

MV SHARIFA LIVEBOARD

MALÉ & ARI ATOLLS- MALDIVES

By Sophie Parry

We have visited the Maldives on several occasions. Previous trips were to island based resorts/dive centres. Whilst these trips were memorable and enjoyable in their own way, we decided it was time to dive the Maldives from a liveboard and sample the best sites of several atolls over 7 days.



We could only make the trip in late July or August (guess where my dive buddy works- even a kid would get this one). We particularly wanted to see manta rays. Some prior research indicated that manta sightings were indeed possible in July/August in the North Malé Atoll.

We have enjoyed constantly good service from Regal Dive over the years including our 2006 Maldives trip, so we decided to return to the Maldives with Regal Dive for our 2007 trip.

We flew out to the Maldives from Heathrow with Emirates to Dubai and changed aircraft for the final leg of the outward flight down to Malé. We were met at the airport by staff from the liveboard and transferred to Sharifa via a dhoni which was parked conveniently outside the airport in the water taxi bays. Sharifa was moored in a lagoon about 15 minutes away and in no time at all we were on board and sipping a welcome drink.

The first house rule on Sharifa is to remove your shoes and stow them away for the rest of the week.

By now it was late morning, so the plan for the rest of the first day was to attend a briefing on the boat and the diving itinerary anticipated (weather permitting) for the week. This was also a good opportunity to meet the other divers and staff we would be sharing a very spacious liveboard with for the next week.

After we had settled in, it was time to unpack and transfer our dive kit to the dhoni that was to be our dive platform for the week. Sharifa moors up reasonably close to the dive site and divers transfer to the site by dhoni which also carries the compressors and your diving equipment.

Sharifa anchored each evening before darkness so there is no traveling to the next dive site through the night.

MV Sharifa Specifications

- 32 metres long by 6.5 metres wide
- Capacity for up to 18 divers
- 9 air conditioned en-suite cabins with double bed and single bunk bed
- Spacious dining/seating area
- 3 levels of sun deck with some shaded areas
- Buffet style meals
- 1 free bottle of water per diver per day
- Coffee/ snack after diving on most days
- Air fills and weights. (Sharifa does not offer nitrox)

Note: There is an additional payment at the end of the week for tips, any alcohol, soft drinks or additional water. Unlike island based resorts, credit cards are not accepted. Payment has to be in US dollars or Rafiah,

Overall, we made 19 dives during the week, typically rising at about 0600hr to do a dive before breakfast. You do have the option of staying in bed if you don't want to be up so early, but not one diver exercised this option.

Adam was the dive master for the week and once we had completed our first orientation dive and ensured our equipment was in full working order and demonstrated we could launch a DSMB from mid-water, we confirmed that we could dive alone as a pair rather than following a group as I particularly wanted to practice my photography within an abundance of marine life.



Diving Dhoni

The Diving

I have rated the dive sites on a scale of 1-10, based on my impressions just after the dive. Water temperature was a consistent 28-29 degrees C on all dive sites. Visibility was typically 12-14 metres on most sites but if there was a current and the water was plankton-rich, visibility could reduce to about 6-8 metres.

North Malé Atoll

Black Faru

7/10

This was our initial orientation dive. The dive was a gentle drift in about 0.25 knot with average coral and marine life on display. The highlight was a honeycombed free-swimming moray eel.



Manta Point

10/10

This was the last dive of the trip and probably one of the most unusual last dives I have ever made.



We were told that we had a 50/50 chance of seeing Mantas on this site. We dived in the afternoon at this manta cleaning station. Within a few minutes of entering the water, we could see the outline shapes of some adult mantas (3-4 metre wing span). We were briefed not to get too close to the actual cleaning station so as not to unsettle the mantas. Our guide indicated how close I could get to the action with my camera.

Mantas like current and today was no exception with a current of about 1 knot that was also changing direction at times. I managed to find a sheltered area, took cover and watched 4 mantas performing circuits over the cleaning station for about 45 minutes. Pure entertainment and hardly a fin stroke required.

South Malé Atoll

Vellasar Caves

6/10

A simple wall dive, but there are no caves on this site, just numerous overhangs. A good selection of reef fish and I also saw several varieties of nudibranch



Nudibranch

Kuda Giri

9/10



This can be a combination wreck and thila dive if planned correctly. We started off by descending via a permanent shot line onto the adjacent wreck of a small freighter that sits in about 30 metres. This is a purposely sunk ship and has been decommissioned with safety in mind. It is possible to penetrate the hold, enter the bridge and generally explore an intact wreck.

After exploring the wreck and mindful of increased air consumption at depth, it is easy to swim over to the walls of the thila and explore the walls and top plateau before completing the dive.

Lhosfushi Kandhu

8/10

We dived this site on a corner of the channel just as the current was starting to run and on the basis that the big fish would be taking advantage of the situation regarding their feeding habits.

We were not disappointed and saw large shoals of tuna, jacks, some napoleon wrasse and reef sharks. Towards the end of the dive the current slowed and there was a leaf fish just begging to have a picture taken. We were also hoping to see mantas on this dive, but to no avail, or so we thought.....



Leaf Fish

No sooner that we were all back on the dhoni and about 500 metres along the channel, the skipper spots mantas breaking the surface just ahead. We all donned snorkeling kit and got back in the water as quickly as we could. There were up to 4 young mantas gracefully swimming about, looping the loop and flaring their gills as they fed on the very soupy plankton-laden water (viz about 6-8 metres) and all just below the surface down at 3 metres.

That evening, Adam the guide intimated he would let the guests in on the secret Maldivian dance of the mantas, which after we all got into party mode he obligingly acted out for the benefit of the guests, including a few bemused crew members.

Kandooma Thila

5/10

This was an early morning dive and we were in the water by 0730 hr. Not much happening at that time of morning, other than a few reef sharks prowling about. The light was poor as we had cloud cover so the general ambience was not particularly spectacular or ideal for photography. Ah well, lets surface and see what's for breakfast.



Anemone Fish

Hathi Kolhu

7/10



A large thila dive, but exploring the walls was interesting with morays, reef sharks and the usual reef fish. Just as we decided to ascend to the top of the thila, we saw a lone manta swimming along just below the surface. Towards the ebb of the dive we found a very large starry puffer fish which must have been about a metre long but was very camera-shy.

South Ari Atoll

Ranvelli Thila

5/10

A typical dive site with all the usual marine life.



Oriental Sweet Lips

Kudarah Thila

9/10



We dived this site early one morning and were greeted by a free-swimming honeycombed moray eel on descent. This site has very intense fish and coral life and is a good site for photography.

Mamigli corner

4/10

This is a long reef dive that is dive plan 'B' if no whale sharks are sighted in the vicinity. The reef forms part of an island that is currently a construction site for a new airport. We went to the same location the previous year hoping to see whale sharks but were unlucky, made the same plan B dive and observations. Maybe if we visit a third time we will be lucky and see whale sharks.

Five Rocks Pinnacle

9/10

This exposed and remote site is made up of 5 under water rocks forming a pinnacle with a flat top at about 15 metres. A GPS was used to locate the site. This site is washed by currents and the marine life & corals are spectacular. Swim through the galleys between the rocks and finish the dive on top of the rocks at 15 metres for a very entertaining dive.



Scorpion Fish

Angaga Thila

8/10

We first dived this site in 2006 and once again, were impressed by the marine life and the fully grown reef sharks.

North Ari Atoll

Hollywood Thila

4/10

Don't be fooled by the name. This site is nowhere near as colourful or exciting as Sunset Boulevard. Just the usual suspects lurking about.



Attention-seeking starlet

Bulhalehi Faru

8/10



This dive is along an under water wall that runs away from the island forming a channel boundary. The corals on this dive were amongst the most diversified and colourful to-date on this trip.

Dhigga Thila

8/10

Great site for reef sharks, large gorgonian fan corals and large overhangs worth exploring. The table corals on top of the thila are also worth checking out.



Fish Head

8/10



The current was starting to run on this site which meant we saw some larger pelagics such as eagle rays, reef sharks and several fully grown napoleon wrasse. There were also turtles resting and grazing on the wall.

Napoleon Wrasse

Hafsa Thila

9/10

Good all-round site for sheer volumes of fish. Sharks, schooling Jacks & tuna and large shoals of snappers that seemed to create a 'rush hour' effect at times causing divers to stop and marvel at the spectacle of so many colourful fish.



Maayaa Thila

10/10



We dived this site twice. The first dive was a night dive. As a night dive you descend to the top of the thila which is at about 8-10 metres. There must have been about 10-12 reef sharks all hunting in the dark and not that concerned about the presence of divers. There is also a large resident barracuda at about 1.5 metres in length that also enjoys a night dive and will follow your torch beam to grab some supper. There are other reef fish about as well, but the sharks and the barracuda definitely stole the show. This has to be one of the most entertaining night dives I have made in the last few years.

The second dive was early the next morning just as dawn was breaking. This time we went deeper and followed the walls of the thilla at about 25-30 metres initially. Here the sharks were cruising about in their usual stealth mode rather than the frenzy we had seen the previous evening and the other reef inhabitants were just getting up for another day on the thila. The current was quite strong and we decided not to waste air fighting the current to circumnavigate the site, so we tended to stay in the lee of the thila.



Titan Trigger Fish

The Last Day

After completing our afternoon dive at Manta Point, Sharifa moored up in the lagoon near the airport. The dhoni took us over to jetty No.1 in Malé and we spent a few hours wandering about the streets just taking in the atmosphere. We had dinner on our return to Sharifa and packed all our dive kit and belongings ready for departure the next morning after breakfast. The dhoni returned us to the airport at about 8.00 am, but our next leg of the journey was to spend some time on Eriyadu in the North Malé atoll for a few days before returning home.

Conclusions

A liveaboard is by far the best way to cover a large area and see the best of the best of the dive sites the selected atolls have to offer. The ratings score I have attributed to each site we visited is relative to the quality of the sites we visited. All the sites were good, but some were better than others. I would certainly do another liveaboard again in the Maldives, although going straight from a busy working environment in the UK and then doing 3 or 4 dives a day, starting at 7 am is exhilarating yet tiring by the end of the week. It was for this reason we never intended to go home straight away and spent a few days on Eriyadu to chill out and dare I say it, indulge in some leisurely diving.

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