



A DIVER'S GETAWAY Maldives-style

Sometimes, the difference between being keenly perceptive and prepared, or being just a bit dim, is only a matter of a few degrees, in one direction or another. Fortunately, sometimes having that dimness pointed out to you can be the nicest thing in the world, as **AL HORNSBY** discovered

Photographs by AL HORNSBY

I was kneeling at 18m in a rough-bottomed channel off Meeru Island, in the Maldives' North Male Atoll. At my back a rounded mound of coral rose up three to four metres, swarming with wrasses and butterflyfish; as you might be supposing, creating a perfect manta cleaning station, this one known as Lankan Manta Point. In normal fashion, on an outgoing tide, we were facing down-current toward the pass through the reef to open sea. Mantas would tend to come in against the current, mouths open to feed, at times stopping to hold position near the mound to simply let the briskly moving water bring food to them, saving effort and energy.

For me, it was a pleasant, patient wait, in a perfect spot... and, in such areas frequented by mantas, knowing there was a very good chance of seeing them at certain times of the day and tide. So, I knelt on the sand and rubble bottom, reef-hook holding me in place, camera and strobes set and ready, watching the many small fish that flitted around in the shifting sunlight, confident that mantas could undoubtedly appear, at any moment.

After a few minutes, my reverie was interrupted; it was Dirk, manager of the Meeru Island Resort and Spa Euro Divers operation and graciously serving as our guide for the day, who had moved over to stop in front of me. He seemed to have a small, sardonic smile creeping out from around his regulator as he slowly raised a hand and index finger, pointing up slightly above my head. Curious, I turned - the three, motionless mantas hovering at the edge of the coral mound just at my back seemed to be staring, curiously, as if thinking, "Hmm... I wonder what he is looking at?"

Thus began one of those joyful underwater experiences that mantas can so uniquely bring... the huge, gentle creatures would hang over the mound being cleaned for a few moments, then pass over our heads, turning and soaring with apparent exuberance, then circle back for more cleaning, sometimes alone, sometimes two or three at a time. As common for them, they apparently didn't mind our presence; in fact, as mantas sometimes do, they would often turn to approach us quite closely, seeming to share mutual curiosity.

All too soon, my computer indicated time was up, and we drifted away on the brisk current to begin our safety stop, watching the mantas as they continued to swirl and dance, until they finally disappeared into the blue behind us.

The small islet of Meeru is one of those dream places, fitting every bit one can imagine of a pristine, tropical paradise. Only a 55-minute boat ride from the Maldives' international airport at Male, it's a quick, comfortable journey that takes you to a small, isolated green island fringed with white sand and swaying palm trees (yeah, you get the picture), which arises out of a bright, aquamarine sea that stretches away in every direc-

Manta gliding overhead



tion. For visitors who have just stepped off an international flight, that 55 minutes takes you to a place and state of mind that has left the real world far, far behind.

At the destination, the Meeru Island Resort and Spa not so much solely occupies the island as emerges from it... while all its parts are but a quick walk or buggy ride from every other part, almost every section of villas is basically secluded from every other, with only near-neighbours in sight, whether snuggled beneath the tropical forest, scattered along quiet beaches or stretching out over the water on wooden walkways. With all this, there are also restaurants, bars, pools, sports facilities - even a golf course - and, as an all-inclusive resort, the availability of virtually every leisure activity one could imagine.

Once immersed in its elegant comfort, it quickly becomes oh-so tempting to simply lie back, occasionally snorkel in the quiet, surrounding waters, eat, drink... except for the simple fact that Maldives' diving, quite deservedly reputed to be among the best on the planet, surrounds you in every direction. So, if you are like us, you quite readily manage to do a great deal of... all of it.

The Maldives island nation is unique in the world, both in its basic geography and its massive scale. It can be best appreciated by first looking at a map... in the warm, Indian Ocean, the Maldives is formed by a series of 26 large, coral atolls - roughly circular or elongated rings of coral - each with a central lagoon sprinkled with small islands, which

Turtle cruising by in the blue



"But, when a carcass-dump from above begins - the marine life is adept at instantly detecting the moment - magic happens"

Angelfish and trumpetfish in perfect harmony



Dive flag provides a splash of vibrant colour among the palms



Maldivian manta magic



“At one point, a mobular ray came slowly by, only two metres away, giving me my best-ever encounter over the next several minutes”

stretches atop a submarine ridge from near the tip of India southward for more than 960km. The underwater environment is complex and incredibly rich with life; large channels break through the outer reefs, with tidal changes creating flows that bring nutrients in and out, feeding massive coral fields and an incredible array of marine life, from the smallest macro exotics to the ocean's largest fish - mantas and whale-sharks. The diving is along outer walls, inside the channels, around huge, reef mounds (called thilas) that just break the surface, and virtually everywhere in between. And, oh yeah, it's also known for its clear - typically averaging at least 25-30 metres and more - warm water.

Meeru Island sits in a prime area, with a great deal of exciting diving reachable within short, comfortable boat trips. Besides Lankan Manta Point already described, among the favourites are:

One Palm - Off a small island with (you guessed it) a solitary palm tree, the site is a sloping, coral slope that reaches 26m to a white-sand channel. In very clear water (in excess of 30 metres on our dive), on the slope are Napoleon wrasse, green turtles and lots of reef fish. The bottom has black-blotched stingrays and whitetip sharks, and a large coral mound emerges from the sand, practically covered with schooling

oriental sweetlips and bluestripe snapper. Under a small overhang we found a large, tawny nurse shark, and mantas are regularly seen, using the mound as a cleaning station.

Tuna Factory - This site ranks as one of the most unique dives one will ever experience. Back toward Male, a small island is the site of a local tuna-processing plant, situated at the water's edge on a steep channel. The tuna carcasses are dumped into the dark water every few minutes, to be swept away on the prevailing current. Beneath the surface, a steep, sand and rubble slope pitches downward, creating an eerie, muted seascape. Morays, especially yellow-margins and brilliant black-spotteds, seem to emerge from every nook and cranny, sometimes four to five in a single, small rock pile, and many different schooling fish meander about. But, when a carcass-dump from above begins - the marine life is adept at instantly detecting the moment - magic happens. From deep water, hundreds (no exaggeration) of cowtail and black-blotched stingrays streak upward for their shares of the spoils, surrounding divers in a roiling, living maelstrom of dark wings and tails. In a few minutes it ends... only to repeat in due time, over and over.

Miyaru Faru - A Miyaru dive begins on the outer reef, with the current



running down the reef toward a channel entrance. The steep slope is home to green turtles, whitetips and lots of reef tropicals, with large anemones and their resident Clark's anemonefish scattered here and there. Descending toward 30m, you begin seeing grey reef sharks patrolling the drop. As the current increases, you hook in and watch the parade, also spotting dog tuna and other big pelagics. To end the dive, you move back up into the shallows to be carried by the strong flow, around the corner and into the channel for a leisurely ride. Like on other similar dives in the Maldives, eagle rays can be seen at practically any moment.

End of day snorkelling - For me, some of my most pleasant experiences in Meeru were spent snorkelling with my wife and daughter (only nine years old, but already a veteran). The snorkelling boat is available morning and afternoon, and it visits several house reefs just a few hundred metres out from the dock. On one late afternoon, along a waist-deep, coral and anemone-covered reef line that drops into deeper

water, we spent ten minutes with a green turtle that was feeding on sponges on the reef top. Completely comfortable with us, she would eat for a while, come up in our midst for a breath, then begin feeding again. At one point, a mobular ray came slowly by, only two metres away, giving me my best-ever encounter over the next several minutes.

Back at our water villa, each day ended as it had begun... sitting on the steps from our deck to the shallow, sand-bottomed water below, watching a parade of marine life - small cowtail rays, black-blotched and eagle rays, juvenile blacktip sharks, blue trevally, unicornfish, triggerfish.... so much of what the bountiful Maldives' waters have to offer, streaming incessantly by through a quiet world gone soft and golden, gently lit by the ball of sun hanging just above the horizon. ■

AI was supported on his Sport Diver expedition by Meeru Island Resort and Spa (www.meeru.com) and Euro Divers Meeru Island (www.euro-divers.com/scuba-diving-maldives/meeru-island-resort-spa)

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW MEERU ISLAND, MALDIVES



WHERE IS IT?

In North Male Atoll, the Republic of the Maldives, Indian Ocean.

HOW TO GET THERE

The chief city of Male, the hub for international flights, is reached by regular flights from London and other major cities of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. From there, it is a 55-minute boat trip to Meeru Island Resort and Spa.

WHEN TO GO

Year round, with the calmest, driest conditions from December through April. The southwest monsoon season is from May through November, with generally somewhat more rain and more balmy conditions, but it is the best time to see mantas.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

A valid passport with six months before expiry.

CURRENCY

Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR) £1 = 19MVR).

WHERE TO EAT

The Farivalhu buffet and the Maalen (adults only) offer great food and beverages, all you can eat (included in the room rate). For a restaurant experience, the poolside Hot Rocks was our favourite.

WHERE TO MEET

The 24-hour, on the beach, Dhuni Bar was a blast, with the adults-only Uthuru Bar the best for sunsets.

VERDICT

Great diving and snorkelling, along with a remarkable resort ambience, food, activities and overall vacation experience.