



FIRST IN
paradise

AL HORNSBY fittingly rounds out his Maldivian odyssey with a visit to Kurumba, the island where the country's tourism industry was born more than 40 years ago

Photographs by AL HORNSBY



Turtles are a common sight



The Maldives is a snorkeller's paradise



The reefs are awash with life



There are simply few places in the world as beautiful as the Maldives. Set in the cobalt-blue expanse of the warm, clear Indian Ocean southwest of India, the island nation is nothing less than a long string of glistening pearls sprinkled over an expanse of 90,000 sq km, the atolls, lagoons and islets of the chain adding splashes of aquamarine, turquoise and glistening white to the rich ocean hues that extend to the horizon in every direction.

And, fittingly, along with the beauty of this tapestry, there are also few places on the planet that are equal in how well they welcome tourists, from the exquisite service to the luxury of the resorts to the incredible array of water (especially the diving, always considered among the world's finest) and beachside activities available everywhere. How this all came to be is an interesting, historical story of itself, but, to cut to the point, it all began with one, small resort experiment back in the 1970s. The surprising - and amazing - success of this entrepreneurial venture spawned a national tourism industry like no other. And, in a world of rapid change and short-term achievement, what's even more surprising is that this small resort - now one of the most-comfortable, beautiful places you'll ever see - still welcomes visitors, especially divers, to all the wonders the Maldives have to offer. It's called Kurumba.

Just a quick, 15-minute boat-ride from the international airport in Male, Kurumba is a small island and resort that can be walked around in a less than half-hour stroll on powdery, white sand, the bright, clear waters inside the fringing reef lapping at the shore. Coconut palms, sea grape and other shore-side vegetation part here and there for glimpses of quiet, luxury villas, wonderful for both their privacy and nearness to everything a visitor would want to do on holiday, whether it be snorkeling just out the back door, relaxing by a pool (there are two, and many villas have their own) or at the spa (the entire list is too long to worry with here). Or, most importantly, one can head over on foot or buggy to

one of the several modern dive boats at the Euro Divers centre, morning, afternoon or night.

The family friendly, all-inclusive nature of Kurumba, even for hardcore divers, provides a 'guilt-free' dive holiday - all that can be done and enjoyed topside make it utterly possible to not worry about occasionally missing a dive on a lazy day. But, as a hardcore diver, let me be the first to tell you that you also won't want to miss many... the diving is everything you've heard and read about the Maldives' experience, with its clear, warm, calm water, exquisite reefs and incredible marine life.

One of my favourite dives at Kurumba was also among the most-unique dives I had ever experienced in all my years of Maldives' diving. Although I suppose the name of the site could use a little work from a PR perspective - 'Tuna Factory' - it does perhaps fit well. It's a mundane-seeming place with a mundane name, yet which provides an eclectic, electric dive that is utterly fascinating. Just minutes from the resort is a small island bordering a narrow channel. At water's edge, a local tuna processing plant prepares freshly caught tuna for commercial use. Every few minutes, the carcasses are dumped into the channel's brisk current.

"On our dive there we had three large mantas swirling around us for an entire dive, coming in to be cleaned for a few minutes, then rising up to move overhead, then circling back in for more"

Anemones and attendant clownfish



“At the moment a load of tuna parts rains down, hundreds of cowtail and black-blotched stingrays explode upslope from deeper water, completely enveloping the lucky divers lying about the sand”

Honeycomb moray eel



Manta ray performing a fly-by



The Maldives is famous for its white beaches



Underwater , magic then happens. A rock-studded, sandy slope tumbles down steeply from the shore, the scene a sombre but surprisingly clear, green-tinted, soft world. At the moment a load of tuna parts rains down, hundreds of cowtail and black-blotched stingrays explode upslope from deeper water, completely enveloping the lucky divers lying about the sand. Not to be outdone, a horde of morays - spotted, giant, yellow-margined and eerily-emerald green hued undulats - emerge from hidey-holes, swarming about for their own scraps. In moments, it's over and the normally strange, quiet scene settles back over the seascape. In a few moments more, it all repeats, over and over. Like I said, it's a dive like no other.

Kurumba's other dives are more traditional Maldives' style, but no less enjoyable. Manta Point, a classic cleaning station formed by a coral mound situated at 18m in a wide channel to open sea, serves up thrilling, multi-manta experiences virtually daily, year-around. On our dive there we had three large mantas swirling around us for an entire dive, coming in to be cleaned for a few minutes, then rising up to move overhead, then circling back in for more. We left only when gas and bottom-time demanded we do so.

Maldives' diving is also known for its rich, coral reefs and swarms of schooling fish, with nearby Nassimo Thila a remarkable example. Along a tumbling, coral-covered slope, schools of longfin spadefish, Oriental sweetlips and blue-striped snapper meander everywhere, and green turtles lay about the coral bottom. In one rugged part of the reef, deep,

cavernous overhangs were practically full of blue-striped snapper, exquisitely patterned white-collar butterflyfish and whitetip squirrelfish, among colourful soft corals.

With all this, perhaps our most re-told dive story from Kurumba happened closer to home, just off the beach from our villa. My regular snorkelling buddy (my nine-year-old daughter, Juliet) and I swam the 50 metres or so from shore to the fringing reef, just where it began its drop to deeper water. Within 15 minutes, we had a close pass from a small whitetip shark; another pass by a huge black-blotched stingray; a



The view from up high!



Striped snapper can often be found hugging the reef



The Maldives truly is a photographer's dream

slow, close encounter with a mobular ray; an up-close swim-along with a small green turtle; and a very close approach by a beautiful, two-metre blacktip shark. Now, that's what I call snorkelling!

Our evenings quickly developed a lovely pattern... having drinks and dinner at one of the several ocean-side bars and buffet and specialty restaurants, with long minutes spent on the pier, watching baby blacktip sharks strike at schools of silversides among the pilings.

The coconut palms would rustle overhead; the night-birds would call softly as the stars emerged and moonlight began to streak the surface of the sea around us. We could only sit, soothed and comforted, wondering just what incredible happening the 'morrow would bring. ■

Al was supported on his Sport Diver expedition by Kurumba Maldives Resort (www.kurumba.com) and Euro Divers Kurumba (www.euro-divers.com/kurumba-island-resort-maldives)

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW KURUMBA, 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 ten-minute boat trip, operating 24 hours per day, to Kurumba Maldives Resort.

WHEN TO GO

Year around, with the calmest, driest conditions from December to April. The Southwest Monsoon Season is from May to 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 (MVR) is valued at €0.0589; £0.0499. However, USD and international credit cards are used at the resort.

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The Vihamanaa buffet (all you can eat) and the on-the-water Thila signature restaurant offer great food and beverages and were our favourites. The on-the-water, Kandu Bar was elegantly comfortable, with the Anthiri beach bar the best for sunsets.

VERDICT

Great diving and snorkelling, along with a remarkable, comfortably-luxurious resort ambience, great food, multi-activities and an excellent overall vacation experience.