m Duke of York, built in 2010, has 10 large en suite cabins all with air conditioning. There is a diving dhoni and a team of at least 11.

[www.luxuryyachtmaldives.com](http://www.luxuryyachtmaldives.com)

### When to go

The Maldives has an equatorial tropical climate. December through April is the dry season. February through April is the hottest time of the year, with temperatures in the 80s and 90s Fahrenheit each day. May through November is the rainy season.

### Currency

The local currency is the rufiya (Rf) but US Dollars and Euros are generally accepted at all resorts.

### Electricity

Power voltage used in the Maldives is 220 Volts to 240 Volts (50 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk.

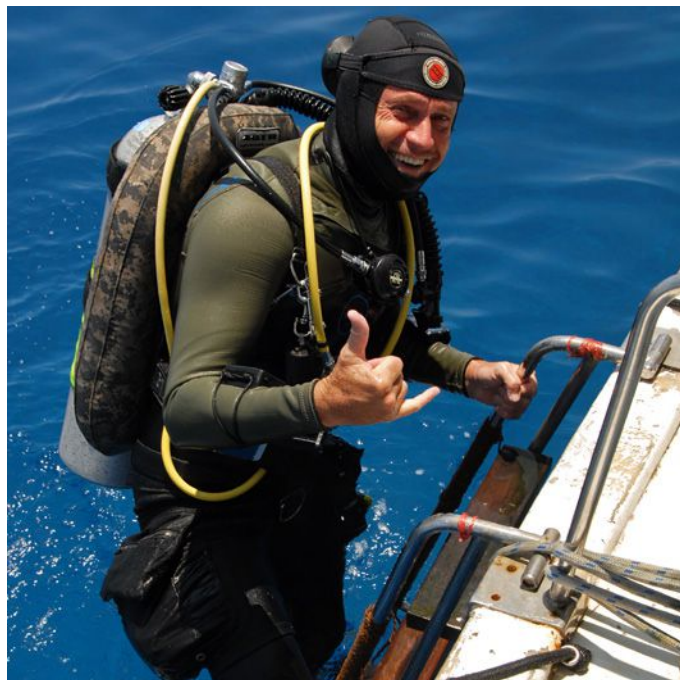
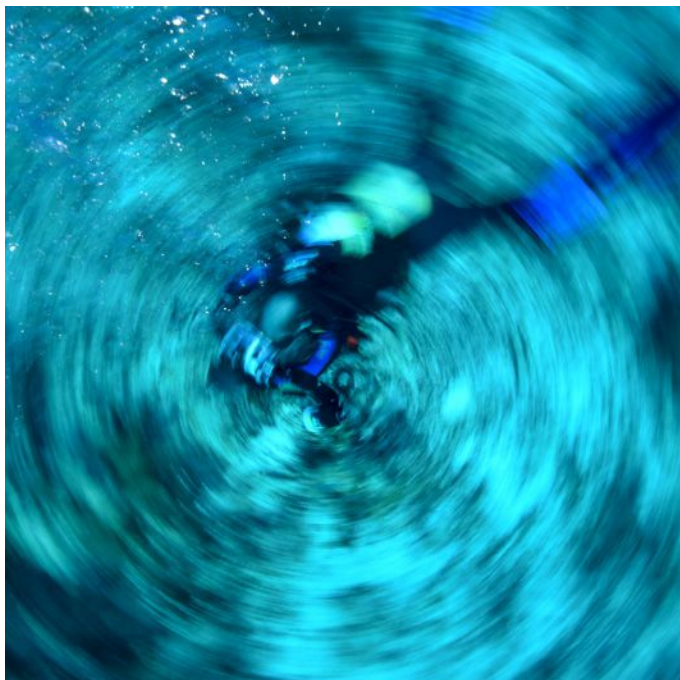
### Prices:

Duke of York charges from US \$2555 pp for two sharing an 8-day itinerary. Nitrox is available on board free of charge.

### Customs

The Republic of the Maldives is a strict Islamic nation. Alcohol, firearms, pornography, pork, narcotics and "idols of worship" are among the prohibited items.

Because of the concern over evangelists spreading their beliefs within the country, attention is paid to religious items. A small crucifix, worn as jewelry, is unlikely to be a problem but a suitcase with several Bibles will likely create concern!



## About Eco-Photo Explorers: Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

Michael Salvarezza and Christopher Weaver have been diving the waters the world since 1978. In that time, they have spent thousands of hours underwater and have accumulated a large and varied library of photographic images. They have presented their work in many multi-media slide presentations, and have appeared previously at Beneath the Sea, the Boston Sea Rovers Underwater Clinic, Ohio ScubaFest and Our World Underwater. Mike and Chris have been published more than 125 articles in numerous magazines, including National Geographic Adventure, and have authored numerous articles for the majority of the dive publications the world over. Their work has also been used to support a number of research and educational programs, including the Jason Project for Education, the Atlantis Marine World Aquarium in New York, The New York Harbor School Billion Oyster Project, The Northeast Ocean Planning Recreation Survey and the Cambridge University and the University of Groningen Arctic Centre work on monitoring the transformation of historic features in Antarctica and Svalbard. Mike and Chris are the Executive Producers of the annual Long Island Divers Association (LIDA) Film Festival.

Eco-Photo Explorers (EPE) is a New York based organization and was formed in 1994 to help promote interest in protecting the environment through knowledge and awareness through the use of underwater photography. Photography, multimedia slide presentations, lectures and freelance writing are all used to accomplish this goal. Christopher Weaver and Michael Salvarezza make up Eco-Photo Explorers. Both live in New York on Long Island and have been scuba diving together since 1978, but didn't seriously start photographing the ocean realm until 1989. Since then, they have spent thousands of hours underwater accumulating and putting together a large and varied library of high-resolution stock photography from around the world. They specialize in all aspects of underwater still photography (wide angle and macro), nature photography, magazine and technical writing and have produced many multimedia slide programs that are designed to educate as well as enlighten the public about the marine environment and the various threats that exist to destroy it.

[www.ecophotoexplorers.com](http://www.ecophotoexplorers.com)

