DIVERNET
The Biggest Online Resource for Scuba Divers

SCUBA + SPA = HAPPY DAYS

Follow Divernet on Social Media

Good times ahead

Scuba and spa – for a week in the Maldives. Honestly, what's not to like? asks ELLEN HUSAIN

Mantas make me happy. Actually, I think mantas make everyone happy – huge, graceful, majestic, wonderful, awe-inspiring, manta rays are special.

In fact we're watching three mantas. Big ones, taking turns at a cleaning station in South Ari Atoll, situated in the midst of the Maldives chain of 26 sparkling atolls. Mantas can live for 50 years or more, and have recently been revealed to be surprisingly intelligent – with the biggest brains of all fish compared to body weight.

This is something I can easily believe as I float, entranced. Alien life-forms – the way they interact with each other, arrive and leave decisively, and sometimes choose to check out divers, all hint at their intelligence. It just feels there's a lot going on with these fish.

Between the three mantas coming and going, and the octopus hunting on the reef to my right, I am spoilt for choice on this dive. One minute I'm enthralled by the octopus's antics – sidling camouflaged across the reef and smothering coral heads with its tent-like mantle – the next a giant manta comes in flying low, plane-like, overhead, on its way to get a spa.

The vis is a touch milky and, diving as a group, we need to stay well clear of the cleaning station to avoid spooking the rays, but putting aside the camera I settle in to enjoy the ballet. Not looking through a viewfinder, twiddling f-stops and ISOs, I think I actually enjoy the moment more.

It's the last dive of the trip, and a great end to a fabulous seven days.

Yin and Yang (Scubaspa)

Contents [hide]

1 My favourite things
2 Best of the Maldives
3 The mothership
4 Lights astern
5 Farewell drinks

My favourite things

The boat is Scubaspa's *Yin* and, as the name of the operator implies, the trip combines two of my favourite things: scuba diving and massage. It's described as "*an award-winning and unique concept combining exceptional scuba diving with a wide range of unforgettable above-the-water experiences*" and the website claims "*Our expert team creates striking itineraries, filled with scuba diving, snorkelling, blissful spa sessions, gourmet cuisine experience, yoga classes, water-sports, beach time and other social activities*". The business consistently receives 5* reviews, and has garnered a number of awards.

Disregarding the more random diving scenarios I have encountered as a wildlife film-maker – remote and basic camps and industrial fishing boats in Papua New Guinea, among the other high-end liveaboard experiences – this boat is *luxe*.

Beautiful interiors, finished in wood and mosaic tiles, are more reminiscent of a boutique hotel. The "manta suite" cabins, complete with signature panoramic oval windows, king-size bed and *en suite* bathroom, are pure comfort, and have enough space to swing several dive-bags.

When underway, you can lounge on the crisply made bed watching atolls sail past your private panoramic window. It all feels very James Bond. There is – of course – also a Jacuzzi on the roof, and a whole deck with suites devoted to massage and various other pampering, with a peaceful relaxation area, complete with loungers and flowering frangipani. Only in the Maldives!

Species variety on the reef

Best of the Maldives

So, what about the diving? The itinerary for our trip was "Best of the Maldives", which takes in islands of the most central atolls. The route itself varies from trip to trip, because dive manager Brendan chooses which course to steer according to the prevailing weather and tides.

Alongside the mantas of South Ari Atoll, highlights included Mashiumasmingli Thila – a sharky pinnacle called Fish Head – where grey reefs hunt large fish schools as the currents run, and clusters of colourful giant anemones in pink and magenta play host to numerous clownfish.

Anemones and anemonefish

Previously a shark-fishing location, this is now a marine park protected in law. There is also Ari's Girifushi Thila, *aka* Rainbow Reef. I've seen a few Rainbow Reefs over the years, but this one is impressive, an elongated rocky outcrop from about 24m to 15m depth, festooned with colourful soft corals of all shapes and sizes.

Divers should take a torch to get the most out of the kaleidoscopic hues, but the display is impressive. My personal favourite, for sheer immersive spectacle, was probably Kudarah Thila. In Maldivian *thila* means pinnacle, and this one is situated bang in the middle of a channel of South Ari, near the island of Dhigura. It's home to giant schools of many tens of thousands of bluestripe snapper, which throng over the top as the currents run – a huge shifting yellow cloud atop its summit.

Diver and snapper

Nurse shark

There are also canyons, crevices and overhangs complete with sea fans and sea whips – and a few sharks about for good measure. It is understandably a very popular site, however, and there were a lot of other boats and a lot of divers. It was almost a theme park.

It would be heaven to get it to myself, but even with the throng I could easily have spent several days at this site alone for video and stills, and another whole day or two at Rainbow Reef.

The mothership

Scubaspa means diving at its least arduous. Keeping the living space and the diving separate maintains the feeling of luxury. Mothership the *Yin* (one of two boats, the sister is the *Yang*) is seen as a "floating resort", while the diving itself is done from the *dhoni*, a characterful wooden boat in the local style, where all kit is set up at the start of the trip and kept onboard throughout.

The *dhoni* tags alongside or follows the *Ying* while underway, and moors alongside when at anchor. When it's time to dive, guests just step aboard and head to their own kit-station to kit up, while the *dhoni* navigates the last leg to the dive-site to drop guests.

The whole operation is run very smoothly, always on time and to schedule, and nothing could be easier.

Soft corals

The diving is guided, in small groups catering to different levels of experience. On our trip there was a high ratio of beginners and novices to more experienced divers, but with the split people could dive at their own level.

By the nature of the package it likely appeals to the more recreational diver also wanting a relaxing holiday, rather than the hardcore enthusiasts wanting to pack in as many underwater hours as possible. It's a supportive environment, with newbies encouraged to extend their experience – several far exceeded their own expectations, which was great to see.

For serious photographers wanting to spend quiet time working a single subject this likely isn't the right trip, because group diving means being constantly on the move and dives limited to an hour, while (rightly) hanging back from some subjects so as not to spook them, for the greater good.

Coral grouper

The team are very accommodating, however, so it might be worth getting in touch if you're after something different, and there are also whole-boat charters for specialist groups.

Of course, aside from the general feeling of boutique luxury, what sets this boat apart is the spa. The serene "spa deck" is home to a number of treatment rooms, and there is a menu of massage and other pampering from which to choose.

When booking your trip you can choose between a solely dive package with up to 17 dives a week, a spa package of eight treatments, or a combined dive and spa package with six dives and four treatments. You can also have additional treatments once aboard if you wish, which might be a good option for those like me who are going to get FOMO if they don't do all the dives!

Diver over the reef

I had two massages during my trip and both were wonderful, but the Filipino *hilot* was definitely the highlight. Relaxing afterwards on the back deck, sipping delicious spiced tea with the scent of flowering frangipani in the air as the sparkling Indian Ocean sprawled out behind us, was also rather wonderful…

Lights astern

As well as the diving and the spa, the trip itself lives up to the billing, packed with activities and experiences suited to divers and non-divers alike. Each night big panel lights are mounted at the stern, where they attract swarms of plankton, baitfish and the animals that come to feed on them.

One night there are ghostly mantas barrel-rolling in the greenish beams; on another night there might be nurse sharks, and dolphins on another, all easily visible from the back deck.

There are also trips to a sandbank island, where you can swim in turquoise lagoon waters, and there are evening trips ashore on tiny deserted islands for yoga and cocktail evenings, and a big barbecue night – with everything taken ashore and set up by the boat staff – including dining tables, chairs and even lanterns.

Beach barbecue

The food is also consistently impressive. It's restaurant quality, varied and sumptuous, and a big topic of conversation among the guests. China teapots at breakfast are a nice touch, and those who wish it can order lobster, which is obtained specially from island fisherman.

The staff-to-guest ratio is extraordinary. On our trip it was 2:1, and it's safe to say that we were very well looked after. From the dive team to the dining room and bar crew, they were genuinely lovely and the good atmosphere onboard can only come from a happy team.

Having left my own partner back in Blighty, I had been a little concerned that (being the Maldives, and with a spa onboard) I might find myself the odd one out on a boat-load of introverted honeymooning couples.

In fact it was a lot of fun, with a mixed group of nationalities, and really friendly. The dining-room is arranged with small tables for two or four around the edge, and there's also a large table in the middle seating around 12 – a good place to chat over dives and plans, and admire food.

There was a mix of couples, some friends, and one other woman travelling solo. For some it was a special occasion – notable birthdays, a wedding anniversary and a father and son now living on different continents uniting for the first time since the Covid pandemic.

Granted there was also one young honeymooning couple, but they were really very nice.

Happy days

Farewell drinks

With direct flights on BA to Male the Maldives is 10 hours away from the UK, which is closer than some other places for guaranteed heat in the early or late part of the year. My trip was in April and the vis wasn't so crystal-clear but it was mostly good, and for my seven days the sun shone consistently and the azure waters were calm and flat, and a very comfortable 29°C.

Sadly, like so many places around the world, Maldivian reefs have been hit by several episodes of coral-bleaching caused by high ocean temperatures and climate change over the past couple of decades, but there are still beautiful places to see, and some recent zones of recovery filled with table corals bring hope.

Coming ashore

At the end of the trip we had farewell drinks and dinner and dive manager Brendan polled the guests on their favourite spot. For most it was the nurse shark night-dive at a renowned location at which the sharks settle on sand allowing divers to get within feet of them, and there were had also been numerous large stingrays.

The Maldives are famous for whale sharks, and every effort was made to be in the right place at the right time to see one, but we were unlucky in that regard. Even the search was fun, however, quietly and slowly cruising 50m off the reef, all eyes on the water, everyone up on deck, looking together – as chill-out music played softly in the background.

In the end everyone agreed that not seeing a whale shark was a good reason to come back. As if they really needed one…

*There are two **Scubaspa** liveaboards, Yin and Yang. Prices for seven nights' full board with either a Scuba, Scuba + Spa or Spa package until May 2023 range from US $3,100 to $4,110 depending on suite*

DIVERNET

**Unattributed pictures on this site are the copyright of the photographer.
Contact DIVER Magazine for details.**

Copyright 2022 Rork Media Limited. All rights reserved.