

## Maldives' Island Paradise Turns Local Divers' Dreams into Reality

The intoxicating mix of skill and adventure that is SCUBA diving recently lured 19 SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC) members from the overcast skies of Belgium to the island atoll paradise of the Maldives for seven days in April.

The 19 SSAC members who took the trip to the island nation – located about 700 kilometers southwest of India (435 miles) – had a chance to live on board a charter boat and explore a plethora of sea life and beautiful coral reefs. The Maldives are considered one of the premier dive locations in the world, where the nation is comprised of 26 atolls that are actually the tips of a submerged volcanic mountain range sculptured by the ocean currents, overlaid with centuries of rich coral growth. The nation encompasses a territory featuring 1,192 islets; 250 of these islands are inhabited, leaving the majority of islands uninhabited. By the end of the trip, divers all agreed the Maldives did not disappoint!

Among the 19 SSAC members participating, nationalities represented were



Maldivian Island Paradise.

ries. The Maldives crystal waters and abundant marine life provided a stunning contrast to the distant memory of the often murky, cold quarry waters in which they were trained.

At times there were so many fish in the water surrounding the divers it was difficult to see. This did, however, provide a virtual checklist of standard marine life hoped for on dive trips: lionfish, moray eels (green ones, spotted ones), turtles, lobster, barracuda, triggerfish, trevallies, tuna, mackerel, the ever-curious batfish, nudibranches, pufferfish, clown fish (Nemos) and rays. The enormous (sometimes the size of a human) humphead wrasse was always exciting to spot. These huge, slow-moving behemoths thought nothing of swimming close by. "Although Kuda Thila reef was small, the marine life was



SSAC Maldives Group Photo: Top row (l to r) Dita Machovcova, Oliver Nemcik, Melanie Thorne, Ramon Brown, Carla Augustine, Lindsay Bjelde, Doris Platzer, and Christian Platzer. Stairs: Colleen Thompson and Angelo Leone. Bottom row (l to r): Patrick Coumans, Chris Rose, Debbie Rose, Maldivian Dive Guide Imti, Martina Zaorolkova, Petr Pilnacek, Ko Boot, Kinga Lubaszka, and Sergiusz Mnacakanjan. Kneeling (l to r): John Orr and SSAC President Bill Ostrander's trip stand-in.

American (5), Austrian (2), British (2), Canadian (1), Czech Republic (3), German (1), Netherlands (2), Polish (2), and Slovakian (1). Newly certified divers Carla Augustine and Martina Zaorolkova were treated with the rare experience of diving amongst some of the most colourful and varied marine life in the Indian Ocean. These divers earned their qualifications through SSAC, learning the intricacies of scuba diving in the SHAPE pool and Belgian quar-



SSAC Instructor Angelo Leone in pursuit of a whale shark.

just unbelievable," said Advanced Diver Melanie Thorne, with a broad smile. To take advantage of the numerous diving sites, the divers opted for a live-aboard charter. Diving, eating and sleeping were done without the interruption of transport to and from hotel. Ko Boot noted, "Living on board is a great way to have a lot of dives at different locations. It was a great experience for me and one I will certainly not hesitate to do again!" Chris Rose, as well as many others, took advantage of the great weather to sleep on the deck allowing themselves to be gently rocked to sleep under the stars far away from reality. A total of 19 dives in six days, including night, drift and deep water dives, kept even the experienced divers happily exhausted. These diverse dives, along with a navigation dive, enabled divers Carla Augustine, Oliver Nemcik, Chris

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Snapper.

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Rose and Martina Zaorolkova to finish their NAUI Advance Certification with SSAC Instructor and member Angelo Leone.

Maldivian cuisine, including fish caught fresh daily off the boat, was an experience even for such an internationally diverse group. One evening the staff provided a special island barbecue, complete with torches and human sand sculptures. On another evening a Maldivian band was brought on board for evening entertainment. Debbie Rose said of the experience, "The unique personalities of the Maldivians, along with their food and produce, all lent to the



Honey-comb moray eel.

Divers clung to the rocky bottom while watching the manta rays, but when whitetip sharks were present the rocky bottom was not the place to be even though this bottom-dwelling, nocturnal shark is not aggressive and hunts among crevices in reefs. A shark's quick change of direction would find a diver with a shark swimming between his legs. John Orr summed it up; "Within the first minute I saw the eye-shine of the sharks and realized they were close, very close. It was an adrenaline rush and startling at first, but then I realized there were many fish to eat and the sharks were not at all interested in a neoprene-



SSAC Instructor Angelo Leone with a manta ray.

laid-back approach in the spirit of the people."

All divers agreed that the highlights of the trip were the whale shark, manta rays, and hammerhead sharks. For avid underwater photographers Sergiusz Mnacakanjan, John Orr and Petr Pilnacek, these sightings alone made the whole trip worthwhile and kept their cameras snapping. Collectively, the group brought back over 1,000 pictures and videos.

Two dives were made to a manta ray cleaning station. The divers had to hold themselves to the rocky bottom and wait for the mantras to circle the area with attached remora fish. With wing spans of over three meters (10 feet), the graceful Mantas created a breath-stopping show. "The friendly way they enjoyed playing in the divers' bubbles and the breadth of their wingspan made them an overall diving highlight for me, and I've amassed quite a few dives in quite a few places," Leone said. Divers Ramon Brown and Carla Augustine were overwhelmed by their sheer size. Augustine commented that she saw a manta swim by Brown and realised by comparison just how large it was and then realised she was in its direct path.

The profusion of whitetip sharks almost made them blasé. Almost! They were in abundance sleeping on the sands during the days and hunting at night.

covered me."

On a dive made exclusively to sight a whale shark divers didn't have long to wait before the appearance of a fish 10 metres (30 feet) in length. Whale sharks are the world's largest fish and feed on plankton. Colleen Thompson exclaimed, "Seeing the shark come into view through the plankton-ridden waters was surreal. I had an impression of what 'big' was, but when I actually saw the shark the reality of its size was fantastic!" Leone added, "The thing that stands out the most about my dive trip was coming within reach of a 10-metre whale shark." A blue dive (away from any reef or land reference) was also undertaken so the divers could see some hammerhead sharks. Again, they were not disappointed.

SSAC Instructor Leone was the mastermind behind the trip, managing all details and executing an unforgettable trip for all participants. SSAC has over 90 members and offers scuba courses at reduced cost to the SHAPE community. For more information on SSAC courses or upcoming trips, contact SSAC at [shapsubaquaclub@hotmail.com](mailto:shapsubaquaclub@hotmail.com) or visit their website at [www.shapsubaqua.com](http://www.shapsubaqua.com). Of the whole experience, Orr says it best, "It's an escape to the end of the world and then 30 metres (100 feet) below the surface!"

## New Service Available to SHAPE International Housing Office Customers

Customers of the International Housing Office (IHO) can now send meter readings by email to the IHO and receive back an estimate of what is owed.

If you want to know if your consumption of water, gas, and electricity is 'normal', and how much you can expect to pay, send an email to the IHO.

We will calculate your bill. This is a 'close enough' estimation; it is NOT the exact bill you will eventually receive from the utility company. Because of constantly changing rate and tax structures, our estimate will be within 5%, but is not a legal bill.

You can use this information to adjust your payments to the utility company, and the IHO can inform you if there could be a problem, such as a water leak or an inefficient heater. Send the email to: [shapehsgiho@shape.nato.int](mailto:shapehsgiho@shape.nato.int) Include the following information:

Subject: Meter readings

Your **name** and **address**, **type** of meter (electric, gas and/or water), **date** of initial meter reading, **units** of the meter reading, and the **date** of your most recent meter reading, with the **units** of that reading.

**Mr Example, 1 Rue du Mons, Obourg**  
**water, 1 May 2008, 123456, 1 June 2008, 134567**  
**gas, 1 May 2008, 23456, 1 June 2008, 26789**  
**night electric, 1 April 2008, 1234, 10 June 2008, 2345**  
**day electric, 1 April 2008, 23456, 4 June 2008, 24567**

The IHO can now offer this service to our remaining customers because of an increase in the staff-customer ratio.

Because of the resources required to operate this programme, it is only available to the 1,100 customers of the IHO.