

MALDIVES

CETACEANS & SNORKELLING

**Wildlife Holidays in the Tropical Indian Ocean
2017**

**Led by
Dr. Charles Anderson**

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Wildlife cruises in the tropical Indian Ocean, 2017

SUMMARY

Charles and Susan Anderson will be leading a series of marine wildlife cruises on comfortable liveboard vessels in Maldives during 2017, including:

7-day cruises

25 Feb to 4 Mar 2017 West-central atolls

11-day cruises (Maldives Explorer)

19 to 30 Nov 2017 Thaa Atoll (south)

The Maldives is home to a stunning diversity of cetaceans, offering some of the very best whale and dolphin watching in the World. This will be the primary focus of all these trips. However, we will spend plenty of time snorkelling on the coral reefs and there should also be some opportunities to visit islands, as well as to relax.

The distribution of whales and dolphins within the Maldives is intimately linked with the seasonally changing ocean currents. We take advantage of our local knowledge to follow the seasonal movements of cetaceans, and can expect wonderful sightings wherever we go. The 7-day cruises will concentrate on the central atolls. During February we visit the western side of the Maldivian atolls, where a glorious variety of tropical whales and dolphins plus Manta Rays can be found at this season.

Our longer, 'Maldives Explorer' trips offer the chance to reach more distant, little-visited atolls. The Maldives Explorer trip in November will visit the southern Thaa Atoll and adjacent Veimandhoo Channel, a deep-water passage used by migrating cetaceans.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MALDIVES

The Maldives is a small island nation in the central Indian Ocean, some 400 miles southwest of the southern tip of India. The Maldives is an independent Republic, with the capital on the central island of Malé. The country is composed entirely of coral atolls. On the atolls are some 1200 sandy islands. All are small, and most can be walked around in less than an hour. These really are the picture postcard islands of your dreams, with swaying palm trees, white sand beaches and turquoise lagoons.

For many people the exquisite islands and coral reefs of the Maldives require little introduction. But it is not so widely known that the Maldives also possesses a particularly rich whale and dolphin fauna. Especially exciting is the great diversity of 'small cetacean' species found here. In recent years we have recorded an astonishing

23 different species. Spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, Risso's dolphins and short-fin pilot whales are all common. Spotted dolphins, striped dolphins and dwarf sperm whales are all regulars. Regular highlights have included superb views of beaked whales including Cuvier's, Blainville's and Longman's. This last was long considered the rarest whale in the world, but is now known to be resident in the Maldives. Large whales are less common, but we do regularly encounter sperm whales, blue whales and Bryde's whales.

DATES

Trip	Depart Malé	Return to Malé	Days	Price
2017 Tropical whales & dolphins	25 Feb, Sat	4 Mar, Sat	7	£1760 pp
2017 Maldives Explorer	19 Nov, Sun	30 Nov, Thu	12	£2590 pp

Note: All these trips are boat-based, and dates are Malé to Malé, i.e. time in Maldives. Add on time at each end to allow for international flights. All trips start at about 10:00h on the first day, and end after breakfast on the morning of the last day.

BOAT TRIP

On these trips we travel through the Maldives to view dolphins and whales from on board our specially chartered liveaboard safari vessels (**M.V. *Ari Queen*** in February and **MV *Keana*** in November). Both have a local crew, including an experienced captain and a full-time cook.

Ari Queen has 10 double, triple and twin cabins, but we normally travel with a maximum of just 16 guests. All cabins are ensuite and air-conditioned. ***Ari Queen*** has four cabins on the upper decks offering wide views of the sea (and sometimes of dolphins or whales), which are available at a surcharge. There is also a spacious bar and lounge area. ***Ari Queen*** is not luxurious, but she is comfortable and ideal for our needs.

Keana is similar in size to ***Ari Queen*** (c30m) with 8 guest cabins. All cabins are on the upper decks; all are ensuite and well-ventilated with optional air-conditioning. Normal group size is 16 guests. There are ample shaded viewing areas on both the main and upper decks. Like our other vessels, ***Keana*** is comfortable rather than luxurious.

Our itineraries will be very flexible, to make the most of our cetacean sightings. The outlines given below should therefore be considered to be a guideline only, not rigidly a structured programme. We will travel past the atolls, enjoying the beautiful scenery, and taking our time to watch dolphins, whales, flying fish and seabirds, and perhaps also magnificent Manta Rays. As is normal practice in the Maldives, we will travel by day, and anchor early each evening in a sheltered atoll lagoon. Depending on our location there should be opportunities for a snorkel both first thing in the morning, and later in the afternoon. There may also be the chance of an island visit at these times. And after dark, far from city lights, the top deck offers stunning views of the night sky.

In summary, these are superb trips that promise great cetacean sightings, a delightful tropical cruise, coral reefs, paradise islands, and friendly local people.

7-DAY ITINERARY

MALDIVES CENTRAL ATOLLS

(February trips will visit the western central atolls on *MV Ari Queen*)

Day 1. Arrival in Maldives. Arrive at Malé International Airport and transfer to our liveaboard vessel. Depart soon after midday. With a little luck we can expect our first dolphin sighting while still in sight of the airport! Tonight, and every night we will anchor in a sheltered location within one of the atolls. Depending on anchoring time there may be time for a snorkel or island visit. This first evening there will be an orientation talk, and most other evenings there will be a slide show or video.

Days 2-6. Cetacean watching in the central atolls. Some mornings we will search out schools of spinner dolphins, at locations where we know they regularly occur. We will then head out of the atolls, in search of dolphins, whales and seabirds. Each evening we will anchor in the lagoon of an atoll, and there should be some opportunities to snorkel or perhaps visit an island. On at least one day we will visit a site where manta rays usually congregate.

Day 7. Cetacean watching off Malé Atoll. A final full day of whale and dolphin watching. Anchor near Malé. Farewell dinner and last night on board.

Day 8. Malé. After breakfast transfer to international terminal for departure.

Our aims on these trips will be to spend time with the delightful and acrobatic spinner dolphins; to see a good variety of the other tropical cetacean species that occur in the Maldives; and if conditions are suitable to swim with giant Manta Rays. Manta Rays are stunningly beautiful creatures, and for most people the chance to swim with them is a wildlife highlight of a lifetime. On some trips there may also be the chance to swim with Whale Sharks.

These cruises will be based on a basic but comfortable **liveaboard safari boat**. They will be conducted at a leisurely pace, allowing time to swim and snorkel, and to visit a variety of islands. Our itinerary will be flexible to make the most of our cetacean sightings, but we hope to have the opportunity to visit uninhabited, fishing and resort islands. In addition to the attractions offered on all of our cruises, the particular highlights of these central atolls trips should include:

- Encounters with several cetacean species
- Hundreds of delightful spinner dolphins
- Stately pilot whales
- Chance of swimming with Manta Rays
- Beautiful islands and coral reefs of the central Maldives

Note: For those who would like to spend some more time in the beautiful Maldives, why not arrange a stay on a resort island immediately before your cruise?

12-DAY ITINERARY

Maldives Explorer Cruises

(Our November trip will head south on MV *Keana*)

Day 1. Arrival in Maldives. Arrive at Malé International Airport and transfer to *Dive Master* (November). Depart soon after midday. With a little luck we can expect our first cetacean sighting while still in sight of the airport! Tonight, and every night we will anchor in a sheltered location within one of the atolls. Depending on anchoring time there may be the chance for a snorkel or island visit. This first evening there will be an orientation talk, and most other evenings there will be a slide show or talk.

Days 2-4. Heading south. We cruise outside the atolls, in search of dolphins, whales and seabirds. Each evening we will anchor in the lagoon of an atoll, and there should be some opportunities to snorkel or perhaps visit an island.

Days 5-7. Cetacean watching. We have three full days around the more distant southern atolls, spending time with the cetaceans. We should also be able to visit one or two islands and some wonderful coral reefs.

Days 8-10. Heading back. We slowly work our way back towards Malé, by a different route from the one we took out, all the time watching out for dolphins and whales as we go. On at least one day we hope to visit a site where Manta Rays usually congregate.

Day 11. Cetacean watching off Malé Atoll. A final full day of dolphin watching. Anchor near Malé. Farewell dinner and last night on board.

Day 12. Malé. After breakfast transfer to international terminal for departure.

This cruise will be based on a liveaboard safari boat. It will be conducted at a leisurely pace, allowing time to snorkel, and to visit a variety of islands. In November we expect to spend time around the southern Thaa Atoll, in search of cetaceans migrating nearby. We can expect to see a wonderful variety of tropical dolphin and whale species.

Our itinerary will be flexible to make the most of our cetacean sightings, but we hope to have the opportunity to visit uninhabited, fishing and resort islands, and plenty of time for snorkelling on the coral reefs. If conditions are suitable, we expect to swim with giant Manta Rays. Manta Rays are stunningly beautiful creatures, and for most people the chance to swim with them is a wildlife highlight of a lifetime.

NATURALIST

All trips will be led by Dr. Charles Anderson, a professional marine biologist who has lived and worked in the Maldives since 1983. He is the foremost authority on both cetaceans and fishes in the Maldives, and the pioneer of whale and dolphin watching in the region. In addition to numerous scientific papers, he has published a series of six guides to the marine life of the islands. He is an accomplished underwater photographer, and will present a series of evening slide shows on marine life during the course of each trip. On some trips he will be assisted by his wife Susan Anderson, who is a qualified nurse as well as an experienced and enthusiastic whale spotter.

CLIMATE

The Maldivian Islands span the equator, stretching from about 7°N to ½°S, so the climate is tropical. From late January to April, and again during October-November, the weather is normally calm and sunny, with just the occasional shower. These are the very best times to visit. During our boat-based trips the sea should be calm, which makes for ideal offshore whale-watching.

Temperatures do not vary much throughout the year. Daytime air temperatures typically reach 29-31°C during the day, dropping to about 25-27°C at night. Sea breezes make this quite comfortable. Sea temperatures average about 28°C, which makes for luxurious snorkeling!

COST

7-Day Trips (MV *Ari Queen*)

Price per person: £1760

Single supplement: £390

Upper cabin: £290

12-Day Trips (MV *Keana*)

Price per person: £2590

Single supplement: £490

Upper cabin: All guest cabins are on the upper decks

NB: Currency surcharge of £150pp applies to Nov 2017 departure (as of 31/1/17)

Includes: Accommodation and all meals; teas and coffees; naturalist; government tourist and green taxes; transfers from airport to boat and vice versa.

Does not include: International flights; insurance; drinks; airport taxes; personal items. For holiday expenses it is a good idea to bring US dollars or Euros cash.

Payment schedule: To confirm your booking we will require a non-refundable £400 deposit per person. The balance should be paid no later than three months before departure. We reserve the right to impose a surcharge at cost in case of major tax, fuel or foreign currency price increases.

MALDIVIAN WILDLIFE

Cetaceans

The great attraction of whale and dolphin watching in the Maldives is the wonderful diversity of species that can be seen. On many trips we see 10 or more different species. And these are not just distant glimpses: many species bowride and can be seen in their entirety at close range. In addition, some species that are rarely seen elsewhere (for example the dwarf sperm whale) are common here. Of course, nothing can be guaranteed with wild animals, but on every trip we have an excellent chance of seeing:

Spinner dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>
Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Indo-pacific bottlenose	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>
Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
Spotted dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>
Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>
Shortfin pilot whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>
Dwarf sperm whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>
Cuvier's beaked whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>

We can also expect to see several of the following:

Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>
Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>
Fraser's dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>
Pygmy killer whale	<i>Feresa attenuata</i>
Melon headed whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>
False killer whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>
Killer whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Dense-beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>
Longman's beaked	<i>Indopacetus pacificus</i>
Rough-toothed dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>

On a typical 7-day trip we have 30+ separate sightings of cetaceans, while on a 11-day trip we can expect to have roughly 60 separate sightings of cetaceans. A sighting might be of one large whale or a school of over 200 dolphins. In total on each 7-day trip we expect to see over 1000 cetaceans of 6-10 species.

Birds

Maldives is not renowned for its birdwatching, in part because there is not a great diversity of habitats. However, there is plenty of interest for the enthusiast. About 180 species have been recorded from the islands so far, but as there has been relatively little ornithological study, many more species (particularly northern migrants) undoubtedly await discovery. Most of our trips take place during the northern winter or spring, when Eurasian migrants are on the islands, or on their return journeys northward. There are no known endemic species, but there are a few endemic subspecies, including:

White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus maldivus</i>
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Indian Pond-heron	<i>Ardeola grayii phillipsi</i>
Striated Herons	<i>Butorides striatus didii</i> & <i>B. s. albidulus</i>
Maldivian House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens maledivicus</i>

There will be plenty of opportunity for seabird watching. Over 40 species of seabird have been recorded, including many rare tropical species, migrant Storm-petrels and others. Species likely to be seen during our trips include:

Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>
Audubon's Shearwater	<i>Puffinus lherminieri</i>
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>
Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>
Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>
Great Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>
Saunders's Little Tern	<i>Sterna saundersi</i>
Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>
Bridled Tern	<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>
Sooty Tern	<i>Sterna fuscata</i>
Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>
Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>
White Tern	<i>Gygis alba</i> (Southern atolls only)

Other Marine Life

There will be plenty of opportunities for snorkeling on the coral reefs. The most spectacular feature of these reefs is the abundant fish life. Over 1000 species of fish have been recorded from the Maldives. You will be able to see over 200 species while snorkelling. Flying fish are abundant and will be spotted regularly as we travel outside the atolls. With just a little luck we may see Manta Rays or a Whale Shark. Five species of turtle are known from the Maldives, and you have a chance of seeing three: green and hawksbill turtles in the atolls, and olive Ridleys out in the ocean.

FLIGHT INFORMATION

You will need to arrange flights to Malé (Ibrahim Nasir International Airport). Note that November to April is high season in Maldives and flights are likely to be heavily booked, so do book early. If you are flying from the west, we recommend **Emirates** (EK), which flies via Dubai. Our holidays are timed to coincide with these flights:

Outbound

Depart	Heathrow	1615	EK030
Arrive	Dubai	0300	
Depart	Dubai	0435	EK658 (following day)
Arrive	Malé	0945	

Return

Depart	Malé	1110	EK659
Arrive	Dubai	1420	
Depart	Dubai	1610	EK005
Arrive	Heathrow	2000	

Note: these timing are subject to change, do check. Emirates also flies from Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle and Glasgow.

British Airways operate a non-stop service to Malé from Gatwick, three times a week, departing Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

Other options include **Sri Lankan** (direct to Malé on some days, via Colombo on others), **Qatar Airways** (via Doha) and **Turkish Airlines** (via Istanbul). If you are coming from the east, we recommend **Singapore Airlines** from Singapore (which is only 4 hours flying time away). **Malaysian Airlines** from Kuala Lumpur is another option.

Airline timetables are available at:

www.emirates.com

www.srilankan.aero

www.qatarairways.com

www.britishairways.com

www.turkishairlines.com

You should aim to arrive in Maldives before 10 am on the first day of the trip. We normally set sail around midday. At the end of the trip, we disembark after breakfast on the last day.

STOPOVERS

On Emirates Airlines you do have the option of a stopover in Dubai, which is a very pleasant city to visit during the winter.

If you have a few days to spare we recommend arriving early in Maldives, as it allows you time to relax after the flight before joining the cruise. We are happy to advise on arranging a stay in a guest house in or near Malé (about US\$60+ pp per night) or a resort (US\$150++ pp per night) nearby.

If you do want some time in Maldives before the cruise, we recommend staying on an island resort *near* Malé and the airport (transfers from distant resorts are sometimes awkward). This will give you the chance to swim, snorkel and relax. The islands vary a lot so you need to think about the standard of accommodation and food that you want, ease of snorkelling, other facilities. A good place to start browsing is:

www.visitmaldives.com