

Mantas, Dolphins and Coral Reefs – A Maldives Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 – 27 February 2016



False Killer Whales



Banded or Humbug Dascyllus



Royal Diacanthus



Spinner Dolphin

Report & images compiled by Jenny Willsher



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Together with 15 Naturetrek clients

Summary

We enjoyed a successful and exciting week in and around this wonderful marine life paradise! After a brief stay in the lovely Bandos Island Resort, which gave us time for some snorkel practice, we boarded the Ari Queen, our base for the next week. We soon settled into the daily routine of early morning and evening snorkels, daytimes searching for cetaceans or relaxing, and evening talks by Chas Anderson, our local Maldives expert. His 30+ years of experience here made for some fascinating and enlightening presentations. Striped, Indo-Pacific Bottlenose and acrobatic Spinner Dolphins were seen regularly. A pod of 30-40 False Killer Whales played around the boat one day, and we swam with graceful Mantas and a curious young Whaleshark. The diversity of colour, shape and size of the reef fish and other marine life was amazing and delightful.

All this was complimented by the unobtrusive efficiency and care of the crew on both the Ari Queen and its accompanying Dhoni (small craft). Also the good humour and enthusiasm of the group contributed enormously to the enjoyment of the trip.

Day 1

Thursday 18th February

Depart UK

The tour started with overnight flights from the UK to Male via Dubai. Some members of the group had arrived in the Maldives the day before for some extra time before joining the tour.

Day 2

Friday 19th February

To Bandos Island Resort, North Male Atoll

Following our flights, we arrived in Male mid-morning and were quickly aboard a water taxi to Bandos Island. A very helpful Javidh welcomed us to the resort and made every effort to get us to our rooms quickly, and arranged a table in the Sea Breeze Restaurant for the whole group to eat together later. Some then chose to catch up on sleep while others relaxed or had a practise snorkel.

Some of us met at the Sundowner Bar pre-dinner where a variety of fish could be seen in the shallow water below including Black-tipped Reef Shark, Zebra Moray, Parrotfish, Powderblue Surgeonfish, Raccoon Butterflyfish, dumpy little Humbug Dascyllus and the strange slim Trumpetfish. Small crabs clambered about also.

Later the whole group met for dinner at a candlelit table on the open deck of the restaurant and enjoyed a delicious meal, at one point being joined by a Grey Heron!

Day 3

Saturday 20th February

Bandos, North Male Atoll

We woke to a cloudy and blustery day and enjoyed breakfast from the excellent buffet. The omelette chef was quite an entertainer as he juggled the cooking of at least three omelettes at once! As we left the restaurant a tropical downpour occurred. We then had the morning to swim or explore the island with its lovely exotic trees of Frangipani, Bourgainvillea, Oleander and the huge Banyan tree near the restaurant which was still decorated with Valentine's Day decorations! The few birds on the island included the vocal Asian Koel, House Crow, Common Myna, White-faced Waterhen and Common Sandpiper. In the large trees behind the restaurant was a small colony of huge noisy Fruit Bats.

We all gathered in reception late morning to await the arrival of Chas on the dhoni; this local type of boat would be ferrying us about over the next week into the shallow water over the reefs. Once our luggage was stowed on board, we headed away from Bandos Island to where the Ari Queen was moored. Chas welcomed us on board and went through the house rules – the first being that we shed our shoes!

After lunch the boat moved north to the eastern edge of North Male Atoll and we saw a few Spinner Dolphins on the way. Then we had the first of many snorkels from the boat. Chas warned us that it was not the best of reefs but it was a chance to practice getting on and off the dhoni. We were accompanied by Ishmalito who tested the current and visibility before we jumped in. Some of us watched him enviously as he did deepwater acrobatics beneath us. We all enjoyed the snorkel and sightings included a Feather-tailed Ray, Maldivian Anemone Fish (think Nemo but only one stripe!), Powderblue Surgeonfish (think Dory from the same film!), Royal Diacanthus – another stunning yellow and blue combination, Moorish Idol, and a fleet of striped yellow Convict Surgeonfish. Chas sensibly does not offer to do the fish checklist as it could be an interminable evening of trying to identify “the blue fish with the yellow tail” or “the little green one with the red fins” etc, etc! There are over 1,000 species of reef fish, some yet to be identified, and juveniles and adults of the same species can look entirely different!

Suitably inspired and excited about the week ahead, we later met on the lounge deck where Chas gave us a brief overview of the Maldives and a talk on dolphins. We learned that the word *atoll* is the only Maldivian word in the Oxford English Dictionary. The Spinner Dolphin is the commonest of the eight species seen in the Maldives and it is not entirely clear why they spin – perhaps to rid themselves of sucker fish (remoras) or to communicate with others. Remoras are a parasitic fish which attach themselves to their host with the large adhesive disc on their heads. The local name is *attamas* which also means a clingy person. The dolphins hunt at night using sonar to locate deepwater fish that come up to the surface at night. They are normally light and dark grey in colour but when very active, their bellies look pink because blood vessels near the surface helps them cool down. To sleep they are able to close one half of the brain at a time.

After a delicious dinner provided by the cook Ali and his assistant Shafeu, and efficiently supervised by Jamal, we relaxed for a while in the tropical breeze on deck as the boat rocked gently, before retiring to bed.

Day 4

Sunday 21st February

North Male Atoll to Goidhoo Atoll

Tea, coffee and biscuits were available before our early morning snorkel. We added Oriental Sweetlips to our favourites amongst the reef fish and it was a good example of how different juveniles can be. The adult sweetlips is a large fish with horizontal black and white stripes on the body and black and yellow dotted fins. The young are slimmer and blotched in brown and cream. This is one of the bigger fish we saw along with various Parrotfish with their amazing, mostly green, patterns, the lovely shoals of indigo blue Redtooth Triggerfish that seem to flutter in the water, the bright yellow Longnose Butterflyfish, and strange shaped Unicornfish.

After breakfast we raised anchor and moved out of North Male Atoll, heading north-west into the central channel between the atolls. The deeper channels gave us a better chance of seeing cetaceans and bigger fish such as tuna, sailfish and flashes of flying fish. We saw small groups of both Spinner and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins, and we got to distinguish the long narrow beak of the Spinners. We enjoyed their company around the boat but they were not very energetic when it came to spinning.

We anchored overnight in Goidhoo Atoll on the western edge of the archipelago. We snorkelled in slightly cloudy water but could appreciate the different shapes and patterns on the coral and saw different fish again. Tiny iridescent blue or red dots in the water were planktonic Copepods. We saw Thick-armed Starfish, Sea cucumbers, deep blue lipped Clams and a favourite for many was the Clown Triggerfish with huge white spots on its black belly. Chas saw a small stingray, and turtles were also seen.

In the evening Chas delivered his talk on the top deck where we could appreciate his subject overhead; the stars and constellations and the problems of early navigation.

Day 5

Monday 22nd February

'A Whale of a Day'

Our morning snorkel was outside the atoll, in the Indian Ocean, and we could appreciate the drop-off at the edge of the reef. Three Hawksbill Turtles were seen plus a Honeycomb Moray and a huge Napoleon Wrasse which can be two metres in length.

After breakfast we moved out of the atoll into the deep ocean channel. We had not gone far before a large blue object was seen floating towards us under the water. What initially seemed like a piece of submerged flotsam was actually a Manta – belly up, doing somersaults as it passed us. We eventually saw three of these magnificent beasts as they frolicked in the current. Sadly it was not good conditions for us to join them in the water.

The rest of the morning was quiet, but after lunch Chas spotted a distant commotion. A Sailfish was thrashing about and Chas rightfully guessed it had been hit. Another Sailfish drifted past us as we headed for the activity and we were soon enjoying the company of a pod of 30-40 False Killer Whales. They eventually cavorted around us and we spent an hour with them. A circling Lesser Frigatebird only got a cursory glance! We moved on, seeing a fleeing pod of Spinner Dolphins, and added a few birds to our list when we saw a raft of Lesser Noddy and Lesser and Greater Crested Terns on a sandbank.

We headed for Raa Atoll for our overnight anchorage. We enjoyed a gentler snorkel this evening. A Giant Moray was seen, and we enjoying floating over this magical world of ever-changing shapes, sizes and colour combinations that drifted or darted about below us: the quite majestic Parrotfish; Oriental Sweetlips; small shoals of slim fusiliers; or jewel-like anthias.

The evening talk was about the smaller whales, starting with the False Killer Whale which is actually a large dolphin - being a toothed cetacean. They are collaborative hunters as we had seen earlier, having worked together to hunt down the Sailfish. Pilot Whales are a similar size, with the same bulbous head shape. False Killer Whales, Pilot Whales, Orcas and Melon-headed Whales are all known locally as 'Black fish'.

Day 6

Tuesday 23rd February

'Mantastic Tuesday'

Our morning snorkel had the potential for Mantas as they had been seen in the area. The dhoni had been out on a scout but no luck. We had a lovely snorkel at the edge of the reef and many of us enjoyed the thrill of possibilities as we moved along the dropoff. After a late breakfast we were about to raise anchor when the dhoni crew sighted some Mantas. Great excitement! Unfortunately it was too soon after breakfast and they were in a strong current for us to join them in the water.

We moved out of Baa Atoll and cruised north, hoping for bigger fish. It was not till after lunch that we met up with a very lively pod of Striped Dolphins and enjoyed watching them leaping out of the water. These are more frequently seen offshore.

We then turned and headed south again and re-entered Baa Atoll. The dhoni crew located a group of about 12 Mantas. We were soon ready to get in the water and excitedly transferred to the dhoni. Chas briefed us on Manta etiquette – no flash photography and no chasing or touching - and then as gracefully as we could, we slipped into the water. The water was cloudy with plankton – Manta food - and some experienced a few tiny stings, but it was a small price to pay for the privilege of being in the presence of these amazing beasts as they gracefully and nonchalantly glided underneath and around us. Chas and Ishmalito urged us to keep looking down, and they had difficulty getting us back on the Dhoni! As we regrouped, the superlatives flew and our smiles were broad! Chas told us that Mantas were a protected species here as they contribute considerably to the tourist economy, whereas further east they are fished for their gills for the Chinese medicinal market.

Later Chas gave us a talk on the early naturalists who studied the birds of the Maldives, and the effect of the ocean currents, the monsoon and the impending El Nino. This latter event often heralds the presence of Bryde's Whales and as there had been recent reports of sightings on the eastern edge of the archipelago, we were to move across there the next day.

Supper was an impressive candlelit buffet, including fresh caught fish and pizza, and we got a reluctant Ali and Shafeu out of the kitchen to thank them.

Day 7

Wednesday 24th February

Whaleshark Wednesday'

Our morning snorkel was close to a deep dropoff and there was a lot to see including a Black-tipped Reef Shark, a Whip-tailed Stingray and the pleasure of looking into the deep blue green depths through shoals of Red-toothed Triggerfish, Banded Dascyllus, Yellowback Fusiliers and Convict Surgeonfish. For those who preferred the shallower part of the reef, there were wonderful views of various Parrotfish, Butterflyfish, Bannerfish, handsome blue and yellow Royal Diacanthus, Moorish Idol, and shoals of small fish such as Orange Anthias and the well described Neon Damselfish. We were reluctant to return to the dhoni!

The Ari Queen then moved out of Raa Atoll and into the central channel, heading towards Lhaviyani Atoll. About mid channel Chas called out "Whaleshark". We all scrambled to get a look, marvelling at his amazing spotting ability! Second officer Charlay also saw it but it was a few minutes before the rest of us caught up. The animal circled the boat and seemed curious. It was a small beast, about eight or nine feet long and probably two years old. Chas offered us the opportunity to get into the water with it and a few of us grabbed our gear and gathered on the back of the boat. With strict instructions to keep hold of the rope to the dinghy, we slipped into the water. This amazing creature circled around and headed towards us and we lifted up the rope to let it through! It had a small retinue of marine hangers-on: two Ramora, two black and white Pilot Fish, a Cobia, a Golden Jack around its mouth, and lice on its skin. Back on board we apologised to Jamal for delaying lunch and enjoyed exchanging photographs and superlatives. Some photographs taken from the ship showed those in the water looking like a string of washing on a line!

Some Bottlenose Dolphins were seen during the afternoon before we moored up inside Lhaviyani Atoll. We then snorkelled over a very different seascape. We floated over a large sandy area dotted by coral outcrops which proved very interesting. We saw huge Oriental Sweetlips, Threespot Chromis, various large Parrotfish, Bird Wrasse, Longnose and Teardrop Butterfly fishes, Phantom Bannerfish, a Fan-tailed Stingray, Yellowfin Goatfish and Spot-tailed Perch wallowing in the sand. Again we were very reluctant to get out of the water and leave this endlessly fascinating underwater world.

Our evening talk from Chas was about tuna fishing which is an important economic activity in the Maldives and much is exported. Spotted Dolphins often follow tuna shoals and are a useful marker. Tuna are line caught with special unbarbed hooks which facilitates an easy release of the fish when they are flicked on board the boat. The Skipjack tuna is a revered fish – its real name is not spoken because of local myths about its origins. It is associated with its following of Lesser Noddys.

Day 8

Thursday 25th February

'Socialising with Spinners'

As we prepared for our morning snorkel, Chas suggested we might like to swim amongst the Spinner Dolphins that were around us in the atoll. The dhoni took us to the nearest group and we slipped into the water. We could immediately hear their squeaking conversations; some closer than others. Most of us saw small pods swimming below us and others had closer encounters. It was thrilling to hear these animals as up to now our snorkelling had been a largely silent activity except for the sound of our own breathing and maybe the occasional rasp of a Parrotfish feeding on the coral.

After breakfast we headed due east to where there had been sightings of Bryde's Whales but no luck for us! Then we headed south to Khaashidhoo Atoll where we were to be overnight. It took a skilful manoeuvre through the narrow channel into the atoll. Our evening snorkel was over a large area of seagrass.

In the evening Chas talked about the re-discovery of Beaked Whales. Of the 100 or so whales, 23 are beaked whales. They are deep sea animals, strictly oceanic, with inconspicuous surfacing behaviour, and are poorly understood. Chas told a complex story of almost serendipitous discoveries of skulls and carcasses and, as always, was modest about his role in this story – following up reports and sending bone samples to Australian colleagues for confirmation. He passed around a tooth from a Longman's Beaked Whale. His talk demonstrated that there could be so much more to discover.

Day 9

Friday 26th February

We started the day with an on shore visit to the community of Khaashidhoo. Chas advised us to dress discretely as this was a Muslim community. The dhoni took us to the dock and we clambered on shore. One of the nearby boats was processing a catch of Yellowfin Tuna and we could appreciate what powerful fish they were. We wandered around this thriving community, observing their daily life. As with so many of the islands we had seen, there were the obligatory dramatic Palm trees including Coconut and Date Palms. There were also handsome Breadfruit, Mango and Banyan Trees, drapes of colourful Bourgainvillea, and lovely white-blossomed Frangipani Trees. Most gardens or yards had Banana and Papaya as well as other exotic plants such as Croton, Ficus, Plumaria, Hibiscus and Fern Palm. There were also many Australian Pines (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) with its feathery foliage. Some of the group were offered Watery-rose Apple (*Syzygium aqueum*) to taste. One attractive white-flowered shrub was definitely not to be touched – the Suicide Tree. This was traditionally used to test the integrity of young offenders but was deemed ineffective as it killed too many of them!

Back on board we enjoyed a late breakfast and headed further south, conscious that this was our last full day on the Ari Queen. We were now heading back to North Male Atoll for our last night. We had a few dolphin sightings during the day and a brief view of a small pod of False Killer Whales; Charlay confirmed that they were blunt-headed. We moored near Kagi island for our last snorkel and many of us thought it was the best. The water was clear, the coral intriguing and the fish performed wonderfully! Sightings included turtles and a Grey Reef Shark. Then we had to move on to our mooring near Male and the reality of other boats and the occasional plane overhead. As if to mark the end of the trip there was a torrential downpour.

Later we settled on deck for our last talk from Chas, wondering what the subject might be. Firstly he tempted us with a short film of his Indonesian trip – a new trip for Naturetrek. Then he switched to Dragonfly migration. Who knew it was such a significant event? We certainly did not! Chas illustrated his research of the unusual phenomena where thousands of dragonflies descended on the islands on their way from northern India to east Africa. The commonest is the Globe Skimmer which exploits the transient rains of the monsoon, taking advantage of the attendant change in air currents. Some bird migration also occurs alongside this, perhaps following the food source, involving Amur Falcon, European Roller, and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. It was a fascinating talk which demonstrated Chas's comprehensive depth of knowledge of so many aspects of the Maldives and his capacity to deliver so much information in a fascinating and relevant way.

Day 10

Saturday 27th February

'Sad Saturday'

It was time to say goodbye! We all loaded into the dhoni for the last time. Those returning to the UK were envious of those extending their stay as they set off for their seaplane or water taxis, still in shorts and T-shirts which had been derigeur for all for our wonderful week on the Ari Queen.

We boarded our plane and left the magic of the Maldives, watching the atolls disappear below us as we climbed into the clouds. We flew back to the UK where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Team Photo

Species Lists

Cetaceans (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Scientific name	Common name	February							
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	False Killer Whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓
2	Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓
5	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Birds

1	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓						
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓
3	Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓
4	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>						
6	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>						
7	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Swift (Great Crested) Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Saunders's Tern	<i>Sternula saundersi</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓				
13	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>						
14	Crimson Rosella	<i>Platycercus elegans</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>						
15	Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>	✓	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓
16	Maldivian House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens maledivicus</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	✓	✓
17	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>						