



EXPEDITION DIARY Maldives 2011

By Matthias Hammer

29 July

Welcome to the first entry of the diary for our brand-new Maldives coral reef & whale shark expedition. I am Dr. Matthias Hammer, founder & executive director of Biosphere Expeditions, and I will also be your expedition leader on this new expedition.

I have put a short welcome message on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1 (you do not need to have a Facebook account to see the diary updates - just click on the link and then go to the "Wall"). As you can see on there, I am a week ahead of you all, the weather is predictably beautiful, as are the islands. The water temperature is a balmy 29°C and the fish and corals are there – at least in the few places I have dived in over the last couple of days ;)

We've already made a big impact over here with the forthcoming press conference and launch of the reef educational booklet, the scholarship places, etc. (see <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/biosphere-expeditions-and-six-senses-offer-maldivians-chance-to-partake-in-coral-reef-conserv.html>) for details, so lots of people will be following our work. This we can all be very proud of, but we'll also all be ambassadors for participatory conservation or citizen science or whatever label you want to put on it. So let's all enjoy our time in this amazing place and collect lots of good and useful data for Jean-Luc and our very welcoming and hospitable Maldivian hosts!

My mobile number on the Maldives is +960 7570825. Remember that this phone number is for emergency communication only (such as being late for assembly). I am overlooking a white beach, azure sea and a beautiful sunset as I write this and I look forward to you joining me over here soon.

Safe travels

Matthias

30 August

In preparation for our expedition, I am currently at Soneva Fushi, a swish resort by Six Senses, who is kindly supporting our work. Part of the deal with them is that we train the resort to become a Reef Check Centre and today we went for our first Reef Check practice dive on their house reef in Baa atoll. You can see some pictures and a video of the dive at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1 (a copy of the video is also at www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPdYNrReAFU). It should give you an idea of what a Reef Check dive looks like.

1 September

I have just finished training a Reef Check team at Soneva Fushi. Group 1 of our expedition is next! Tomorrow I will take the sea plane to Male' to set up the Carpe Diem and run around like a headless chicken trying to get everything ready in time. Attached is the draft day-to-day schedule, subject to approval by our expedition scientist (who also arrives tomorrow) and just in case you were under the impression you are coming to the Maldives for a nice holiday ;)

I am a great believer in that you get as much out as you put in, and this is your project as much as it is ours, so group 1, please bear with us as we try to hit the groove on this trailblazing first-ever Biosphere Expeditions Maldives project. I am sure there will be teething problems as we sort out the details of our expedition, but I am sure we'll also have a lot of fun in between all the classroom sessions ;)

Safe travels & I'll see you before the press conference on Saturday, group 1.

4 September

Our first-ever Maldives expedition kicked off with the press conference launching our educational booklet (see <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/images/stories/pdfs/education/Maldives%20educational%20booklet.pdf>) to the press & the Maldives. Ibrahim Ismail, Deputy Minister of Education, came to the conference and officially accepted the booklet on behalf of the Maldivian government. He also had many kind things to say about the booklet, the expedition and the participants, thanking everyone for their enthusiasm and efforts. (The picture shows from left to right: Angel Shujau, the person who illustrated the book; Matthias Hammer, Biosphere Expeditions founder & executive director; Kate Wilson, marine biologist from Suneva Fushi by Six Senses who drafted the text; Jean-Luc Solandt, expedition scientist from the Marine Conservation Society and Reef Check co-ordinator for the Maldives; Ibrahim Ismail, Deputy Minister of Education).

From there group 1 went onto our liveboard base and straight into Reef Check training, swapping classroom with dives sessions, learning Reef Check's indicator fish, invertebrates and substrates. As I type this, everyone is busy swatting up for the fish ID test after dinner tonight. Wish them luck!

6 September

Our Reef Check training is done and everyone is now qualified to collect data. So out (or down) we went yesterday to do our first real Reef Check surveys at three depths (4 m, 8 m, 12 m). It all went well and after dark we threw in a fun night dive. As I type this, we are steaming over to Ari atoll, where we will get into some serious Reef Checking and later in the week visiting a whale shark hotspot in the hope of collecting some data on these too.

7 September

We've had some great Reef Check dives, one with a whipping current (not so great) but with a manta ray sailing by gracefully in the current. We've also come across black- and white-tip reef sharks, a nurse shark, plenty of turtles and dive sites with a stunning 100% hard coral coverage. There's also a 05.30 yoga class on the sun deck each day, but alas only for this week as the yogi is leaving ;) If that's a bit too early, you can get a 30 minute lie-in, ready for the first Reef Check dive.

We've really hit the groove and the team look like they've done nothing but Reef Check for a while. Well done everyone.

Last night we watched the sunset from a little uninhabited island, fringed by silky soft white sand. The hard life of a marine biologist!

Oh, and check out some press coverage as a result of our press coverage at <http://minivannews.com/environment/volunteer-team-collecting-data-to-protect-maldives-reef-ecosystems-24971/print/>.

9 September

The whale sharks eluded us yesterday as we were cruising up and down South Ari atoll for hours yesterday, so no data to add for us on that score. But lots of data to add to our Reef Check database with another stunning reef dive in the morning and a consolatory twilight dive in the late afternoon with J-L, Jenn, Riz, Conny, Kate & Sue showing total commitment by insisting to collect more data on what was originally billed as a last fun dive.

This brings our trailblazing slot to an end. I type this as we steam back to Male' for the changeover. J-L has just given us an excellent presentation putting all our work into context and enlightening us further, as he has done all week, on coral reef biology. Thank you for all your hard work - sorry we couldn't top it with whale sharks, but that's nature, which is what we're all here for.

Safe travels, trailblazers. Don't forget to share your pictures via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare. See you tomorrow, slot 2!

11 September

Team 2 arrived safely, but with it a spell of bad weather. The ride from Male' to our liveboard was very choppy, the skies were overcast and it was gray and rainy. This has not changed for the last couple of days and weather fronts like this usually last 2-3 days.

Our first training dive was at beautiful Baros again and this morning we made the crossing over to Rasdhoo atoll. At the end of a bumpy ride we were rewarded by the best dive yet. You name it, Rasdhoo had it - HC, RKC, SC, SP, NIA (for those in the know) sharks, rays, humphead wrasse, great fish diversity and beautiful coral gardens.

We're halfway through the Reef Check training, hopefully through the worst of the weather and in celebratory mood. Happy birthday Alan!

14 September

The weather has been pretty horrible with thick clouds, rain and high wind at times. We even had to call one dive off, because of the wind & waves. Unperturbed by this, the team all passed their tests and are now qualified Indo-Pacific EcoDivers. With the qualifications under our belts, we have gone into Reef Check mode ticking sites off first in Rasdhoo and now in North Ari atoll. On the way back from one of the Reef Check dives we came across two manta rays and spent some time with them. We've also thrown in a fun twilight dive.

We're making our way towards South Ari and the whale shark site now, surveying as we move south. Tomorrow will be our whale shark survey day - wish us luck (and better weather!).

15 September

Good luck on all fronts: really good Reef Check dives, great fun dives, the weather has broken with a great sunset a couple of hours ago, and most of all, we came across two whale sharks (one male, 5 m; one female, 3 m) today on our whale shark research day!

This brings to an end a great first expedition to the Maldives. All that remains tomorrow is to go full steam to Male', give a few interviews to a Maldives TV film crew that is awaiting our return and declare the 2011 coral reef and whale shark expedition officially closed & a success. Thank you to all of you who have made this happen, and thank you to the two teams for your enthusiasm and making it all come true. Safe travels home and we will hopefully see you again, some day, somewhere on another expedition.

Matthias

P.S. I have uploaded lots of pictures to www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150277999424472.337681.132594724471 and will also share some on our "pictureshare" site in due course. Please do this too via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

P.P.S. Thank you for the picture Wendy.

20 September

Some news just in from the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP):

"We have managed to ID the photograph of one of the sharks you sent me. It is WS036 Duncan. He has been spotted since 2007 and is a regular on the reef. He was also one of the sharks we satellite-tagged back in 2008. He made a considerable round trip to the Laccadives off India and back to South Ari in under 3 weeks."