

Introduction

Diving in the Maldives has it all...

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As the oceanic currents eroded the atolls' rims they created channels, and today these channels provide some extraordinary diving. The tides of the Indian Ocean flow in and out through the channels, and in so doing concentrate millions and millions of microscopic plant cells, tiny marine animals and larvae, collectively called plankton. This rich soup provides food for many of the reef's inhabitants. In turn, creatures further up the food chain are attracted from the ocean by the prospect of a good meal, and a rich and diverse marine community builds.

Inside most of the atolls is a complex formation of reefs. A number of these reefs are circular, enclosing a shallow lagoon, others irregular and shallowly submerged. All offer interesting and usually easy diving and excellent snorkelling. Some of the best diving is on submerged reefs called thilas; usually located in the middle of a channels, these rise from the atoll floor to within 10m (33ft) of the surface.

Reef life is prolific, with over 700 common fish species and many more still to be discovered and classified; invertebrate species are reckoned to be in their tens of thousands. For the sharp-eyed diver there are encounters with species like frogfish, leaf fish, ghost pipefish and a multitude of nudibranchs. Whether it's the sight of the awesome manta ray, being face to face with a grey reef shark or spotting a tiny brightly coloured flatworm, the Maldives has it all.

Most dive sites in the Maldives can be grouped according to the geological formation of the reef and are either Channels, Farus, Thilas or Giris.

The Channel or "Kandu" as it is called in Dhivehi, is the deep cut in the atoll rim that connects the waters of the atoll with the open ocean. This is usually the first dive of the day as it tends to be the deepest with some channels being narrow enough to cross from one side to the other. The channel is home to the larger species such as grey shark that feed on the smaller reef life which, in turn, feeds on the plankton being carried into the atoll by the ocean currents.

A Faru is a circular reef rising up from the ocean floor usually lying in the ocean channels.

A Giri is a small area of coral, smaller than a thila that is found inside the atoll.

A Thila is an underwater reef that has formed inside the atoll.

Thilas are oblong or circular in shape with the reef top at 6-10m. Sometimes you can swim around the whole thila in one dive but, as with all diving in the Maldives, the most action will be taking place on the point of the current.

Diving Seasons

The southwest season

The diving on the west side of the atoll in the southwest season is spectacular. You will regularly encounter large schools of pelagic fish like sharks, eagle rays and tuna.

Another noticeable feature of the southwest season is that the water temperature is usually one or two degrees lower than the usual 28° C (82°F). This has an effect on both the behaviour and sightings of marine life, particularly the grey reef sharks and hammerheads, which seem to congregate in larger numbers and in shallower water at this time of year.

On the eastern side of the atolls, the southwest season is the best time to see manta rays and whale sharks. Here your visibility is not so good, but this is compensated for by the wonderful experience of diving with these huge plankton feeders.

The northeast season

This is the Maldivian summer. The effect of the season change on diving is dramatic. From November onwards the currents begin to flow from the northeast, visibility is superb and there is lots of action in the channels and thilas on the eastern side of the atolls from the sharks and other pelagic species.

Currents tend to be stronger in January and then ease as we move into February. From February the waters calm down and the surface of the sea is undisturbed by any major wind or wave action. The doldrums continue through March and April with easy diving and slack currents. The end of May generally sees the change of monsoon season back to the southwest.

Throughout the northeast season, pelagic species such as shark and jacks are to be found on the current points on the

eastern side of the atoll. In addition, there is usually a cornucopia of reef life. Manta rays and whale sharks, however, will only really be found on the west side during the northeast season.