

## TRAVEL

**G**alping nervous lungfuls of compressed air, I descended into the cobalt-blue depths of the Indian Ocean. A few feet above me, a harmless – or so I hoped – blacktip reef shark cut effortlessly through the water. Below, fish of every imaginable shape and colour darted among the intricate corals and pulsating anemones of the reef. Sticking close to my instructor, I plunged deeper still, the silence broken only by the sound of exhaled air bubbling from my mouthpiece like balls of liquid metal. This was my first taste of scuba diving, and I was hooked.

For as long as I can remember, I had wanted to learn to dive, but the thought of doing so in the UK – in a thrill-free swimming pool, a murky flooded quarry or our icy coastal waters – had never really appealed. So, when the opportunity arose to try the sport in the Maldives – a country that, if the climate change doom-mongers are right, could soon be submerged for ever – I grabbed it with the eagerness of a Great White devouring an unwary swimmer.

A 500-mile-long chain of coral islands to the south-west of Sri Lanka and southern India, the Maldives are 99 per cent ocean, and the aquamarine rings of its reefs and lagoons make the approach to Hulhule Airport one of the most breathtaking in the world.

No sooner had we arrived after our 16-hour, two-stage flight, than our bags were plucked from us and we were ushered on to a speedboat by a pair of pristinely uniformed young men. Our fatigue vanished as we powered through the crystal-clear waters of the North Male Atoll – the lagoon encircling the capital, Male, and our destination, the resort island of Baros.

As we clambered on to the resort's jetty, we were delighted to note that the tropical coconuts – swaying palms, turquoise ocean and chalk-white sand – were all present and correct.

One of just 200 inhabited Maldivian islands out of a total of nearly 1,200, Baros suffered minor damage in the 2004 tsunami and its owners took the opportunity to rebuild in lavish style. My 'room' was actually an individual villa with a covered lounging area leading straight on to the beach. There was a bed the size of a London studio flat and a huge plasma TV concealed within an upholstered bench. The vast bathroom contained enough high-end skincare products to start my own spa and, as well as boasting a generous freestanding bath, it opened on to an outdoor shower in its own secluded courtyard.

But the sumptuous surroundings couldn't stop my mind wandering anxiously to the following day's mission. Did I have what it takes to master the complexities of diving? Would I have a panic attack 40ft underwater and risk humiliation – or drowning? Would I become a shark's supper? I needn't have fretted, though, as my unfailingly patient diving instructor, Ronny, quickly put me at ease. After struggling into wetsuits, masks, fins and oxygen tanks, we swam a few metres away from the beach and ran through exercises including taking the regulator, or breathing device, out of my mouth and putting it back in – underwater, of course. Venturing further out, within moments we'd reached the coral reef that surrounds the island.

Shelving towards an inky abyss, the reef, with its array of corals and anemones, resembles an

# Scuba do!

Learn to dive in **The Maldives** and you'll discover a stunning underwater world – and it's pretty amazing on dry land too. Gareth West took the plunge



Baros resort in the Maldives: heaven for divers, above

*'Aperitifs were served on the terrace – with sharks gliding through the floodlit water below'*

master of disguise, stonefish, which evolution has fashioned into replicas of lumps of coral.

Although diving is undeniably adventurous, you don't have to be the Mac or Woman From Atlantis to frolic beneath the waves – practically anyone, whatever their fitness level, can learn to dive. Admittedly, some of the underwater drills can be hair-raising: having to locate and breathe from your instructor's spare regulator after he has shut off your air supply to simulate an equipment failure, is guaranteed to quicken the pulse. There's also a fair amount of reading to do if you want to gain a PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) qualification – but it's a passport to dive pretty much anywhere in the world.

Scuba diving burns up as many calories as

a vigorous aerobics session, and four descents in three days had given me a ferocious appetite. Happily, there was no shortage of gourmet food with which to refuel in the resort's five bars and restaurants.

The most remarkable meal was the five-course tasting menu in The Lighthouse, which stands over the ocean on stilts. After aperitifs on its terrace – given added zest by the sight of sharks gliding through the floodlit water below – the food came thick and fast. Cognac-flamed lobster bisque gave way to carpaccio of tuna, pastry-wrapped tiger prawns, crispy duck with thyme, and, finally, chocolate and macadamia ganau. Each course was washed down with its own wine, specially chosen by the resort's sommelier. I'm sure they all complemented

their allotted dishes perfectly, but by the fifth course it was hard to tell, as my head was spinning with the bacchanalian splendour of it all.

For many of Baros's guests, most of whom are honeymooning couples, epic meals and a spot of diving, snorkelling or simply gazing in awe at the endless Indian Ocean are all the entertainment they need. The more demanding, however, can choose from activities including big-game fishing, glass-bottomed boat trips and pampering in the resort's spa. We opted for a Champagne-fuelled dolphin cruise in the deeper waters of the atoll, and were rewarded with the unforgettable sight of a pod of spinner dolphins repeatedly corkscrewing through the air right by our boat.

Not all the wildlife in the Maldives is aquatic, however. Despite being just a few hundred metres long, Baros is home in all manner of creatures great and small, including herons, yellow-headed geckos, bright-red moths and some unnervingly large bats – one of which

## NEED TO KNOW

Kuoni Travel ([www.kuonitourclass.co.uk](http://www.kuonitourclass.co.uk) or tel: 01306 747001) offers seven nights at Baros Maldives from £1,487 per person on a bed and breakfast basis in a deluxe villa, including flights with Qatar Airways from Heathrow and transfers to and from the resort. Price is for June this year based on two sharing and includes one free night.

flapped dramatically overhead while I was taking an outdoor shower.

Sadly, time passes all too quickly in paradise, and the day of our departure soon dawned. After saying goodbye to the island's obliging staff, we climbed reluctantly back into our transfer speedboat and there were moist eyes all round as our tropical Eden became a speck on the horizon.

We're not the only ones to have fallen under Baros's spell. One couple, we learned, have notched up a staggering 51 visits to the island. It's hard to imagine anyone growing quite so attached to a flooded quarry in Blihty. ■