



YOU COULD LEARN TO DIVE AT YOUR LOCAL SWIMMING POOL, OR YOU COULD STAY ON A FIVE-STAR ISLAND SPA IN THE MALDIVES AND DIVE WITH MANTA RAYS. **PHILIP WATSON** CHOSE THE LATTER OPTION

FISH TALES

I AM FLOATING WEIGHTLESSLY near a reef shelf, 12 metres down in the Indian Ocean, when above me I spot it. Emerging out of a big blue sea softly clouded by plankton, the manta ray glides into view. Everything is magnified underwater, but still the manta seems a colossal, otherworldly presence, a ghostly visitor that dwarfs all around it and casts amorphous shadows on the ocean floor.

As it slowly swoops around to the coral peak nearby, wings flapping in the gentle currents, Niyaz, my dive instructor, signals to me to stay still and silent. All I can hear is the rhythmic sound of my breathing and the burbling of bubbles as they break for the surface. As the manta opens its gaping letterbox mouth to suck in the sealife, I notice small cleaner wrasse fish scouring its gills and underbelly, simultaneously valeting it and feeding.

Scuba do Above, a diver hitches a ride on a manta ray. *Opposite page, clockwise from top:* the Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa; the exotically named oriental sweetlips; a green turtle; the Twin Otter seaplane that flies guests to the Kanuhura Sun Resort

Niyaz and I stare, awestruck, as the manta continues to circle and feed like a stealth bomber coming in to land. This is only my second time diving in the open sea and yet, I realise later, I am witnessing one of the great submarine spectacles.

"The manta is unique because it seems to be moving in its own time and space," says Niyaz when we are back on board the dive boat and heading back to my resort, the Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa in the Maldives. "We know where mantas feed and what time of year is best, but it is still quite rare to see one. It's always a thrill when we do – like seeing one of the Big Five on safari."

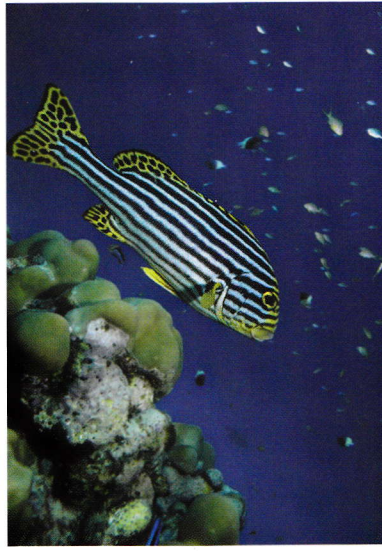
There are many places to learn to dive, from Australia's Barrier Reef to your nearest swimming pool. Yet few sites offer such warm seas, superb visibility and rich and varied fish life as the 1,190 islands

that make up the Maldives archipelago. All the major island resorts have dive centres offering a range of beginners' courses. All you need is a reasonable bill of health and a small leap of faith.

I'd decided to spread my PADI-registered Scuba Diver course over two resorts in the islands, the Kanuhura Sun Resort and the Four Seasons, doing a little each day. It worked out perfectly. Both are on five-star paradise islands. The Four Seasons has gourmet food, impeccable service and the only spa in the world to be located on its own private island. We reached Kanuhura in a Twin Otter seaplane and stayed in a "water villa" built on stilts over the sea. Yet even lotus-eaters crave variety, and the change of view stopped us feeling too indulged.

My first sessions were at Kanuhura with a nice Bavarian dive master named





Wolfgang. I was introduced to a BCD, the buoyancy control device that inflates and deflates you in the water. I was told that scuba tanks contain not oxygen but pure air, “like the stuff we breathe all the time”. I was told never to hold my breath, but the first time I put my head under, instinct kicked in and I did just that.

After the theory, it was out for our first fun dive in the shallows of the resort’s reef lagoon. It was an immediate revelation. When El Niño hit the Maldives in 1998, the rise in water temperature bleached the coral almost out of existence, but everywhere I turned the intense colour of the fishlife on offer was startling. We saw the splendid harlequin filefish, which has a patterned green and orange body that makes it look like a foppish buffoon, and the sour-faced blacktip grouper, which has the look of a misanthrope at a garden party. There were fish down there, I later learned, with such fantastic names as oriental sweetlips and humbug damselfish. Even the pinky white coral, which is gradually growing back, is fascinating to observe up close – like looking at reborn fossils through a microscope.

“I have dived all over the world and, while there is much nicer coral in other

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countries, the fish life in the Maldives is unbeatable,” said Wolfgang afterwards. “Nowhere else are you guaranteed to see such variety and number.”

At the Four Seasons, under Niyaz’s supervision, things moved on apace and I was introduced to more advanced diving techniques. I back-rolled into the sea and we slowly dropped to four metres to kneel on the ocean floor. I was to perform an exercise that would enable me to be prepared for any eventuality. All I had to do was release my mask a little, allow water to flow in, and then clear it by blowing out through my nose. How hard could that be? Let out mask; let in sea; exhale. Simple, huh? Wrong. Down there, it seemed like the last thing in the world I wanted to do. This was alien. This was not my world. *Get me outta here.*

Niyaz, of course, won me round. Adopting a beatific smile and making smooth, expressive movements, like t’ai chi, he managed to calm my breathing. Slowly, meditatively, he looked around him, and encouraged me to do so. He clasped his hands in front of him like a benign Buddha and, when he thought I was ready, repeated the exercise. I steadied myself, rediscovered my determination, and did it.

After that, everything else seemed simple and, as I became more confident, the allure of scuba became more clear. I swam through a school of blue fusilier fish which scattered in all directions, like an army dispersed by shellfire. I watched a gang of graceful green turtles, some four feet long, and a huge stingray sleeping on the ocean bottom. I explored the wreck of an old fishing boat and saw the inimitable profile and the menacing movements of white-tip reef sharks skitting along the ocean floor. Each dive was different, each was an adventure. There was the sense of time passing slowly yet imperceptibly. And there was the adrenaline rush afterwards – the sense of achievement, of exploring a world few ever see.

But there was something more. The easy metronomic movement of my fins, the folding of my arms across my body in a self-embrace, the escape from gravity and immersion in a new world, all created an overwhelming feeling of freedom, of being at once highly relaxed and stimulated. I felt mentally cleansed.

“I was attracted to scuba because I thought it was macho, an activity for tough guys, but I soon realised that was just the surface,” said Niyaz, after our last dive together. “You have to be very gentle with your actions, and with the fish life and coral, and you need to be very calm. Diving is actually the most peaceful sport in the world.” 🌊

WAY TO GO

Esquire travelled to the Maldives with Emirates Airlines (0870 243 2222; www.emirates.com) and Kuoni World Class (01306 747 001; www.kuoni.co.uk). Flights are via Dubai from Heathrow, Birmingham and Manchester, and take around 11 hours. Seven nights including flights, bed and breakfast start at £1,525 at the Kanuhura, £1,626 at the Four Seasons. PADI Scuba Diver courses at both resorts start at £155. Kuoni also operates seven-day live-aboard dive cruises in the Maldives which cost from £1,039 including flights; call 01306 747 006. The British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC) (0151 350 6200; www.bsac.com) and the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) (0117 300 7234; www.padi.com) offer advice on courses, schools and clubs, here and abroad. Essential scuba reading: *Neutral Buoyancy: Adventures in a Liquid World* by Tim Ecott (Michael Joseph, £13).