



Report of our dive safaris in the Maldives September & October & November 2011

- **Hanifaru**

When I arrived in the Maldives I contacted some safari boat operators what the status was of the action in Hanifaru. All boats promoted Hanifaru and went there during the first couple of months of the season. Unfortunately there was very little action when I arrived so I asked the crew to call their friends and family on islands to find out where the mantas and whalesharks were hiding. At that time there were manta sightings at Alimata (Felidhoo Atoll) and Dhigurah and Maamagili (South Ari Atoll) so I decided to go south instead of north. The first safari was great, plenty of mantas and whalesharks in the south of the Ari Atoll, we were one of the first boats going to the South Ari Atoll instead of the Baa Atoll (Hanifaru) and we noticed that after our good reports and the lack of any action in the Baa Atoll more and more safariboats started to go to the South Ari Atoll and it was getting more and more busy. During our 5 trips we had some guests on the boat that went to Hanifaru a couple of weeks before and they confirmed what we heard from the other boats.....it was pretty bad in the Baa Atoll.

On the following safaris there were less and less boats who went to Hanifaru and the reports but the reports we got were still bad. There was 1 period in which there was action at Hanifaru and that was around the full moon in October (12 October) and after this day it died again. One boat took the risk and kept going there and they were rewarded with some good manta action. Too bad Hanifaru was so bad and difficult to predict last season. Reason why it was so bad this year is not clear. It could be the attention by the hundreds of divers or just the lack of plankton.

- **Mantas**

With the choice of going south instead if north we were rewarded with 40+ mantas at Dhigurah and had mantas behind the boat at night at two different sites where the guests could snorkel for hours (if they were disciplined and did not chase them away). The good thing about these mantas behind the boat is that these locations are in lagoons where the big boats cannot come. As the boats are getting bigger and bigger every year this is good news for the smaller boats.

The mantapoint close to Male was also a good place to start the safari. We had up to 12 mantas on this point but sometimes it could take a while before they showed up. As we were more out of sync with the regular safariboats (1 week trips all start and end in the weekend) we were able to plan a lot of dives on sited when the whole pack of boats left or before they arrived.

- **The Weather**



When I arrived in the Maldives we had a couple of nice days and then the first rain came in. I already started to get nervous remembering how bad the previous year was with a tropical storm in the Arabic sea with 75knot winds. Fortunately the wind died and in the first trip we had great weather. We even had high season weather with no wind at all and perfect conditions. The second trip was a little bit less and during the 3rd trip we had to plan some dives in sheltered locations as it was sometimes too dangerous on the outside of the Atoll. Also the monsoon was changing and we had the currents coming from unusual angles during the dives. The danger of bad weather is not the dive itself but not being found by the Dhoni. If we surface in 2 meter waves and or in thunderstorms, the Dhoni has problems seeing us and then it is a long way to Indonesia (2400km).

- **Currents**

In the start of the safari we always try to avoid the currents and after a couple of days when the guests are up to it we up the game and try to find these currents as they supply us with big fish and big action. Sometimes this works perfectly and the moon and tides are perfect, sometimes it is very difficult and we start with very strong currents (which we don't want) and end with no current (which we don't want).

In the west monsoon it is difficult to dive the channels on the east side as the currents mainly go out. Later on in the safaris when the west monsoon was dying and we had some east currents this became easier and we fitted in some great channel dives with plenty of sharks, eagle rays and other big stuff.

As a rule of thumb you can say that diving in the Maldives is all about current points. You want enough current to create such a point on a Thila or Kandu but not that much that you are swept away. Sometimes we are surprised and this happened 1 time this season. We hit very strong currents at Banana reef in the end of the last safari and we did the reef in 3 minutes 😊.

- **Sharks**

We tried Batalaa Maaga a couple of times to look for the dozens of sharks we have seen the years before but the peak of the east current fell in the night or the tidal height was not big enough to create enough current. Thus we dived there a couple of times with minimal current but discovered a grey reef shark cleaning station on the inside of the reef. A couple of divers extended their dive and an oceanic manta and a very big napoleon joined the cleaning station. They were ecstatic and had the dive of their life! You just have to be there at the right time at the right place but you never exactly know when that is so being in the water as much as possible is your second best option. We had (grey reef) sharks at Kandooma Thila, at Guraidhoo corner, at the channels in the Felidhoo Atoll, at Maaya Thila, at Ayabe Thila, Hafza Thila and Batalaa Maaga. We dived a couple of times for hammerheads at Fotteyo and Rasdhoo but we were not lucky. The visibility was crap and we guess the water temperature was too high as the other boats also did not see any. We had whitetips



on almost every dive and at Maamagili we also found the nursesharks. Another 3 meter big nurseshark we found on a new site we were checking out but if the nurseshark would not have been there the dive would not have been interesting so this will not be a place we are going back to.

- **Whalesharks**

We had whalesharks on almost every safari. Only the people on the second safari were unlucky as the weather was not so good when we arrived there. The best circumstances are no clouds (lots of sun) and not too much wind (no waves) so you can see their shadows right below the surface. The other option is seeing them during the dive but then you really have to be lucky (and aware) as they don't make a sound and can pass you at 3 meters without you noticing them. Personally I prefer mantas over whalesharks as they are much more graceful and interact more with humans but that is my personal view.

- **The boat**

After having some problems with the compressor last year I decided to rent a big 320liter/min Bauer compressor from Male compressor and use the compressor which comes with the boat as a secondary/backup compressor. This was a very good decision as again we had some problems with this compressor. On the first trip a valve in the first stage broke, on the 2th trip the exhaust broke of the engine which could not be fixed in-between the trips because we arrived in Male on a public holiday. So we used it also the 3rd trip without silencer. On the last trip, 3 days before the end, a fitting broke so we could not use it anymore. Always good to have a backup or two (or three). As things break down on a boat all the time we have almost everything redundant, regulators, torches, computers, masks, fins, bcd's, gps systems and even diveguides 😊.

- **Near (dive) accident**

The dive guide of the Moonima is very thankful because we saved an Italian diver from his safari. This diver accidentally swam with our group when we entered Guraidhoo channel and then found out he wasn't following his own group. When he discovered he was following the wrong group he wanted to surface immediately. One of our divers asked him if he was ok and how much air he had left but he did not understand any handsignals (!?) We checked his gauges and found out he had 20bar left and was 9 minutes in deco. I told him to stick with me and supplied him with air when he ran out during our very long deco stop. I think the dive guide of this group had a near heart attack when he surfaced and found out the least experienced diver of his group was missing. Luckily all went well. This time we help them, next time they help us (I hope). Other than a near accident on another boat we had 1 broken toe because of a nightly excursion to an inhabited island combined with a bottle of Pastis.



- **Future plans**

As we always have to deal with the maintenance of the boat and the crew the owners put on it and we want to do this for many more years to come we decided to start looking for our own boat in the Maldives. This way we can guarantee good maintenance and thus no headaches during safaris and a good team.

At present the boats are getting bigger and bigger with more luxury (flatscreens, home entertainment and Jacuzzi in your cabin) but we don't think this is (or should be) the future of the diving in the Maldives. Imagine diving on each divesite with 30 or more divers. Also these boats do mainly 1 week safaris and travel in packs so it is even more likely you dive with 60 or more divers on every dive!

Our ideal boat is a 14 guest capacity boat with an economic setup in good condition. We keep you posted 😊.