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ScubaH2O



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A Quest for the Titanic

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HISTORY**

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SHARKS AND RAYS**

Knowing When
to Protect Them

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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!



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Chris Weaver inspects the marine life under a coral overhang.

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Hurray for Huraa: A Maldives Escape

Article and Photos by Michael Salvatorezza & Christopher P. Weaver

There's a Maldivian legend that describes how God, after he made the world, was overcome with emotion at the beauty of his creation and that he shed a few tears as a result which fell into the Indian ocean, giving origin to the Maldivian Islands.

Indeed, as we flew over the atolls and islands of the Maldives on our approach into the capital city of Male, we could not help but marvel at the sublime beauty of this island nation. Myriad tiny islands, surrounded by azure blue water, lie strewn across this vast stretch of ocean as if a bag of jewels had broken apart and spilled its precious gems onto the water.

We landed into Male and the tranquility of the aerial scene was instantly punctured by the frenetic activity of the international airport. Hustling through, we caught sight of the capital city just across a small stretch of water. High rise office buildings, construction cranes and

mosques all contributed to the skyline. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of boats were making their way to and from... speedboats, fishing vessels, commercial ships and liveboard yachts intermingled in the bustling waterway. It felt hot, crowded and chaotic.

But this was just a passing moment, the price of admission to a nation of proud elegance and jaw dropping beauty. In just a few short moments, we had been whisked away by a speedboat headed for the nearby island of Huraa, located in the Male Atoll. Huraa is 30 minutes and an entire universe away from the choking confines of Male.

We arrived shortly after to a working dock on the island and were transported by golf cart to the Pearl Sands Beach Resort, a lovely property situated on a spectacular stretch of impossibly beautiful sand. With 32-rooms, a nice open-air restaurant

and an onsite spa, we were tempted to retreat the comfort of a beach chair and skip the diving.

But, we were here to dive, and the Albatross Top Dive Center on site was our first stop after checking in. Time to schedule our dives, prepare our gear and get our camera systems ready.

The next morning, we boarded the dive Dhoni at the dock and headed off to the first dive of the day at a site known as The Aquarium. This is a sloping reef that opens onto a wide, sandy channel at about 100 feet of water. The Aquarium gets its name from the extreme profusion of fish life that seems to aggregate here. Large schools of Snapper, Grunts and Bigeye Trevally meander in circles in several of the coral cutouts.

As we swam along the reef, slowly descending to the sandy bottom, we spotted a curious Spotted Moray

Eel poking its head out from its lair between two rocks. We maneuvered in the slight current to try for the best camera angle and as soon as we snapped the final image, a Hawksbill Turtle caught our eye cruising about 25 feet shallower on the reef. Almost as if fake, this turtle actually had a heart-shaped marking on its shell... was she trying to send us a message?

The Maldives are known for the outrageously colorful fish life abounding on its reefs. If you are a macro photographer, you will delight in searching for nudibranchs, anemone shrimp, blennies, gobies or porcelain crabs in the nooks and crannies of the coral jungles. We spotted a Decorator Crab that had us hysterically laughing with its trio of small anemones attached to its borrowed shell.

Perhaps most entertaining, and often most frustrating for photographers, are the Anemonefish. Arrestingly beautiful they wiggle nervously in and out of the photogenic tentacles of the host anemone, moving out of focus or view the instant you press the shutter release. Good anemonefish images come with a healthy dose of

throwaway images...its yet another price of admission to the beauty of the Maldives!

Some of the best marine life can often be found in the passes, or cuts, in the circling coral reef of the islands. Here, large volumes of water rush through during the tidal cycles, attracting huge schools of fish and pelagics looking for a meal. At Kani Corner, a dive site located at the bend in the reef near a pass, we spotted schools of Red Tail Butterflyfish sweeping over the reef, along with large groups of snapper and barracuda. In the pass, we saw a pair of Eagle Rays swoop through along with Whitetip Reef and Grey Reef Sharks in the distance.

The action is non-stop and it always seems as if our time is too short when we head to the surface for our safety stop, regardless of how long the dive was!

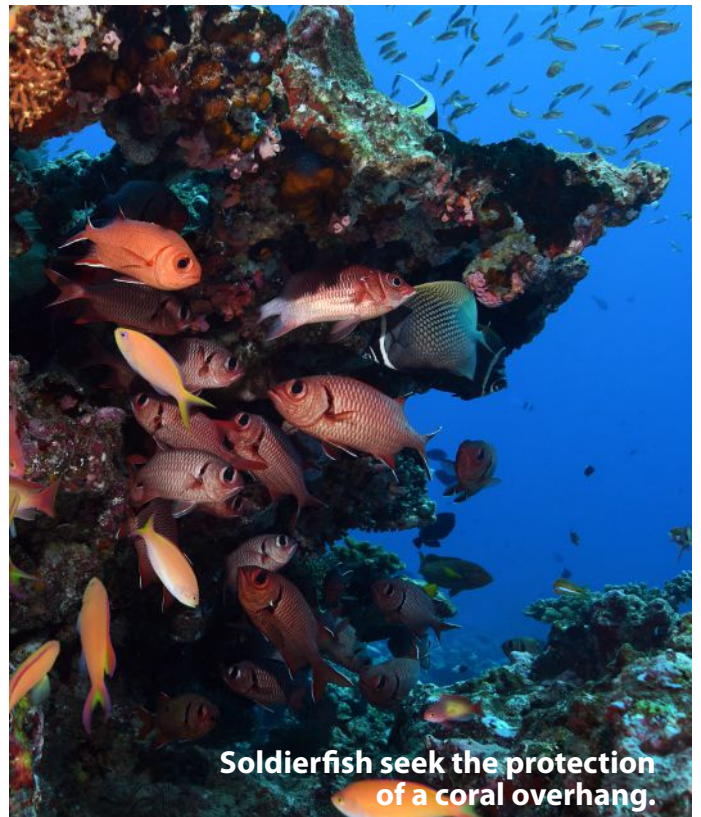
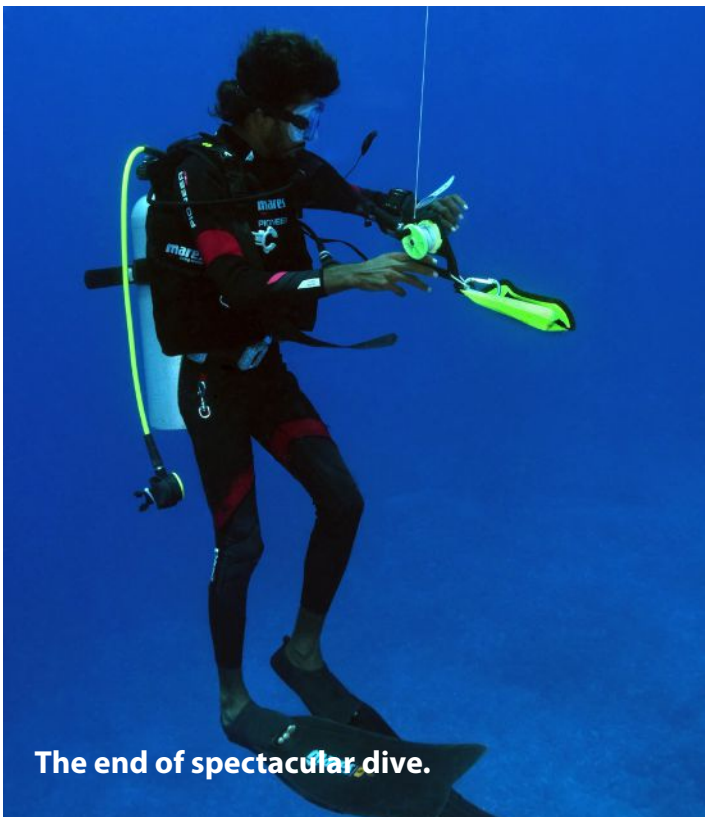
Besides diving, the center can organize snorkeling tours and dolphin encounters.

There are numerous other dive sites to explore off Huraa, but we also wanted to spend some time touring

the island itself. This is a special place. Only a half hour from Male, this is an island that is just beginning to open its doors to tourism. Using the golf cart to explore, we met some of the local residents and got a sense of what daily life is like in this tiny corner of the world. We spotted children leaving school wearing backpacks with colorful princess images alongside their parents in traditional Muslim attire. The traditional call to prayer would often ring out from the local mosque, and everyone we met flashed us a wide smile and a friendly nod of the head.

The dive team and staff at the Albatross Dive Center were extremely professional and very helpful. Our stay on Huraa, and our dives here, were memorable in both their underwater drama and in the peaceful time above the water. Huraa seems like it exists in the way that much of the world wishes it could.

Indeed, at dinner one evening, we struck up a conversation with one of the waiters named Hassan. Born and raised on Huraa, Hassan began talking about his love for soccer, or football as he calls it. Interestingly,



the topic changed to the state of the world. And here, on this remote island so far removed from the rest of the world, Hassan profoundly said that “What’s happening in the world today is separating us. Sports is there to bring people together. We all need to come together!”

Hurray for Hussan, and Hurray for Huraa.

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.

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

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.

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!

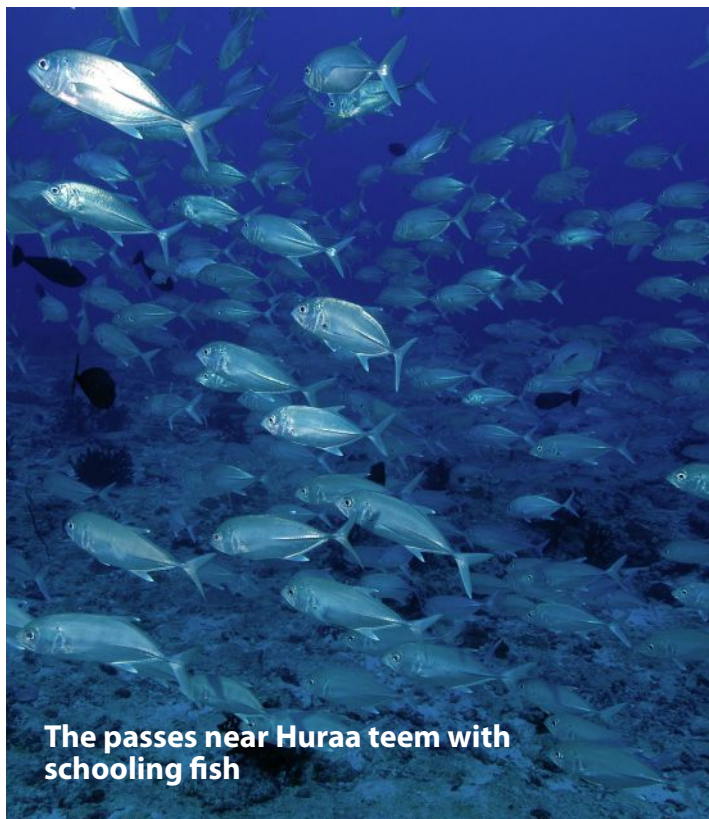
Uncaptioned photos from left to right:

A Spotted Eagle Ray cruises the pass at Huraa.

Blue striped Snapper huddle in the current.

Orange, yellow and purple soft corals drape the rocks and boulders.

Anemonefish shelter in the stinging tentacles of their host anemones.



The passes near Huraa teem with schooling fish



A true Maldives escape

The lovely Spanish Dancer comes out at night.



The Maldives Sponge Snail is endemic to these waters.

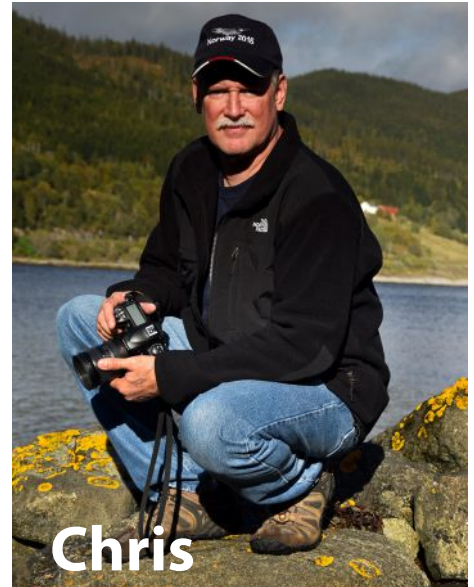


About Eco-Photo Explorers: Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

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



Chris



Mike