



26/03 - 09/04/2023  
Maldives

## 500 memories of a 500 miles journey - Jess Haines

A plan that started almost two years ago finally came to life and was bigger and better than any of us could have ever imagined! With bags packed and a big smile on my face, I gazed out of the window as I flew over the Maldives' stunning reef formations taking in all the stunning colours below as we headed to the deep south of the Maldives. I have been excited about this expedition for a long time, not just for the epic adventure we were about to embark on but also to reunite with the same Brazilian friends I had met on a previous Manta Expedition in 2021 as well as to meet new friends and welcome them to this little world of paradise.

Having spent five years working in the Maldives and having visited many of the central and northern atolls to dive or snorkel, I thought I knew what to expect for this 500-mile journey. That was until our first dive in Addu Atoll, the furthest south atoll of the island nation. My breath was taken away by the sheer beauty of the coral reef that spread like a garden of flowers below me, I have never in all my years seen such vibrance, such life, and such healthy corals of all different species, shapes, and structures. It's these moments in life that you count your lucky stars to be seeing such beauty that so few will ever get the chance to see. If the reefscape view wasn't enough our first dive brought with it not one but two reef manta rays, gliding around newfound cleaning stations that were entirely new to the Manta Trusts database. To top off an already epic check-dive, a huge school of giant bump-head parrotfish (a bucket list species of mine), swam amongst us throughout the entire dive. The first dive brought even bigger smiles and we knew we had a great two weeks ahead of us.

Things just got better and better as we started our journey northwards. With Fuvahmulah as our next stop, we saw some incredible megafauna during these dives ticking off more bucket list species in just one day! Thresher sharks, hammerhead sharks, tiger sharks, and silvertip sharks were some of the few giants that greeted our presence underwater, and our trip's first oceanic manta ray, literally making my heart stop as I took in this giant beauty and indulged in my first encounter with an oceanic in the Maldives. As the day ended, we sipped wine, chatted about our encounters of the day, and divulged in the glorious sunsets.

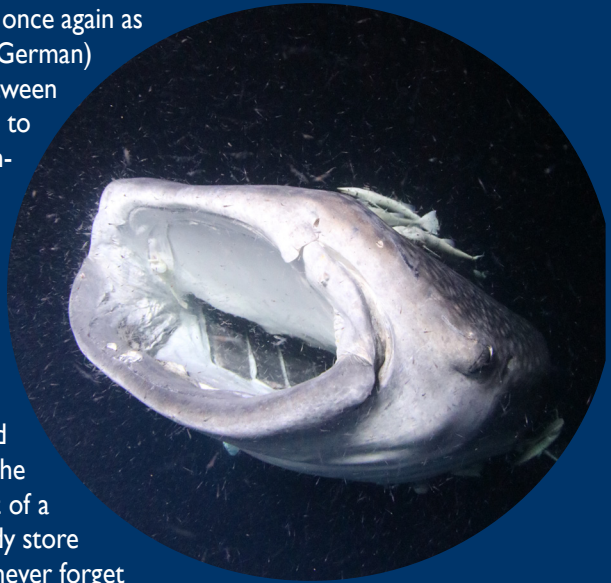


Crossing the equator from the southern to the northern hemisphere with a group jump and big cheers, we were on our way to Huvahdhoo Atoll the next place on our itinerary. I think, deep breath, this atoll might be by far my favourite place I have now dived in the Maldives. Dive after dive, this place delivered unforgettable memories. Our first dive of the day brought

us a school of 10-15 scalloped hammerhead sharks, gracefully manoeuvring amongst our dive groups, followed by a curious silky shark with her two friendly pilot fish swimming close by. As we moved to the western channels, we met our second oceanic manta ray of the trip, a new one to the Maldives database which we have named 'Ivy', along with walls of grey reef sharks in numbers exceeding 100, to the most numerous and largest green turtles I have ever encountered in my entire life. It became a running joke for the rest of the trip "No more turtles please", as everyone laughed, knowing we had witnessed a pure sanctuary for these marine reptiles, why else would there be so many of them?

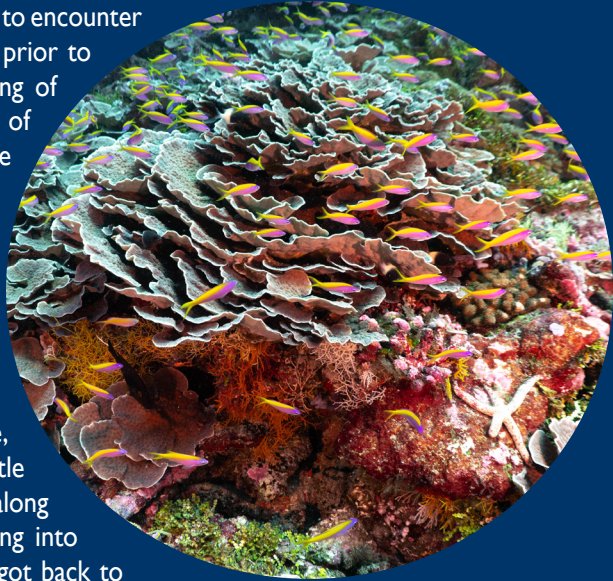


Moving on up we had now reached Laamu Atoll, in the hope of seeing some of the unique resident Laamu reef manta rays. Diving at the famous Hithadhoo Corner, our lucky stars aligned once again as Schmetterling (which means butterfly in German) greeted us with her glorious presence. Between dives we all got together to venture over to Hithadhoo local island to do a beach clean-up, gathering 10 full bags of trash, we all felt a little better doing our bit to give back to the local community even if it's only a small dent in a bigger problem. As the afternoon came, we took local knowledge from the resident Laamu Manta Trust team about some mass Mobula sightings at a nearby reef, so tried our luck to see if we could find them. The beauty of this reef was something like out of a Nat Geo magazine, I felt like a kid in a candy store snapping pictures left right, and centre to never forget what beautiful coral reefs I had just had the pleasure of diving.



Following Laamu we veered off to the eastern side of the Maldives archipelago and reached Thaa Atoll. Here is where the real night-time adventures began! If a glorious orange sunset filling the horizon, wasn't enough to end a great day of diving. Try having some gentle giant visitors for two nights in a row, right off the back of your own boat. Zipping around the light where the zooplankton had accumulated, six mobula kuhii (aka: Shorthorned pygmy devil rays) were the first to greet us with their presence, offering hours upon hours of endless entertainment as we sipped our beers, watching them dart through the plankton patch, and spinning in all directions as they feasted upon their prey. Interested to see what they were feeding on, we scooped some up and checked out the fascinating microscopic life, spotting some mysid shrimps and crab zoeae to name just a few. Just as we were saying our goodbyes for the night a friendly whale shark appears, and the excitement onboard arises once again the idea of sleep now a far distant memory. Hungrily gulping up the seemingly delicious zooplankton that had now densely accumulated in the light the beautiful giant let us swim with him for several hours. Maintaining a respectful distance, we were able to see this gorgeous animal in its entirety, admiring the unique way they move, its unique spot pattern, and the way they feed. This kind of encounter is an experience that I will never forget. I still dream of this moment and am sure I always will.

The rest of our itinerary was spent with thrilling dives in Ari Atoll, and although a little busier than the places we had been in the south, this only made us realise just how lucky we had been to encounter all of those things alone at the dive sites prior to our arrival in Ari. The ocean is for sharing of course and we enjoyed a diverse array of dive sites, from sunken shipwrecks where we searched for interesting macro-life and found new and exciting nudibranchs. To the Marine Protected Areas that Ari has to offer, including thilas' covered in a bed of yellow made up by thousands of blue-striped snappers. Rangali manta point, where we encountered courting manta rays with a heavily pregnant female, cleaning silvertip sharks, and another gentle giant the beautiful whale shark cruising along the top reef as it thermoregulated. Moving into the more northern parts of Ari atoll we got back to our sharky diving, with schools of grey reefs awaiting us in the current, and a final epic night dive with juvenile reef manta rays feeding in the light somersault feeding right in front of us as we knelt in the sand below. Identifying our second new manta ray of the trip a tiny female manta pup which we've called 'Alegria'.



We have been lucky time and time again during our 500-mile journey, making more than 500 memories along the way. If the dives weren't special enough then it's the between-dive time that adds to the best moments, the amazing conversations with people from other parts of the world, exploring uninhabited islands, beach BBQs, and dancing barefoot in the sand under the stars, the worst part of a Manta Expedition is when it comes to an end. The last day hits you with a new lease of life and the final dive ended with such a high, as we swam with hundreds of stingrays, a bull shark, a tiger shark, and a guitar shark just to leave us wanting more as we had to pack our bags and have your final hugs goodbye.

Until next time

Jess Haines – Ocean lover from the UK

Photos credits: Luiz Fernando & Rafael Mesquita Ferreira