



VILAMENDHOO sojourn

AL HORNSBY's next island-hop in the Maldives took him to Vilamendhoo, where he discovered sublime snorkelling and diving, picturesque views – and the ultimate beach bar

Photographs by AL HORNSBY

On a blue-water, blue-sky day, in the sea near the Vilamendhoo Resort's snorkeling boat, the manta, a big one at least three metres across its wings, sweeps by the excited crowd of snorkellers, giving a thrill most people will never even hope to see. As it passes, the group swims in chase, though with no real likelihood of catching up to it. Our family group, however, with my wife Christine and nine-year-old daughter Juliet stays put and, as hoped, the manta turns and comes straight back, to within metres. Christine is filming on her Go Pro, capturing incredible footage of the manta passing closely by just under the surface, then turning and coming back; the final frames are of its broad back as it flies by, just under her fins. I think – my word, if this is from the snorkelling boat, what will dives from the dive boats, reaching some of the most-famous sites in South Ari Atoll, have in store?

The Maldives' Vilamendhoo Island, South Ari Atoll, located a quick, 25-minute seaplane flight south of the capital, Male, sits amid other scattered, small islands in one of the country's most-celebrated diving areas. It features clear water, profuse coral growth, large groups of schooling fish of many species, sharks, turtles, and more. And, like several other parts of the Maldives, it has large populations of mantas and eagle rays. What makes it ultimately special, however, is its proximity to Maamigili Whaleshark National Park, just over an hour away by dive boat, one of the few places in the world where whalesharks are not seasonal, but are seen year-round.

It's the sort of diving area which, for hard-core divers, would be worth it, regardless of the type of accommodation or dive services available ('Just give me a place to put my bedroll and have a boat that can drop me off, sir, and I'll be fine'). Well, as it turns out, those aren't the options one faces at Vilamendhoo. The Vilamendhoo Resort and Spa, which solely occupies the 900 metre-long, 250-metre-wide island, is a casually luxurious place, where families, couples and singles find total escape into what a tropical holiday should all be about – lovely, white sand beaches, calm, clear water, beautiful accommodations, great food, etc, etc (you can see where I'm going). Socially, its chief gathering place, the large, beachside Bonthi Bar, is quite remarkable – it actually serves free food and drinks – alcoholic and non - as part of the all-inclusive package, 24 hours a day, has a wall-sized TV and big, easy chairs scattered about its sand floor, a disco and game rooms, and a weekly karaoke night (one that is actually utterly fun, and attracts most every guest on the island).

What's perhaps most amazing for divers and snorkellers, however, is the house reef, which runs all along both sides of the island – the entry is a walk across the beach a few metres from your room and a swim of perhaps ten metres to a waist-deep, coral-covered reef that gently drops away into deeper water. And, the resident green turtles, completely accustomed



A diver drifts over a coral-encrusted reef



Eagle rays

"In a special encounter for me, just at our dive's beginning, two large eagle rays approached from along the side of the thila, came directly to me and gave me the two closest, best images of eagle rays I've ever captured"



Batfish mingle with divers



Anemonefish

The Maldives is famous for its healthy reefs and walls



“What did happen, however, was that while back on the boat between dives, a six-metre shark was spotted near the surface, coming toward us, alongside the reef”

Manta rays can offer close encounters



to people, tend to either tag along or simply go about their business, without fear or apparent regard.

For divers or those wishing to be, there is a Euro Divers five-star PADI Dive Centre (www.euro-divers.com) next to the beach villas, also just steps from the water and the dive boat dock. It has EANx as its standard gas, comfortable, Maldivian Dhoni-style dive boats, excellent PADI instructors and dive guides, and a full range of PADI courses, from Discover Scuba Diving on up, is available. Along with everything else at Vilamendhoo, the dive experience is just easy and ever-so comfortable.

But, on to what we really came here for – the diving. The area is rich with life, no matter which site is chosen. There are thilas (large bommies with steep sides that rise out of deep water), channels, coral slopes on the outer reefs near the channel-mouths and calm, coral gardens sparkling with colourful reef fish. Among our favourites:

KUDA THILA - Kuda rises up from a 30m bottom to near the surface, with overhangs and canyons, which split the sides. Scattered small bommies dot the slopes, and marine life is profuse. Schools of blue triggerfish and blue-striped snapper congregate, and oriental sweetlips, grouper and reef tropicals are encountered at practically every turn. In a special encounter for me, just at our dive's beginning, two large eagle rays approached from along the side of the thila, came directly to me and gave me the two closest, best images of eagle rays I've ever captured. Nice.

VILAMENDHOO CAVES - Along the side of another thila, the caves are an area of deep overhangs and swim-throughs, with lots of gorgonions, especially large, orange *Stephanogorgia* bushes swaying in the currents. Here and there, green turtles were encountered, resting under overhangs and among the corals along the reef-top. There were also lots of anemones with resident Clark's anemonefish.

VILAMENDHOO THILA - Within sight of the resort, Vilamendhoo Thila is a large, complex reef structure that begins in 10m of water and extends down to a sand bottom at 30m. Parts of the thila are sloping reef, others steep walls with overhangs. In the shallow portions, large bommies are scattered about, with rich growths of hard corals. The fish life is especially dense, with schooling blue-striped snapper, oriental sweetlips and

A whaleshark passes below



variable-lined fusiliers. Trevally patrol along the steeper slopes, white-tip sharks swim along the deep portions of the reef, and mantas are regularly seen moving through the channel, just off the thila. What makes this dive so special, however, is the resident congregation of hundreds of longfin spadefish. They followed us our entire dive, the way spadefish often do, as if fascinated by our presence (they seem to like to swim in and out of your exhaust bubbles). So thick were they the entire dive that I came away with few images that didn't contain spadefish!

DHIDHOU AND LUX, MAAMIGILI WHALESHARK NATIONAL PARK - What made Vilamendhoo diving most special for me, however, is the island's proximity to Maamigili Whaleshark National Park, one of the Maldives' two Whaleshark Marine Protected areas (the other at Honifaru, in Baa Atoll). The remarkable aspect of Maamigili is that it is one of the few places known where the whalesharks are not seen just while migrating seasonally, but are found any month of the year. It is not completely known why the sharks are always here, but as most are young males, it is thought this may be a nursery area. The dives here are along a long, sloping reef that fringes a channel out of the lagoon, which spills into open ocean. Dhidhou and Lux are two areas along this long stretch of reef.

It's an incredible place to encounter whalesharks – the water is very clear, you ride a gentle current, and the reef slope is lovely, extending down to a flat coral plain at about 20m. The slope is profuse with hard-

coral growth, and there are lots of fish – we saw large Napoleon wrasse, schools of unusual crescent-tail bigeyes (I had never seen such large schools of them before), and many different butterfly and angelfish.

On our two dives, we were in anticipation every moment, just waiting for a whaleshark to materialise out of the deep, blue distance. Well, unfortunately, that didn't happen, but the dives were so nice, regardless, that no one was particularly disappointed.

What did happen, however, was that while back on the boat between dives, a six-metre shark was spotted near the surface, coming toward us, alongside the reef. Everyone quickly donned snorkelling gear and cameras, and jumped in. The shark, its lovely, deep-charcoal skin patterned with brilliant white spots, was swimming steadily, not hurrying, but covering a lot of ground the way large animals do. I had time for one close-in shot in shallow-water, a trip up for a quick breath, and back down for another image as it angled toward the bottom, from above its back at 15m. I could only hang there, gazing at this magnificent creature as it gradually disappeared into the blue distance. Then, it was time to rapidly head up, to breathe and to rest in the bright sunlight at the surface.

If you haven't already decided for yourself, I'm happy to let you know – Vilamendhoo is simply not a place you want to miss. ■

A diver admires the scene around them



A pufferfish seeks protection from the reef



Vilamendhoo's reefs reach right to shore



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW VILAMENDHOO ISLAND, MALDIVES



WHERE IS IT?

In South Ari 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 25-minute seaplane flight to Vilamendhoo Island Resort and Spa.

WHEN TO GO

Year around, 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 is all you need.

CURRENCY

The Maldivian Rufiyaa (£1 = .0499 MVR). However, USD and international credit cards are used at the resort.

WHERE TO EAT

The Buffet Restaurant (all you can eat, included in the room rate) is surprisingly good, with a different menu theme each night; and the over-the-water Asian Wok restaurant were our favorites.

WHERE TO MEET

The 24-hour, on the beach, Bonthi Bar was a blast and 'the' meeting and hang-out place on the island, 24 hours a day.

VERDICT

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