

miles from nowhere

On the far side of the world, the 151-foot charter yacht *Golden Compass* hosts our intrepid photojournalist for some diving of a lifetime.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM RAYCROFT



The Maldives are formed by a double chain of 26 atolls with 1,190 islets, of which 200 are inhabited. Eighty of these are private island resorts.



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MALÉ, CAPITAL OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MALDIVES SITS in a tiny coral atoll barely poking above the surface of the Indian Ocean. It's a half a world away from the start of *Golden Compass's* globe-encircling trek, which began 16 months earlier in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Since I was last aboard the yacht on the Amazon River, she has crossed the Atlantic Ocean and called on a vast number of ports throughout the Mediterranean and Adriatic Sea. Following a brief stay at Herzliya near Tel Aviv, Israel, she transited the Suez Canal, hosted some memorable diving in the Red Sea and picked up a security detail to travel through the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and into the Indian Ocean, making her way south to the Maldives.

This Maldives leg of the trip is all about diving. With 20 percent of all the country's visitors making the long journey to this far-away string of islands for the world-class diving, I am sure not to be disappointed.

After 18 hours in the air with a change of planes in Dubai, my Emirates flight touches down at Malé International Airport, which is located on Hulhulé Island. Met by *Golden Compass's* captain, Luis Nunez de Castro, I marvel how the warm tropical day stands in sharp contrast to the harsh New England weather I had just escaped.

Within minutes, *Golden Compass's* Nautica tender is speeding across the warm, colorful Maldivian waters, whisking us to the mother ship anchored a couple of miles away off the private resort island of Kurumba, one of 80 such resort islands dotting the Maldivian archipelago. After a welcome-back greeting from the owners and crew and a light snack, I settle into the posh VIP stateroom.

In the late afternoon we tender over to Kurumba Island Resort for a sunset drink on the beach. Standing on powder-soft sand, knee deep in the calm tropical sea, we discuss the plan for the week over fruit-laden rum drinks from the resort beach bar and watch the sun hit the surface and disappear into a red glow while distant lights appear all around.

Morning comes mighty early with a nine-hour advance

PHOTOS: MAIN: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/TATIANA POPOVA; TOP RIGHT: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/TROPICALPIX; BOTTOM RIGHT: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/MAXIM BOLOTNIKOV



Diving with a native Maldivian has its perks, they know the region and can point out the best areas for sighting sea life.



The sun is just edging over the horizon as we roll off the Nautica and drop down along the reef wall. Drifting with the current, moving along with the mass of tropical sea life is effortless.



A diver's dream, the Maldives are known for its wide variety of ecosystems, most notably the 200 types of colorful coral and more than 300 species of fish.



PHOTOS: BOTTOM LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/KRISTIAN SEKULIC, CENTER RIGHT: FRANK WASSERFUHRER, BOTTOM RIGHT: BOB THOMAS

Up on the sun deck with a glass of vintage red, I gaze into the clear night sky with stars so bright they have that reach-out-and-touch-them feeling.

life and experiences in the Maldives and the variety of sea life we will observe on the dives to come.

The next day begins with another colorful sunrise opening to another beautiful day. *Golden Compass* weighs anchor at 9:30 a.m. bound for Rasdhoo Atoll by way of Bodu Hithi Island and the Kithi Kandu passage at the west edge of Malé Atoll—two hours' steaming time from Malé. Somewhere in between, we stop to snorkel with manta rays. Sharing this spot of ocean with these majestic beasts flying solo and in formation a few feet from the surface is surreal as they glide and turn, their gigantic mouths gaping as they swoop through the plankton. Unbothered by our presence, they circle and come within inches of us, their huge wing tips flapping up and down like giant bats in slow motion. This incredible scene goes on for a half an hour and is the highlight of my underwater experiences to date.

Back underway, we pick our way through much reef and drop anchor at sunset off a pristine sandbar that seems to stretch to the horizon.

Gathering on the aft deck at 5:45 a.m. the next morning, we meet Niyaz and the deck crew who have prepared our dive gear. We pull on wet suits for a dive in the blue channel between Kuramathi and Rasdhoo islands. Loaded into the Nautica tender, we head out in the pre-dawn glow with Niyaz for a reef dive rendezvous with some hammerhead sharks. I have to be honest—there are some things I like to do in the dark, but diving with large predators isn't one of them. After a few minutes bobbing around adjusting and tweaking my dive gear, I just wasn't able to achieve a comfort level sufficient to embrace the 110-foot descent, so I headed back to the tender, heeding the advice of Martin Sheen's character Lt. Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, "Never get out of the boat—absolutely damn right! Unless you were goin' all the way." Hanging out on the tender, I was treated to a dramatic sunrise. As it turned out, the hammerheads were otherwise engaged this morning. I ended up only missing some gray sharks and a big tuna.

Back on board *Golden Compass* at 7 a.m., we are greeted with hot coffee—now this was a welcome wake-up call. Next, we tender over to Veligandu Island Resort, a picture-perfect Maldivian hideaway where the reception lobby has a floor of beach sand and the thatched-roofed guest quarters on stilts stretch out into the lagoon like a string of pearls. Returning to *Golden Compass* we spot another group of manta rays to swim with in the Kuramathi Channel.

Kuramathi Island, home to the Kuramathi Island Resort, is five miles long and positioned across the channel from Madi-varu, a small island with a sandbar that goes on for miles at the reef's edge. The afternoon dive in the channel has us down to 90 feet then slowly working our way up along a ridge. The abundance of sea life on the reef is startling. We found ourselves surrounded by all kinds of tropical fish—many I had seen before but not so large or plentiful. A big leopard moray eel (a first for me) kept a close watch as we passed its den.

Another amazing day on and under the Indian Ocean and I'm

getting quite used to living in a wet suit. Up on the sun deck with a glass of vintage red, I gaze into the clear night sky with stars so bright they have that reach-out-and-touch-them feeling.

The sun is just edging over the horizon the next morning as Captain Luis, Niyaz and I are rolling off the Nautica and dropping down along the reef wall to a depth of 103 feet. Drifting with the current, moving along with the mass of tropical sea life is effortless. With the sun slowly rising, its rays beginning to penetrate the depth, we spot a couple of dogtooth tuna and gray reef sharks. Later, on the return run from Kuramathi, we head around the reef and catch a glimpse of *Golden Compass* riding at anchor in the clear, turquoise water while a couple of our group take the opportunity to explore the sandbar at midday. It should be noted that Maldivian sand is some of the finest in the world, as soft and smooth as it gets.

By 2:30 p.m. *Golden Compass* is on the move again heading for North Ari Atoll. Careful navigation and lookout are essential in this area due to so much reef reaching up to the surface ready to snag the unwary. With the highest elevation in the Maldives being only seven-and-a-half feet above sea level, navigation here is based pretty much on what you don't see. A great amount of the beauty of this place is underwater. We arrive at North Ari Atoll in the afternoon to drop the hook between two horseshoe-shaped reefs. With 30 feet of water under the keel we are seemingly in the middle of nowhere but Niyaz knows exactly where we're going.

The next day dawns clear and calm with no wind. Today we are treated to a dive at an unnamed rock in the middle of the deep blue Indian Ocean that the locals call Hafsa; it's unmarked on the charts, so we find it by GPS coordinates. We dive around the rock down to about 100 feet; the sea life is plentiful: gray reef sharks, dogtooth tuna, stingrays, eagle rays, bat fish, grouper, snapper and walls of sardines.

Following what certainly has been the most rewarding dive so far, *Golden Compass* moves a couple of miles to anchor off a sandbar right out of central casting. The local rule for naming islets is "no trees, no name." There is no green growth of any kind on this tiny pristine beach that barely manages to break the surface. With few beachcombers passing this way, the sand is littered with beautiful bits of coral brought in by the tide and bleached white by the sun; it's as though a delivery of coral gems bound for an upscale gift shop was deposited on the beach for us to discover.

At midday, we're off in the tender to nearby Bathala Island Resort to refill the dive tanks and take a stroll around this tiny inhabited dot. A belt of beautiful sand encircles Bathala with little waterfront huts placed just off the beach in the shade of coconut palm trees. We walk around the entire island at a slow pace in just 20 minutes. A very quiet and relaxed place, Bathala has more guests asleep on their loungers than engaged in upright activities. The majority of visitors to the Maldives come from Italy, Germany and England, though the Japanese are coming in increasing numbers, as are multi-nationalities living

time difference; I wake up at 6 a.m. and arm myself with coffee and camera. Dozens of water taxis, ferries, fishing and cargo boats motor past my lens—coming and going in all directions. Truly a "Water World," everything moves by boat in the Maldives. Breakfast is served on the main aft deck, affectionately nicknamed "the office." I had spent days in this comfortable spot on the Amazon trip—covered but open to the view and breezes. On this trip it will also become the staging area for the many dives to come, but first, we are off to explore Malé on one of *Golden Compass's* two tenders.

Malé is the center of the Maldivian universe. Although English is widely spoken, the official language is Dhivehi, a combination of Hindu, Senegalese and Arabic. Comprising 1,190 coral islands, the Muslim nation of the Maldives is home to a population of approximately 395,000, of which 136,000 squeeze into the two square miles of Malé. The demand for housing and commerce has driven development to the very edges of the island, where buildings rising as much as 10 stories blanket from shore to shore. The nation's remaining population is spread out over 200 islands.

We hop off the tender at the town dock adjacent to the market packed with local wooden boats unloading crates of mangos, stalks of green bananas, tubs of fish, household

appliances and building materials. The entry port at Malé is the clearinghouse for food and material bound for the outer islands. There are no farms or factories—everything but fish is imported. On the dock there was no shortage of fresh fruit. Looking at a huge tub of fresh mango, Captain Luis asks, "How much?" The reply, "Free mango today" is hard to beat.

Exploring Malé doesn't take very long. Malé proper doesn't contain much in the way of tourist interests; most visitors never set foot on the island. After making our way through the incredible fish market and narrow streets, we hail a cab and tour the island's perimeter.

By the time we finish our mini-circumnavigation and arrive back at the dock, the captain has completed negotiations with a PADI-certified Divemaster, Niyaz (pronounced Knee-oz) Mohamed. A Maldivian native of many generations, Niyaz hails from Laamu Atoll located south of Malé near the equator. Before starting his own dive/guide business, he worked for 12 years with the Four Seasons Resort, gaining the skills and local knowledge that puts him at the top of his field today.

Back aboard *Golden Compass*, Captain Luis plots the course to several special dive sites with the aid of our dive guide's extensive local knowledge. Niyaz joins us on the bridge aft deck for dinner and some fascinating conversation about his

fact file

AIRPORT: Malé International Airport

CAPITAL: Malé

CLIMATE: Tropical

CURRENCY: Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR); the U.S. dollar is widely accepted.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS: Visas are issued on arrival at the immigration desk at Maldives International Airport and are valid for 30 days. A valid passport, along with an onward/return ticket is required for entry.

LANGUAGE: Dhivehi; English is widely spoken.

POPULATION: An estimated 395,000

TIME ZONE: GMT+5

TOURISM: www.visitmaldives.de

WHEN TO GO: High season – December to April

contacts

CHARTER INQUIRIES:

International Yacht Collection
Tel: (954) 522-2323;
Email: charter@iyc.com
www.iyc.com

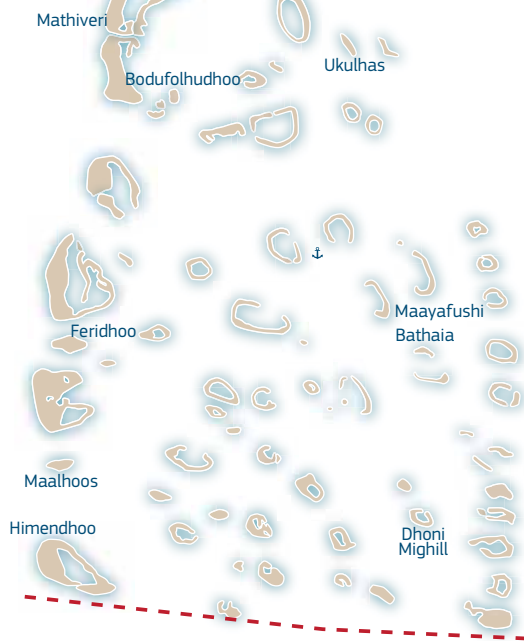
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MALDIVES DIVE GUIDE:

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NORTH ARI ATOLL (ALIFU ALIFU)



↓ SOUTH ARI ATOLL

RASDHOO ATOLL



MALÉ ATOLL (KAAFU)



↓ SOUTH MALÉ ATOLL



and working in Dubai. Waiting for the dive tank refill, we enjoy a round of drinks served in the resort's open-air lounge.

There is one final afternoon dive with Niyaz leading us through even more submerged natural beauty. We add turtles and lionfish to our sighting list.

The sun drops lower and we are delivered ashore by tender and Jet Ski to a snow-white sand spit that curves away and disappears into the reef. The surrounding water color is amazingly vivid. The crew have been busy setting up tables and

chairs while the chef prepares another fabulous meal, this time a barbecue featuring scallops with basil tagliatelle followed by grilled chicken breast with parmesan risotto and carrots, ending with white chocolate mousse. The glow of tiki torches leads the way up the beach to the dining table. We're miles from nowhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean under a ceiling of stars and a full moon, with vintage wine, great company and, riding at anchor 100 yards away, a glowing kumatage across the water, *Golden Compass*—the means to this incredible end. ■