

# Off the Beaten Track

## Cruising Isolated Indian Ocean Atolls

## Other Voyagers Seldom Encounter

Over 1,000 islands make up the Maldivian Republic; they lie scattered, jewel-like in the clear blue waters of the Indian Ocean, grouped in atolls each surrounded by its own lagoon.

Twenty-six of these coral atolls stretch down almost to the Equator. Below the surface sea life is staggering, making scuba diving here some of the best in the world. Coral gardens are only bettered by the colors and patterns of the wide variety of fish that you encounter.

However, below the water are just some of the better-known jewels in the Maldives crown – the others are the outlying islands themselves.

WRITTEN BY  
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Until recently the government had determinedly restricted tourism to Male, the capital, and another 80 or so hotel-developed resort islands. The locally inhabited fishing islands are, as a result, partly closed to non-locals to safeguard the islanders' devout Muslim lifestyle. It is only now with the introduction of *Island Explorer*, a new passenger ship operated by the Four Seasons resort that visitors are, at last, able to visit some of these fascinating outlying outposts.

Many islanders see just 10 or so boats a year and there are some islands that have yet to encounter the splashing of a tourist anchor. For those who choose to voyage around these atolls they offer pioneering stuff. Very little has been published about these delightful "off the beaten track" islands, and some of them remain even still uncharted. Cruising here is not for the faint-hearted – coral reefs lie just below the surface and are scattered around the island chain. Many are easy to see and appear exactly where the chart states they will, though other smaller outcrops of reef have built up around wrecks of former local craft that long ago hit an isolated coral head and sank. Cruising these waters calls for a sense of adventure, and if you are at the helm: nerves of steel and a jolly good pair of Polaroid sunglasses.

The fifth island to open as a resort within the Maldives was Four Seasons on the island of Kuda Huraa, and it remains both luxurious and definitely five star. This resort boasts an international je ne sais quoi feel about it that is reflected in both its décor and in the clients it attracts, suiting those looking for high standards of comfort and service within familiar surroundings. A high proportion of visitors come as couples, many of whom are on honeymoon. For those spending a few days on the island it offers a variety of organized activities each day that include cookery classes, ecology lectures, or visits to other islands. For the more active, there is scuba diving arranged through the water sports centre where helpful staff and quality equipment make it just as easy to while away the hours in the tropical sunshine playing in the crystal blue lagoon with canoes, small sail boats, wind surfers, and snorkelling equipment.

In today's modern world most holiday island resorts have their own spa, but somewhat conversely the spa at this resort has its own island. No, I am not joking: out in the lagoon, a short boat trip away, is a self-contained spa unit accessible only by a tiny dhoni, which operates a ferry service on demand. Purely in the interests of undertaking research for the discerning readers of *Yacht Vacations & Charters* it became my duty to put this sumptuous spa to the test. I chose to have an aromatherapy massage, which is said to appeal to all of the senses and is enhanced by the choice of either of two essential oil blends. Solace

oil combines sandalwood, jasmine, and geranium while Zeal oil comprises mandarin, neroli, and palmarosa. Thinking I had enough zeal and not knowing what either neroli or palmarosa were, I chose to have a Solace oil massage. Wrapped in a Japanese-style kimono and a down-to-the-ankles matching sarong, I looked very fetching as I shuffled in matching slippers into a room full of fragrance. Lying face down overlooking the water, a tray of aromatic herbs was placed in front of my face and the treatment began. The masseur used deep, hard strokes and cross fibre massage techniques to say nothing of the occasional slapping, beating, and pummeling, but 60 minutes later as I recovered with my own cup of ginger lemon tea I felt truly relaxed with a feeling of overall well-being.

The management team at Four Seasons is environmentally aware and they have a responsible attitude towards the Maldivians they employ. On a nearby local island of Bodu Huraa the hotel sponsors small business projects and most important, the island school, to ensure all local children are educated to a reasonable standard. Locals are encouraged to seek advancement through the hotel's own highly evolved training system. A full-time marine biologist is on staff to help with conservation as well as educate the guests with lectures and guided diving and snorkelling tours. The hotel has invested in the creation of an innovative reef restoration program and supports a series of reef balls used as coral nurseries that hatch polyps inside them on their house reef.

The hotel is justifiably proud of the latest enhancement at Kuda Huraa: their new cruising catamaran called *Island Explorer*. This is an unusual concept in which the notion of a luxurious dive boat is crossed with that of a small cruise ship. Launched in early 2003, the ship's route takes in two seven-night cruise options: the Northern Passage starting in Male Atoll, visiting Lhaviyani Atoll, and the Baa Atoll; whilst the Southern Cross again starts in Male Atoll, and visits South Male Atoll, Felidhoo Atoll, and Ari Atoll. Guests who select one of the three- or four-day options will embark or disembark the ship en route by seaplane.

This well thought out program allows avid divers, water enthusiasts, nature lovers, and *Island Explorers* to discover distant atolls and rarely visited dive sites, while at the same time enjoying the same service, comfort, and style offered at the home resort. Each day of the cruise has plenty of activities for both divers and those who prefer life above water. Underwater explorers can take part in up to three dives each and every day. Live Aboard dive boats are generally very basic affairs and usually offer very little for a non-diver to do, and price and the number of possible dives a day far outweigh food and accommodation in importance. *Island Explorer* is very different because it



**Island Explorere Catamaran** ▲  
A cruising catamaran. This is an unusual concept in which the notion of a luxurious dive boat is crossed with that of a small cruise ship.

is both comfortable and way beyond the standard dive boat.

With just 22 passengers the ship feels very like a charter yacht rather than a passenger ship, being an unusual hybrid of both these. Truthfully I believe the ship would be better crewed had the yachting industry been tapped for its professional crew rather than the ethnically diverse team from differing disciplines that was on board. The sleek three-deck catamaran features 10 spacious state rooms and one beautifully appointed full-beam suite, two sun decks with Jacuzzi, restaurant with an indoor and outdoor dining area, bar, lounge and small but comprehensive library. This 39-meter catamaran has a beam of 12 meters and a draft of 1.90 meters, and she cruises at 14 knots using twin MTU diesels and fixed-pitch propellers. A sea-state motion-control system further enhances the innate stability of the vessel. All 10 staterooms are bright and airy with large windows. The mood of the interior is contemporary with teak wood grain complemented by cool, subdued tones and soft goods from the subcontinent. All state rooms are air conditioned and feature twin beds that can convert to a king bed, couch, writing desk, mini bar, satellite TV, VCD and music system, telephone, in-cabin safe, and en-suite bathroom with bath tub/shower. The suite with its expansive panoramic windows offers a staggering 45 square meters of space and features a king bed, daybed, and its own indoor dining area.

To ensure that guests view the most spectacular scenery and sites in these remote waters, *Island Explorer* stops at preselected anchorage sites. The alternative to diving is to indulge ones self on the private shores of tropical white sandy beaches, or relax in solitude under the shade of a coconut palm like



Robinson Crusoe. Try a massage on a deserted beach that surrounds an uninhabited island under the shade of a specially erected tented gazebo. What luxury and how wonderful it is to listen to the sea and feel the gentle breeze whilst being massaged and pummelled into tip-top condition. If water activity is on the menu then try snorkelling, water skiing, kayaking, windsurfing, or even deep-sea fishing. Non-divers can also join a discover scuba diving course or snorkelling excursions.

Diving, or playing on a beach, can be achieved in many places on this planet, but it is the especially arranged shore excursions that make this adventurous voyage a cut above the rest. Because this ship calls on islands seldom visited by tourists, special arrangements have been made with the island chiefs to enable passengers to go ashore and visit these fishing communities. It is a very great privilege to be especially and uniquely entertained by local dance and music groups on islands where these ceremonies are still routinely practiced for their own enjoyment rather than performed as tourist shows. The islanders are very friendly, clearly as fascinated by us as we are by them. Taking portrait shots with a digital camera that can immediately show the subject the picture has been taken was an endless source of delight to people who have probably never even seen a photograph of themselves before.

These trips ashore provided a wonderful insight into the lives of these islanders where coir rope is still hand woven by women sitting on the beach tugging at tufts of coconut husk and hand spinning it first into yarn and then into string to become rope. We watched the employment of age-old skills as the menfolk built, by hand, dhonis, which are local fishing boats from local woods using almost Iron Age

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Maldives by Air ▲

The fifth island to open as a resort within the Maldives was Four Seasons on the island of Kuda Huraa



The Locals ▲

The islanders' devout Muslim lifestyle. It is only now with the introduction of *Island Explorer*, that visitors are, at last, able to visit some of these fascinating outlying outposts and their people.



implements. The true skill of this is brought home to the observer as you watch copper nails made from scratch and wooden dowels whittled away by hand by young men who clearly learned their skills when they were very small. The ability to walk around these islands without feeling you are intruding is delightful. We watched in awe as the daily meal was prepared in an outside-style kitchen that all of the homes seem to feature. Spices were ground using pestle and mortar hewn from stone clearly passed down through generations of daughters. We watched and were encouraged to take part in an exercise where housewives strip down coconut palm leaves to extract the single wiry centre strand and discard the remainder of the leaf. With a couple of hundred of these cores you have the makings of a brush with which the locals sweep their homes and the pathway outside it clean each day. The

brush is of course bound together with coir string freshly woven from the product of the very same tree that produced the leaves.

The Dive Center on board is managed by an international staff of dive instructors and it is well equipped with Nitrox air as well as a comprehensive selection of dive gear, including electrically driven sea scooters. Sunrise, wreck, night dives, as well as PADI specialist and educational dive courses are offered to those who want them. Diving is well organized with a specially fitted local dhoni acting as a large dive boat and following the ship around, which was therefore able to take divers off to their sites while *Island Explorer* stayed at anchor or travelled on to another stunning location. One particular dive site will forever be etched upon my memory. Because I am an avid ship fan, I enjoy diving on wrecks. Sometimes locating a sunken ship site can be

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**Spa Ingredients** ▲

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**Dhonis** ▲

Local fishing boats from local woods using almost Iron Age implements.

difficult, but finding this wreck is easy because six meters of the bow protrude above the surface! Lying on its keel at 45 degrees to the reef wall, the ship Skipjack belonged to the nearby Felivaru Tuna Fish Factory. In 1985, having served her usefulness, she was towed seawards to be scuttled. During the passage sparks from a cutting torch set the ship ablaze. Fearing an explosion, Skipjack was cut free and she drifted onto the reef where she sank stern first onto the seabed 30 meters below. Her bow continued to burn for almost three weeks. Below the surface this site is alive with fish; the wheelhouse is filled with sweepers, bigeye, and sizable groupers. Outside small schools of surgeonfish, batfish, and emperor hang in the lee whilst an ever-moving school of silver jacks occupies the open water. An old container near the stern is filled with life, including stingrays and small sharks. This can be a tricky site when the current is running hard, so check the tides if you wish to avoid the washing machine effect.

Akin to the mother resort, *Island Explorer* also carries a resident marine biologist and a highlight of any voyage has to be a fish talk followed by a guided snorkel trip for those wishing to learn and understand more about this fascinating aquatic environment. Checking in books after you have seen a fish on a dive can be so difficult – having an expert point them out and name each one is marvellous.

Food on board is good, but one evening meal stood out amongst the crowd when we were told to expect a beach barbecue. We had expected more than plastic tables and chairs on the beach but reality far exceeded our imaginations and we were truly impressed when we were taken ashore by tender as darkness fell to be greeted by a wonderful site. The beach had been transformed; nightlights had been dug into the sand, the excavations decorated with palm fronds to create a bizarre yet beautiful up-lighter effect. Coir matting had been used to create a welcome table on which stood yet more candles. The bar and the barbecue kitchen area were all decorated with palm fronds, but the piece de resistance was our dining table and seating area dug trench-like out of the soft coral sand and decorated with Indian fabrics of such myriad colors and laid out for dining with such meticulous care. The whole area was illuminated by flares, their flames giving an airy, glowing, glimmering light by which we ate supper. Dinner was truly excellent, with crab and fish cakes, our own freshly caught job fish captured during an earlier fishing trip, salads, and seafood appetizers. Truly delicious grilled local lobster and rib eye steak

with portobello mushrooms, fresh sweet corn on the cob, and campfire-baked potatoes were served as our main course. Just as the dessert course of fresh fruit salad arrived, we heard the sound of distant drumming and then from out of the darkness our multitalented crew from aboard *Island Explorer* appeared with drums and dance troop to serenade us at our table on the beach.

With just a handful or two of like minded souls as passengers, this cruise experience is for people who enjoy privacy and seek a holiday that takes them cruising through isolated Indian Ocean atolls that other Ocean Voyagers will seldom encounter. This is well beyond the normal beach escape. **W**

**Credits**

*Frances & Michael Howorth were accommodated at Kuda Huraa and aboard Island Explorer by Four Seasons. They travelled to the Maldives from India courtesy of Indian Airlines. Rates for Island Explorer are: for a stateroom rates start at US\$340 (Shoulder Season – May 12 to July 14), US\$380 (High Season – July 15 to December 21, December 2 to May 11) and US\$470 (Festive Season – December 22 to January 4). The Explorer Suite is available for US\$700 (Shoulder Season), US\$880 (High Season), and US\$950 (Festive Season). All rates are priced per person per night and based on twin share basis, including full board, all excursions, plus diving and equipment. Alcoholic beverages are excluded. These rates are subject to a US\$20 service charge and a Government Bed tax of US\$16 per person per night. A single supplement of US\$200 is applicable. Children over the age of 10 years old are welcome.*

**About the Writer and Photographer**

Frances & Michael Howorth have been travelling together for the last 25 years, initially working aboard cruise liners and then as crew aboard luxury private and charter yachts. Latterly their trips have been confined to joint photojournalistic assignments aboard ships and yachts. Their voyages of discovery have taken them to Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, India, and a plethora of islands in between with such diversity as to include Tristan de Cunha, St Helena, and the Maldivian Islands.

**Information**

*To charter this trip or any yacht you see in this issue of YV&C, please contact any of the recommended charter brokers listed on page 8.*

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