

HOLIDAYVIBE MALDIVES

# Maldives Diving Guide

*Best Atolls, Seasons, Marine Life & Trip Planning*

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## Maldives Diving Guide: Best Atolls, Seasons, Marine Life, and Trip Planning

Few places on earth combine what the Maldives offers divers: warm, clear water year-round, 1,100+ fish species, 26 atolls stretching nearly 900km across the Indian Ocean, and a genuine chance of encountering whale sharks, manta rays, hammerhead sharks, and tiger sharks within a single week. This guide covers everything you need to plan a Maldives dive trip — from choosing the right atoll and timing your visit to understanding the rules, costs, and what to realistically expect underwater.

Maldives diving is different from reef diving in Thailand, Egypt, or the Caribbean. Most dives here are drift dives, carried by the same monsoon currents that feed the reefs and attract pelagic species. You go with the flow — literally — and the fish, sharks, and rays come to you. The challenge is matching your skill level, target species, and budget to the right atoll, resort, and season.

This guide covers the best time to dive, the best atolls for different goals, marine life expectations by season and location, beginner vs advanced routing, resort vs liveaboard vs guesthouse options, regulations, safety, sustainability, costs, sample itineraries, and a practical packing list.

### QUICK ANSWERS

- Is the Maldives good for diving? Yes — it is consistently ranked among the top 3 dive destinations globally.
- Is it good for beginners? Yes, with the right atoll and resort choice. Many sites are calm and shallow.
- Sharks, mantas, reefs, or big pelagics? All four — the Maldives covers the full spectrum.
- Best months for visibility: December to April (dry / northeast monsoon season).
- Best months for manta action: June to November, especially August and September at Baa Atoll.
- Best region for whale sharks: South Ari Atoll — year-round, with peak October to December.
- Best trip style for first-timers: Resort-based, South or North Ari, 7 nights minimum.

## Why Diving in the Maldives is So Special



### The Geography That Shapes the Diving

The Maldives consists of 26 natural atolls — ring-shaped coral reef systems enclosing lagoons — spread across roughly 90,000 sq km of the Indian Ocean. This geography creates the conditions that make diving exceptional: channels between atolls funnel nutrient-rich water from the open ocean into the lagoons, feeding complex reef ecosystems and attracting large pelagic species. The country's north-to-south spread of nearly 900km means conditions, marine life, and dive styles vary significantly between the northern, central, and southern atolls.

### Maldives Dive-Site Vocabulary

Understanding these terms helps you know what to expect before you enter the water:

- **Thila:** An underwater pinnacle that doesn't reach the surface. Reef tops typically 3–8m deep, richly covered in soft coral. Maaya Thila (North Ari) and Fish Head (South Ari) are considered among the best dive sites in the world.
- **Giri:** A shallow coral formation with the reef top within 2–5m of the surface. Great for snorkelling and beginner divers.
- **Kandu:** A channel between the open ocean and the atoll lagoon. Tidal currents funnel nutrients through, attracting sharks, rays, Napoleon Wrasse, and large schools of fish.
- **Faru:** An outer reef wall or reef flat. Most house reefs are farus. Can include dramatic vertical walls dropping 30m+.

- **House reef:** The living reef immediately surrounding a resort island. Quality varies enormously — some are world-class, others barely worth snorkelling.
- **Drift dive:** A dive where you move with the current rather than fighting it. The dominant dive style in the Maldives. Exhilarating and efficient.

### What Kind of Diving to Expect

- **Channel dives (kandu):** Current-driven, action-heavy, suited to intermediate and advanced divers. Best for pelagic species.
- **Thila dives:** Circling a pinnacle, usually with current. Some thilas are calm; others require solid buoyancy control.
- **Reef / wall dives:** Calm by Maldives standards. Good for beginners on protected lagoon sides.
- **Wreck dives:** Limited but excellent options — Victory Wreck (North Male), British Loyalty (Addu). Advanced certification often required.
- **Night dives:** One of the Maldives' hidden highlights. White-tip sharks hunt on house reefs, octopus emerge, nudibranchs appear. Best done on a quality house reef. Requires torch and SMB. Some resorts restrict independent night diving.
- **Photography dives:** Maldives is a wide-angle destination. Clear water, big subjects, dramatic reef backdrops.

### Who the Maldives is Best For

- First big dive trip outside your training waters
- Honeymoon combined with diving — many couples' resorts have excellent dive operations
- Advanced drift divers wanting current-heavy channel and pelagic diving
- Underwater photographers seeking wide-angle subjects
- Shark and manta chasers — few destinations match this
- Liveaboard divers wanting to cover multiple atolls in one trip
- Mixed diver / non-diver couples — almost every resort has strong non-diving activities

## Best Time to Dive in the Maldives

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### Maldives Diving Seasons Explained Simply

The Maldives has two monsoon seasons. The northeast monsoon (Iruvai) runs November to April — this is the dry season. Winds and currents flow east-to-west, visibility is typically best, and conditions are most consistent for beginners. The southwest monsoon (Hulhangu) runs May to October — this brings more rain, stronger currents on the western atoll faces, and the plankton blooms that attract manta rays to Baa Atoll in extraordinary numbers. The critical point: neither season is bad for diving overall. The wet season simply requires knowing which side of each atoll to be on.

### Best Time for Underwater Visibility

December to April offers the clearest conditions, with visibility regularly reaching 30–40m and occasionally exceeding 50m. The water is calmer, plankton levels are lower, and currents are more predictable. This is peak season for photographers and beginners who want the cleanest possible conditions.

### Best Time for Manta Rays

June to November is manta season — particularly August and September at Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll, where aggregations of 100–200+ rays have been documented during plankton feeding events. This is one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on earth. Note: scuba diving is not permitted at Hanifaru Bay — snorkelling only, under strict controls. Manta ray cleaning stations in other atolls, including North Male and South Ari, can be visited year-round.

### Best Time for Whale Sharks

South Ari Atoll offers near-year-round whale shark encounters, making it uniquely reliable. Peak months are October to December. Whale shark sightings in this atoll are so consistent that most operators offer boat trips specifically targeting them, with success rates above 80% in peak season.

### Best Time for Sharks and Pelagics

Year-round, though conditions vary by atoll. Hammerhead sharks at Rasdhoo are best sighted at dawn in January to April. Tiger sharks at Fuvahmulah are present year-round. Channel dives throughout the atolls produce consistent grey reef shark and whitetip shark encounters in all seasons.

### The Wet Season Myth — Is it Really Bad for Diving?

Many travelers avoid June to October based on the 'wet season' label. This is a mistake. Rainfall is real but typically brief and tropical. More importantly, the southwest monsoon creates excellent conditions on the eastern sides of most atolls, while only the western faces experience stronger currents and reduced visibility. Manta aggregations at Baa Atoll happen exclusively during this period. Prices are significantly lower. Resorts are less crowded. For serious divers, the wet season often delivers more marine life action than the dry season — you just need to choose your atoll correctly.

## Month-by-Month Maldives Diving Calendar

Month	Conditions	Visibility	Best For	Notes
January	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	All-round, photography	Peak season begins
February	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	Photography, wide-angle	Best overall visibility
March	Dry / NE monsoon	25–40m	Reefs, photography	Hammerheads at Rasdhoo
April	Dry / NE monsoon	20–35m	Reefs, transition diving	Season shoulder
May	Transition	15–25m	Flexibility, value	Changeable currents
June	Wet / SW monsoon	15–30m	Mantas begin (Baa)	Rates drop
July	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Manta feeding events	Plankton blooms
August	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Peak manta aggregations	Hanifaru Bay peak
September	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Peak manta aggregations	Best value month
October	Wet / SW monsoon	20–30m	Whale sharks, transition	South Ari peak begins
November	Transition	25–35m	Whale sharks (South Ari)	Value + conditions
December	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	All-round, photography	High season begins

MONTH	CONDITIONS	VISIBILITY	BEST FOR	NOTES
JANUARY	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	All-round, photography	Peak season begins
FEBRUARY	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	Photography, wide-angle	Best overall visibility
MARCH	Dry / NE monsoon	25–40m	Reefs, photography	Hammerheads at Rasdhoo
APRIL	Dry / NE monsoon	20–35m	Reefs, transition diving	Season shoulder
MAY	Transition	15–25m	Flexibility, value	Changeable currents
JUNE	Wet / SW monsoon	15–30m	Mantas begin (Baa)	Rates drop
JULY	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Manta feeding events	Plankton blooms
AUGUST	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Peak manta aggregations	Hanifaru Bay peak
SEPTEMBER	Wet / SW monsoon	15–25m	Peak manta aggregations	Best value month
OCTOBER	Wet / SW monsoon	20–30m	Whale sharks, transition	South Ari peak begins
NOVEMBER	Transition	25–35m	Whale sharks (South Ari)	Value + conditions
DECEMBER	Dry / NE monsoon	30–40m	All-round, photography	High season begins

## Maldives Dive Regions Explained

The Maldives is not a single diving destination — it is a country of 26 atolls with meaningfully different conditions, marine life, and dive styles. The choice of atoll should drive your trip planning, not the other way around.



## North Male Atoll

- Best for: Easy resort access, wreck diving, manta ray cleaning stations, mixed abilities
- Access: Speedboat from Velana Airport — no seaplane required, most flexible transfer
- Highlight sites: Manta Point (cleaning station, Dec–May), Victory Wreck (109m cargo ship, 35m, advanced), HP Reef, Nassimo Thila
- Trip length: Works well as 5–7 night base

*Pro tip: North Male is the most accessible atoll and suits divers who want good diving without a long or expensive transfer.*

## South Male Atoll

- Best for: Channel diving, drift diving, wrecks, caves — close to Male
- Highlight sites: Guraidhoo Corner (sharks), Vadhoo Caves (swim-throughs, turtles), Cocoa Corner
- Access: Speedboat, 45–90 minutes from airport
- Suits divers who want action and don't need whale sharks or Baa-style manta events

## North Ari Atoll

- Best for: Thila and kandu diving, current-driven pelagic encounters
- Highlight sites: Maaya Thila (world-class, night diving for white-tips), Broken Rock, Gangehi Kandu
- Who should base here: Intermediate to advanced divers who want variety and current diving
- Access: Seaplane (25–30 min) or speedboat depending on resort

## South Ari Atoll

- Best for: Whale sharks, accessible diving for mixed abilities
- Whale shark encounters: Near year-round, peak October–December, success rate 80%+ in peak
- Highlight sites: Fish Head / Mushi Mas Mingili (protected marine area, resident sharks), Kudarah Thila, South Ari whale shark zone
- Who should base here: First-time Maldives divers who want guaranteed megafauna, families, mixed groups
- Access: Seaplane (30–35 min) from Velana Airport

*Note: South Ari is the single most popular atoll choice for first-time Maldives divers because whale shark reliability is unmatched.*

## Rasdhoo Atoll

- Best for: Early-morning pelagic and shark diving, particularly hammerheads
- Hammerhead Point: Dawn dive, 30m, January–April — one of the few accessible hammerhead sites
- Suits: Intermediate+ divers specifically targeting hammerheads
- Small atoll — usually combined with a liveaboard or as part of a two-base itinerary

## Vaavu Atoll

- Best for: Channel diving, dramatic drift dives, strong currents, shark density
- Highlight sites: Fotteyo Kandu (stunning wall + current), Miyaru Kandu ('Shark Channel'), Devana Kandu
- Who should base here: Intermediate to advanced divers who specifically want current-heavy channel diving
- Less crowded than Ari Atolls — fewer resorts, more rewarding for experienced divers

## Baa Atoll

- Best for: Manta ray aggregations, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve diving, June–November
- Hanifaru Bay: Snorkelling only — scuba diving is strictly prohibited. Manta aggregations of 100–200+ rays, August–September peak
- Diving around Baa: Excellent reef and thila diving outside Hanifaru; manta ray cleaning stations accessible by scuba
- Protected area rules: Hanifaru Bay has permit requirements, strict group sizes, and guide requirements
- Access: Seaplane (30–40 min) — weather and timing dependent

*Important: If your primary goal is the Hanifaru Bay manta spectacle, plan for June–November and book well in advance. Hanifaru Bay visits are managed with daily quotas.*

## Lhaviyani, Raa, Noonu, and Shaviyani Atolls

- Best for: Repeat Maldives visitors seeking less crowded diving with excellent quality
- Lhaviyani highlight: Kuredhoo Express — one of the most exhilarating drift dives in the country
- Access: Seaplane to most resorts
- Quieter, less commercially developed, good for those who have 'done' the standard atolls

## Fuvahmulah

- Best for: Shark specialist diving — tiger sharks, thresher sharks, and pelagic encounters
- Tiger Zoo dive site: One of the only places in the world offering near-guaranteed tiger shark encounters
- Thresher shark cleaning station: Rare globally, present here
- Who should choose it: Advanced, experienced divers who specifically want tigers and pelagics
- Who should not: Beginners, non-divers, families looking for resort comfort — infrastructure is limited
- Access: Domestic flight from Male + speedboat, or liveaboard

## Addu Atoll

- Best for: Southernmost diving, easier currents, healthy coral, wreck diving

- British Loyalty wreck: 134m British tanker, 33m depth — excellent advanced wreck dive
- Coral health: Addu was largely unaffected by the 1998 bleaching event; reefs are exceptionally healthy
- Easier currents than central and southern atolls — good for intermediate divers
- Access: Domestic flight from Male to Gan International Airport

### The Deep South — Huvadhoo, Laamu, and Southern Itineraries

- Best for: Advanced divers on liveboards seeking less-dived territory and strong pelagic action
- Stronger currents, more shark-focused diving, fewer organised dive operations
- Usually accessed via liveboard rather than resort — this is a different style of trip
- Not recommended for beginners or mixed diver / non-diver groups

### Seaplane Transfer Logistics — What Every Diver Needs to Know

Many of the best diving atolls require a seaplane transfer from Velana International Airport. This has real implications for dive trip planning that most guides fail to mention:

- Seaplanes operate daylight hours only — roughly 06:00 to 17:00 local time
- International flights arriving after sunset mean an overnight in Male before transfer — plan and budget for this
- Seaplanes are grounded in poor weather — have a contingency plan for delayed transfers
- Seaplane routes serve most resorts in Ari, Baa, Lhaviyani, and Vaavu atolls
- North and South Male Atoll resorts use speedboats — more flexible, not weather-dependent
- Domestic flights (Male to Gan, Male to Fuvahmulah) serve the southern atolls

*Budget tip: Some mid-range resorts offer speedboat transfers to atolls that luxury resorts reach by seaplane — the same diving at significantly lower transfer cost.*

## Dive Site Quick-Reference Matrix

The 25 most significant dive sites in the Maldives, cross-referenced by atoll, site type, skill level, current strength, signature marine life, and best season:

Site	Atoll	Type	Level	Current	Signature Life	Best Season
Manta Point	N. Male	Cleaning station	Beg+	Mild	Manta rays	Dec–May
Victory Wreck	N. Male	Wreck	Adv	Mild	Groupers, barracuda	Year-round
HP Reef	N. Male	Reef / thila	Int	Mod	Bumphead parrotfish	Year-round
Guraidhoo Corner	S. Male	Channel	Int	Strong	Grey reef sharks	Year-round
Vadhoo Caves	S. Male	Cave / reef	Beg+	Mild	Turtles, unicornfish	Year-round
Maaya Thila	N. Ari	Thila	Int+	Mod–Str	White-tip sharks (night)	Year-round
Fish Head	S. Ari	Protected thila	Int	Mod	Grey reef sharks, rays	Year-round
S. Ari Whale Sharks	S. Ari	Open water	Beg+	Mild	Whale sharks	Oct–Dec peak
Kudarah Thila	S. Ari	Protected thila	Int	Mod	Eagle rays, reef sharks	Year-round
Hammerhead Point	Rasdhoo	Deep drop-off	Adv	Str	Hammerhead sharks	Jan–Apr dawn
Fotteyo Kandu	Vaavu	Channel	Int+	Strong	Grey sharks, eagle rays	Year-round
Miyaru Kandu	Vaavu	Channel	Int	Mod–Str	Grey reef sharks	Year-round
Devana Kandu	Vaavu	Channel	Int	Mod	Trevally, eagle rays	Year-round
Hanifaru Bay	Baa	Snorkel only	N/A	Mild	Manta rays (mass)	Jun–Nov
Kuredhoo Express	Lhaviyani	Drift / channel	Adv	Very Str	Pelagics, reef fish	Year-round
Fushivaru Thila	Lhaviyani	Thila	Int	Mod	Eagle rays, Napoleon	Year-round
Tiger Zoo	Fuvahmulah	Pelagic	Adv	Str	Tiger sharks	Year-round
Thresher Shark Pt	Fuvahmulah	Cleaning station	Adv	Mod	Thresher sharks	Year-round
British Loyalty	Addu	Wreck	Adv	Mild–Mod	Groupers, batfish	Year-round
Turtle Point	Addu	Reef	Beg+	Mild	Hawksbill turtles	Year-round

## Best Maldives Diving by Travel Goal

### Best for Beginners

- South Ari Atoll — calm lagoons, reliable whale shark trips, PADI 5-Star resorts
- North Male Atoll — accessible, easy transfers, good mix of sites
- Addu Atoll — easier currents, healthy reefs, relaxed pace
- Avoid: Vaavu, Fuvahmulah, Rasdhoo — these atolls suit intermediate to advanced divers

### Best for Advanced Divers

- Vaavu — Fotteyo Kandu and Miyaru Kandu among the best channel dives in Asia
- Fuvahmulah — specialist shark diving, demanding conditions
- Rasdhoo — Hammerhead Point at dawn
- Deep South liveaboard — frontier diving, strong currents, minimal crowds

### Best for Whale Sharks

- South Ari Atoll — only place in the Maldives with near year-round reliability
- Peak: October to December. Success rate 80%+ with reputable operators
- Snorkel or dive — both options available unlike Hanifaru Bay

### Best for Manta Rays

- Baa Atoll (Hanifaru Bay) — June to November, snorkelling only
- North Male Manta Point — December to May, scuba accessible
- South Ari cleaning stations — year-round, smaller gatherings

### Best for Sharks and Pelagics

- Tiger sharks: Fuvahmulah, Tiger Zoo site
- Hammerheads: Rasdhoo, Hammerhead Point, January–April dawn
- Grey reef sharks: Vaavu, North and South Male channels — year-round
- Nurse sharks: North Male house reefs
- Whale sharks: South Ari (see above)

### Best for Wreck Diving

- Victory Wreck, North Male — 109m cargo ship, 35m depth, advanced certification required
- British Loyalty, Addu Atoll — 134m WWII tanker, exceptional condition
- Lady Christine, North Male — shallower wreck, accessible to intermediate divers

### Best for Underwater Photography

- South Ari + North Ari — whale sharks, thilas, wide-angle variety
- Baa Atoll — manta ray feeding aggregations (snorkel, Jun–Nov)
- Fuvahmulah — tiger sharks with ultra-clear water
- Shoot wide-angle — Tokina 10-17mm fisheye or 10-20mm rectilinear ideal
- Macro opportunities exist but the Maldives rewards wide-angle work



### Best for Honeymooners Who Also Dive

- Choose resorts in South Ari or North Male with luxury water villas and a strong dive centre
- Look for resorts where non-diving excursions (spa, sunset cruises, private sandbars) are excellent
- Couples where one dives and one doesn't: avoid liveboards; choose a resort with full activity programme

### Best for Budget Divers

- Local island / guesthouse diving — North Ari, South Ari, North Male atolls
- Wet season (June–October) rates significantly lower than peak
- Liveboards can offer better per-dive cost than resort diving for serious divers

### Best for Repeat Maldives Visitors

- Northern atolls — Lhaviyani, Raa, Noonu, Shaviyani — less crowded, fewer operators
- Deep South liveboard — completely different environment from Central Maldives
- Fuvahmulah — specialist destination unlike any other atoll

## Marine Life Guide for Maldives Divers

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## Manta Rays

Two species are encountered in the Maldives: the oceanic manta ray (*Mobula birostris*) and the reef manta ray (*Mobula alfredi*). Cleaning stations are the most reliable encounter type — rays hover while wrasse and shrimp remove parasites. Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll offers feeding aggregations of 100–200+ rays during plankton bloom events from June to November, but scuba diving is banned there. Cleaning stations at Manta Point (North Male) and various South Ari sites are accessible by scuba year-round.

*Responsible behaviour: never chase manta rays, never rise to their level or dive below them on their approach, keep group size small, and do not use flash photography.*

## Whale Sharks

The Maldives hosts one of the world's most reliable whale shark populations, concentrated in South Ari Atoll where the species feeds year-round. Unlike many destinations where whale shark encounters are seasonal and uncertain, South Ari operators offer dedicated boat trips with consistent success rates — over 80% in peak season (October–December). Both snorkelling and diving encounters are available,

though most operators use a snorkel-first approach for logistics. The animals are never touched, fed, or pursued.

## Sharks

- **Blacktip and whitetip reef sharks:** Present on most atolls year-round. House reefs at good resorts often have resident populations. Not aggressive.
- **Grey reef sharks:** Channel dive staples. Vaavu and South Male channels offer the highest density encounters.
- **Hammerhead sharks:** Rasdhoo's Hammerhead Point at dawn, January to April. Demanding dive — 30m, strong current, early start.
- **Tiger sharks:** Fuvahmulah's Tiger Zoo site. Year-round, near-guaranteed. Advanced divers only — conditions are challenging.
- **Nurse sharks:** North Male house reefs, resting on sandy bottom. Benign and photogenic.
- **Whale sharks:** See dedicated section above.

## Turtles, Eagle Rays, Schools of Fish, and Reef Species

- Hawksbill and green turtles — common year-round on most atolls, often at cleaning stations
- Eagle rays — frequently seen on channel dives throughout the Maldives
- Napoleon (humphead) wrasse — large and curious, present at many thila sites
- Schools of trevally, barracuda, fusiliers, and tuna — feeding aggregations on current-swept channels
- Macro life: nudibranchs, frogfish, ghost pipefish — best on night dives and in sandy areas

## Seasonal Wildlife vs Realistic Expectations

The Maldives is genuinely one of the world's best dive destinations, but some operators oversell certainty. Whale sharks in South Ari are reliably present — not guaranteed on every dive. Manta aggregations at Hanifaru depend on plankton blooms that vary annually. Hammerheads at Rasdhoo require an early morning, good current timing, and some luck. Set realistic expectations, choose your atoll to match your priorities, and treat every exceptional encounter as a privilege rather than an entitlement.

## How to Behave Around Marine Life Responsibly

- No touching any marine life — turtles, rays, sharks, coral
- Maintain good buoyancy — dragging fins across coral damages reefs permanently
- No feeding wildlife — alters behaviour and creates dependency
- Keep appropriate distance — most operators use 3m minimum for large animals
- No flash photography at cleaning stations — disturbs the behaviour you came to observe
- Follow operator and guide instructions — they know the specific site protocols

## Can Beginners Dive in the Maldives?

Yes — but the answer requires nuance. The Maldives has sites for every level, and the warm, clear water makes learning to dive here genuinely enjoyable. The challenge is choosing the right atoll, resort, and dive type for your experience level.

### What Certification Level is Required

Any PADI Open Water Diver (or equivalent SSI, NAUI, BSAC) certification qualifies you to dive at most Maldives resorts to 18m. Advanced Open Water extends this to 30m, which is the legal maximum. Some specific dives (certain channel dives, the Victory Wreck) require Adventure Dives or Advanced certification plus evidence of recent experience.

### Getting Your PADI Certification in the Maldives

Many first-time Maldives visitors deliberately time their trip to coincide with their Open Water certification. This is a genuinely good option — conditions are warm, clear, and gentle, making the learning experience far more enjoyable than a cold-water quarry or busy pool. Most resorts with PADI 5-Star centres offer the full Open Water course in 3–4 days.

- **Referral option:** Complete pool/confined water sessions at home, then do the open-water dives in the Maldives. This saves 1–2 diving days and is the most efficient approach.
- **Cost comparison:** Getting certified in the Maldives typically costs \$450–\$650, similar to or slightly higher than urban dive schools. The quality of the experience and the environment make it worth considering.
- **Timing advice:** Don't use your first 2 certification days to 'waste' good weather and visibility. Plan to do the certification early in the trip so the remaining days are spent on fun dives.

### Which Atolls are Friendlier for Newer Divers

- South Ari Atoll — calm lagoon entry, excellent PADI resorts, whale shark trips accessible at 10m snorkel depth
- North Male Atoll — easy transfers, range of site difficulties, established dive centres
- Addu Atoll — genuinely easier currents than central atolls, healthy reefs

### When an Orientation Dive or Refresher Makes Sense

If you have not dived in 12+ months, most Maldives resorts require an orientation dive before allowing independent or group dives. This is sensible — drift diving in current requires good buoyancy control. The MRes (ReActivate) programme refreshes skills in around two hours and is worth doing proactively if you have a gap in your dive history.

### When Advanced Open Water and Nitrox Become Valuable

Advanced Open Water is worth getting before a Maldives trip if you want access to the most exciting sites — Maaya Thila at night, channel dives in Vaavu, the Victory Wreck, Hammerhead Point. Nitrox (enriched air) is valuable for divers doing 3+ dives per day — it reduces nitrogen loading and extends no-decompression limits, meaning more

bottom time. Nitrox fills cost \$10–\$20 per tank and are widely available at reputable resorts.

### What Beginners Should Avoid

- Kandu (channel) dives with strong incoming currents until you have 20+ logged dives
- Deep dives beyond 18m in your first few days — acclimatise to the environment first
- Fuvahmulah and Rasdhoo — these destinations are genuinely for experienced divers
- Night diving on day one — build familiarity with the site during daylight first

## Maldives Diving Rules, Safety, and Legal Limits

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### Certification, Logbook, and Dive-Centre Paperwork

All recreational diving operations are licensed under the Maldives Recreational Diving Regulation 2003. Dive centres are required to verify certification before any dive. Carry your C-card and logbook. Resorts with strict standards will ask to see your logbook — recent dives matter, especially for channel or advanced sites.

### Depth Limits and No-Decompression Rules

- Maximum depth: 30 metres — no decompression diving is permitted by law
- No decompression stops — all dives must remain within recreational no-decompression limits
- A dive computer is mandatory — not optional — and must be worn on every dive

### Equipment Expected on Every Dive

- Dive computer — mandatory
- Surface Marker Buoy (SMB) — mandatory, especially critical on drift dives where you surface away from the boat
- No gloves — reef protection policy enforced at most resorts and required by regulation
- Torch / underwater light — required for night dives, recommended for overhangs and swim-throughs

### No-Fly Timing After Diving

Standard recreational diving requires a minimum 12-hour surface interval before flying. After multiple dives over multiple days, 18–24 hours is recommended. DAN (Divers Alert Network) guidelines should be followed.

### Seaplanes, Altitude, and the No-Fly Grey Area

This question is unique to the Maldives and most guides skip it entirely: seaplanes typically fly at altitudes under 300m (1,000ft), which is significantly below commercial flight altitude. DAN guidance indicates that seaplane transfers shortly after diving are generally low-risk due to low altitude, but this is not a substitute for proper surface

interval planning. If in doubt, take the speedboat alternative where available and follow standard no-fly intervals.

### Hyperbaric Chambers and Dive Emergency Planning

- Primary recompression facility: ADK Hospital, Male — covers most central and northern atolls
- DAN hotline: +1-919-684-9111 (international emergency)
- Medical evacuation by speedboat or seaplane to Male is the standard protocol for dive accidents in remote atolls
- Dive accident insurance with medical evacuation cover is strongly advised — standard travel insurance rarely covers hyperbaric treatment

### Marine Protected Areas and Permits

The Maldives has designated numerous protected marine areas (PMAs) including Hanifaru Bay, Fish Head / Mushi Mas Mingili Thila, Maaya Thila, HP Reef, and others. Diving in designated PMAs may require permits, which reputable dive centres handle automatically. Independent diving in PMAs without a licensed guide is not permitted.

### No Touching, No Extraction, No Shark Feeding, No Coral Damage

- Removing, collecting, or damaging coral, fish, or any marine life is illegal — heavy fines apply
- Shark feeding is prohibited throughout Maldivian waters
- Anchoring on reef is illegal — boats must use moorings or drift where none are available

## Resort Diving vs Liveboard vs Local-Island Diving

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### Resort-Based Diving

- **Who it suits:** Couples, families, mixed diver/non-diver groups, anyone valuing comfort and infrastructure
- **Pros:** Fixed base, full resort facilities, non-diving activities, spa, beach access, flexibility
- **Cons:** Limited to dive sites near the atoll, cost per dive often higher
- **Best trip type:** First Maldives dive trip, honeymoon, mixed group

### Liveboard Diving

- **Who it suits:** Serious divers who want maximum dives and multiple atolls in one trip
- **Pros:** 4–5 dives per day, access to remote atolls, typically lower cost per dive, dedicated dive community
- **Cons:** Fixed itinerary, limited personal space, no non-diving entertainment, rough seas possible
- **When liveboard makes more sense:** 7+ dives planned per day, multiple atoll ambition, underwater photography, advanced divers chasing specific species

*Cost note: A 7-night liveboard in the Maldives typically costs \$1,800–\$3,500 all-in. Per-dive cost often works out cheaper than resort diving.*

## Local-Island / Guesthouse Diving

- **Budget angle:** Significantly cheaper than resort options — accommodation from \$60–\$150/night
- **Diving setup:** Local island dive operations are often standalone dive centres not connected to your guesthouse. Quality varies significantly — research the specific dive centre, not just the island.
- **What to check:** Instructor-to-diver ratios, equipment age and maintenance, boat condition, and whether the dive centre is PADI/SSI affiliated
- **Who should consider it:** Budget divers, backpackers, independent travellers, divers who want authentic local Maldivian island experience

*Important: Local island diving restricts bikini beach and alcohol — this is an Islamic local community, not a resort island. Understand this before booking.*

## How Much Does Diving in the Maldives Cost?

### Diving Cost Breakdown by Trip Type

Dive Type / Item	Budget (Guesthouse)	Mid-Range Resort	Luxury Resort
Single fun dive	\$40–\$70	\$70–\$100	\$100–\$140
10-dive package	\$300–\$500	\$550–\$750	\$750–\$1,100
House reef dive	\$25–\$40	\$35–\$60	\$50–\$80
Night dive	\$50–\$80	\$80–\$110	\$100–\$140
PADI Open Water Course	\$350–\$500	\$500–\$650	\$600–\$750
PADI Advanced OW	\$250–\$400	\$350–\$500	\$400–\$600
Whale shark trip (S. Ari)	\$60–\$90	\$90–\$130	\$110–\$160
Nitrox fill	\$8–\$15	\$12–\$20	\$15–\$25
Full equipment rental	\$15–\$30	\$25–\$45	\$35–\$60

### Extra Costs People Forget

- Marine Park fee: USD 6 per dive at protected sites — collected separately from your dive package. This is not included in most quoted dive prices and surprises many visitors.
- Equipment rental: If you are not bringing your own BCD and regulator, budget \$25–\$45 per day on top of dive costs
- Nitrox: Not included in standard dive packages — an extra \$10–\$20 per fill
- Seaplane transfer: \$280–\$500 per person round trip depending on atoll — often not included in resort pricing
- Dive insurance: \$50–\$150 for a week's coverage — essential, not optional
- Camera fees: Some liveaboards charge \$30–\$50 per day for bringing camera equipment

- Tips: Not mandatory but customary for dive guides — \$5–\$10 per day per guide is standard

## How to Plan a Maldives Dive Trip Step by Step

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### Step 1: Choose the Right Atoll First

Identify your primary diving goal — whale sharks, manta rays, hammerheads, tiger sharks, drifts, reef photography — and choose the atoll that delivers it. Everything else follows from this decision.

### Step 2: Choose the Right Season

Match your atoll choice to the season. South Ari works year-round. Baa Atoll mantas require June–November. Hammerheads at Rasdhoo need January–April. Visibility-focused trips prefer December–April.

### Step 3: Pick Your Trip Format

Resort, liveaboard, or guesthouse — based on your group composition, budget, and diving intensity. Mixed groups with non-divers default to resort. Serious divers consider liveaboard. Budget travellers explore guesthouse options.

### One-Base vs Two-Base Trip

A two-base trip is how many serious divers maximise a 10–12 night Maldives visit. Common combinations:

- **North Male + South Ari:** Wreck diving and reef variety in Male Atoll, then whale sharks in South Ari. Speedboat to first resort, seaplane to second.
- **Baa + South Ari:** Manta aggregations (Jun–Nov) in Baa, then whale sharks in South Ari. Two seaplane transfers.
- **North Male + Vaavu:** Accessible first base, then advanced channel diving. Good for intermediate divers moving up.

*Two-base logistics: plan the transfer day carefully — seaplane transfers often require overnight in Male between segments.*

### Flights, Visa, and Entry Basics

- International hub: Velana International Airport (MLE), Male — the only airport receiving international flights
- Visa: 30-day tourist visa issued on arrival for most nationalities — no pre-application required
- IMUGA declaration: Required within 96 hours before arrival — complete online before travel
- Onward transfers: Book through your resort — seaplane or speedboat pickup is coordinated on arrival
- Late arrivals: If your flight lands after 17:00, plan for an overnight transfer hotel in Male — budget \$100–\$200

### Booking Timeline for Popular Seasons

- Peak season (December–April): Book 3–6 months in advance for popular resorts
- Baa Atoll manta season (August–September): Book 4–6 months in advance — Hanifaru Bay quotas fill early
- Liveaboard peak season: Book 4–8 months in advance, particularly for Christmas and New Year
- Value season (June–October): Book 6–8 weeks out — availability is generally good

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## Sample Maldives Diving Itineraries

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### 5-Night First-Time Maldives Dive Trip

- **Base:** South Ari Atoll resort with PADI 5-Star dive centre
- **Day 1:** Arrival + afternoon orientation dive on house reef
- **Day 2–4:** 2–3 dives daily — thilas, channels, whale shark boat trip on Day 3
- **Day 5:** Morning dive + afternoon check-out / transfer
- **Dives total:** Approximately 8–10

### 7-Night Manta-Focused Trip

- **Timing:** June–November
- **Base:** Baa Atoll resort
- **Itinerary:** 2–3 daily dives on Baa reefs and thilas + 2–3 Hanifaru Bay snorkel visits during stay
- **Add-on option:** 1-night transfer to North Male for Manta Point (scuba) as season and schedule allow

### 7-Night Whale Shark-Focused Trip

- **Base:** South Ari Atoll
- **Itinerary:** Daily diving on Fish Head, Kudarah Thila, and South Ari reef sites + 2 dedicated whale shark boat trips
- **Optional addition:** Night dive on house reef for white-tip sharks

### 10-Night Two-Base Trip

- **Nights 1–5:** North Male Atoll — Manta Point, Victory Wreck, HP Reef
- **Transfer day:** Overnight Male transfer hotel if seaplane required
- **Nights 6–10:** South Ari Atoll — whale sharks, Fish Head, night diving
- **Total dives:** Approximately 18–22

### 10–12-Night Deep South Shark Itinerary

- **Format:** Liveaboard
- **Route:** Fuvahmulah (tiger sharks) + southern atolls + Addu (British Loyalty wreck)
- **Level required:** Advanced Open Water minimum, 50+ logged dives recommended
- **Total dives:** 35–45

## Budget Local-Island Dive Itinerary

- **Base:** North Ari local island guesthouse (e.g. Mahibadhoo or Rasdhoo)
- **Diving:** Daily 2-tank boat dives with local dive centre, afternoon house reef snorkelling
- **Estimated cost:** \$80–\$120/night accommodation + \$80–\$120/day diving = highly accessible

## What to Pack for Diving in the Maldives

### Essential Personal Dive Gear

- Mask, fins, snorkel — always bring your own, hired masks rarely fit perfectly
- BCD and regulator — worth bringing if you have them; reduces hire cost significantly
- 3mm shorty or full wetsuit — water is warm but a wetsuit adds sun protection and comfort on multiple dives
- Dive computer — mandatory; bring your own rather than relying on hire units
- SMB (surface marker buoy) — mandatory on drift dives; bring your own, bright colour
- Reef hook — useful for kandu dives to hold position in current without touching reef

### Reef-Safe Sun and Exposure Protection

- Reef-safe sunscreen only — many resorts mandate this; oxybenzone-based sunscreen is harmful to coral
- Rash guard or 3mm wetsuit top — most divers use this instead of sunscreen underwater
- Wide-brim hat and high-SPF sun protection for surface intervals

### Camera and Underwater Photography Packing

- Wide-angle setup — fisheye lens (Tokina 10-17mm) or rectilinear 10-20mm range
- Video: wide-angle fisheye video is ideal for whale sharks and mantas
- Red filter for video in 5–20m range where natural light has a blue-green cast
- Extra batteries and memory cards — shooting underwater drains batteries faster
- Do not bring macro lenses as your primary setup — the Maldives rewards wide-angle

### Documents and Admin Checklist

- ✓ Dive certification card (C-card)
- ✓ Dive logbook (showing recent dives)
- ✓ Dive insurance documentation
- ✓ Travel insurance (check diving is covered)

- ✓ IMUGA declaration (complete within 96hrs before departure)
- ✓ Nitrox card (if applicable)

## **Sustainable and Responsible Diving in the Maldives**

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### **Why Protected Areas Matter**

The Maldives has designated over 50 Protected Marine Areas (PMAs), recognising that specific sites — particularly thilas, channel aggregation points, and cleaning stations — are ecologically critical and easily damaged by unregulated visitor pressure. These protections are a central reason why Maldives marine life remains extraordinary despite decades of tourism.

### **Hanifaru Bay Rules and Why Scuba is Banned**

Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll was awarded UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status in 2011. The bay is accessible by snorkel only because scuba divers' bubbles disrupt manta ray feeding behaviour, causing them to leave the aggregation. Daily visitor quotas are strictly enforced. Guides are mandatory. This is not bureaucratic restriction — it is the reason the aggregations still exist.

### **Coral Reef Health and Bleaching Context**

The Maldives suffered severe coral bleaching events in 1998, 2016, and more recently in 2024. While deep-water reefs and many atoll systems have recovered well, shallow reefs remain vulnerable. Choose operators who actively support reef monitoring, avoid resort developments that require reef blasting for lagoon construction, and follow all no-touch protocols.

### **Choosing Operators with Strong Environmental Standards**

- Look for PADI Green Star Awards or similar environmental certifications
- Ask whether the dive centre participates in reef monitoring or citizen science programmes
- Choose liveaboard operators with single-use plastic reduction policies
- Tip your dive guide — good guides are the frontline of marine conservation

### **Citizen Science and Conservation Organisations**

- Manta Trust ([mantatrust.org](https://mantatrust.org)) — manta ray identification and population monitoring
- Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP) — South Ari whale shark photo-ID database
- Reef Check Maldives — volunteer coral reef health monitoring
- Marine Savers by Six Senses — coral propagation and marine conservation volunteering

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### Is the Maldives good for beginner divers?

Yes, with the right choice of atoll and resort. South Ari, North Male, and Addu Atoll offer sites with calm conditions and easy access. Avoid Vaavu, Fuvahmulah, and Rasdhoo as a first Maldives destination.

### What is the best month to dive in the Maldives?

December to April offers the best overall visibility and conditions. June to November is better for manta ray aggregations at Baa Atoll. October to December is peak for whale sharks in South Ari. There is no genuinely bad month — just different trade-offs.

### Where is the best place to see whale sharks in the Maldives?

South Ari Atoll is by far the most reliable location, with near year-round sightings and peak success rates in October to December.

### Where is the best place to see manta rays?

Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll offers the most spectacular manta aggregations (snorkelling only, June–November). For scuba diving with mantas, Manta Point in North Male Atoll (December–May) is the primary site.

### Is Hanifaru Bay for diving or snorkelling?

Snorkelling only. Scuba diving is prohibited at Hanifaru Bay. Scuba diving with mantas is available at other sites in Baa Atoll and at Manta Point in North Male.

### Is the Maldives better as a liveaboard or resort dive trip?

Liveaboard is better for serious divers wanting maximum dives, multiple atolls, and lower cost per dive. Resort is better for mixed groups, non-divers, couples, honeymooners, and those who value comfort and flexibility.

### How many dives do I need before diving in the Maldives?

Open Water certification (minimum) is required. For the most dramatic sites — channel dives, wreck dives, Hammerhead Point — Advanced Open Water plus 20+ logged dives is recommended. Some sites explicitly require Advanced certification.

### Do I need Advanced Open Water in the Maldives?

Not for most sites. But Advanced Open Water significantly expands your options, gives access to the best channel and wall dives, and is worth getting before a dedicated Maldives dive trip.

### Is Nitrox worth it in the Maldives?

Yes, for divers doing 3+ dives per day. Nitrox reduces nitrogen loading and extends no-decompression limits, giving you more bottom time on repetitive dives. It costs \$10–\$20 extra per tank.

### Are the currents strong in the Maldives?

At channel and kandu dive sites, yes — sometimes very strong. This is why most Maldives dives are drift dives. House reef and lagoon dives have mild or no current. Know your skill level and choose sites accordingly.

### What is the best atoll for sharks?

Tiger sharks: Fuvahmulah. Hammerheads: Rasdhoo. Grey reef sharks: Vaavu and South Male channels. Year-round reef sharks everywhere: North Male, South Ari.

### How much does Maldives diving cost?

Budget for \$60–\$100 per single dive at a mid-range resort, or \$450–\$750 for a 10-dive package. Add equipment hire (\$25–\$45/dive), marine park fees (\$6 per dive at protected sites), and dive insurance (\$50–\$150/week).

### Can non-divers enjoy a Maldives dive holiday?

Absolutely. Snorkelling, whale shark excursions, spa, water sports, sunset cruises, and island excursions mean non-divers are well catered for at most resorts. Choose a resort with strong non-diving activities and a good house reef for snorkelling.

### Are there hyperbaric chambers in the Maldives?

Yes. ADK Hospital in Male is the primary recompression facility. Medical evacuation from remote atolls is by speedboat or seaplane. Dive insurance with evacuation cover is essential.

### Can I dive right before my flight home?

No. The standard rule is 12 hours minimum surface interval before flying. After multiple days of diving, 18–24 hours is recommended. Note: seaplanes fly at low altitude and are generally low-risk, but do not use this as a reason to skip proper surface intervals.

### Do I need travel or dive insurance for the Maldives?

Both. Standard travel insurance rarely covers hyperbaric treatment. Get dedicated dive insurance (DAN, PADI Insurance, or equivalent) that specifically covers recompression chamber treatment and medical evacuation.

## Plan Your Maldives Dive Trip with HolidayVibe Maldives

HolidayVibe Maldives is a specialist travel agency based in the Maldives. We know these waters because we live here. Our team can match you to the right resort, atoll, and dive operation for your goals — and handle everything from seaplane transfers to dive package pre-booking.

### TELL US AND WE WILL BUILD YOUR IDEAL TRIP

- Your target marine life (whale sharks? mantas? sharks? all of them?)
- Your certification level and number of logged dives
- Your travel dates and preferred trip length
- Your budget range (accommodation + diving)

▸ Whether you are travelling with non-divers

What We Help With	Where to Go Next
Resort selection for your diving goals	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-diving-resorts/">https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-diving-resorts/</a>
Budget vs luxury dive resort comparison	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/best-diving-resorts-maldives/">https://holiday.com.mv/best-diving-resorts-maldives/</a>
Liveaboard options and routes	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-liveaboard-cruises-guide/">https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-liveaboard-cruises-guide/</a>
All-inclusive diving packages	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-all-inclusive-holidays/diving/">https://holiday.com.mv/maldives-all-inclusive-holidays/diving/</a>
PADI dive resort options	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/padi-dive-resorts-maldives/">https://holiday.com.mv/padi-dive-resorts-maldives/</a>
Custom itinerary enquiry	<a href="https://holiday.com.mv/contact-us/">https://holiday.com.mv/contact-us/</a>

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