

WildOceans MALDIVESWhales and Dolphins in Paradise

A tropical whale and dolphin cruise.

A personal account by John Brodie-Good.

The image most people have of the Maldives is of turquoise lagoons, reefs, and small white sandy islands with coconut palms gently swaying in the breeze, warm temperatures and sunshine every day. I'm pleased to report it's all true, these islands are indeed a tropical paradise, the sea temperature is 31 degrees with an incredible abundance of life within the tranquil waters. The islands are entirely composed of corals which were sadly 'bleached' by El Ninio in 1998 effectively killing at least 95% of them. Six years later and many of the corals are starting to return, it will take some years to get back to what it was but thankfully most of the other marine life still thrives. Dr Charles Anderson has been studying the undersea world here since 1983, and in 1996 started an annual series of whale and dolphin watching cruises.

29 February and 1st March

Snowflakes swirled around our Air Lanka A340 as we boarded at Heathrow. Fourteen hours later, a change of plane in Colombo and our second pilot announced our imminent descent into Male, the Indian Ocean day barely a few hours old. As we turned at the end of the runway a group of presumably Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins moved through the plethora of small boats darting between the airport, Male Island and the various offshore resort atolls. The doors opened and a pleasant rush of heat, approaching 30 degrees greeted us as we disembarked, the long night quickly forgotten. A smiling representative from our first night's hotel quickly had us aboard a local boat for the 40 minute crossing to Vadoo Dive Resort. The sea was an enticing rich blue, our tiny atoll home for the night looked and felt like paradise. The manager beamed as he checked us in, a little surprise in store, we had been given one of the water bungalows, a room on stilts sitting in the shallow part of the reef. In the middle of the living area a 'reverse' fish tank, open the lid and you could feed the fish swimming directly below. The balcony faced out to sea, with steps leading into the lagoon. Complete lack of sleep should have meant bed but with only one night...into the sea for a short snorkel, followed later in the day by a longer one off the reef edge itself. A few distant Crested Terns seemed to be the only avian activity over the sea, while our tiny island hosted a few Grey Herons, the Maldivian race of

Striated Heron, a single Common Sandpiper and a single White-breasted Waterhen.
Sunset and dinner, I slept outside on the balcony under the stars, just because I could.

2nd March: North Male Atoll to South Male Atoll

We awoke before the sun, enjoyed breakfast washed down with fresh tropical fruit juice, the temperature rapidly rising as the sky was much clearer than yesterday. All too soon we were back on the boat for the 40-minute ride back to the airport. Here we met our fellow travellers and our hosts, Chas and Sue Anderson, who pioneered whale watching here. Chas has been working in the islands for over 20 years and started recording his cetacean sightings from 1990. 21 species recorded to date, including some highly desired species for watchers used to more temperate or even polar waters including the 'rarest', Longman's Beaked Whale. Smiles all round as we boarded a water taxi to take us to the M/V Isis, our home for the next 11 nights as we explore part of this multi island archipelago. After a short briefing, we explored the ship before pulling up the anchor and heading south. She seemed perfect for the task, a catamaran with shaded rear deck and fore decks, with plenty of comfortable plastic chairs. She is used mainly for diving in the islands and her local skipper (Mohamed) and crew made us feel at home almost immediately. The public rooms and cabins are air-conditioned, needed for those of us just arrived from the damp and cold of a Northern European winter; the day now well into the 30s in the direct sun. We cruised away from the hustle and bustle of Male, the horizon dotted with atolls, most of which contained resort hotels. The first of a good number of flying fish were flushed, and the odd Crested Tern passed ahead of us. Just as we turned into the shelter of a huge pale turquoise reef, a few dorsal fins broke the surface ahead of us. Our first Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins, only five or so. Chas told us that being nocturnal feeders, they were effectively resting. Reasonable first views, our trip had truly started. We spent the afternoon sailing south towards the distant atolls in the haze. On our port bow we saw Odyssey, a yacht engaged in beaked whale research, a slight diversion from its world mission to census Sperm Whales. The breeze was behind us, making the fore deck extremely hot, not helped by sailing directly into the sun. We turned west around some local fishing boats with their attendant Crested Terns. A group of 20 or so Lesser Noddies flew off the sea as we came close and we dropped anchor in a sheltered reef at Guraidhoo. A superb half-hour snorkel on the reef edge and before we knew it, the sun was setting. Cold beers in hand, Chas gave us an introductory talk, illustrated with slides before dinner, after which most people headed to bed early, still trying to catch up on crossing time zones in flying cigar tubes.

3rd March: South Male Atoll to Felidhu Atoll

Shortly after dawn, most of us took the launch to a reef edge and dropped over the side for 30 minutes or so. Highlights included a Moray Eel swimming amongst some broken coral pieces, a lone ray below us and a small group of fish which looked just like Goldfish to me. After a shower and breakfast, we were heading south again, over the ocean proper,

towards the most south-easterly atoll in the group. As we left Guraidhoo we came across a group of just over 100 Spinner Dolphins in the channel, a few living up to their name. Chas spotted the planet's only marine insect going between our two keels, quite a feat considering it was about 3mm long! 'German' Peter, a retired entomologist was just about to fulfil one of his life's ambitions. The skipper and five of us piled into the tender and slowly cruised away from Isis, drifting in the main channel. Chas on the front with his collecting net. Within a few minutes we had one and returned back to the ship in triumph, our precious cargo swimming rapidly around the bucket. Very similar to our pond skaters these tiny insects spend their whole life on the surface of the sea, laying their eggs on floating bird feathers. We headed off south, into the glaring sun, the breeze behind us, making sea watching from the front, a hot and sticky affair. As we neared our destination we came across several flocks of seabirds fishing around Skipjack Tuna that were chasing smaller fish. The flocks were comprised mainly of Sooty Terns, which flew off high after each frenzy had finished, Lesser Noddies and a few Brown Noddies were noted too. A single skua species and an Audubon's Shearwater passed ahead of us. Two small flocks of Saunder's Little Terns flew past, their black primary wedges very prominent. The captain caught himself a tuna on the line dragging behind the ship, whilst one of his crew was using the line to floss his teeth with.

As we neared Fotheyo Falhu, the longest reef in the Maldives, 25 kilometres of turquoise water disappeared into the distance. Another group of Spinner Dolphins were leaping out of the sea in front of us and finally a group came into bow ride, giving superb views for the 15 minutes or so they stayed with us. Small and sleek, with their long snouts, Spinners are tri-coloured, dark above, grey flanks and pale underparts, we could even hear them exhale when they broke the surface. We dropped anchor inside the reef, piled into the launch again and enjoyed floating with the current along the reef edge for over an hour. A number of the group initially heard whistles and then spotted some Spinners close by. Some people had up to four swimming under them, whilst 'English' Peter managed 24 underwater! Chas talked and showed some slides of some of the other dolphins species that occur around the Maldives, and passed round a pickled Pelagic Snake, black above, yellow below.

4th March: Felidhu Atoll

We hauled up the anchor just after dawn and headed out of the narrow channel back out into the ocean and turned south. A pair of Lesser Crested Terns were fishing along the reef's edge. Another hot morning but the breeze at least swirled around the front of the vessel where most of us watched. A few distant Spinners could be seen, but the morning was pretty quiet again. We saw Odyssey again not too far away and as they were not responding to the radio, Chas took the tender and went over to them, the good news was they hadn't seen anything either! But, as happens in the world of cetaceans, things were about to start to happen. We were coming up to the south-east corner of the atoll when the cry of 'fins' could be heard. Four or five fairly distant, erect slim brownish dorsals could

be seen, almost certainly Risso's Dolphins. About half an hour later, the cry of Sperm Whale came back and we raced up to the front again. We quickly discovered it was a Dwarf Sperm Whale and it had already dropped below the surface. I felt a slight sinking feeling inside when Chas called it again. It had come back to the surface and did indeed look like an upside down surfboard. The smallest whale, difficult to see anywhere but the Maldives has become one of the best places in the world to see them. It sank and appeared again a further three or four times before finally diving. I even managed to get it in the 'scope, dorsal fin and body being on view each time. It looked dark and stocky. A flock of eight Saunderson's Little Terns flew by. We headed for lunch with big smiles on our faces. We spent the afternoon cruising west along the southern edge of the atoll. At about 14.30 Chas called a group of Risso's Dolphins and the skipper hove to so we could get closer. We enjoyed super views of a party of about 10-12 animals, which seemed generally brownish with only a few individuals grey and scarred. Chas then called our attention to a smaller animal in the group that had a beak? We quickly worked out it was in fact a baby Spinner Dolphin few days old, which presumably had become separated from its own mother and somehow had hooked up with these Risso's. Whether it would survive had become a subject of debate. It was staying very close to a female Risso's, another female also had a small calf with her but that was the right species at least. Shutter clicked and whirred as the dolphins swam ahead and around the front of Isis. We left them alone after about 15 minutes and headed west again. "Cetacean species" was the next call, dash up to the front in time to hear the words "it's a beaked whale". I put my binoculars up to see a dark chocolate brown back and dorsal fin, the body ahead of the fin being covered in long, wide prominent scars. There seemed to be no change of colouration towards the head and Chas had noted a gently sloping forehead rather than a bulbous melon. The skipper cut the engines and we waited for about 20 minutes hoping the animal would return. It didn't of course but Chas was "95% certain" it was a Blainville's Beaked Whale (also known as Dense Beaked Whale), the animal didn't seem big enough to be a Cuvier's Beaked Whale. The scarring indicated it was a male, they fight with their two tusk like teeth. The islands were finally starting to live up to their reputation! Late afternoon and we turned north into the atoll again, heading for uninhabited Anbara Island for a walk and/or short snorkel as the day was now fading. The island, a few hundred yards long, took only 10 minutes to walk round, it had a sandy spit at one end, a few Coconut Trees and Mangroves, whilst the other end was rocky. A few Grey Herons, Striated Herons and a single Little Egret were present and a lone Greenshank, single Common Sandpiper and a pair of Turnstones, almost in full summer plumage were dotted around the rocky shore area. We just managed a brief snorkel, some of the group connecting with a turtle underwater. Our pre-dinner talk focussed on beaked whales, especially the account of Chas finding the first complete skeleton of Longman's Beaked Whale, one of the least known species on the planet. He passed one of the two front teeth around and then showed some great photos of some of the first ever sightings in the field. It may have been in the past they were overlooked as Southern Bottlenose Whale. The best bit of all, we have a chance to see them ourselves tomorrow. The sandy point of the island was decorated by braziers and illuminated by a myriad of candles, an onshore barbecue was in progress. We went to bed dreaming of more whales and dolphins tomorrow (hopefully).

5th March: Felidhu Atoll to Dhaalu Atoll

Another gorgeous Indian Ocean morning, we went back to the island for a longer snorkel while three of the group went for a dive with Mohamed. Each snorkel site seemed better than the last, fish of many species drifting around the broken reef wall. We weighed anchor and headed west after breakfast, travelling over an undersea plateau towards our first atoll in the west of the group. Another very hot day, several flocks of Sooty Terns and Lesser Noddies hawking around jumping Skipjack Tuna again and in the distance our first group of dolphins today. As we changed course and headed towards them, some of the animals could clearly be seen breaching clear of the ocean, Bottlenose Dolphins and at least several hundred of them. A sailfish seemed stuck in the middle of them, swimming on the surface with its sail raised. We spent some time going round in circles with a continuous show from our new bow-riding friends, a number of calves were present too. We encountered several more smaller groups and by mid-afternoon we had arrived at the next atoll, and its tiny islands could be seen in the distance. Two groups of Spinner Dolphins came in to bowride, but only stayed with us for a few minutes at a time. We turned south to head into our safe anchorage just inside the reef; quite large flocks of Lesser Noddies and our first Black-naped Terns lined both sides of the entrance channel. Within minutes we were in the launch and jumping into the sea again for our afternoon snorkel. The water seemed a bit murkier here than elsewhere, with amazing changes in temperature every few metres, from warm to almost cold. This was yet again the best site yet. A number of new species were seen including a few pairs of Black-footed Anemonefish (Nemo's cousin) darting in and out of their host. Thousands of small fry darted around us, as just about every other larger fish seemed to be eyeing them up. Occasionally a Jack would come zooming in from the depths and cause widespread panic, presumably snatching a victim in the process. I noticed a couple of large clams open on the seabed and Blue-striped Cleaner Wrasses manned their stations feeding along the larger fish which had come to be 'serviced'. The underwater highlight of the trip so far was a Hawksbill Turtle that shot out from the reef on my left and disappeared at a steep angle down the reef face into the murky depths below. Our evening talk was a fascinating account of the geological history of the islands, delivered on the top deck under the stars and an almost full moon. The word 'atoll' originates from the Maldives, which comprise of a north-south chain of sunken volcanoes with approximately 2000m of coral perched on top of them. The current islands are thought to have formed only 3000 years ago and with a maximum height of 3m above sea level, the whole archipelago is very vulnerable to any rise in sea level.

6th March: Dhaalu Atoll

Just after dawn, the skipper moved our vessel about a mile to Faandhoo, a small-uninhabited island with terns flying around it. Although the birds are protected by law, we noticed a local boat and four men collecting eggs. Chas took the boat's registration number and promised to report them later to the authorities. Black-naped Terns, a pair of Roseate Terns and a few pairs of Common Terns seemed to be trying to nest. Common Tern is not known to have bred in the islands previously. We had time for a brief snorkel before breakfast and then sailed west, back out to the open sea. The conditions were close to flat calm and visibility for cetaceans was stunning. A few distant Spinners started the day and a lone large (wedge-tailed?) shearwater flew by laboriously, on our starboard side. A few distant noddies and terns could be seen, and fish jumped out of the sea in all directions. Chas went up on top of the bridge to look out and quickly returned saying he could see animals on the horizon and we would head towards them. Little did we know what the next few hours were going to bring. As we sailed towards the horizon two or three Dwarf Sperm Whales appeared on our port side, rather more distant than the one a couple of days ago. Our attention turned to the bow again and it was clear a number of other cetaceans had appeared ahead of us. Blackish animals with tall dorsals with some dolphins in amongst them, Pilot Whales perhaps? As we finally got closer we realised we were looking at False Killer Whales and were quickly surrounded by small groups, some coming from the stern and swimming down the sides of Isis. Long and sleek, with a very distinctive high dorsal, hooked back at the top and slightly rounded. We could even hear them whistling to each other. A group of about 70 Bottlenose Dolphins lay to the north. Chas finally admitted the group of animals he had spotted in the first place were possibly another goodie. We turned towards them and were about halfway when we spotted another set of fins in the water ahead. Chas thought they may be Rough-toothed Dolphins and indeed their 'pink lips' confirmed this. They swam down the side of the vessel giving superb views as they raised their heads to breathe. Gently sloping foreheads led to the longish snout and pinkish lower jaw line. Some of them looked as if it was the first time they had put lipstick on, smearing it clumsily in the process. One animal seemed very pale, almost leucistic. These dolphins look somehow prehistoric, almost reptilian. The dorsal fins seem somewhat shark-like, with ragged trailing edges. Normally seen only once a year, we were very lucky. False Killers continued to be scattered over the sea, in groups of four to six, we estimated 75+ in total. We finally headed for the line of animals that started it all. They stayed in a tight line formation, creating great quantities of white water on the tranquil seas. Stout, stocky with no real beak, we were closing in on another Maldives speciality, Fraser's Dolphins. We slowly approached, there were about 200 animals and some of them turned and starting bowriding, shutters soon clicked away. We could hear their high pitched whistles as they communicated with each other. We spent about half an hour with them, occasionally seeing their pink bellies as they came up to breathe. While all of this had been going on a few beaked whales had appeared and vanished and several of the group saw what may have been a Sperm Whale blow in the distance. Time for lunch, what a morning!

After lunch we headed south, making a short stop to collect Ocean Striders, but no luck, instead the launch came back with a baby flying fish in a jar which was photographed by enthusiasts before being returned to the sea (and not pickled by Dr Anderson for science). Another single Dwarf Sperm Whale appeared and characteristically disappeared and then we came across the Rough-toothed Dolphins again. This time there was some tail-lobbing and some of the animals rose halfway out of the sea and splashed back down again (headslapping). We left them in peace, headed back north and into the atoll towards Vommuli, where a few distant Spinners could be seen. This would be our anchorage for the night. Before dinner we had another superb snorkel along the reef edge of a neighbouring small island. As we sat on the upper back deck, cold drinks in hand, a full moon reflected in the tranquil waters whilst Jupiter and Venus were visible in the night sky above us. After another informative talk from Chas, this time on blackfish, we had dinner, wrote diaries, whilst the digital gang downloaded their images onto 'English' Peter's laptop. Finally, at the back of the vessel, Lawrence and Yvette noticed a cuttlefish swimming towards the soup of tiny blue fish and other small fry attracted by the overhanging bait light. We watched the cuttlefish suddenly grab one of the blue fish. Being a small fish in the sea has to be the worst job in the world.

7th March: Dhaalu Atoll to Faafu Atoll

We left our anchorage just after 07.00 and headed north-west. It was another very hot morning, with a light breeze producing a few whitecaps. A quiet morning though, in spite of much scanning, the only cetaceans so far being up to six Dwarf Sperm Whales off a small island. At one point four lay on the surface together. At least a couple rolled forward rather than just sinking down. Noddies and the odd tern flew over the sea and fish jumped out from time to time. Chas tried further out from the west coast of the atoll, still nothing. So in the afternoon we turned east into a deep-water channel. Ahead we could see fins, as we got closer the unmistakable shape of Pilot Whales, in this part of the world Short-finned. Many of the animals started spyhopping; who was watching who? The loose group (approx. 50 animals) included two huge males. A few animals approached us closely, encouraging cameras to burn copious amounts of film and pixels. A couple of animals lobtailed, followed by much more spyhopping and as they dived we could see their curled tail flukes. When some of them spyhopped they lifted half their body out of the water, including their pectoral fins. After enjoying their company for about half an hour we left them and headed into another reef for the night. We dropped over the side of the tender for another superb snorkel, highlights included a curious group of squid, a Blotched Porcupine Fish hiding under a rock, a spawning sea cucumber and a stunning Black-blotched Stingray laying on the seabed. A few of the group came across a resting Hawksbill Turtle on the reef. A beautiful orange moonrise preceded our evening talk on the roof, which included some stargazing; Sirius, Taurus the Bull and Orion all clearly visible. Another fascinating session, this time the about the seasons of the Maldives and the effects of the Southwest Monsoon (May-October) and the Northeast Monsoon (December-April). After dinner a splendid Red Snapper could be seen in a

bucket on the back deck, freshly caught by the crew. Just before we went to bed, the Southern Cross had appeared in the sky behind the stern.

8th March: Faafu Atoll to South Ari Atoll

Isis sailed half a mile to another little uninhabited islet for our morning snorkel. 30 or so Black-naped Terns were present. Chas is keeping a record of seabird breeding sites so we took a careful walk to look for nests. A single Greenshank flew off calling as we left Chas to investigate two pairs of terns that seemed to be distressed by our presence; sure enough he eventually found a scrape in the sand with a single egg. We swam off a sandy beach and enjoyed almost an hour exploring the reef edge, whilst the three divers explored in the depths below us. Two or three Hawksbills were seen, but the highlight for us was a lionfish serenely swimming beneath us. Back on board and fish for breakfast, Maldivian style. This included, freshly cooked chapatis with a tuna, coconut, onion and lime filling, delicious. They had spared us the other local ingredient, chillies, shame. Back out onto the hot sea, heading north-east at first and then north-west. A sandbar next to the islet contained 200 Lesser Noddies and a selection of resting terns, including Saunder's, Little, Crested and Lesser-crested. A small group of Spinner Dolphins purposefully sped past, showing little inclination to bowride. The rest of the morning was quiet but just before lunchtime "fins ahead" rang out. Animals were breaching all over the place, as we drew closer we seemed to be in a sea of Risso's Dolphins, they could be seen in every direction. The energetic breaching continued together with frequent headslapping. Groups of three and four animals regularly came in to surf the wake waves, swimming surprisingly close to Isis and then quickly veering off again, a few coming very close across the bows but not bowriding. It was difficult to estimate numbers, but there were certainly hundreds of animals in this group. Time for lunch and we turned north-east. The afternoon was very quiet with little to report, we were heading for Dhangethi at the south-east corner of Ari Atoll, more fuel being our quest this time. We arrived at about 16.30 and took the launch to the jetty. We had an hour or so and walked down the main sandy street with its numerous souvenir shops. Two huge Banyan trees contained roosting Flying Foxes hanging upside down, with their umbrella-like wings wrapped around them as sunshades. A few animals were starting to wake up and began preening themselves. The distinctive and noisy Asian Koels could be heard, I poorly impersonated their calls and a male and female came down to have a look at us. At the end of the little street I noticed a small crow with pure white collar, it was a House Crow which had somehow got its head stuck in what looked like the top of a washing up liquid bottle. In spite of its modification it seemed fit and well. We returned to the vessel at sunset, the foxes were having a lie-in, as sadly we didn't see them fly. Chas' last cetacean talk of the trip, was about the great whales that included passing around a Sperm Whale Tooth and some baleen from a Blue Whale, both recovered from strandings in the islands.

9th March: Ari Atoll

We headed back out to sea at 07.00, initially southbound. We encountered a small group of Spinners, maybe 10 or so, but they kept moving. Dive boats in the area had reported three Whale Sharks the previous day and so with some excitement we dropped into the sea off the south-east reef of Ari Atoll. Deeper water than we had snorkelled in before, we spread out spending an hour in the water. No luck on this occasion but at least we had tried. There were however, plenty of fish and Lawrence and Yvette enjoyed a turtle encounter. In some parts the water was cloudy with poor visibility, this was entirely due to the vast amount of plankton in the water, food for the big gentle giants. We still had a chance in the next few days. Back on board and three or four inshore Bottlenose Dolphins went past our bows. The launch went off again for a few minutes and came back with three more Ocean Striders, this time a larger species than before, they too are now part of an ongoing science project. A few minutes later we spotted distant splashing, another group of Risso's Dolphins, 50 or so. However, no sign of the Blue Whale which had been seen in the area previously. The afternoon was quiet and we soon anchored off Moofushi. The launch ferried us towards a 'picnic' islet for another one-hour snorkel along a beautiful reef. Clearer water this time, a small manta ray was seen and we added the second species of anemonefish to our ever-growing list. We had a long way to catch up with Chas though, his list is about 1040 and rising. His talk this evening was an introduction to reef fishes and whilst the skipper and crew fished off the back deck, a Trumpetfish swam round the collection of fry drawn to the bait light, we watched it take a small blue fish then headed for bed.

10th March: Ari Atoll

I got up early to see the sunrise, the first few Black-naped Terns had already started fishing over the nearby reef. We sailed west to the outer coast of the atoll to snorkel at various Manta sites. On the way we surprised a dozing turtle on the surface. The first site was too choppy and we travelled for an hour north to a second site. In spite of a good hour in the water cruising up and down the reef we had no joy. At one point however we were bobbing about the surface as a group of Black-naped Terns picked food from the water around us. The northerly light wind was enough to make it a little lumpy and so we turned south again looking for cetaceans. We soon encountered another group of Risso's Dolphins (around 50 animals) but had to wait a few minutes for the vessel to turn towards them as the entire bridge crew were on their prayer mats! We sailed on into the hot afternoon but saw nothing else. We turned back into the southern part of Ari Atoll and headed for Mirihi, a small island with a resort. We hoped to go ashore after dark for a drink at their bar but in spite of several phone calls the manager was unavailable to give us permission (asleep!). We entered the water again for an evening snorkel and enjoyed a number of new species of fish and much activity before the light started to fail. Chas' talk this evening focussed on invertebrates and we discussed starfish, sea urchins, sea cucumbers and flatworms. Before retiring we were treated to a stunning ceiling of stars and planets, as the now waning moon hadn't yet risen.

11th March: Ari Atoll

The engines fired up at 07.00 and we cruised west to Manta Point. Five or six dive boats were already at the site as we dropped in and floated along the reef with the current. There were lots of beautiful table corals here. The water was initially clear but soon turned into plankton soup, and shafts of sunlight could be seen shooting into the murky depths. Huge schools of Blue Triggerfish were feeding on the plankton, some of which occasionally 'stang' bare skin. The fish seemed to readily accept our presence as we drifted into their midst, at times they were only inches from our faces, and their red teeth were clearly visible. The odd barracuda cruised menacingly through them, and the school opened up to give the potential predator plenty of space. We climbed back into the launch to be greeted with the news that some of the group had seen a few Giant Mantas and we were going to move the launch a few hundred yards, drop in again to try and see them. This time there was a quite a current, and we headed with high expectation towards Chas who was acting as a human marker, his arm held up above the water signalling our quarry. The first sight that greeted us were the numerous divers beneath us, (there must have been about forty) and streams of bubbles rose all around us. Suddenly we saw it, a gigantic graceful animal emerging out of the deeper water and over the reef floor, surrounded by an attendant party of small fish cleaning it. We were entranced, it was much bigger than most of us expected, with at least an 8' wingspan and just beautiful as it slowly swam round in circles beneath us. Largely blackish with white wing patches, it was clearly 'enjoying' its human fanclub; it could have disappeared at any instance but chose not to. We spent a magical 20 minutes watching it from above, it even seemed to like swimming over the resting divers on the bottom, allowing their bubbles to tickle its underwings. A huge underwater seabird or even spaceship, the words grace and beauty cannot do justice to them. For the grand finale it flushed a resting Hawksbill Turtle from the reef floor, which to our delight slowly rose towards us, heading for the surface to breathe. As there about six of us together, we thought it would veer away, but it kept coming, surfacing almost in the middle of us, just a few feet away, before swimming directly under Lawrence and back into the depths. We clambered back on board the launch, absolutely elated, a top 20-wildlife experience to be sure. After a well-needed breakfast we headed back north again, the sea was calmer than yesterday but still had a few whitecaps. A quiet hour or so followed and we decided to make a brief visit to a small sandbar covered in terns and noddies. On arrival we flushed off a few Saunder's, Crested and Lesser-crested Terns. We stayed only 15 minutes and slowly fanned out across the islet, looking carefully for eggs in the sand. Despite the 50+ Black-naped Terns, Caroline finally spotted just three nests with eggs before we left, rather disappointing. Another place the locals take eggs from, not good. We headed on north through the afternoon and saw a small group of about ten Spinners and a few more Risso's Dolphins, albeit rather distant this time. Just before we turned back into the atoll for the night, we noticed several fish and seabird feeding frenzies, this included a group of Yellow-finned Tuna leaping out of the sea with numerous attendant Lesser-crested Terns. Instead of an evening snorkel we went ashore to the island of Madoogali, an Italian resort. We celebrated the morning with a well-earned drink, the rum laden Banana

Coladas were delicious and soon went straight to our heads. We had disturbed a fruit bat that flew off over the palm tops, Koels flitted in the bushes and a White-breasted Waterhen scuttled in the undergrowth. In the shallows a Beach Moray and Fan-tailed Stingray could be seen and as we returned to the little jetty for the short ride back to Isis, we saw two Nurse Sharks drawn in by fish remains from the kitchen. Instead of a lecture we lay on the top deck and enjoyed some stargazing, we spotted four satellites moving overhead and three shooting stars.

12th March: Ari Atoll to Rasdhoo Atoll

I missed the morning snorkel having had a lie-in until 08.00. We sailed north for our last full day at sea and a gentle breeze cooled our watch on Isis. A few terns flew by, and mid morning we spotted a pair of distant Bridled Terns. In the afternoon we turned east towards Rasdhoo Atoll, which was to be our final night's destination. We encountered two small groups of inshore Bottlenose Dolphins (a group of eight and another of five animals). However, they showed little interest in us and quickly vanished. It had been another rather quiet day and we sailed into our atoll passing a couple of very small islets with sandy spits. A number of terns were resting there, including some possible like Common-types, while a single, summer-plumaged Pacific Golden Plover preened on the beach. We piled into the launch for our last snorkel, a slight swell was running. We spent nearly an hour swimming around a small piece of circular reef, which initially seemed quiet. A nice collection of butterflyfish swam around the coral debris and Powder Blue Surgeonfish, still one of my favourite fish, were common. Just below the surface about halfway across the reef, we noticed a line of squid in the water ahead of us, I swam hurriedly towards them and they immediately darted backwards in unison, still maintaining their perfect line. We were just about to leave the water when Chas swam over to us shouting "mating squid....follow me". We struggled to keep up with him, years in the water have made him a very powerful swimmer. We reached the edge of the reef to witness a wonderful little show. Almost certainly 'our' squid of a few minutes back, swimming in pairs by a piece of table coral. The males were changing colour and black spots alternately appeared and disappeared on their skirts. The females came and took sperm sacs from the males, then in turn placed their fertilised eggs under the coral. We almost felt we were intruding on their very private act. 'English' Peter swam down next to me to point out something in a hole. I realised that we were now looking at a small octopus, it too kept changing colour from brownish (the colour of the coral it was hiding in) to white and back to brown in seconds. A brilliant finale to our last snorkel. Like many people of my generation I remember watching the 'Undersea world of Jacques Cousteau' as a boy. Never had I dreamed that I would see many of the natural wonders under the sea with my own eyes and so well.

13th March: Rasdhoo Atoll to North Male Atoll

The anchor came up for the last time; our final morning of paradise and we headed east, final destination Male. We could see distant splashing, as we came closer the sea seemed covered in Spinner Dolphins, 500 or so, many leaping out of the water, spinning and sometimes performing complete backward cartwheels. A gang of about 20 came onto the bows and rode with us for 20 minutes or so. We noted one of the animals seemed to have some blue plastic caught in its mouth, but seemed none the worse for it. We had noted throughout the trip plastic bottles in the sea. Most of the deserted islets we visited also showed too much human debris, washed up from the sea rather than deposited directly. Reassuringly most of the reefs showed little sign of discarded rubbish. Sadly, even in paradise, people don't always know how to behave. Spinners are the commonest cetacean in the island, so it was fitting on our last day that we were treated to such a grand display. We left them and continued on our journey east. Chas spotted a distant tropicbird sp. but it was just too far to identify. We 'cut' through the southern end of North Male Atoll to spend a last hour or so searching in the sea to the east. Just as we re-entered the ocean Yvette spotted what sounded like a beaked whale on the surface. We stopped and waited, but in spite of eager eyes scanning in all directions, no further sign. We swung out wide past the airport and enjoyed our last brief encounter, a group of 30 or so Risso's Dolphins cruising north. Isis headed in towards her anchorage, close to the airport, boats going in all directions, seaplanes coming and going to the outer resorts and atolls. Just as we dropped anchor, Odyssey, the US whale research yacht sailed past us heading back out to sea in search of beaked whales again. There were smiles and waves as the two vessels passed each other. The sun was dropping into the sea as a flock of 20 Cattle Egrets passed by. Our journey had come to an end and the first of the passengers left by water taxi. The rest of us enjoyed a farewell dinner outside on the back deck before our water taxi arrived to ferry us to the airport. Then after goodbyes all round, we reluctantly began our long journey home.

Cetacean sightings on the same trip last year included Striped Dolphin, Sperm, Blue and Bryde's Whales plus Cuvier's Beaked Whale. Other species seen on these voyages include Spotted Dolphin, Melon-headed Whale and Longman's Beaked Whale. The November trips boast a much higher list of birds, 80 or so, due to autumn migration being in progress. Migrant butterflies and dragonflies are also present then too.

NB: Snorkelling.....If you have never seen a tropical sea reef before you are in for a major treat on this trip. If you can swim, you can snorkel; it's as simple as that. It is worth buying a decent mask (approx. £50) and snorkel (approx. £25) from a dive shop in the UK (try Yellow Pages for your local PADI centre) and bring an old T-shirt to wear to protect against sunburn. The colours and variety of undersea life are just incredible, and with Chas' encyclopaedic knowledge and enthusiasm add a whole new dimension.

Edited, with additional notes by Caroline Still.

Species list

Cetaceans

Long-snouted Spinner Dolphin

Risso's Dolphin

Bottlenose Dolphin (offshore and inshore form)

Fraser's Dolphin

Rough-toothed Dolphin

False Killer Whale

Dwarf Sperm Whale

Blainville's Whale (Dense-beaked)

(Beaked Whale sp.)

Short-finned Pilot Whale

Other mammals

Indian Flying Fox (Maldives race)

Reptiles

Hawksbill Turtle

Insects

Ocean Strider or Sea Skater (the planet's only marine insect!)

Birds

Striated Heron (Maldives race, quite pale and grey)

Grey Heron

Cattle Egret

Little Egret

Common Sandpiper

Turnstone

Greenshank

Pacific Golden Plover

White-breasted Waterhen

Crested Tern

Lesser-crested Tern

Blake-naped Tern

Saunders's Little Tern

Little Tern

Common Tern

Roseate Tern

Sooty Tern

Bridled Tern

Lesser Noddy

Brown Noddy

Audubon's Shearwater

Wedge-tailed Shearwater

(Tropicbird sp.)

Skua sp. (Arctic/Pom)

House Crow

Asian Koel

Selected Fish

Manta Ray

Great Moray Eel

Beach Moray Eel

Oriental Hotlips

Blue-finned Jack

Skipjack Tuna

Yellow-finned Tuna

Flying fish sp.

Napoleon fish

Common Lionfish

Humbug Damsel

Ringed Wrasse

Indian Triggerfish

Surgeon fish sp.

Triple-tail Maori Wrasse

Indian Butterfly Fish

Moorish Idol

Powder-blue Surgeonfish

Orangespine Unicornfish

Clown Triggerfish

Moon Wrasse

Bigeye Trevally

Blackfoot Anemonefish (endemic)

Sailfish

Brown Tang

Flounder sp.

Blue Triggerfish

Striped Triggerfish

Indian Triggerfish

Long-nose Butterflyfish

Yellow-tailed Basslet

Soldierfish sp.

Black-blotched Stingray

Squid sp.

Bluestripe Snapper

Meyer's Butterflyfish

Checkerboard Wrasse

Bannerfish

Blotched Porcupinefish

Sea Cucumber sp.

Clams sp.

Featherstar sp.

Barracuda

Black-tipped Reef Shark

Trumpetfish

Yellow-tail Anemonefish

Goatfish sp.

Moon Fusilier

Spaghetti Eel

Peacock Rock Cod

Chevroned Butterflyfish

Corals sp.

Nurse Shark

Octopus Cyanea

Sea Urchin sp.

Starfish sp.