

Mantas, Dolphins & Coral Reefs – A Maldives Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Exclusive Naturetrek Charters in 2024

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Depart London.

Day 2 Malé.

Day 3/9 Maldives cruise.

Day 10 Fly London.

Dates

Fri 26th January – Sun 4th February 2024

Fri 2nd February – Sunday 11th February 2024

Cost

£5,995 (London/London); £5,095 (Malé/Malé)

Grading

A (easy) – please see tour grading section

Focus

Dolphins, whales, other marine life, snorkelling
& birds



From top: Manta Ray, the Maldives. Left: Spinner Dolphin.
Images by Charles Anderson & Tim Melling



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Introduction

Ribbons of turquoise water lapping against white sand beaches and a diversity of marine life guaranteed to make even the most experienced wildlife traveller weak at the knees – welcome to the Maldives! A visit to this Indian Ocean country of around 1,200 picture-postcard perfect islands really is like arriving in paradise. The Maldives is a small island nation some 400 miles south-west of the southern tip of India. It is an independent Republic, with the capital on the central island of Malé. The country is composed entirely of small coral atolls, most of which can be walked around in less than an hour and consist of swaying palm trees, white sand beaches and turquoise lagoons.

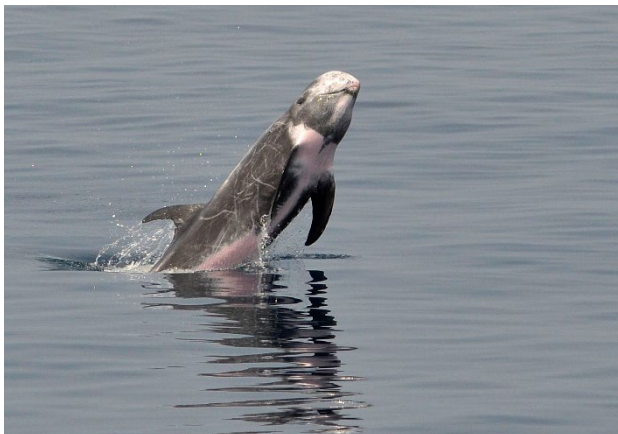


Pantropical Spotted Dolphin, by Chas Anderson

The best way to explore this tropical archipelago is by boat and for this 10-day holiday Naturetrek has chartered the M/V Keana, a comfortable vessel which accommodates 16 guests in air-conditioned en-suite cabins. The principal focus of this tour is the rich diversity of whales and dolphins present around the Maldives, but there will also be plenty of time dedicated to exploring the Maldives' world-famous underwater world, as well as enjoying the country's pristine coral atolls, small sandy islands and the region's birdlife.

This cruise will be led by internationally renowned marine biologist Dr Charles 'Chas' Anderson, who has lived and worked in the Maldives since 1983. He is the foremost authority on the cetaceans and fishes of the Maldives and the pioneer of whale and dolphin-watching there.

The exquisite islands and coral reefs of the Maldives are well known for their underwater wildlife, but it is not widely known that they also possess a particularly rich whale and dolphin fauna. Especially exciting is the great diversity of species found here and in the last few years Dr Anderson



Risso's Dolphin, by Chas Anderson

has seen an astonishing 18 different species – Spinner Dolphins, Bottlenose Dolphins, Risso's Dolphins and Short-finned Pilot Whales are all common, while Spotted Dolphins, Striped Dolphins and Dwarf Sperm Whales are also regularly seen. Recent (but somewhat rarer) sightings of particular interest have included Sperm Whales, Blue Whales and Bryde's (pronounced 'Broo-dess') Whales, as well as beaked whales including Cuvier's, Blainville's and Longman's. The latter was long

considered the rarest whale in the world, but is now known to occur regularly around the Maldives.

Our daily itinerary will be very flexible to make the most of cetacean sightings. The outline given below should, therefore, be considered to be guidelines only, not rigidly structured programmes. We will travel along the western edge of the Maldivian 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, meaning that there will usually be an opportunity each day for an early morning and early evening snorkel, or perhaps an island visit. And after dark, far from city lights, the top deck offers stunning views of the night sky.



Collared Butterflyfish, by Brian Jones

This wonderful tropical cruise offers you the opportunity of seeing of a wealth of cetaceans, typically around 2,000 individuals of 7 to 12 different species, in the company of a professional marine biologist. You will also see matchless coral reefs, paradise islands, and friendly local people.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Malé via Dubai

We depart on an afternoon scheduled Emirates Airlines flight to Malé International Airport, Maldives. N.B.: British Airways flies direct from London Heathrow to Male several times per week, but our cruise dates are confirmed well before airline schedules are published. If our tours dates coordinate with the BA schedule, we will plan to use these direct flights instead.

Day 2

Malé

Following a change of aircraft in Dubai, we are due to arrive at Malé International Airport this morning, from which we transfer to a comfortable resort island around 15 minutes or so from the airport. The rest of the day is then free to relax and unwind after the long journey or swim/snorkel in the warm sea. The resort has a beautiful white sandy beach and excellent snorkelling offshore. Dolphins are often seen on the short boat ride from the airport to the resort.

Days 3 – 9

Maldives Cruise

Our cruise will be based on the comfortable live aboard safari boat, M/V Keana, and this morning we will transfer from our overnight accommodation near Malé to our vessel, aiming to board around midday. Departing after lunch, with a little luck, we may enjoy our first cetacean sighting while still in sight of the airport! Our cruise around the Maldives will be conducted at a leisurely pace and we may have the opportunity to visit uninhabited, fishing and resort islands. Each night we will anchor in a sheltered location within one of the atolls, and there will normally then be an opportunity for a swim, snorkel or island visit before sunset. Cruising these waters is a pleasure in itself and, as we pass atolls, the brilliant shades of blue of these waters never fails to excite visitors. The strips and patches of kingfisher blue in the sea are truly spectacular, and it is easy to spend hours simply enjoying the visual feast of these surroundings. On our first evening there will be an orientation talk and there will be a slide show or informative talk most other evenings as well.



Manta Ray, by Brian Jones

Our main aim during the week's cruise will be to enjoy the diversity of sea life around the coral atolls which collectively make up the Maldives, focusing in particular on the many species of cetacean which are abundant in the waters of the central atolls. On at least two days we will visit sites where Manta Rays regularly congregate. Manta Rays belong to the family of cartilaginous fish creatures and, for many people, the chance to swim with them is a wildlife highlight of a lifetime and, if conditions are suitable, we will have a chance to join this iconic species in the water. Manta Rays are supremely graceful animals and it is an unforgettable experience being close by, watching them as they go about their business, swimming or feeding.

Spinner Dolphins are one of the most charismatic species of cetacean and they are found in large numbers in the Maldives. These delightful and acrobatic dolphins will be high on our list of target species to see during our week's cruise. They should provide plenty of opportunities for the keen wildlife photographers in the group as we watch them approach the boat, bow-ride and join us for extended periods as they leap and play beside us in the water.



Spinner Dolphins, by Pete Johnson

Another of our target species for the week is the Short-finned Pilot Whale. These distinctive 'whales' (actually a large species of dolphin) may often be seen 'logging' at the

surface. They are highly social and often curious, regularly coming close to boats as they move about in family groups of typically 30 or more individuals. They are deep divers and feed on squid hundreds of metres below the surface.



Rough-toothed Dolphin, by Chas Anderson

Among the other species of dolphin we hope to see during the week are Risso's Dolphin, Fraser's Dolphin, Spotted Dolphin, Rough-toothed Dolphin, Striped Dolphin, Bottlenose Dolphin and magnificent Orca (or Killer Whale!). As we cruise, we are sure to be joined on numerous occasions by pods of dolphins. Bottlenose Dolphins are distinctive by their acrobatic behaviour and are always guaranteed to bring smiles to the faces of

onlookers as they suddenly appear out of a wide ocean, join the boat to ride on its sub-surface pressure wave, bow-riding and taking turns to leap clear of the water before disappearing again below the surface. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they typically vanish back out into open sea! We may on occasion be able to hear or feel their communicative whistles and clicks – giving the exciting sensation of being allowed entry into their secret world!

The Maldives has only relatively recently come to the world's attention as a top whale and dolphin-watching destination and one of its attractions for enthusiasts is the wonderful diversity of species found here – on most trips we see between 7 and 12 different species, and these are not just distant glimpses: many species bow ride and can be seen in their entirety at close range. In addition, some species that are rarely seen elsewhere, for example Dwarf Sperm Whale and Cuvier's Beaked Whale are quite common here.

Whilst small cetaceans are abundant in Maldives waters the larger whales can be more difficult to find. Even though the little-known Bryde's Whale and the superlative Blue Whale both occur here, it will take a degree of good fortune to find these great ocean wanderers. Should we be fortunate, however, to have a Blue cross our path, its vast 'blow' as it exhales is very distinctive and, if we are reasonably near, we should get a whiff of its extremely fishy breath! Another of the great whales present in these waters is the Sperm Whale, the largest of the toothed whales, and one that is relatively easy to identify from a distance. This deep-diving whale has just one nostril situated front left on its enormous bulbous snout and its distinctive lopsided blow comes out at a 45 degree angle to the water! Be sure to have your cameras at the ready if we are lucky enough to have an encounter – when it dives, the flukes are raised clear of the water and it may then not surface again for an hour!

Other less well-known species of cetacean to look for during our week on the water include Pygmy Killer Whale, Melon-headed Whale, False Killer Whale, Dense-beaked Whale and Longman's Beaked Whale. Sightings of any beaked whales will excite cetacean aficionados in particular as they belong

to a highly elusive group of cetaceans, some of which have never actually been seen alive! The Maldives really does represent a whale and dolphin enthusiast's dream; but be warned, standing out on deck waiting for the next appearance of a dorsal fin or approaching dolphins can become seriously addictive!

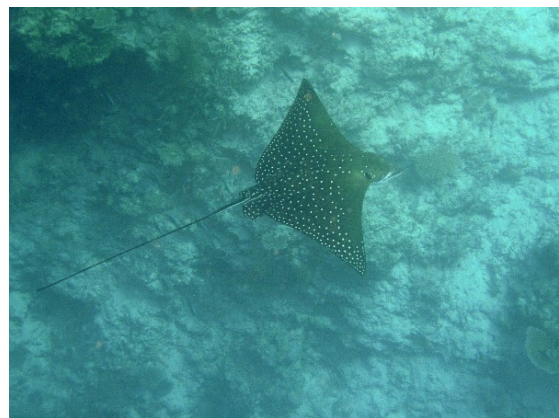


From left: Maldives Anemonefish, Convict Surgeonfish, Chevron Butterflyfish, by Brian Jones

The 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, with about 180 bird species having been recorded for the islands so far. However, as there has been relatively little ornithological study, many more species (particularly northern migrants) undoubtedly await discovery. There are no known endemic species, but there are a few endemic subspecies, including: White-breasted Waterhen, Indian Pond-heron, Striated Herons and Maldivian House Crow.

There will be plenty of opportunities for seabird watching. Over 190 species of seabird have been recorded, including rare tropical species, migrant storm-petrels and others. Species likely to be seen during our trips include Wedge-tailed and Tropical Shearwaters and a variety of terns such as Bridled, Black-naped and Lesser Crested. Brown and Lesser Noddy are found here, although it would take a degree of good luck to spot one of the Lesser Frigatebirds or White-tailed Tropicbirds that breed on the atolls a little further to the south.

There will also be plenty of opportunities for snorkelling on the coral reefs, and we aim to do this each morning before breakfast and each evening before sunset. The most spectacular feature of these reefs is the abundant fish life. Over 1,000 species of fish have been recorded from the Maldives and you should be able to see over 200 of these during your cruise. Each day we are likely to see beautiful fish such as Maldives Anemonefish, Clown Triggerfish, Titan Triggerfish, Regal and Imperial Angelfish, a great variety of Butterflyfish, Parrotfish and Wrasse, plus there is always the possibility of larger creatures such as Black-blotched Stingrays, Eagle Rays, Black-tip Reef Sharks and Nurse Sharks.



Eagle Ray by Brian Jones



Hawksbill Turtle, by Kerrie Porteous

Snorkelling in the Maldives really is like swimming in a warm bath and it is delightful to watch the numerous fish and other creatures that make these island atolls their home going about their everyday business. In fact there is such an abundance of marine life everywhere here you can even enjoy watching the fish from above water, without ever getting wet! Flying fish, for example, are abundant and will be spotted regularly as we travel outside the atolls. As they are disturbed

by the movement of our boat they shoot out of the water, looking like wound-up toys, before diving back under the surface.

If we are lucky we may see Manta Rays and there's even a possibility of seeing the giant Whale Shark, though we would have to be extremely fortunate to see one of these great ocean giants. Five species of turtle are known to live in the waters surrounding the Maldives, and we have a chance of seeing three – Green and Hawksbill turtles in the atolls, and Olive Ridleys out at sea.

Day 10

Fly London

Sadly, after a wonderful week's cruising, the time has come to tear ourselves away from the tranquil, other-worldly life we have been experiencing. Following an early breakfast, must transfer back to Malé Airport to catch our morning flight back to London (or regional airport), via Dubai. We are due to arrive back into Heathrow in the evening.

Tour grading

We have graded this holiday A (easy). There will be an opportunity for some easy, optional walks in the daytime. Getting on and off the M/V Keana is usually easy although, if the sea is choppy, there will always be a friendly hand from the crew or Naturetrek staff should you require any assistance. Snorkelling and swimming activities are optional, but recommended. Snorkellers enter the water by jumping in or sitting and sliding in from the dhoni, and climbing back up a ladder on the return. The dhoni crew will always be on hand to help.

NB - Although we have graded this holiday as 'easy', please be aware that the M/V Keana is a small cruise vessel, not a luxury cruise ship. The different decks are accessed by short - but quite steep - staircases and the vessel can roll somewhat if the conditions are a little choppy. As such an average level of fitness is required to get the most out of this holiday and please could we ask you to ensure that you are fit enough to undertake this cruise. Should you have any further questions on this aspect of the tour please give the Naturetrek office a call.

Focus

The holiday will focus on the region's cetaceans (whales and dolphins), Manta Rays and the other marine wildlife likely to be encountered here at this time of year. There will be plenty of opportunities to enjoy the underwater life for those who wish to snorkel.

Weather

The weather in the Maldives is characterised by a wet (south-west monsoon) during May to October, and a dry (north-east monsoon) season from November to April. The odd shower can be expected at any time of year, even during the dry season, though these usually pass quickly. The average maximum temperature stays very constant throughout the year, ranging from about 29°C to 31°C. Temperatures at night are a touch lower and range from about 25°C to 27°C. Sea breezes make this quite comfortable. Sea temperatures average about 28°C, which makes for luxurious snorkelling!

M/V Keana

On this trip we travel through the Maldives to view whales and dolphins from the 30 metre liveaboard safari vessel, M/V Keana. She has a local crew of 9, including an experienced captain and a full-time cook. All cabins are en-suite and air-conditioned.

There are 8 cabins available for guests, and we travel with a maximum of just 15 Naturetrek clients. *Keana* is not luxurious, but she is comfortable and ideal for our needs. The cabin configuration is as follows:



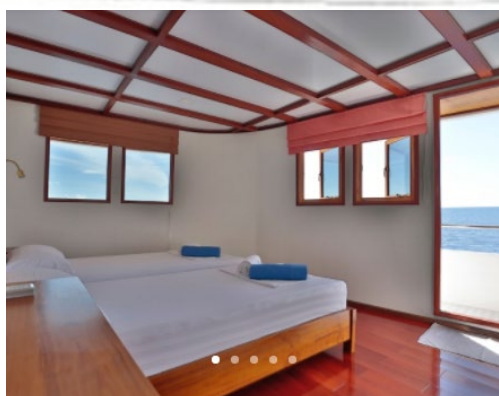
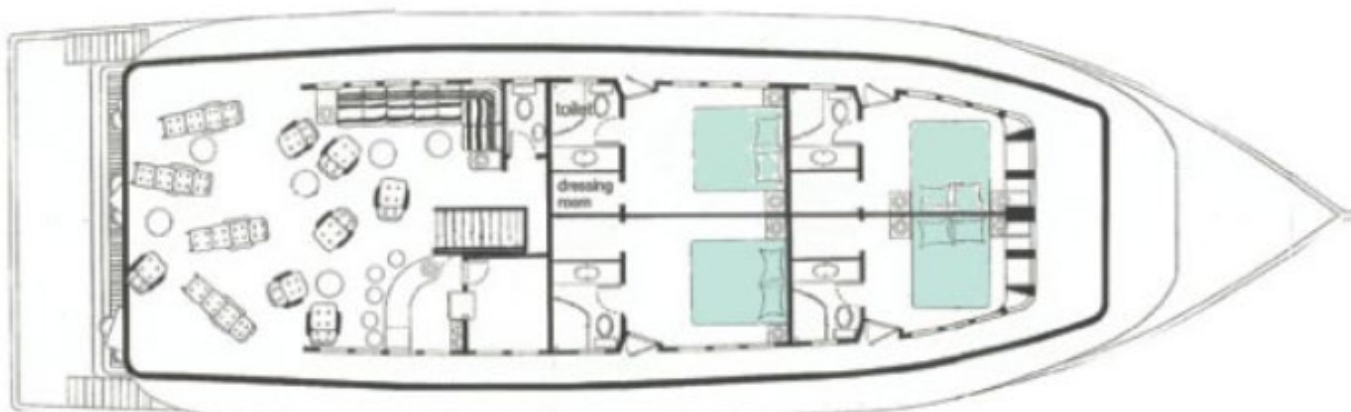
MV Keana

Main Deck – Three twin-bedded cabins (these can be pushed together) and one double-bedded cabin, all with windows and a sea view

Upper Deck – Three twin-bedded cabins (these can be pushed together) and one double-bedded cabin, all with windows and a sea view. The two forward cabins also have windows with views to the front.

For further information, please visit www.keana.mv.

Upper deck:



Upper deck cabins

Main deck:



Main deck cabins

Extra expenses

Whilst all meals are included during your cruise on-board the M/V Keana, accommodation in Malé is on a bed and breakfast basis only (lunch and dinner are excluded). Drinks (other than bottled water) are excluded throughout the tour, as are crew tips, any applicable visa fees (not currently required for British Citizens staying for less than 30 days) and all items of a personal nature.

NB: Naturetrek reserves the right to impose a surcharge on this cruise should fuel prices increase significantly, or currency exchange rates fluctuate greatly, and as such the boat operators request an additional payment. As always, however, we will do our very best to avoid such increases in costs.

Extensions

Many choose to extend their stay in the Maldives at one of the numerous island resorts, either before or after the whale and dolphin watching cruise. If you would like to extend your stay in the Maldives, please don't hesitate to contact the Naturetrek office for further information.

Flights

We fly to Malé from London Heathrow with Emirates airlines, via a change of aircraft in Dubai. Regional departures are also available from Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, London Gatwick and Glasgow. Flight times vary and these options may incur a small flight supplement, so please contact the Naturetrek office for further information. Upgrades to Business Class and First Class are available.

Direct flights to Malé are also available with British Airways. As these flights do not depart daily, we can only confirm if they coordinate with our cruise dates around 11 months prior to departure. If they do, we plan to use these flights as standard. If they don't, we are still happy to book this route for you, and you will just need to spend one or more additional nights in the Maldives at one end of the holiday or the other (which we will be happy to arrange for you). Please contact the Naturetrek office for further information. Upgrades to World Traveller Plus (premium economy) and Club World (business class) are available.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to the Republic of Maldives. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/maldives> regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking

form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.



Clockwise from top left Oriental Sweetlips & Black Pyramid Butterflyfish, Moorish Idol, Whale Shark, Maldivian island (images by Kerrie Porteous and Chas Anderson)