

Requirements

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Most diving trips take place in North and South Male Atolls, Felidu and in Ari Atoll. The water temperature remains warm and comfortable (27-30 deg C) throughout the year. though with minor variations locally and seasonally. A wetsuit is not necessary, though some people wear a thin suit until acclimatized to Maldives waters. Visibility is also clear all year round, though plankton blooming around early May can reduce visibility on the outer reef from about 40 metres (130 feet) down to about 20 metres (65 feet). The richest concentrations of plankton are usually on the eastern side of an atoll, which is where you will find the most fish.

The northeast monsoon which arrives in January, brings clearer water to most parts of the atoll. In the clearest conditions you can see up to 70 metres (230 feet) below as you float over the reef edge, giving a sensation of vertigo when one looks out into the open ocean. Tidal movements are also very important in determining visibility levels. Incoming tides bring clear water but outgoing ones carry sediment and can sometimes decrease visibility on the fringing reef and lagoon, and reef outlets nearby. Rougher weather, usually in the southwest monsoon from May to October, sometimes restricts boat dives but resorts still provide opportunities to explore the house reef.

Coral reefs are not dangerous places, but there are some points divers new to any region should bear in mind. Sharks can be seen regularly. Most sharks are not interested in humans, which are not part of their normal high-protein diet (unless provoked or cornered). However, if you see the 'threat display' (hunched back, nose up, pectoral fins down), it is wise to leave the scene slowly and quietly. The most common types in the Maldives are the nurse, whitetip, reef black tip, grey reef and silvertip sharks. Barracuda are no danger to humans in clear water but annoying them is not a good idea. The moray eels have very sharp teeth, but they, too will keep clear unless provoked.

Predators who rely on ambush can be a problem for those who stumble about the reef rather than just look at it (a good reason to learn to stay neutrally buoyant). The scorpion fish has excellent camouflage and care should be taken to avoid accidentally touching its poisonous spines. Stonefish, are extremely well camouflaged, and care should be taken when walking on the sea floor. Brightly coloured lionfish floating in mid-water also carry poisonous spines. Fire coral gives a nasty sting, as can some cone shells that deliver a sharp dose of poison to divers who try to collect them. Marine life should be seen but not touched, and those who stick to this simple philosophy should enjoy a lifetime of happy tropical dives.

It certainly beats sitting in a swimming pool or the bottom of a murky pond.

For those who wish to progress from Open Water Diver to Divemaster or beyond, there are certification courses conducted under PADI supervision. For experienced divers

A wide variety of dives is possible, including sheer drop-offs, drift dives, night dives and some limited coral cave diving. There are enough sites around any resort to provide new experiences every day. Regular visitors enjoy diving the same spot in different seasons to see how life on the reef changes with time and tide.

Most aquatic life is seen within 1 to 26 metres, so decompression dives are not necessary. Drift diving is encouraged as a conservation measure, as it is less damaging on coral and underwater structures.

In addition to miles of wall diving on the outer edges of the various atolls, there are submerged pinnacles (known in Maldives as "Thila") made up of a large coral structure jutting up out of deeper water. These rise to up to within just a few feet of the surface, and serve as havens for marine life, from fish fry to large sharks and rays.

Another interesting area is the crevice which forms a channel from the ocean into the reef (called "Kandu Olhi"), where current and nutrient flow produce enhanced coral growth, thus attracting a host of reef and pelagic fish. Here large groupers, manta rays and sharks are a common sight. Sometimes, hammerheads or whale sharks make seasonal appearances. These channels are best seen when drift diving during an incoming tidal flow.

A dive inside the atoll's inner reefs will provide a glimpse of the sheer variety and biodiversity within the reef community. Here, all varieties of soft and hard corals can be seen amidst myriad colours of swarming fish. Even the apparently bare coral sand at the bottom of shallow lagoons provides a habitat for crabs, garden eels and aggressive trigger fish. There are no empty niches and, if one is found, it is quickly occupied.

Wreck dives in the Maldives offer nowhere near the range and variety of Truk or Saipan, but the few available attract many divers. The best known, the "Maldivian Victory," is all that remains of a cargo ship which sank off Male' after hitting the reef. Shortly after the sinking, the wreck was invaded by divers seeking to salvage as much cargo as possible, and much remains to this day (mainly because there is not much use for 100,000 bags of cement soaked in salt water). Another recently popular wreck dive is on a small freighter sitting in 23 metres (80 feet) of water near Halaveli Resort. The wreck has become famous for its population of large Marble Stingrays that swirl on the sandy bottom around the wreck, seeking attention and (mainly) food from the local dive instructors who feed and handle them.